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**The Initiatory Rose**

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**UNIVERSITY OF WESTMINSTER**  
**SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES**

**SORBONNE UNIVERSITÉ**  
**ÉCOLE DOCTORALE 3 (ED 019) DE LITTÉRATURES FRANÇAISES ET**  
**COMPARÉE**

**Laboratoire de recherche CELLF UMR 8599**

**PHD THESIS**  
**DUAL INTERNATIONAL PHD**

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (PhD) AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTMINSTER**  
in English Literature

**DOCTEUR DE L'UNIVERSITÉ SORBONNE UNIVERSITÉ**  
in Littérature Française et Comparée

**Piero LATINO**

on 13 December 2023

**The Initiatory Rose**  
**From the *Fedeli d'Amore* to the European Literature of**  
**the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries**

**Under the direction of:**

Leigh WILSON – Professor, University of Westminster

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Sylvain LEDDA – Professor, Université de Rouen, President of the Jury

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Alexandra WARWICK – Professor, University of Westminster



In accordance with the agreement between the University of Westminster and Sorbonne University, this thesis is written in English and French. It contains a considerable number of quotations that had not previously been translated into English, and which I have translated myself. Thus, unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine, and the original source text is indicated in the footnote.



*To the memory of my father, Leonardo Latino*



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is dedicated to a person who is special to me, my father, Leonardo Latino.

Before dedicating the effort of this work to him, I would like to express my gratitude to the people who made it possible for this doctoral thesis to be written. I am infinitely grateful to my two Research Supervisors, André Guyaux and Leigh Wilson, without whom this research work would never have seen the light of day.

The joint cooperation project between Sorbonne University and the University of Westminster has also been made possible thanks to a person who will not be able to read these words that I dedicate to him: Geoffrey Petts, former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Westminster. While he was fighting his battle against death, he entrusted his colleagues with the task of finalising the agreement with the Sorbonne. I never had the chance to thank him for the opportunity he gave me, and I do so now, with these words in the first pages of my thesis, which owes a great deal to the name of Geoffrey Petts.

The agreement was made possible by the work of the École Doctorale de Littératures Françaises et Comparée at the Sorbonne and the School of Humanities at the University of Westminster. In particular, I am grateful to Amélie Loiseau and Richard McCormack, and special thanks go to Fériel Younsi who has been a constant and important presence throughout all the phases of my thesis. In addition to the Sorbonne and the University of Westminster, another academic institution played a key role in my doctoral path – the University of Amsterdam, where I was a PhD Visiting Researcher (PhD UvA Guest) for two academic years (2019/2020 and 2021/2022) in the Department of History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents. Another institution that welcomed me during my doctoral years was the University of Oxford, where a considerable part of my research took place. I would also like to thank the Department of Comparative Literature of the University of Edinburgh.

After thanking the Institutions that have welcomed me, I would now like to thank the members of my Jury, who have been very important figures in my path. My sincerest thanks go to Jean-Pierre Brach, Sylvain Ledda, Ida Merello, Marco Pasi, Marisa Verna and Alexandra Warwick. I am particularly grateful to some Professors and scholars who have been fundamental points of reference and guides for me, both from the point of view of academic research and from the human point of view, both from the point of view of academic research and from a purely personal one. Following the alphabetical order of their names, I express my profound and sincerest thanks to Anne-Marie Baron, Michel Brix, Massimo Ciavolella, Peter Dayan, Sandra Debenedetti Stow, Francesco Fiorentino, Michela Gardini, Frank Grenier, Peter



Liebrechts, Davide Messina, Alfredo Perifano, Bruno Pinchard, Ali Qadir, Stefano Salzani, Giuseppe Stellardi, Paolo Tortonese.

The transversal and interdisciplinary nature of my research has given me the opportunity to meet and learn from internationally renowned specialists in their fields of research. So I wish to express my gratitude to all the people I have met and crossed during the path, and who have had a certain importance or influence on my work, in a more or less direct way (sometimes even with a simple email), guiding me towards what I needed to make progress towards the completion of the thesis. I warmly thank them, following the alphabetical order of their names: Egil Asprem, Simon Avery, Tessel Bauduin, Rebecca Beasley, Luca Bevilacqua, Clare Birchall, Lucia Boldrini, Françoise Bonardel, Jenny Butler, Flavia Buzzetta, Alessandro Cabiati, Fabio Camilletti, Igor Candido, Roberta Capelli, Aurélia Cervoni, Simona Cigliana, David Cunningham, Carole Cusack, Giuliano D'Amico, Baptiste Danel, Paolo De Ventura, Andrea Del Lungo, Kirsten Dickhaut, Catherine Douzou, Gabriela Dragnea Horvath, Guy Ducrey, Mariella Di Brigida, Henry Egbums, Silvia Fabrizio-Costa, Simon Gaunt, Michelle Geric, Jane Gilbert, Alessandro Grassato, Wouter Hanegraaff, Julia Caterina Hartley, Georgiana Hedesan, Peter Forshaw, Christine Ferguson, Valentina Gosetti, Francesca Guglielmi, Christian Greer, Frankie Hines, Jean-Nicolas Illouz, Catherine Keen, Didier Khan, Peter Lanchidi, Fabrizio Lelli, Adeline Lionetto, Eleonora Lizzul, Elena Lombardi, Boris Lyon-Caen, Bertrand Marchal, Valerio Magrelli, Jean-Yves Masson, Thibaut Maus de Rolley, Christopher McIntosh, Renan Nery Porto, Gianni Oliva, Luca Pietromarchi, Gilles Polizzi, Nemanja Radulović, Ayesha Ramachandran, Riccardo Raimondo, Claude Rétat, Aren Roukema, Mauro Ruggiero, Antoinette Rutten, Catriona Seth, Richard Sieburth, Federica Simone, Annette Simonis, Maria Immacolata Spagna, Leon Surette, Steven Sutcliffe, Demetres Tryphonopoulos, Natale Vacalebri, Seth Whidden, Francesco Zambon. I am sincerely grateful to all of them. I would like to thank researchers who are not just colleagues but also true friends: Léo Bernard, Djibril Camara, Giulio Dalla Grana, Dell Rose, Tom Fischer, Nathan Fraikin, Mriganka Mukhopadhyay, Bamian Van Eeckhout, Alberto Winterberg, and special thanks go to Matteo Leta. I sincerely and warmly thank Stella Cragie, Régine Pajot, Paolo Aprile, Augusto Spicchiarelli and Maria Grazia Attanasi.

I would like to express my gratitude to the libraries where I did my research, and of course the people who worked there and helped me with my bibliographical documentation: the Bibliothèque Interuniversitaire of Sorbonne, the Bibliothèque Ascoli at Sorbonne, the Bibliothèque Nationale of France, the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève of Paris, the Bibliothèque Pompidou of Paris, the Library of the Cité Universitaire of Paris, the University of Westminster Library (Little Titchfield Street Library, Cavendish Library, Marylebone Library), the British

Library in London, the Bodleian Library in Oxford, in particular the Taylor Library and the Radcliffe Camera in Oxford, the Library of the University of Amsterdam, the Ritman Library (Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica) in Amsterdam, the Library of the University of Edinburgh, the Library of the University of Cork, the Library of Milan, the Library of Monza, the Library of the University of Salento (Lecce, Italy), the Library of the University of Vilnius.

This thesis may or may not be appreciated, it may or may not arouse interest; but into this thesis, as Charles Baudelaire wrote of his *Fleurs du Mal*, “j’ai mis tout mon cœur”, “I put all my heart”: it is the result of immense sacrifice and profound suffering. I endured long periods of extreme difficulty, and if I have managed to overcome these painful obstacles, I owe it exclusively to my family, to my sisters Simona and Maria Dolores, to my mother Elisa, and to the person to whom I dedicate the effort of this work: my father, Leonardo.

I lost my father on 27 August 2023, a few days before the completion of my thesis. To you, my dear and unforgettable “Papà”, I dedicate these words of acknowledgements:

*Caro Papà,*

*you will not be able to see, at least in this mortal world, your son obtaining his PhDs at Sorbonne and Westminster. You were so proud to have a son who, coming from a small village in southern Italy, had started a double Doctorate in Paris and London. You were so proud of me and you did the impossible so that your son could achieve this difficult aim. I cannot forget the courage you gave me when I was in difficulty, almost lost with the fear of not succeeding in reaching my goal. I cannot forget when you gave me the strength I did not have, when you suffered for me, when you held my shoulders to give me courage and told me that I was not to give up, that in life one must never stop, that one must always fight. You taught me to be like the albatross of Baudelaire, but a special albatross, one that fights like a lion against “les hommes d’équipage”, the “sailors of the crew”, and the adversities of life. The day you left me, the priest described you as “un uomo piccolo dal cuore grande”: a small man with a big heart. You were that special and rare person. For me, you were my “companion de voyage”, my “travelling companion”, you were a friend, a brother, my beloved father. You and my mother, your beloved wife, Elisa, read the whole thesis that your son wrote and the advice you gave me are in the pages that follow this dedication. I will not be able to thank you for everything you have done for me, but I want you to know, wherever you are, that I love you. I think of you, always. May your name, Leonardo Latino, be forever engraved on the pages of this Thesis, which I dedicate to you with all my heart. Ciao Papà. Ti voglio bene.*

*Your son, Piero*



## INTRODUCTION

The starting point of my research is Dante, and more precisely, a critical work published in 1840 by the Italian poet and professor at King's College London, Gabriele Rossetti: *Il Mistero dell'Amor Platonico del Medio Evo* (The Mystery of Platonic Love of the Middle Ages).<sup>1</sup> In this work, Rossetti for the first time systematically stressed the esoteric dimension of Dante's work and of medieval love literature, of the troubadours and the Italian *Dolce Stil Novo* poets. According to Rossetti, Dante shared an esoteric doctrine with the Initiatory Order of the *Fedeli d'Amore* (the Faithful of Love), composed of medieval love poets, whose poetic compositions would have been based on a coded and conventional jargon which, under the veil of the *topos* of love, concealed ideas of a mystical and initiatory nature, but also religious and political ones.

Gabriele Rossetti gave birth to a critical current that included, among its representatives, scholars such as Michelangelo Caetani, Giovanni Pascoli, Luigi Valli and Alfonso Ricolfi, and outside Italy, figures such as Eugène Aroux and René Guénon. But Rossetti's contribution has been ignored and relegated to the margins of academic debate. His ideas were, in fact, considered a literary extravagance, an interpretative folly of literature; likewise, the critical current which he started was considered as heterodox, even heretical. Nevertheless, studies in the last few decades (although few in number) have shown the validity of much of the exegetical contribution that arose from the work of Gabriele Rossetti, and which influenced pioneering works in the field of twentieth century humanist studies, such as those of Henry Corbin, Mircea Eliade and Carl Gustav Jung.

In fact, the esoteric dimension of Dante's work has been confirmed by specialists such as Antoine Faivre, a pioneer in the study of Western esotericism, who wrote that "there are many who wish to see the *Divine Comedy* (begun in 1302) as an alchemical text", but "it does not take much effort of imagination to pick out an esoteric theme here and there"<sup>2</sup> in Dante's masterpiece. In addition, Faivre rightly points out that "the *Convivio* [...] distinguishes [...] the four meanings of Scripture; the fourth is anagogical, that is to say, basically esoteric, and this is undoubtedly how *The Divine Comedy* should be read".<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gabriele Rossetti, *Il mistero dell'Amor platonico del Medio Evo derivato da' misteri antichi. Opera in cinque volumi*, v. 5, London, Dalla Tipografia di Giovanni E. Taylor, 1840. This work by Gabriele Rossetti has recently been republished: Gabriele Rossetti, *Il mistero dell'Amor platonico del Medio Evo*, 2 v., Milan, Luni Editrice, 2013. The latter edition is the source that I use in my thesis.

<sup>2</sup> Antoine Faivre, "The Divine Comedy; Alchemy and Literature; The Imagination of Chivalry", in *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, eds. Antoine Faivre, Jacob Needleman and Karen Voss, New York, Crossroad, 1992, p. 61.

<sup>3</sup> "Le *Convivio* [...] distingue [...] les quatre sens de l'Écriture; la quatrième est anagogique, c'est-à-dire au fond ésotérique, et sans doute est ainsi qu'il convient de lire *La Divine Comédie*". Antoine Faivre, *Accès de l'ésotérisme occidental*, 2 v., Paris, Gallimard, v. I, 1996, p. 126.

As we shall see in the following chapters, Rossetti argued that the doctrine of esoteric love was not only hidden in the works of Dante and the so-called *Fedeli d'Amore*, but was also guarded and transmitted, through literature, by love poets across Europe, such as the French troubadours and trouvères, the English minstrels, the German Minnesänger or the Scandinavian skálds. According to Rossetti, this doctrine was passed on during the Renaissance right up to the publication of the *Mistero* in the nineteenth century. My research is based on this last point, namely the transmission of this allegedly esoteric knowledge in later centuries. More specifically, my aim is to study the presence of the doctrine of love in European literature, especially in French and English literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Gabriele Rossetti and those who have continued his research always emphasise that the most important symbol for understanding esoteric love is the rose, which is the main focus of my work on the symbolism of the rose. To my knowledge, there are no in-depth studies on the esoteric and initiatory dimension of the rose symbol in literature, so with this research work I intend to make a contribution to the scientific community in this field. My thesis therefore deals with the relationship between literature and esotericism.

Until a few decades ago, the role of esotericism in literature was ignored or neglected, but today the relationship between literature and esotericism has begun to be studied by scholars with objectivity and scientific rigour. In fact, it was in the 1960s that the study of esoteric currents in the history of ideas became an academic discipline, giving rise to its own field of academic studies.<sup>4</sup> The two main centres for the study of esotericism are currently the École Pratique des Hautes Études (Sorbonne) in Paris and the Department of History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents at the University of Amsterdam.

A new scenario is thus opening up in the panorama of academic studies, as Wouter Hanegraaff observes, who states that “without any exaggeration, esotericism stands for the single most neglected and misunderstood domain of research in the humanities, at least as far as Western culture is concerned”, which means that “the possibility – even the probability – of new discoveries and surprising new insights is nowhere so great as precisely here”.<sup>5</sup> The potential for new discoveries offered by the field of esoteric studies is therefore very high.

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<sup>4</sup> On the history of the field of esoteric studies, see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy. Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021; *Hermes in the Academy. Ten Years' Study on Western Esotericism at the University of Amsterdam*, eds. Wouter J. Hanegraaff and Joyce Pijnenburg, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2009; Antoine Faivre, *Accès de l'ésotérisme occidental*, v. II, p. 134-142; Marco Pasi, “Esotericism Emergent: The Beginning of the Study of Esotericism in the Academy”, in *Religion: Secret Religion*, ed. April D. DeConick, Farmington Hills, Macmillan, 2016, p. 143-154. See also Mauro Ruggero, “Esoterismo e studio accademico”, in Mauro Ruggero, *Le muse ermetiche. Esoterismo e occultismo nella letteratura italiana tra fin de siècle e avanguardia*, Milan, Jouvence, 2019, p. 21-68; Giorgio Galli, “In cerca del segreto”, in Giorgio Galli, *Esoterismo e politica*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2010, p. 7-19.

<sup>5</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism. A Guide for the Perplexed*, London-New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2016, p. VII.

Marco Pasi points out that “the historical study of esotericism is one of the youngest and most dynamic fields of research in contemporary historical-religious studies”,<sup>6</sup> and that “esotericism has historically manifested itself in the most diverse cultural fields: art, philosophy, literature, science”.<sup>7</sup> Pasi therefore highlights “the vitality”<sup>8</sup> of this field of study, characterised by its multi- and interdisciplinary nature. In fact, as Antoine Faivre writes, “the study of esoteric traditions and currents, of their reinterpretations and reconstructions, also implies [...] the study of their penetration of art, literature, music, science”, whilst “these migrations constitute a rich field of investigation on the multi- and interdisciplinary levels”, because “the esoteric form of thought is by itself, and par excellence, of a transdisciplinary nature”.<sup>9</sup> However, this rich and fertile field of investigation mainly concerns the literary domain, which constitutes a still unexplored research horizon, as Wouter Hanegraaff points out:

While the esoteric dimensions of visual art have come to be recognised more generally at least in the wake of *The Spiritual in Art*, there have been almost no systematic attempts yet to investigate them for the domain of literature. And yet, the potential here is at least as great, possibly even greater. [...] [T]he role of esotericism in the work of well-known poets and writers has been overlooked or wholly neglected, simply because specialists were unfamiliar or uncomfortable with it, and because they found it difficult (understandably enough) to find reliable scholarship that could help them interpret literary references to esoteric ideas and symbolism.<sup>10</sup>

The study of the relationships between literature and esotericism has often been viewed with suspicion by literary scholars. Back in 1955, Paul Arnold, in his book *L'Ésotérisme de Shakespeare* (The Esotericism of Shakespeare) deplored the fact that the intellectuals of his time, with rare exceptions, ignored and refused to acknowledge the influence of esotericism on most of the great literary works,<sup>11</sup> while recently Frank Greiner has spoken of this phenomenon in terms of a “critique of suspicion”<sup>12</sup> and Leigh Wilson, in her study on the relationship between Modernism and the occult, has pointed out that “the marginalisation of the occult in the modernist studies as the result of the critic’s desire that the writers and artists they work on

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<sup>6</sup> “Lo studio storico dell’esoterismo è uno dei campi di ricerca più giovani e dinamici nel panorama contemporaneo degli studi storico-religiosi”. *Dizionario del sapere storico-religioso del Novecento*, ed. Alberto Melloni, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2010, p. 585.

<sup>7</sup> “L’esoterismo si è storicamente manifestato nei campi culturali più disparati: arte, filosofia, letteratura, scienza”. *Ibid.*, p. 599.

<sup>8</sup> “La vitalità”. *Ibid.*, p. 585.

<sup>9</sup> “L’étude des traditions et des courants ésotériques, de leurs réinterprétations et reconstructions, implique également [...] celle de leurs migrations dans l’art, la littérature, la musique, la science”; “ces migrations constituent un riche terrain d’investigation sur les plans multi- et interdisciplinaire”; “la forme de pensée ésotérique est par elle-même, et par excellence, de nature transdisciplinaire”. Antoine Faivre, *Accès de l’ésotérisme occidental*, v. II, p. 40.

<sup>10</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism. A Guide for the Perplexed*, p. 149.

<sup>11</sup> See Paul Arnold, *Ésotérisme de Shakespeare*, Paris, Mercure de France, 1955, p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> “Critique du soupçon”. Frank Greiner, “Préface”, in James Dauphiné, *Ésotérisme et littérature. Étude de symbolique en littérature française et comparée du Moyen Âge à nos jours*, Paris, Eurédit, 2009, p. XXI.

be as ‘learned and respectable as they are’<sup>13</sup> Sylvain Ledda has rightly spoken of an “enlightening paradox” given that “the Hermetic tradition, the study of esotericism and the understanding of the impact of the occult sciences are still subject to a form of suspicion”<sup>14</sup> in academic studies, particularly in the field of literature.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, however, he acknowledges that today “sociology, the history of science and ideas, and literature are once again turning their attention to these richly instructive fields, which are indispensable for a real understanding of the fluctuations in the history of thought”.<sup>16</sup> But this does not mean that an expert on esotericism subscribes to the theories, thoughts and ideas associated with esoteric currents, because – as Ledda points out in the Foreword to the *Cahier de l’Herne - Mondes invisibles*, which is one of the most comprehensive recent works on the relationship between literature and esotericism – the approach must be objective and scientific, since the “intention is not to assess the credibility of this or that testimony, nor to adhere to this or that esoteric conception, occult practice or hermeticism”.<sup>17</sup> On the contrary, it is a question of “taking into account a whole part of our culture, whether it is denied or simply excluded from the field of epistemology”,<sup>18</sup> and of “examining the issues at stake in what sometimes looks like a counter-culture, or at the very least a reaction to a dominant culture or way of thinking”.<sup>19</sup> Thus, as Sylvain Ledda writes, the aim is to “seek to detect and follow the influence of the shadowy areas of our cultures”.<sup>20</sup>

Quoting a letter from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe to Passow of 20 October 1811,<sup>21</sup> Arthur Melzer mentions another cultural phenomenon that the German writer had highlighted and that concerns the study of esoteric currents, namely the “collective amnesia” concerning “the philosophical practice of esoteric writing”:

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<sup>13</sup> Leigh Wilson, *Modernism and Magic. Experiments with Spiritualism, Theosophy and the Occult*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2015, p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> “Paradoxe éclairant”; “la tradition hermétique, l’étude de l’ésotérisme, la compréhension de l’impact des sciences occultes font toujours l’objet d’une forme de suspicion”. Sylvain Ledda, “‘Nous contemplons l’obscur, l’inconnu, l’invisible’ – Avant-propos”, in *Mondes invisibles*, ed. Sylvain Ledda, Paris, Éditions de L’Herne, 2023, p. 12.

<sup>15</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> “Sociologie, histoire des sciences ou des idées, littérature se tournent à nouveau vers ces domaines riches d’enseignements, indispensables à la connaissance réelle des oscillations de l’histoire de la pensée”. *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> “Intention n’est pas d’évaluer la crédibilité de tel ou tel témoignage, ni d’adhérer à telle conception ésotérique, telle pratique occulte ou tel hermétisme”. *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> “De prendre en considération toute une partie de notre culture, qu’elle soit déniée ou simplement écartée du champ épistémologique”. *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> “De scruter les enjeux de ce qui s’apparente parfois à une contre-culture, ou à tout le moins à une réaction face à une culture ou une pensée dominantes”. *Ibid.*, p. 12-13.

<sup>20</sup> “Chercher à déceler et à suivre le rayonnement des zones d’ombre de nos cultures”. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>21</sup> See the letter from Goethe to Passow of 20 October 1811, in *Goethes Briefe und Briefe an Goethe*, ed. Karl Robert Mandelkow, Munich, Beck, v. 3, 1988, p. 168. This letter (translated into English by Werner J. Dannhauser) is also quoted in Arthur M. Melzer, *Philosophy Between the Lines. The Lost History of Esoteric Writing* [2014], Chicago & London, University of Chicago Press, 2017, p. XII. In the letter quoted by Arthur Melzer, Goethe also speaks of forgetting the distinction between the concept of “exoteric” and “esoteric”.

Through a slow act of collective amnesia, a well-known phenomenon has quietly been dropping out of awareness: the philosophic practice of esoteric writing. By this is meant the practice of communicating one's unorthodox thoughts primarily "between the lines," hidden behind a veneer of conventional pieties, for fear of persecution or for other reasons.<sup>22</sup>

According to Goethe, the intellectual life of Western culture underwent a form of collective intellectual amnesia from the second half of the eighteenth century onwards, and in the wake of this cultural transformation in the history of ideas, Arthur Melzer coined the concept of "philosophical forgetting".<sup>23</sup> He points out that "most philosophers of the past routinely hid some of their most important ideas beneath a surface of conventional opinions", adding that "if they wrote esoterically and we do not read them esoterically, we will necessarily misunderstand them".<sup>24</sup> Moreover, Melzer continues, "not only will we misunderstand all these thinkers as individuals, but through the accumulation of such errors, we will also form mistaken ideas about the relations among thinkers, about how ideas develop over time, about the whole movement and meaning of Western intellectual history".<sup>25</sup> The same idea had already been expounded in the 1930s by Leo Strauss, a political philosopher and professor at the University of Chicago, as Alexandre Kojève pointed out: "Leo Strauss has reminded us of what has tended to be too easily forgotten since the nineteenth century – that one ought not to take literally everything that the great authors of earlier times wrote, nor to believe that they made explicit in their writings all that they wanted to say in them".<sup>26</sup> Thus, the phenomenon highlighted by Arthur Melzer, of "reading esoteric writers nonesoterically",<sup>27</sup> involves a misinterpretation of the history of ideas, and the same logic also applies to literature, thus giving rise to an inaccurate or incomplete interpretation of literature, or rather the part of literature that conveys esoteric messages. Paraphrasing Melzer, if we read an esoteric literary text non-esoterically, we will not understand its true meaning, but only its exoteric meaning, namely the external one, which does not reflect the author's original intention, and which will just be the reader's personal and subjective interpretation, not the author's. In his book *Lector in fabula*, Umberto Eco (to whom I devote a chapter on the rose in the *Name of the Rose*) speaks of the interpretative freedom of the reader, but we must be careful with this freedom granted to the reader since, as Mario Praz rightly points out, the risk is that we may subscribe to the "ideas which are aroused in the mind of the interpreter, but which certainly did not exist in the mind of the artist".<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Arthur M. Melzer, *op. cit.*, p. XI.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. XII.

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

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. XIII.

<sup>26</sup> Alexandre Kojève, "The Emperor Julian and His Art of Writing", in *Ancients and Moderns. Essays on the Tradition of Political Philosophy in Honor of Leo Strauss*, ed. Joseph Cropsey, trans. James H. Nichols Jr., New York, Basic Books, 1964, p. 95.

<sup>27</sup> Arthur M. Melzer, *op. cit.*, p. XIV.

<sup>28</sup> Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, London, Oxford University Press, 1970, p. 6.



Suspicion around the esoteric interpretation of literature, ignorance in matters of esotericism and in the distinction between the concept of “esoteric” and “exoteric”, the consequent exoteric reading of an esoteric literary text, the forgetting of the subject of esoteric currents in the history of ideas and the forgetting of the philosophical practice of esoteric writing – all of these elements that characterise research on the relationship between literature and esotericism, as in the case of this thesis on the initiatory symbolism of the rose. In particular, the subject of my thesis fits into the logic of “forgetting”, of intellectual “amnesia” postulated by Arthur Melzer, in the wake of Goethe. My research, in fact, arises from and finds its inspiration in the forgotten work of the nineteenth-century scholar Gabriele Rossetti, who had to fight against the prejudices and attacks of his opponents in his time; in fact, even today his name is forgotten or marginalized in academic studies. The oblivion into which Gabriele Rossetti has fallen represents amnesia of one of the most important intellectual and historical figures of the nineteenth century, whose influence on the literature and culture of his time and of the following century is impressive, although this aspect is almost totally ignored and forgotten. It is no coincidence that Isaac Disraeli, father of Benjamin Disraeli, described one of Rossetti’s earliest works, the *Comento analitico* [Analytical comments (of *The Divine Comedy*)], as the “work of the century”.<sup>29</sup> Not to mention the strong influence of Gabriele Rossetti’s children on nineteenth and twentieth century culture, in particular Dante Gabriel Rossetti – the main exponent of the artistic and literary Pre-Raphaelite Movement.

But Gabriele Rossetti is not the subject of my thesis. Rossetti is merely the starting point. The same applies to Dante, as my research does not focus on the author of *The Divine Comedy*. Dante and the medieval *Fedeli d’Amore* were at the centre of Rossetti’s contribution, thus they form the basis of my study, which seeks to explore the influence that this phenomenon exerted in the history of ideas in later centuries, particularly the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. My work is thus an exploration of European literature (in particular, French and English), not solely Italian, through the study of the most important symbol of the doctrine of love in literature: the rose. Gabriele Rossetti, Luigi Valli and Alfonso Ricolfi repeatedly stress the importance of the rose symbol in understanding the esoteric dimension of the *topos* of love. *The Romance of the Rose* by Jean de Meung and Guillaume de Lorris (a work that was the basis of Rossetti and Valli’s research) clearly states that the doctrine of love is summarised in the mystery of the symbol of the rose: “ce est li romanz de la rose, / ou l’art d’amours est toute

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<sup>29</sup> The expression “work of the century” (“opera del secolo”) by Isaac Disraeli with regard to the *Comento analitico* (1826-1827) by Gabriele Rossetti is quoted in a letter of Dora Rossetti, dated 14 February 1826, addressed to Gabriele Rossetti. See *Gabriele Rossetti. Carteggi. Volume secondo (1826-1831)*, eds. Philippe R. Horne, Tobia R. Toscano, John R. Woodhouse, Naples, Loffredo, v. II, 1988, p. 19. Benjamin Disraeli considers the *Comento analitico* to be potentially the “work of the century”, because in order to be considered the most important work of the nineteenth century, the theories proposed in this work would have to be demonstrated and confirmed by future studies.

enclose”,<sup>30</sup> “*The Romance of the Rose* it is, and it enfolds / within its compass all the Art of Love”.<sup>31</sup>

The studies on the *Fedeli d'Amore* carried out so far mainly focus on the medieval period, while my research extends to later centuries, moving beyond Italy and paying particular attention to the symbol of the rose, whereas the focus in previous works was the *topos* of love. It goes without saying that the rose goes hand in hand with love in my study, as they are intrinsically linked. Furthermore, the study of the initiatory dimension of the rose in literature involves two fundamental strands related to the concept of initiation, namely mysticism and the initiatory Orders.<sup>32</sup> In the first case, the concept of initiation is linked to the mystical dimension of the initiatory journey, considered as an ontological transformation of the being – a path of perfection undertaken by the human being. In the second case, the symbolism of the rose refers to the esoteric currents in the history of ideas, and in this context the esoteric and initiatory Orders play a crucial role. These two strands are often interrelated, and one can see this dual approach in authors such as Gérard de Nerval or William Butler Yeats, in whom we find both an esoteric knowledge associated with a mystical dimension attained by enlightened individuals and a reference to the initiatory Orders of their times. The rose associated with the *topos* of love is key to addressing these two aspects of the history of ideas: one of a spiritual nature (spirituality understood as a way of perfecting the being), the other of a historical nature concerning religion and politics. In particular, the latter aspect concerns the occult history of Europe, or more generally the secret history of humanity. In this thesis, far from proposing a reading of reality based on so-called *conspiracy theories*,<sup>33</sup> we cannot deny or forget what Roberto de Mattei calls “the occult dimension of history”.<sup>34</sup> De Mattei maintains that “to deny on principle the existence of secret forces that move history is as foolish and childish as seeing conspiracies everywhere without ever giving proof of them”,<sup>35</sup> since “the existence of a

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<sup>30</sup> Guillaume de Lorris, Jean de Meung, *Le Roman de la Rose*, ed. Armand Strubel, Paris, Librairie Générale Française, 1992, p. 42, 44.

<sup>31</sup> Guillaume de Lorris, Jean de Meung, *The Romance of the Rose*, translated and edited by Frances Horgan, Oxford – New York, Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 4.

<sup>32</sup> In order to distinguish between the different connotations of the word “order”, I use the form with the initial capital letter (Order) to mean an initiatory organisation. By the same token, for the word “power” I use the word with an initial capital (Power) to mean the established, political and religious power.

<sup>33</sup> On conspiracy theories, see the excellent work of Clare Birchall. In particular, her book *Knowledge Goes Pop. From Conspiracy Theory to Gossip* is extremely interesting for my study of the initiatory symbolism of the rose. In fact, Birchall deals with the literary and scientific production of Umberto Eco, *Le Roman de la Rose* by Guillaume de Lorris and the theme of medieval love associated with the concept of secrecy. See Clare Birchall, *Knowledge Goes Pop. From Conspiracy Theory to Gossip*, Oxford, New York, Berg, 2006, p. 75-83, 100-101.

<sup>34</sup> “La dimensione occulta della storia”. Roberto de Mattei, *I sentieri del male. Congiure, cospirazioni, complotti*, Milan, Sugarco Edizioni, 2022, p. 19. In this book, Roberto de Mattei pays particular attention to two figures pertinent to my thesis, namely Umberto Eco and Abbé Augustin Barruel (whose work influenced Gabriele Rossetti). See *ibid.*, 113-120.

<sup>35</sup> “Negare di principio l’esistenza di forze segrete che muovono la storia è altrettanto sciocco e infantile che vedere ovunque complotti senza mai darne la prova”. *Ibid.*, p. 139.

multiplicity of secret societies and occult forces throughout history”<sup>36</sup> is undeniable. This occult history was the central theme of Gabriele Rossetti's works on the *topos* of love in European literature. Moreover, the study of the theme of love and the symbol of the rose inevitably leads to an analysis of the phenomenon of the secret history of Europe.

As mentioned above, Rossetti claimed that his theories on esoteric love were not only relevant to the Middle Ages, but also handed down through the Renaissance right up to the nineteenth century. Therefore, in my research I have devoted myself to writers and poets that the author of the *Mistero*, as well as the representatives of the so-called “heterodox” school of Dantean studies, had not studied. This implies that the study of the initiatory dimension of the symbolism of the rose leads to authors who are not necessarily linked to Rossetti’s research, to Dante or to the *Fedeli d’Amore*, as in the case of Jules Verne or Arthur Rimbaud. Nevertheless, in the majority of cases, we will see that the writers and poets central to this thesis are directly or indirectly linked to Dante and medieval love poetry, to the *Fedeli d’Amore* and even to Gabriele Rossetti.

After an extensive first part devoted to Dante and the writings in which love and the rose are present in the context of the Middle Ages, as well as the Renaissance, I concentrate specifically on authors of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as Gérard de Nerval, Joséphin Péladan, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Ezra Pound, William Butler Yeats and Umberto Eco. The first chapter deals with the figure of Gabriele Rossetti, through the presentation of his life and works. The aim of this chapter is not to give a biographical or bibliographical account of Rossetti, but to highlight the oblivion that he fell into and the direct and indirect influence of his contribution in the field of literature, but also more generally in the history of ideas, especially in the field of esoteric studies. The critical current he initiated had a remarkable impact on European culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the second chapter focuses on this interpretative current, tracing its evolution before and after Gabriele Rossetti’s contribution. In fact, the symbolic interpretation of Dante’s work and love poetry began with Boccaccio and continued from the fourteenth century until the esoteric interpretations of the nineteenth century. Therefore, this chapter explores the question of the esotericism of Dante and of the *Fedeli d’Amore* in academic debate over the centuries, with a particular focus on twentieth-century research. In the following three chapters, I examine the research topics of Gabriele Rossetti and the interpretative current that he started, devoting an entire chapter (chapter III) to *The Romance of the Rose*, a chapter to Dante and the *Fedeli d’Amore* (chapter IV) and a chapter to the symbolism of the rose during the Renaissance (chapter V). *The Romance of the Rose* chapter can be considered one of the few existing contributions on the

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<sup>36</sup> “L’esistenza di una molteplicità di società segrete e di forze occulte che percorrono la storia”. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

esoteric dimension of this French medieval work. The chapter on Dante and the *Fedeli d'Amore* presents, in a concise yet detailed manner, the complex discourse of Dantean esotericism and medieval love literature. In this chapter, particular attention is paid to literary texts through the analysis of some of the *Fedeli d'Amore* texts, in order to show the references that can be considered as linked to an esoteric and initiatory dimension. The chapter on the Renaissance is a development of Rossetti's research, as I focus on authors that Rossetti and his successors had not studied, and which may provide the basis for fruitful future research, for example, on William Shakespeare. A constant reference to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is one of the characteristics of this initial part of my research work, which highlights the interdisciplinarity and the strong relationships between the different eras, enabling the field of literary studies to communicate with the history of esotericism.

The second part of my thesis deals with the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Chapter VI introduces the esoteric context of the nineteenth century and focuses on French literature. The first two authors studied are Victor Hugo and Balzac, the two French writers considered by Gabriele Rossetti to be the repositories of the esoteric doctrine of Dante and the *Fedeli d'Amore*. Both Hugo and Balzac lead us to the subject of mysticism associated with the *topos* of love and the symbol of the rose, as well as the theme of nineteenth century Orders and initiatory circles. The latter leads us to Jules Verne, for whom love and the rose play a key role. Jules Verne probably belonged to a secret society, the *Société Angélique* (Angelical Society), as allegedly did Hugo and Nerval. Here literature meets history, since the hidden and secret history evoked by Balzac, George Sand or Gabriele Rossetti is confirmed in the documents of Giacomo Rumor, one of the most important Italian political figures of the twentieth century, not only in Italy, but also across Europe. These are documents written by his son Paolo Rumor and which, to my knowledge, have not been studied or even mentioned in academic research. The secret history is thus approached both through literature and through historical documents that mention, among others, the writers who are central to my work. Chapter VII is devoted to Gérard de Nerval, whose rose and love in his literary production also leads us to explore the Sufism of the Persian tradition (studied in particular by Henry Corbin, who was influenced by Rossetti's and Valli's studies on the *Fedeli d'Amore*), as well as the initiatory and esoteric Germanic panorama, from Goethe to Mozart's music, in which the symbolism of the rose plays a major role. The next chapter (VIII) deals with Joséphin Péladan and the Rosicrucian tradition, touching on authors such as Stanislas de Guaita or the English writer Edward George Bulwer Lytton with his initiatory novel *Zanoni*. Chapter IX is devoted to English literature, in particular to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, son of Gabriele Rossetti, and William Blake. The study of the rose in these two poets and artists is linked to Seymour Stocker Kirkup, who was a friend of Blake and the person to whom Gabriele Rossetti dedicated his *Mistero dell'Amor Platonico*. Chapter

X begins with a study of the esoteric rose by the Irish poet William Butler Yeats, who gives pivotal importance to the rose. For example, one thinks of the poem *To the Secret Rose* or the Order of the Alchemical Rose, which he mentions several times. Yeats provides a link to one of the most important figures of English occultism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: Aleister Crowley. This is therefore a relationship dictated by membership of the same esoteric circles of the time, in particular the Golden Dawn, to which both Crowley and Yeats belonged. Whilst it is true that Aleister Crowley was an occultist, he was also a poet, even if this aspect is ignored or neglected, and he writes a poem called *Rosa Mundi*, where the initiatory nature of the rose symbol is evident. In addition to Crowley, Yeats' literary production leads to one of the cardinal figures of twentieth-century English literature: James Joyce. Yeats and Joyce were both Irish and both attracted by the occult. Although the relationship between Yeats and the occult is out of the question, which is acknowledged by the critics, the same cannot be said for Joyce, whose esoteric dimension in his literary production has been only partially explored. In Joyce's work, the rose is a recurring symbol, associated with Dante and esoteric traditions and thought, of which he is a profound connoisseur. Another figure linked to William Butler Yeats is Ezra Pound, but I have devoted a whole chapter to him (XI), because he is the author who, more than any other, is linked to Gabriele Rossetti and to the question of the esotericism of Dante and of medieval love poetry. Pound's rose is an opportunity to address not only the mystical dimension, but also the secret history of Europe – themes that were at the basis of Gabriele Rossetti's research. Moreover, the study of Pound's mystical rose introduces the figure of Olivia Rossetti Agresti, daughter of William Michael Rossetti, thus the granddaughter of Gabriele Rossetti. Pound established an epistolary correspondence with her, the contents of which are set out in this chapter on the initiatory rose of the author of the *Cantos*. The subject of Chapter XII is alchemy, and the alchemical rose. Here, particular attention is paid to the figure of Fulcanelli and his work *Le Mystère des Cathédrales* (The Mystery of the Cathedrals), in which at the beginning of the twentieth century he revealed knowledge of an esoteric nature related to the alchemical art. Other important figures in this sense, discussed in this chapter, are Fulcanelli's disciple Eugène Canseliet and the bookseller Pierre Dujols, whose writings are closely related to the esotericism of the *Fedeli d'Amore*. On the relationship between literature and alchemy, particular attention is paid to the Argentinean poet and writer Jorge Luis Borges, who was to have a profound influence on Umberto Eco and his work *The Name of the Rose*. The chapter ends with Elémire Zolla, one of the most important intellectuals of twentieth-century Italian culture. His vast erudition in the fields of literature and alchemy enabled him to develop the links between these two fields, revisiting most of the topics discussed in this thesis. Chapter XIII also deals with alchemy, but here it is studied through one author in particular: Carl Gustav Jung and his *Red Book*. This work has not received the attention it deserves from

the critics, but it is Jung's literary masterpiece, in which we find alchemical knowledge imbued with mysticism and linked to the symbolism of the rose, to the theme of love and, in particular, to the concept of faithfulness to love. Jung was, in fact, influenced by Luigi Valli and his work on the esotericism of Dante and the *Fedeli d'Amore*. This source is evident in one of Jung's most important works, namely *Psychology and Alchemy*. After these two sections devoted to alchemy, Chapter XIV deals with the Italian esoteric context at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, specifically the Confraternity of Miriam created in Naples by the esotericist Giuliano Kremmerz. Scientific research on Kremmerz and his Neapolitan esoteric school represents an unexplored field of investigation, not only in the field of esoteric studies but also in the literary field, because in Kremmerz and the representatives of his school there are themes such as esoteric love, the initiatory dimension of the rose, the links between the *Fedeli d'Amore*, the troubadours and the authors of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as the world of the occult and the invisible. Chapter XV deals with the mystical rose in European literature. The first part of this chapter focuses on authors from French, English and Italian literature such as Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Valéry, Czeslaw Milosz, Edouard Schuré, Charles Williams and Gabriele D'Annunzio. A particular feature of this chapter is that it also focuses on little-known authors (beyond their national borders) from French, English and Italian literature. The two authors who conclude the chapter are Rainer Maria Rilke and Fernando Pessoa. The latter summarises all the elements involved in this study of the initiatory symbolism of the rose, such as mysticism and initiation in relation to the initiatory Orders. The authors in this chapter represent, in different ways, all the themes in my study: the esoteric dimension of the symbol of the rose and the *topos* of love, participation in the initiatory milieu, the relationship with the esotericism of Dante and love literature, as well as the direct or indirect links with Gabriele Rossetti. The last chapter, XVI, is centred round the rose of Umberto Eco in his *Name of the Rose*. Eco himself encompasses both the figure of the writer and of the literary critic. In fact, Eco was responsible in the 1980s for raising the question of esotericism in Dante and the *Fedeli d'Amore* and its first tentative appearance in the field of academic research. Eco wrote novels impregnated with esotericism and concentrated on themes of esotericism. He embodies the figure of the man of letters and, at the same time, of the historian. This characteristic is also the approach I take in my work, which brings together two fields of research: literary studies and esoteric studies in the history of ideas. Particular importance is given to the literary text, which becomes a true historical datum, whilst historical documents become a scientific and objective means of demonstrating the presence of elements of esoteric thought and tradition in literary works. Thus, history explains literature and literature becomes history.

This thesis therefore proposes a rethinking of literature – a literature in which esoteric currents do not play a marginal or secondary role, but rather are the main reason why the literary work was written. This does not mean that literature is entirely influenced by esoteric thought, but that a part of literature (to which many of the most important authors of any age belong) is permeated by elements that refer to the esoteric tradition. In this regard, Frank Greiner has rightly stated that “many authors have found in the esoteric tradition, if not a source of inspiration, at least interesting ideas, themes, metaphors and motifs”.<sup>37</sup> It is therefore not necessarily a question of a literary filiation linked to the transmission of an esoteric doctrine but also, as Greiner has pointed out, a question of literary creation more or less influenced by esoteric thought and motifs.<sup>38</sup>

Concerning the esoteric and initiatory dimension of the symbolism of the rose, linked to the history of the *Fedeli d'Amore*, as Luigi Valli writes in his *Linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d'Amore*, the hypothesis of “the veil of love poetry”<sup>39</sup> implies a rewriting of the history of literature: “if this hypothesis is true, many chapters of our literary history will have to be rewritten, suffice it to say that we may be holding a unique thread that secretly connects and explains a series of works such as *The Romance of the Rose*, all the *dolce stil novo* poems, *The Divine Comedy*, the *Documenti d'Amore* and *L'Acerba*”.<sup>40</sup> The hypothesis of which Valli speaks is that of a literature closely linked to esoteric currents, and the “unique thread” that he evokes is linked, directly or indirectly, to the works of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as the chapters that follow this introduction aim to show.

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<sup>37</sup> “De nombreux auteurs ont trouvé dans la tradition ésotérique sinon une source d’inspiration, du moins des idées, des thèmes, des métaphores, des motifs intéressants”. Frank Greiner, “Préface”, in James Dauphiné, *op. cit.*, p. XV.

<sup>38</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> “Il velame della poesia d’amore”. Luigi Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d’Amore* [1928], Milan, Luni, 2013, p. 492.

<sup>40</sup> “Se quest’ipotesi è vera, molti capitoli della nostra storia letteraria dovranno essere rifatti, basti pensare che abbiamo forse in mano un filo unico che ricollega segretamente e segretamente spiega una serie di opere come il *Roman de la Rose*, tutte le poesie del *dolce stil novo*, la *Divina Commedia*, i *Documenti d’Amore* e *L’Acerba*”. *Ibid.*

## CHAPTER I

### GABRIELE ROSSETTI: A FORGOTTEN MAN OF LETTERS

*“Une sorte de Hugo initiatique et sectaire”*: Gabriele Rossetti

In a letter published in the *Spiritual Scientist* on 23 September 1875 by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky addressed to one of her correspondents, she speaks about Gabriele Rossetti, presenting him as the scholar who showed the esoteric dimension of literature, a literature that spread an occult and subterranean continuity of philosophical and religious ideas throughout the history:

The works of the Hermetic Philosophers were never intended for the masses, as Mr. Charles Sotheran, one of the most learned members of the Society *Rosae Crucis*, in a late essay, thus observes: “Gabriele Rossetti in his *Disquisitions on the Antipapal spirit, which produced the Reformation*, shows that the art of speaking and writing in a language which bears a double interpretation, is of very great antiquity; that it was in practice among the priests of Egypt, brought from thence by the Manichees, whence it passed to the Templars and Albigenses, spread over Europe, and brought about the Reformation.<sup>1</sup>

Madam Blavatsky evokes the theory of an occult underground doctrine that spread throughout history, from East to West, which she does by mentioning Gabriele Rossetti and his book *Disquisitions on the Antipapal Spirit*.<sup>2</sup> This work was mostly known in Europe (especially in the Anglophone world), simply because it was the only book by Rossetti translated into English, but his greatest masterpiece is *Il Mistero dell’Amor Platonico del Medio Evo* (1840), which can be considered as the first research work that systematically<sup>3</sup> studies not only Dante’s esotericism but more generally the relations between esotericism and literature, from troubadour and trouvère love poetry to Chaucer, from the Renaissance theory of love by Marsilio Ficino to the nineteenth century.

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<sup>1</sup> “From Madame H. P. Blavatsky to her correspondents. An open letter by H. P. Blavatsky such a few can write”, in *H. P. Blavatsky. Collected Writings. 1874-1878*, Wheaton, The Theosophical Press, v. I, 1966, p. 126. This letter by Madame Blavatsky was published for the first time in *Spiritual Scientist*, Boston, v. III, 23 September 1875, p. 25-27.

<sup>2</sup> Gabriele Rossetti, *Disquisitions on the Antipapal Spirit which Produced the Reformation; its Influence of the Literature of Europe in General, and of Italy in Particular*, translated from Italian into English by Caroline Ward, Smith, Elder & Co., London, 1834.

<sup>3</sup> I stress the importance of the word “systematic” (“systematically”) because, as we shall see in Chapter II, before Gabriele Rossetti’s contribution other scholars and men of letters proposed a symbolic interpretation of Dante’s work and of medieval love literature. However, no scholar has presented an esoteric interpretation as complete, detailed and exhaustive as Rossetti’s.



Though Madam Blavatsky credits Gabriele Rossetti with revealing the occult nature of literature, studies on Western Esotericism rarely mention his name, whilst in the literary field he has been almost completely forgotten and relegated to the margins of academic debate. Yet Gabriele Rossetti was the pioneer of what is now called “Dantean esotericism”, an expression which is usually associated with a book by René Guénon, *L'Ésotérisme de Dante* (The Esotericism of Dante) of 1925.<sup>4</sup> Rossetti was, in fact, the first scholar who proposed an esoteric interpretation of *The Divine Comedy*, as well as of medieval love poetry. Thus, he presented literature in a new light, based on the esoteric dimension hidden in literary texts. To my knowledge, Gabriele Rossetti was the first to propose a systematic study of the relations between literature and esotericism, and by doing so he produced one of the first accounts of the history of Western esoteric currents. He can thus be considered one of the pioneers in the field of Western esotericism studies, to such an extent that the historian Alessandro Grossato defined Gabriele Rossetti as the pioneer of studies on Western esotericism in his article “Gabriele Rossetti, autore della prima storia dell'esoterismo occidentale” (“Gabriele Rossetti, author of the first history of Western esotericism”).<sup>5</sup> In his pioneering work on the relations between esotericism and literature, Rossetti focuses on different esoteric currents: Ancient Egyptian and Greek mysteries, the Chaldaic religion, the Assyrian religion, the Persian Sufi tradition, the Indian mystical tradition, Brahmanism, Manichaeism, Catharism, Neo-Platonism, Swedenborgism and modern freemasonry. Therefore, he proposed a rethinking of literature, namely a European literature profoundly influenced by esoteric currents, and thus gave rise to the so-called “heterodox” current of Dantean studies. These developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and include figures such as Ugo Foscolo,<sup>6</sup> Giovanni Pascoli, Luigi Valli, Francesco Perez, Eugène Aroux, René Guénon, Alexandre Masseron, Pierre Mandonnet, Alfonso Ricolfi or Michelangelo Caetani.

As with Gabriele Rossetti's writing, the critical current he started has been relegated to the fringes of academic debate, but recent studies have shown the validity of much of his exegetical contribution, with implications not just of interest to the literary world but also, and particularly, to studies on Western esotericism. In recent decades, the most comprehensive and in-depth study on Dantean esotericism is, to my knowledge, one by Stefano Salzani, *Luigi Valli e l'esoterismo di Dante* (Luigi Valli and the esotericism of Dante),<sup>7</sup> which is the result of his international joint PhD thesis, *Luigi Valli (1878-1931). Contribution à l'histoire des*

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<sup>4</sup> René Guénon, *L'Ésotérisme de Dante*, Paris, Ch. Bosse Libraire, 1925.

<sup>5</sup> Alessandro Grossato, “Gabriele Rossetti, autore della prima storia dell'esoterismo occidentale”, *Archivi di studi indo-mediterranei*, V, 2015, p. 1-8.

<sup>6</sup> In reality, Ugo Foscolo published his works about the “occult system” of *The Divine Comedy* at the same time as the publication of Gabriele Rossetti's works. Rossetti and Foscolo were both exiles in London.

<sup>7</sup> Stefano Salzani, *Luigi Valli e l'esoterismo di Dante*, San Marino, Il Cerchio, 2014.

*interprétations ésotériques de l'œuvre de Dante* [Luigi Valli (1878-1931). Contribution to the history of the esoteric interpretations of Dante's work], under the direction of Jean-Pierre Brach (École Pratique des Hautes Études - Paris) and Adriana Cavarero (University of Verona). Stefano Salzani's excellent work can be considered the first scientific study that deals with the historical and phenomenological reconstruction of the theme of esotericism attributed to Dante. Salzani focuses on the figure of Luigi Valli, who was the major exponent in the twentieth century of the esoteric current of Dantean studies, and whose most important publication was *Il Linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d'Amore* (The Secret Language of Dante and of the Faithful to Love, 1928).

As far as Gabriele Rossetti is concerned, the only academic study entirely devoted to him and to his work is a doctoral thesis by Mariella Di Brigida, developed at the University of Chieti in Italy and published under the title *Gabriele Rossetti. Taccuini inediti*.<sup>8</sup> Mariella Di Brigida carried out her research in the British Columbia Archives of Vancouver ("Fondo Angeli-Dennis"), which holds a large collection of Rossetti's unpublished writings. Part of these manuscripts have been studied by Mariella Di Brigida, but there is still a large quantity of material that could lead to sensational and unexpected discoveries, both in the field of literary studies and in the study of esotericism in the history of ideas.

Outside Italy, one of the scholars who brought the figure of Gabriele Rossetti to the attention of the European public, especially the Francophone one, is Bruno Pinchard, who defined the author of *Il Mistero dell'Amor Platonico* thus: "Rossetti is a sort of initiatory and sectarian Hugo, whose hermeticism, like that of George Sand, Pierre Leroux or Gérard de Nerval, is a hermeticism of emancipation".<sup>9</sup> In this sentence, Bruno Pinchard perfectly captures the dual aspects characterizing his personality and his research interests: political engagement and the study of esotericism. But who precisely was Gabriele Rossetti?<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Gabriele Rossetti. Taccuini inediti*, ed. Mariella Di Brigida, Lanciano, Carabba, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> "Rossetti est une sorte d'Hugo initiatique et sectaire, dont l'hermétisme, comme celui de George Sand, de Pierre Leroux ou de Gérard de Nerval, est un hermétisme de l'émancipation". Bruno Pinchard, "Soleil dans les gémeaux. L'ésotérisme de Dante selon Gabriele Rossetti", *Journal de la Renaissance*, v. 2, Centre d'Études supérieures de la Renaissance, Université François Rabelais de Tours, Turnhout, Brepols, 2004, p. 251.

<sup>10</sup> On the life of Gabriele Rossetti, see Pompeo Giannantonio, *Bibliografia di Gabriele Rossetti (1806- 1958)*, Florence, Sansoni, 1959; Eric Reginald Pearce Vincent, *Gabriele Rossetti in England*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1936; Ross Douglass Waller, *The Rossetti Family*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1932; Pier Luigi Vercesi, *Il naso di Dante*, Vicenza, Neri Pozza, 2018, p. 51-84; Margaret Campbell Walker Wicks, *The Italian Exiles in London, 1816-1848*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1937, p. 163-172. For a profile of Gabriele Rossetti, see Pompeo Giannantonio, "Rossetti, Gabriele", in *Enciclopedia Dantesca*, Rome, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana fondata da Giovanni Treccani, 1973, p. 1042-1043.

*The story of a dangerous book: Il Mistero dell'Amor Platonico*

Gabriele Rossetti was a poet and Professor of Italian literature at King's College in London,<sup>11</sup> where he lived not because he had decided to spend his life in the English capital, but because he was exiled during the revolutionary movements of 1820-1821 in Italy. He came from a family of humble origins, the son of a blacksmith, but his life took an unexpected turn which was undoubtedly painful for him, but his personal suffering led to some of the most important events in the history of ideas and in our recent culture: the first presentation of an esoteric reading of literature and the birth of the artistic and literary Pre-Raphaelite movement represented by Rossetti's sons, whose impact at cultural level was (and is still) impressive. Born in Vasto, a small town in central Italy, Gabriele Rossetti excelled from adolescence in the art of poetry. His literary talent was noticed by the Marquis Tommaso D'Avalos who sent him to Naples where he was educated and where, after graduating, his life took an unexpected turn. He actively participated in the political life of his times and came into contact with the initiatory milieu of Naples. More importantly, he became a member of the *Carboneria*, a secret society of liberal and democratic inspiration that was active during the Italian revolutionary movements of 1820-21 against Austrian domination.<sup>12</sup> During the 1820 insurrections, a list of proscriptions was drawn up, which contained just thirteen names, one of which was Gabriele Rossetti's. He was unfairly considered as one of the most subversive and dangerous insurgents, and as a result he was condemned to death. He was therefore obliged to leave Naples and go into exile, first in Malta (where he stayed for three years from 1821 to 1824), and subsequently in London, where he arrived on 7 April 1824 and where he spent the rest of his life.

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<sup>11</sup> Gabriele Rossetti was the first Italian Professor at King's College in London, where he taught for sixteen years, from 1831 to 1847. The fact of being the first Italian Professor is stressed by Gabriele Rossetti himself, in one of his poetical compositions: "You want to justly boast, and not insane pride, / that I am swimming in the later future / that the first Professor of Italian / in the King's College was the exultant bard. / Oh almost different kings, I sometimes said, / one wanted to hang me, the other honours me" ("Vuoi giusto vanto, e non orgoglio insano, / ch'io faccia nuoto all'avvenir più tardo / che il primo Professor d'Italiano / nel Collegio del Re fu l'esul bardo. / Oh quasi diversi re, dissi talora, / l'un mi volle impiccar, l'altro mi onora"). Gabriele Rossetti, *La vita mia. Il testamento*, ed. Gianni Oliva, Lanciano, Carabba, 2004, p. 112. On the experience of Gabriele Rossetti as a Professor of Italian literature at King's College, see Eric Reginald Pearce Vincent, *op. cit.*, p. 21; Margaret Campbell Walker Wicks, *op. cit.*, p. 170; Tobia R. Toscano, "Introduzione", in *Gabriele Rossetti. Carteggi. Volume secondo (1826-1831)*, p. XX.

<sup>12</sup> It is important to note that on 13 September 1821, Pius VII promulgated the encyclical *Ecclesiam a Jesu Christo*, which condemned the Carbonari and the Freemasons. The Church's condemnation of secret societies was reiterated by Leo XII in his encyclical *Quo graviora* of 13 March 1825, by Pius VIII in his encyclical *Traditi humiliati* of 24 May 1830, and by Gregory XVI in his encyclical *Mirari Vos* of 15 August 1832. In a letter from Giuseppe Mazzini to Gabriele Rossetti dated April 1841, Mazzini asked Rossetti for information about the papal excommunication of the Carboneria in 1821 (which he confused with the year 1820): "I promised to send to a friend in New York a copy of the Excommunication, issued, I believe, in 1820. Could you indicate where I might find it?" ("Ho promesso di mandare a[d] un amico a New York la copia della Scomunica, lanciata, credo, nel 1820. Sapreste indicarmi dove potrei trovarla?"). In *Gabriele Rossetti. Carteggi. Volume quinto (1841-1847)*, eds. Alfonso Caprio, Philip Horne, Sergio Minichini, John Woodhouse, Naples, Loffredo, 2001, p. 55.

In London, Gabriele Rossetti married Frances Lavinia Polidori (daughter of Gaetano Polidori, secretary of Vittorio Alfieri), sister of the author of *The Vampyre* (1819),<sup>13</sup> John William Polidori, and with her he had four children: Maria Francesca, Dante Gabriel, William Michael and Christina Georgina.

At that time, the intellectual elite of London welcomed Italian exiles of the Risorgimento, such as Ugo Foscolo or Giuseppe Mazzini,<sup>14</sup> and the fact that he was a freemason gave him introductions to English cultural and social circles. His membership of nineteenth-century initiatory circles facilitated periods abroad in Malta and London. In addition to being a member of the Carboneria and a freemason (to which he was initiated up to the third degree)<sup>15</sup> he also belonged to a Rosicrucian society, though little is known about the latter.

Two people were extremely important for Gabriele Rossetti during his exile abroad: John Hookham Frere (1769-1846) and Charles Lyell (1767-1849), the two patrons who helped him economically and financed the publication of his works. John Hookham Frere was an English diplomat and a freemason that Rossetti met during the time he spent in Malta, while Charles Lyell was a Scottish botanist, as well as a translator of Dante.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *The Vampyre* is a literary work which would deserve particular attention for the presence of esoteric elements.

<sup>14</sup> On the exiles in London after the Italian insurrectional movements, see the study by Margaret Campbell Walker Wicks, *The Italian Exiles in London, 1816-1848*.

<sup>15</sup> In a letter to Charles Lyell on 18 March 1830, Gabriele Rossetti affirms that he reached the third degree of masonic initiation: “and me, old Freemason since 1809, [...] I did not go beyond the third degree” (“ed io, vecchio massone fin dal 1809, [...] io non passai mai oltre il terzo grado”). *Gabriele Rossetti. Carteggi. Volume secondo (1826-1831)*, p. 516. In a letter addressed to Charles Lyell on 18 January 1828, Gabriele Rossetti speaks about belonging to the Carboneria and to Freemasonry, and he does so by referring to the book *Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire du Jacobinisme* (Hamburg, Fauche, 5 v., 1798-1799) by the French Jesuit Augustin Barruel (1741-1820), which was one of Rossetti’s sources and which focuses on the topic of occult conspiracy elaborated by some masonic and Jacobin lodges to the detriment of Christianity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: “concerning Barruel, you can be sure that what he says about Freemasonry is true. [...] Everything I have seen among the freemasons, up to the degrees where I was initiated is exactly what he describes. So I deduce that the same thing can be said for the rest” (“riguardo al Barruel, potete essere sicurissimo che quello che dice è vero circa la Maçonnerie. [...] Tutto ciò ch’io ho veduto fra i muratori, sino ai gradi in cui fui iniziato, è esattamente quello che egli scrive. Quindi deduco che del resto sarà così. È declamatore, è parziale, ma è veridico; e nessuno lo ha mai smentito”). In *ibid.*, p. 304. In another letter to Charles Lyell on 9 March 1829, Rossetti confirms he is a *carbonaro* and freemason up to a certain degree, and explain the difference between Carboneria and Freemasonry: “I can swear, on my honour, that in the Carboneria (which is a form of the Freemasonry and I know it up to the last degrees, while in the Free-Masonry I did not go beyond), where everything is the passion of Jesus Christ in its first degrees, and at the end one declares that those are only emblems. The dead Jesus Christ becomes man oppressed by Tyranny and by superstition, and the Pope becomes Herod and Pontius Pilate, servant and minister of the devil, who condemned him to death [...]. When I put symbols and facts together of ancient and modern sects you will surely see that those ones are a continuation of these ones. This will be the most important point of my discoveries, namely demonstrating that those writings in the sacred part are freemasons, masked with an imperceptible art” {“io posso giurarvi, sull’onore mio, che in Carboneria (la qual è una riforma della Maçonnerie e la quale io conosco sino ai suoi ultimi gradi, mentre nella Maçonnerie non giunsi sì oltre), dove tutto è passione di Gesù Cristo ne’ grandi primi, al termine vien dichiarato che quelli son puri emblemi. Gesù Cristo morto diviene l’Uomo oppresso dalla tirannia e dalla superstizione, e il Papa diviene Erode o Pilato, servo o ministro del diavolo, che lo condannò a morte [...]. Quando raccosterò simboli e fatti tra le antiche sette e le moderne vedrete che queste sono una continuazione di quelle, sicurissimamente. Questo sarà il punto più essenziale delle mie scoperte, il dimostrare che quelli scritti nella parte sacra sono muratori, mascherati con un’arte impercettibile”}. *Ibid.*, p. 416.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Lyell was the father of a more famous Charles Lyell (1797-1875), his son, who was one of the most important geologists of the nineteenth century.

In London, Rossetti published his works on the esotericism of Dante and of medieval love poetry, and about the relationship between European literature and esoteric currents. As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Rossetti's best-known work in Europe (especially in the Anglophone world) was *Sullo spirito antipapale che produsse la Riforma*,<sup>17</sup> simply because it was the only work by Rossetti translated into English. The translation is by one of his faithful students at King's College in London, Carolina Ward. In addition to the *Disquisitiones*, in which Rossetti set out his discoveries, he produced the *Commento Analitico de la Divina Commedia* (Analytical Commentary on the Divine Comedy, 1826-1827),<sup>18</sup> the *Mistero dell'Amor Platonico del Medio Evo* and *La Beatrice di Dante* (The Beatrice of Dante, 1842, 1935).<sup>19</sup> The two latter works can be considered as the most important ones that he wrote, in particular, the *Mistero dell'Amor Platonico*, but this book had a difficult life: it was withdrawn from circulation and destroyed. In fact, Rossetti's main patron, John Hookham Frere, did not want the book to be published. Rossetti had confidentially sent his work to Frere who, after reading it, prevented the publication, because he considered this work to be dangerous. Therefore, the book had to be burned to destroy any trace of it. In two letters of 1832 to Rossetti, Frere wrote:

The Apocalypse is appointed to remain sealed to the time of the end. At this time of the end, many of the harmonies of the ancient and primitive world; now prohibited to profane and impious curiosity, will be developed and revealed, but in the meantime. It is an inexpiable crime to attempt to break open the sanctuary in which they are concealed [...].<sup>20</sup>

Pray think well and consult with conscientious men and with your own conscience before you venture on the irretrievable step of revealing one of the two great antagonist mysteries. My firm conviction and apprehension is that it will be ruinous to your fortune and future peace of mind.<sup>21</sup>

But Gabriele Rossetti decided to persevere. He did not want all the years he had spent working on the *Mistero dell'Amor Platonico del Medio Evo* to be in vain. Thus, despite the obstacles, Gabriele Rossetti stubbornly succeeded in publishing his work. He wrote to John Hookham Frere to inform him that he would only publish a few copies, and these copies would be distributed privately to his most faithful followers in Europe. Eventually, in 1840, *Il Mistero*

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<sup>17</sup> Gabriele Rossetti, *Sullo spirito antipapale che produsse la Riforma, e sulla segreta influenza ch'esercitò nella letteratura d'Europa, e specialmente d'Italia: come risulta da molti suoi classici, massime da Dante, Petrarca, Boccaccio: disquisizioni di Gabriele Rossetti*, London, R. Taylor, 1832.

<sup>18</sup> Gabriele Rossetti, *La Divina Commedia di Dante Alighieri con commento analitico di Gabriele Rossetti in 6 volumi*, London, John Murray, 1826-1827.

<sup>19</sup> Gabriele Rossetti, *La Beatrice di Dante. Ragionamenti critici* [1842], ed. Maria Luisa Giartosio De Courten, preface by Balbino Giuliano, Rome, Atanor, 1982. *La Beatrice di Dante* was partly published in 1842, whilst the complete work was not published until 1935.

<sup>20</sup> Letter from John Hookham Frere to Gabriele Rossetti on 29 June 1833, in *Gabriele Rossetti. Carteggi. Volume terzo (1832-1836)*, eds. A. Caprio, P. Horne and J. Woodhouse, Naples, Loffredo, v. III, 1984, p. 275.

<sup>21</sup> Letter from John Hookham Frere to Gabriele Rossetti on 31 July 1833, in *ibid.*, p. 287.

*dell'Amor Platonico* was published. Only seventy-two copies were distributed: fifty in England, twenty in Italy and two in Germany.<sup>22</sup> The *Mistero dell'Amor Platonico* soon became a rarity, and after Rossetti's death, his wife Frances Polidori was obliged to burn all the copies in her possession for fear of reprisal against herself and her children, as well as with the aim of defending the honour and the name of her family and her husband.<sup>23</sup> She burned all the copies she had, except for the copy with her husband's annotations. Thus, *Il Mistero dell'Amor Platonico* became an almost unfindable book, full of unpublished documentation.

But why was there such an aversion to this book? Why did John Hookham Frere consider it as dangerous, whilst for the literary critics it was a folly, or literary extravagance? A plausible reply is given by Douglas Waller who affirms that the danger of Rossetti's book lay in the fact that this work would reveal the sectarian and secret traditions jealousy kept by the Freemasons.<sup>24</sup> Paolo Peluffo agrees with this, pointing out that "at the time [the first half of the nineteenth century], studies on initiatory traditions such as those that would appear in France at the end of the nineteenth century had not yet been developed",<sup>25</sup> and adds that "arguments about sects and secret societies may have raised some eyebrows",<sup>26</sup> which is why "perhaps his English friend feared that Rossetti was embarking on a risky operation to unravel sectarian traditions and beliefs jealously guarded within Scottish Rite lodges".<sup>27</sup> "The freemasonic interpretation of literature"<sup>28</sup> is the expression used by Philip Horne and John Woodhouse to define the interpretation of literature proposed by Gabriele Rossetti.

According to Rossetti, Dante shared an initiatory doctrine with the Order of the so-called *Fedeli d'Amore* (Faithful of Love), a secret Brotherhood composed of medieval love poets (belonging to the *Dolce Stil Novo*, the 'Sweet New Style' – the medieval literary school of Italian love poetry), whose love poetry was based on a cryptic and coded language, in which the literary theme of love was not a feeling or erotic impulse expressed in poetic verses but a language that hid mystical and initiatory ideas, as well as political and religious messages that were specifically anti-papal ideas. Basically, it was a form of jargon used by the members of

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<sup>22</sup> See Pier Luigi Vercesi, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

<sup>23</sup> William Michael Rossetti was a fundamental figure in defending the reputation of his father and his family, and thanks to him we have a great deal of information about his father.

<sup>24</sup> See Douglas Waller, *op. cit.*, p. 105-106.

<sup>25</sup> "All'epoca non si erano ancora sviluppati studi sulle tradizioni iniziatiche come quelli che sarebbero comparsi in Francia alla fine dell'Ottocento". Paolo Peluffo, "Introduzione", in Gabriele Rossetti, *Il mistero dell'Amor platonico del Medio Evo*, v. I, p. XXVII.

<sup>26</sup> "Argomentazioni circa sette e società segrete potrebbero aver suscitato qualche malumore". *Ibid.*, p. XXVI.

<sup>27</sup> "Forse l'amico inglese temeva che Rossetti si stesse imbarcando in una rischiosa operazione di disvelamento di tradizioni settarie e convinzioni gelosamente custodite all'interno delle logge di rito scozzese". *Ibid.*, p. XXVI-XXVII.

<sup>28</sup> "L'interpretazione framassonica della letteratura". Philippe R. Horne and John R. Woodhouse, "Il carteggio Rossetti-Lyell", in *Gabriele Rossetti. Carteggi. Volume secondo (1826-1831)*, p. XXVI.

the Order to communicate among themselves, without being discovered by the ecclesiastical Power.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, all the women praised by the *Dolce Stil Novo* poets were nothing more than the same woman, namely Sophia, the personification of Divine Wisdom. But the word “woman” had different meanings according to the context: it could symbolise the secret doctrine of the *Fedeli d’Amore*, the different initiatory Orders to which the love poets belonged, or it could indicate the poet himself. For Rossetti, the origins of the secret doctrine of love, the metaphysical love for Divine Wisdom, are to be found in the Egyptian and Greek traditions, linked to Pythagorean philosophy, subsequently passed on to the Manicheans. The esoteric doctrine of love was thus transmitted from the East (in particular, the Persian and Sufi tradition, imbued with Manichaeism) to the West, from Eastern literature to Western literature, especially through the Crusades. More precisely, the doctrine of mystical love was brought to Provence in southern France, where the troubadours sang about it, as did the trouvère poets in the north. It then passed to the Italian poets of the Middle Ages (from the poets of Frederick II’s Sicilian court to the love poets of Tuscany). According to Rossetti, this esoteric doctrine then reached the Renaissance, and eventually the nineteenth century, through Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry. Therefore, in his study, Rossetti covers a vast time span, as he himself states in a letter to Charles Lyell dated 1834:

I have gone back to the origin of the allegorical language, I have explained the whole foundation of the mythological system of Egypt, of Rome, up to India, and I have given the keys to it, I have shown that this ancient school had never disappeared, having continued its underground path up to the time of Dante and up to ours.<sup>30</sup>

Rossetti thus speaks of a filiation which runs from ancient times to Dante, then up to the time in which he writes: the nineteenth century. In fact, though the title *Il Mistero dell’Amor*

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<sup>29</sup> On the position of Gabriele Rossetti towards the Ecclesiastical Institutions, it is worth pointing out that even though he opposed the power and the corruption of the Roman Catholic Church, he was nevertheless a devoted Christian with a profound religious sense: “I do not confuse the catholic dogma with the Roman hierarchy. I know that many people associate these two things so inextricably that they almost take them for identical [...]. I reverently bow my head to the dogma, but I do not do so to the hierarchy; for if the hierarchy teaches mysteries that it is not permitted to scrutinise, it introduces abuses that there is a duty to denounce” (“io non confondo dogma cattolico e gerarchia romana. So che molti associano così indissolubilmente queste due cose, da tenerle quasi per identiche [...]. Io piego riverente la fronte innanzi al dogma, ma non fo così riguardo alla gerarchia; poiché se quello insegna misteri che non è lecito scrutinare, questa introdusse abusi ch’è dovere denunciare”). Gabriele Rossetti, *Il mistero dell’Amor platonico del Medio Evo*, v. I, p. 4. The fact that Gabriele Rossetti did not refute the Catholic religion is confirmed by William Michael Rossetti, who writes: “it should be understood that, though a fervent and outspoken anti-papalist, he [his father Gabriele Rossetti] never expressly renounced the Roman Catholic faith”. *Gabriele Rossetti: A Versified Autobiography*, translated and supplemented by William Michael Rossetti, London, Sands & Co., 1901, p. 71.

<sup>30</sup> “Son rimontato all’origine del linguaggio allegorico, ho spiegato tutto il fondamento del sistema mitologico di Egitto, di Grecia, di Roma e fin dell’India, ne ho dato le chiavi, ed ho fatto vedere che quell’antica scuola non si è mai perduta, ma ha continuato con cammino sotterraneo sino al tempo di Dante e sino al nostro”. Letter from Gabriele Rossetti to Charles Lyell on 26 February 1834, in *Gabriele Rossetti. Carteggi. Volume terzo (1832-1836)*, p. 331-332.

*Platonico del Medio Evo*, Rossetti's masterpiece, seems to refer exclusively to the Middle Ages, his book focuses not only on Dante and medieval love literature, but also on the following centuries, from the troubadour and trouvère love poetry to Chaucer, the Renaissance theory of love of Marsilio Ficino, to the eighteenth century of Swedenborg, thence to the nineteenth century, in authors such as Honoré de Balzac or Victor Hugo.

As Gian Mario Cazzaniga points out, Gabriele Rossetti proposes “a dualistic reading of history”, according to which “the sect of the *Fedeli d'Amore* and the Order of the Templars are for him no more than an episode in the thousand-year struggle involving Europe, the Mediterranean and the Near East in a common history of struggles for freedom of thought and the emancipation of peoples from religious superstition and political despotism”.<sup>31</sup> Paolo Peluffo highlights this last point, namely the aim of emancipation at the root of the secret language of love according to Rossetti, and confirms that “the historical path of Rossetti's argument starts from the ancient Egyptian cults, veiled through a special language (or jargon) made secret to escape persecution by the rulers, capable of passing on knowledge whose dissemination could be risky, because it could potentially fight superstition and promote the people's freedom of thought”.<sup>32</sup> This knowledge reserved for a group of initiates, and transmitted through a secret code of communication from ancient poetry to the members of the initiatory societies of the thirteen centuries, would thus have been the thread linking a filiation between the mystic cults of Egyptian-Hellenic antiquity, Pythagoreanism, Hellenistic Platonism, Cathar and Manichean heresies allegedly linked to the Templar organisation, medieval poetry and the literature that handed down the occult wisdom by making use of the secret language based on love and the symbol of the rose. Gian Mario Cazzaniga brilliantly sums up Rossetti's reading of history and the connections between politics, religion and philosophical ideas hidden in literature, affirming that:

this story interweaves political and philosophical-religious readings, which will prevail, so Rossetti will see the origins of the sect in the preaching of Mani, a passage to Egypt where Egyptianism meets Alexandrian Judaism, a second passage to Palestine with the Templars who will become the heralds of a sort of metareligion, imperial and anti-Vatican, the original form of modern Freemasonry, of which Provençal and Italian poets will in turn become advocates, hiding it under a language of double meanings, anagrams

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<sup>31</sup> “Una lettura dualistica della storia”; “la setta dei Fedeli d'Amore e l'ordine dei Templari non sono per lui che un episodio del combattimento millenario che coinvolge Europa, Mediterraneo e Vicino Oriente in una comune storia di lotte per la libertà di pensiero e per l'emancipazione dei popoli dalla superstizione religiosa e dal dispotismo politico”. Gian Mario Cazzaniga, “Dante profeta dell'unità d'Italia”, in *Storia d'Italia. Annali 25. Esoterismo*, ed. Gian Mario Cazzaniga, Turin, Einaudi, 2010, p. 462.

<sup>32</sup> “Il percorso storico della trattazione di Rossetti parte dai culti antichi egizi, velati tramite un apposito linguaggio (o gergo) reso segreto per sfuggire alla persecuzione dei governanti, capace di tramandare una conoscenza la cui diffusione poteva essere rischiosa, perché potenzialmente capace di combattere la superstizione e promuovere la libertà di pensiero del popolo”. Paolo Peluffo, “Introduzione”, in Gabriele Rossetti, *Il mistero dell'Amor platonico del Medio Evo*, v. I, p. XXIX.



and allegorisms that from Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio, passing through the Renaissance academies, will reach Tasso.<sup>33</sup>

The interpretation of literature devised by Rossetti is strictly linked with a religion that profoundly influenced politics and, as Paolo Peluffo remarks, “Rossetti [...] interprets religion in an initiatory key”.<sup>34</sup> Like religion, literature is initiatory for Gabriele Rossetti, and consequently the symbols of this initiatory literature – love and the rose are, in his opinion, initiatory symbols, an initiatory love and an initiatory rose, strictly linked to the esoteric currents spread through the history of ideas.

As William Michael Rossetti writes, there could be some errors or exaggerations in his father’s work.<sup>35</sup> This is also recognized by Gabriele Rossetti himself, but the theories that he expounded were the result not only of his hard and long work of research, but also of his knowledge of the initiatory world.<sup>36</sup> The knowledge acquired in the initiatory milieu had, in fact, an important role in the interpretation of literature that he proposed, and it is worth pointing out that his approach towards the initiatory and masonic world was critical. In a letter to Charles Lyell on 27 March 1830, he hints at the supreme secret kept by Freemasonry, a secret that cannot be revealed “because it is *horrible*, it is more than *atheism*”.<sup>37</sup> It is a secret which “concerns directly Religion and Society”,<sup>38</sup> and, he continues, this secret is “not only dangerous, but also *very painful*... and I regret to have discovered it”.<sup>39</sup> For Rossetti, a certain kind of literature, that of esoteric and initiatory love, is the key to understanding hidden historical, political and religious truths. Rossetti reveals part of his knowledge, whilst concealing the

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<sup>33</sup> “Questa storia intreccia lettura politica e lettura filosofico-religiosa, che verrà prevalendo, per cui Rossetti vedrà le origini della setta nella predicazione di Mani, un passaggio in Egitto dove l’egizianismo si incontra con l’ebraismo alessandrino, un secondo passaggio in Palestina coi Templari che si faranno araldi di una sorta di metareligione, Imperiale e antivaticana, forma originaria della massoneria moderna, di cui poeti provenzali e italiani si faranno a loro volta sostenitori nascondendola sotto un linguaggio di doppi sensi, anagrammi e allegorismi che da Dante, Petrarca e Boccaccio, passando per le accademie rinascimentali, arriverà fino al Tasso”. Gian Mario Cazzaniga, “Dante profeta dell’unità d’Italia”, in *Storia d’Italia. Annali 25. Esoterismo*, p. 462.

<sup>34</sup> “Rossetti [...] interpreta la religione in una chiave iniziatica”. Paolo Peluffo, “Introduzione”, in Gabriele Rossetti, *Il mistero dell’Amor platonico del Medio Evo*, v. I, p. XXVIII.

<sup>35</sup> See *Dante Gabriel Rossetti. His Family Letters with a Memoir by William Michael Rossetti*, ed. William Michael Rossetti, London, Ellis and Elvey, 1895, p. 17.

<sup>36</sup> According to Luigi Valli, Gabriele Rossetti drew much information from “the first ideas about the secret content of Dante’s work in Malta, where he made contact with a Rosicrucian group” (“le prime idee sul contenuto segreto dell’opera di Dante a Malta, dove era entrato in rapporto con un gruppo di Rosa-Croce”). Luigi Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d’Amore*, p. 665. Silvano Panunzio is of the same opinion and affirms: “it would seem that he [Rossetti] had learned the revelations during his three-year refuge in Malta (1821-1824) from a Rosicrucian group, who were survivors of the Chevalier’s Exodus” [“sembrerebbe che le rivelazioni gli siano state fatte durante il suo triennale rifugio in Malta (1821-1824) da un gruppo rosacrociano superstite, scampato all’esodo dei Cavalieri”]. Silvano Panunzio, “Avvertenze”, in Gabriele Rossetti, *La Beatrice di Dante*, p. VI. Panunzio adds that “many dispersed Templars [...] poured both into the Teutonic Order and the Johannite, and then in the Order of Rhodes and of Malta” (“non pochi Templari dispersi, come è noto, rifluirono chi nell’Ordine Teutonico che nell’Ordine Giovannita di Gerusalemme e poi di Rodi e di Malta”). *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> “Perché è *orribile*, è più che *l’ateismo*”. *Gabriele Rossetti. Carteggi. Volume secondo (1826-1831)*, p. 431.

<sup>38</sup> “Tocca da presso la Religione e la Società”. *Gabriele Rossetti Carteggi. Volume terzo (1832-1836)*, p. 212.

<sup>39</sup> “Non solamente pericoloso, ma *dolorosissimo*... E mi dispiace di averlo scoperto”. *Gabriele Rossetti. Carteggi. Volume secondo (1826-1831)*, p. 517.

whole truth he knows, because, as he states in a letter to Charles Lyell on 29 October 1831, he does not want to draw attention to “the bad humour of the sect which still exists and which has power and influence on the civil world”.<sup>40</sup>

*The esoteric rose of the mystery of love according to Gabriele Rossetti*

The esoteric interpretation of literature proposed by Gabriele Rossetti implies the recognition of an occult doctrine hidden in literary texts, especially in Dante’s work, as well as in the love poetry of the Middle Ages and the centuries to come. Yet the aim of the author of *Il Mistero dell’Amor Platonico* was not to explain the “Occult Science”, but to demonstrate that Dante’s work spread it: “my intention is to prove that *The Divine Comedy* is all based on Occult Science, and not to show the inner essence of this, because I do not know it”.<sup>41</sup> Thus, Rossetti is not interested in explaining the occult science because he did not know it at all. He maintained that religion and partly politics were based on it, on an “ineffable truth” which, as he writes in his poem *Il Veggente in solitudine* (The Solitary Seer, 1846), “is obscure to the majority of people, but it is clear to a minority”.<sup>42</sup> For Rossetti, the occult doctrine is not detached from religion and politics. He speaks in terms of “Dante’s arcane science of politics and religion”,<sup>43</sup> which is the same arcane science that, in the philosophical and literary writings, makes use of obscurity in order to hide its secret doctrine, as he writes in one of his poetic compositions, *L’ombra di Dante* (The Shadow of Dante, 1839):

Mystical veils of Philosophy  
You cover theology in this way  
But who is able to penetrate these veils  
Perceives truth, admires it and keeps silent.<sup>44</sup>

The connection between the occult doctrine and literature, philosophy, politics and religion is not only evoked in Rossetti’s poetic production, but also and especially in his critical works of

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<sup>40</sup> “Il cattivo umore della setta che ancora esiste ed ha potere ed influenza nel mondo civile”. *Ibid.*, p. 637.

<sup>41</sup> “Il mio disegno è quello di provare che la Divina Commedia è tutta fondata sulla Scienza Occulta, e non già quella di mostrare l’interna essenza di questa, perché la ignoro”. Gabriele Rossetti, *La Beatrice di Dante*, p. 403.

<sup>42</sup> “Ineffabil ver”; “Oscuro ai molti, è chiaro ai pochi”. Gabriele Rossetti, *Poesie di Gabriele Rossetti, ordinate da G. Carducci*, Florence, Barbera, 1861, p. 150. The poetic production of Gabriele Rossetti would deserve a separate study, which still lacks. In fact, though the name of Gabriele Rossetti is usually associated with his esoteric interpretation of literature (particularly of Dante), it is worth pointing out that his poetic production is extremely vast, and the symbolism of the rose is often evoked in the poems by Gabriele Rossetti. See, for instance, Gabriele Rossetti, *Poesie di Gabriele Rossetti, ordinate da G. Carducci*, p. 8-9, 32, 34, 37, 59-60, 93, 367, 394, 398, 402-403, 405, 414, 416, 418, 435-436, 438, 524.

<sup>43</sup> “La scienza arcana della politica e della religione di Dante”. Gabriele Rossetti, *Il mistero dell’Amor platonico del Medio Evo*, v. I, p. XXIV.

<sup>44</sup> “Filosofia di mistici velami / copristi si che par teologia; / ma chi quei veli è di squarciar capace / scorge la verità, l’ammira e tace”. Gabriele Rossetti, *Il Veggente in Solitudine*, Paris, Dai Torchi di François, 1846, p. 268.

research. Thus, for instance, in the dedication to Charles Lyell of the *Disquisitiones on the Antipapal Spirit*, Rossetti writes:

I have wandered through the vast field of my country's literature, and have explored the many gardens which adorn it. I saw that they were redolent, not only to flowers delightful to the eye, but of sweet and nutritious fruits. I discovered that treasures beyond all price were buried under the enchanted ground whereon I was treading, and I beheld the muses there, presiding over all that is most recondite in philosophy, mysterious in politics, and inaccessible in mystic theology.<sup>45</sup>

Thus, according to Rossetti, literature hides an inaccessible truth – a secret doctrine which is concealed in initiatory literature based on Platonic love and the symbol of the rose. Whilst Gabriele Rossetti made his literary discoveries about an underground or occult continuity of philosophical or religious ideas, he owes this especially (and thereafter his association with the initiatory milieu) to a symbol, the rose, or rather to a French work, *The Romance of the Rose*, as he explains in a letter to Charles Lyell on 11 July 1829:

The book which has chiefly helped me [to understand the esoteric nature of love literature] is the poem of the *Rose* in French, preceding Dante [...], which ends like this:

This is *The Romance of the Rose*  
where *the art of Love* is all enclosed

All the mysteries of the sect [the sect of Love] are subsequently developed in this work, but always in jargon. After the poem which deals with the art of love, a *codicil* of Jean de Meung follows, in which all the language of love is changed into sacred jargon. Jean de Meung wrote at the same time of Dante, and he adapted the system, but he spoke more clearly, and his work [*The Romance of the Rose*] is a real commentary of the *Divine Comedy*.<sup>46</sup>

In Rossetti's view, *The Romance of the Rose* is the fundamental text for understanding the esoteric doctrine of love, as he states in one of the manuscripts discovered by Mariella Di Brigida in the archives of the British Columbia in Vancouver: "*The Romance of the Rose* analysed separately would show what this Love is".<sup>47</sup> In fact, the work by Guillaume de Lorris

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<sup>45</sup> Gabriele Rossetti, *Disquisitiones on the Antipapal Spirit which Produced the Reformation*, p. VII.

<sup>46</sup> "Il libro che mi ha sommamente aiutato è il poema della *Rosa* in francese, precedente a Dante [...], il quale finisce così:

Ci finit le Rouman de la Rose,  
où l'*art d'amour* est tout enlose.

Tutti i misteri della setta, successivamente, vengono in esso sviluppati, ma sempre in gergo. Dopo il poema che tratta dell'arte d'*amore* segue un *codicillo* di Giovanni de Meun, nel quale tutto il linguaggio d'amore è cangiato in gergo sacro. Giovanni de Meun scrisse contemporaneamente a Dante e ne adattò il sistema; ma ha parlato più chiaro, ed è un vero commento alla *Divina Commedia*". Letter from Gabriele Rossetti to Charles Lyell on 11 July 1829, in *Gabriele Rossetti. Carteggi. Volume secondo (1826-1831)*, p. 431. On the importance of *The Romance of the Rose* for understanding the esoteric love of the Middle Ages, see also Gabriele Rossetti, *Il mistero dell'Amor platonico del Medio Evo*, v. I, p. 162-163, 166-171, 179-180, 230, 486.

<sup>47</sup> "Il Romanzo della Rosa analizzato a parte farebbe vedere che cosa è questo Amore". Gabriele Rossetti, "Taccuino II", in *Gabriele Rossetti. Taccuini inediti*, p. 488.

and Jean de Meung, as well as the troubadour and trouvère poetry, was the starting point for Gabriele Rossetti's research. To my knowledge, the first systematic presentation of the esotericism of *The Romance of the Rose* and French medieval literature was provided by Gabriele Rossetti, who did so both in his critical works and in his letters. In his *Mistero dell'Amor Platonico*, he devotes three chapters to the esotericism of the troubadours and *The Romance of the Rose*: “De' Trovatori di lingua d'Oc, e de' Trovieri di lingua d'Oïl” (On Troubadours of Oc language, and on Trouvères of Oïl language”, chapter II), “Breve Cenno sulle Corti d'Amore” (A Brief Outline of Love Courts, chapter III), “Propaganda de' Trovatori” (Troubadour Propaganda, chapter IV).<sup>48</sup> Rossetti also speaks of the esoteric dimension of a corresponding poem in the English literary context, namely an almost unknown composition by a certain John Gaddesden (1280-1361): *Rosa Anglica* (1304-1317).<sup>49</sup> Moreover, as far as the esotericism of medieval love poetry of English Literature is concerned, Rossetti was the first, to my knowledge, to speak about esotericism in Geoffrey Chaucer,<sup>50</sup> who was, in Rossetti's opinion, representative of the English esoteric school of love in the Middle Ages. In fact, it was Chaucer who translated *The Romance of the Rose* into English, whilst John Gaddesden was one of his models for *The Canterbury Tales*.<sup>51</sup>

Before Gabriele Rossetti, the esotericism of troubadour poetry was pointed out by Antoine Fabre d'Olivet (1767-1825), although he proposed a symbolic reading of troubadour love poems in the shape of literary anthology, not in critical research work, as Rossetti did. In

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<sup>48</sup> See Gabriele Rossetti, *Il mistero dell'Amor platonico del Medio Evo*, v. I, p. 163-191.

<sup>49</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 486; Gabriele Rossetti, “Taccuino III”, in *Gabriele Rossetti. Taccuini inediti*, p. 539. John Gaddesden was a fellow at Merton College, in Oxford, and was also physician for members of the British royal family, as well as a theologian. The original manuscript was owned by All Souls College, in Oxford.

<sup>50</sup> On the esotericism of Geoffrey Chaucer, according to Gabriele Rossetti, see Gabriele Rossetti, *Il mistero dell'Amor platonico del Medio Evo*, v. 1, p. 486; the letters of Gabriele Rossetti to Charles Lyell on 15 December 1828 or on 21 October 1831, in *Gabriele Rossetti. Carteggi. Volume secondo (1826-1831)*, p. 296-297, 633; the letter on 8 January 1839, in *Gabriele Rossetti. Carteggi. Volume quarto (1837-1840)*, eds. Alfonso Caprio, Philip R. Horne and John R. Woodhouse, Naples, Loffredo, 1995, p. 223; the letter to John Hookham Frere on 1 January 1841, in *Gabriele Rossetti. Carteggi. Volume quinto (1841-1847)*, p. 5.

<sup>51</sup> See Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, translated into modern English by Nevill Coghill, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, Penguin Books, 1977, p. 31. On the theme of love in Chaucer, and the importance of *The Romance of the Rose* for the English author, see Piero Boitani, *La letteratura del Medioevo inglese* [1991], Rome, Carocci, 2001, p. 165-220. Piero Boitani emphasises the importance of the concept of “fidelity to love” in Chaucer, particularly in his *Legend of Good Women* (see *ibid.*, p. 205-207). Piero Boitani's excellent work explores not only the literary output of Geoffrey Chaucer, but also that of other writers in the English medieval context, such as John Gower (1330-1408, see *ibid.*, p. 77-98), William Langland (1332-1386, see *ibid.*, p. 99-122), John Lydgate (ca. 1370-1350, see *ibid.*, p. 224-230), John Skelton (1460-1529, see *ibid.*, p. 230-234), Stephen Hawes (ca. 1475-1523, see *ibid.*, p. 234-235), Robert Henryson (ca. 1425-1500, see *ibid.*, p. 241-245), William Dunbar (ca. 1460-1520, see *ibid.*, p. 245-248), Gavin Douglas (ca. 1475-1522, see *ibid.*, p. 248-250). In all of these authors, love and the rose play a major role in their literary productions, whilst there are many analogies with the French and Italian love poets of the Middle Ages (particularly with Dante, as in the case of William Langland). Finally, Piero Boitani's book also looks at the historical context of the English Middle Ages. In particular, there is an allusion to a secret society that developed in England during the medieval period to oppose ecclesiastical Power: “in 1231 ‘anti-Roman’ riots broke out and a secret society was founded with the aim of combating ‘foreign’ oppression, namely the clergy, who were not English but possessed English benefits” (“nel 1231 scoppiano tumulti ‘anti-romani’ e viene fondata una società segreta con lo scopo di combattere l’oppressione ‘straniera’, del clero, cioè, non inglese ma possessore di benefici inglesi”). *Ibid.*, p. 47.

fact, *Le Troubadour, poésies occitaniques du XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (The Troubadour, Occitan poetry of the thirteenth century, 1803) by Antoine Fabre d'Olivet is a presentation of Occitan literary works, translated by Fabre d'Olivet and commented on by him in the notes.<sup>52</sup> This work by Fabre d'Olivet is not critical research work as such, but this contribution is undoubtedly of seminal importance for all future studies on the esotericism of troubadour love poetry. Moreover, it is worth pointing out that one of Fabre d'Olivet's major works is based on the rose symbolism, coupled with the theme of love: *Les Amours de Rose* (The Rose Loves).<sup>53</sup> In addition to Fabre d'Olivet and Gabriele Rossetti, esotericism in medieval French love poetry was expounded in the nineteenth century by one of the members of the "heterodox" school of Dantean studies in France – Eugène Aroux (1793-1859). However, the concept of esoteric love spread by Aroux was actually plagiarism, which has gone almost unnoticed by scholars. In fact, Eugène Aroux plagiarized Gabriele Rossetti's manuscript *La Beatrice di Dante*, and published his works on Dante's esotericism and on troubadour poetry. I will focus on this particular aspect in the second part of my thesis, in the chapter on the rose in Péladan. I will just point out here that Aroux's plagiarism, though almost completely ignored by the critics, is extremely important as the concept of esoteric love he disseminated in France influenced many writers and poets of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as Joséphin Péladan and other figures who belonged to the esoteric milieu, such as Paul Sédir and René Guénon, or twentieth century scholars who proposed a rethinking of literature according to an esoteric perspective, such as Denis de Rougemont with his book *Love in the Western World*, or René Nelli with his works on Catharism. These two authors proposed an esoteric interpretation of French love literature in the Middle Ages. In his *Love in the Western World*, Denis de Rougemont (who draws on Aroux, Péladan and Luigi Valli, without mentioning Gabriele Rossetti) confirms many ideas that were developed by Rossetti in the nineteenth century, such as the continuity of the esoteric doctrine of love throughout the centuries. In this respect, Denis de Rougemont speaks of "a kind of Indo-European unity" that gave rise to "the background of medieval heresies",<sup>54</sup> and he stresses the relations between different eras and traditions, including Manicheism, Platonism, the medieval love story of Tristan, troubadour love poetry, sixteenth century Spanish literature in literary works like the *Libro de cavalleria celestial del pié de la rosa fragrante* (Book of celestial chivalry of the foot of the fragrant rose, 1554) by Hyeronimo de Sempere, a work

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<sup>52</sup> Antoine Fabre d'Olivet, *Le Troubadour, poésies occitaniques du XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* [1803], Nîmes, C. Lacour, 1997. Fabre d'Olivet would deserve a separate study for his contribution related to the links between literature and esotericism. Gabriele Rossetti and Fabre d'Olivet are very similar in their approach towards literature, that is to say a literature influenced by esoteric currents. On Fabre d'Olivet, see the excellent work by Léon Cellier: *Fabre D'Olivet: contribution à l'étude des aspects religieux du Romantisme*, Paris, Nizet, 1953.

<sup>53</sup> Antoine Fabre d'Olivet, *Le Troubadour, poésies occitaniques du XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, p. 1-130.

<sup>54</sup> Denis de Rougemont, *Love in the Western World* [1940], Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1983, p. 64.

imbued with what Denis de Rougemont calls the “Manichaeistic esoterism”,<sup>55</sup> and Wagner. Another main plank of Denis de Rougemont’s argument concerns the relations between Catharism and the troubadour tradition, which he describes as follows:

There occurred during the twelfth century in Languedoc and in the Limousin one of the most extraordinary spiritual confluences of history. On the one hand, a strong Manichean religious current, which had originated in Persia, flowed through Asia Minor and the Balkans as far as Italy and France, bearing the esoteric doctrines of Maria Sophia and of love for the Form of Light. On the other hand, a highly refined rhetoric, with its set forms, themes, and characters, its ambiguities invariably recurring in the same places, and indeed its symbolism, pushes out from Iraq and the Sufi, who were inclined alike to Platonism and Manichaeism, and reaches Arabic Spain, then, leaping over the Pyrenees, it comes to the south of France upon a society that seems to have but awaited its arrival in order to *state* what it had not dared and had not been able to avow either in the clerical tongue or in the common vernacular. Courtly lyrical poetry was the offspring of that encounter.<sup>56</sup>

The relations between Catharism and the troubadour tradition represent the focal point of research by René Nelli.<sup>57</sup> The affinities between the two movements were also of importance for Gabriele Rossetti’s research, whilst René Nelli presents the same arguments, highlighting that the Cathar heresy and courtly love spread simultaneously, both diachronically (in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries) and diatopically (in the South of France), and that some troubadours were Cathars or linked in some way to Catharism, such as Raimon de Miraval, Raimon Jordan, Guilhaum de Durfort, Pierre Rogier de Mirepoix, and Mir Bernat.<sup>58</sup> René Nelli has shown the relationship between Catharism and troubadour literature, whilst other scholars of the history of esotericism have demonstrated the relations between Catharism, troubadour poetry and esotericism. In fact, the historian Pierre Riffard has pointed out the esoteric dimension of troubadour literature, affirming that “the use of the obscure style (*troubar cruz*),

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107. Moreover, Hugo Friedrich (1904-1978) confirms the relations existing between Manichaeism, French troubadour poetry and medieval Italian poetry, and he writes of “the presence of a neo-Manichaean sect, favoured by the Ghibelline bourgeoisie in central and northern Italy of that epoch. One cannot [...] deny that some ascetic-spiritual traits present in the troubadours and Florentine poetry have some affinities with Manichaeism and with its contempt of the body [...]. The cryptic interpretation rightly states that the poems are not to be understood as expressions of actual love stories [...]. So all lead to the conclusion that one must interpret Beatrice as a mythic figure [...]. It is, however, undeniable that Dante sees Love as a relationship with the divine” (“la presenza di una setta neomanichea, favorita dalla borghesia ghibellina nell’Italia centrale e settentrionale dell’epoca. Non si può [...] negare che alcuni tratti ascetico-spirituali presenti nei trovatori e nella lirica fiorentina abbiano affinità col manicheismo e con il suo disprezzo del corpo [...]. L’interpretazione criptica dice il giusto quando afferma che le poesie non devono essere intese come espressione di effettive storie d’amore [...]. Tutto porta così alla conclusione che si deve interpretare Beatrice come una figura mitica [...]. È comunque innegabile che Dante concepisca Amore come rapporto con il divino”). Hugo Friedrich, *Epoche della lirica italiana. Dalle origini al Quattrocento*, Milan, Mursia, 1974, p. 74.

<sup>57</sup> Among the works by René Nelli, important ones are *L’Érotique des troubadours*, Toulouse, Privat, 1963; *Troubadours et trouvères*, Paris, Hachette, 1979; *Les Cathares*, Marabout, Maurepas, Diffusion Hachette, 1981; *Les cathares du Languedoc au XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, Hachette, 1995.

<sup>58</sup> See René Nelli, *L’Érotique des troubadours*, p. 228.

the ideal of a sublimated love (*fin' amor*) brings the troubadour closer to the esotericist".<sup>59</sup> He also highlighted the esoteric dimension of Catharism, maintaining that "many elements are uncontestedly esoteric in Catharism",<sup>60</sup> and showing that the troubadour tradition and Catharism have many points of contact. In particular, Pierre Riffard mentions a poet who embraces the two traditions, namely Peire Cardenal, whom he defined as a "*troubadour catharisant*",<sup>61</sup> meaning "a Cathar troubadour poet". In addition to the relations between esotericism and Catharism, and with troubadour poetry, it is also worth pointing out another point of contact between Catharism and the troubadour tradition, that is the aversion shown by the Catholic Church towards the Cathar movement and medieval love poetry. Whilst the crusades against the Albigensians (1208) ordered by Innocent III were an undeniable and recognized historical event, we should not forget that – as René Nelli remarks – "the Roman church had never been favourable to the troubadour love doctrine".<sup>62</sup> An example of heretical love poetry in the Middle Ages that René Nelli gives is the French love poet Raimon de Cornet (1324-1340), who risked being burned alive in Avignon, and used in his poems a *senhal* (a nickname, in accordance with troubadour custom) to refer to his beloved Lady, and this *senhal* was "Rose". On the name "Rose" given by Raimon de Cornet to his beloved, René Nelli affirms: "it is not impossible that this 'Rose' had [...] an esoteric sense which it would be imprudent to specify".<sup>63</sup> Thus, Nelli recognizes the esoteric meaning of the Rose of Raimon de Cornet, whilst warning that it is better to avoid this topic. But in doing so, he confirms the esoteric and initiatory nature of this flower by indirectly confirming the esoteric nature of love literature in which the rose has a pivotal role.

Jean Marquès-Rivière has also pointed out the relationship of "rose-anticlericalism", observing that immediately after the destruction of the Cathar movement many literary works, which were "neatly anti-Roman",<sup>64</sup> had the rose as their main subject. In particular, he mentions *The Romance of the Rose*,<sup>65</sup> which was, according to Rossetti, the most important work for understanding not only Dante's esotericism, but also the esotericism of love literature in the Middle Ages. The esoteric dimension of *The Romance of the Rose* proposed by Rossetti in the nineteenth century has been confirmed in recent decades by scholars in the field of Western

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<sup>59</sup> "L'usage du style obscur (*troubar cruz*), l'idéal d'un amour sublimé (*fin' amor*) rapprochent sans doute le troubadour de l'ésotériste". Pierre A. Riffard, *L'Ésotérisme. Qu'est-ce que l'ésotérisme? Anthologie de l'ésotérisme occidental*, Paris, Robert Laffont, 1996, p. 646.

<sup>60</sup> "Plusieurs éléments sont incontestablement ésotériques dans le catharisme". *Ibid.*, p. 630.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 645.

<sup>62</sup> "L'Église romaine n'avait jamais été très favorable à la doctrine amoureuse des troubadours". René Nelli, *L'Érotisme des troubadours*, p. 221.

<sup>63</sup> "Il n'est pas impossible que cette 'Rose' ait eu [...] un sens ésotérique qu'il serait imprudent de vouloir préciser". *Ibid.*, p. 269.

<sup>64</sup> "Nettement anti-romains". Jean Marquès-Rivière, *Histoire des doctrines ésotériques*, Paris, Payot, 1940, p. 121.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 302.

esotericism studies, such as Pierre Riffard, who considers the publication of *The Romance of the Rose* as one of the most important events of the Middle Ages in terms of the history of esotericism.<sup>66</sup>

The esotericism detected by scholars in *The Romance of the Rose* and in the love poetry of the Middle Ages was the same esotericism proposed for the first time by Gabriele Rossetti, whose esoteric reading of love literature was not accepted by the academic world and is still marginalised by the critics even today, though interest in his work is increasing. In fact, the esoteric dimension of the so-called *trobar clus* could be the key to explaining the hermetic nature of medieval love literature, whose content is reserved for the chosen few who know the key to deciphering the literary obscurity. This concept is clearly expressed by Arnaud Daniel (mentioned by Dante in his *Divine Comedy*)<sup>67</sup> who, as Gabriele Rossetti points out, “has written in order not to be understood, and he boasts that he does not want to be understood by everyone but only by a small minority”.<sup>68</sup>

With regard to the double meaning of love poetry, in a letter to Charles Lyell of 1828 Rossetti mentions the verses of the troubadour poet Gaudevan, who states: “amongst one thousand people, there will not even be ten of them who can understand the sense of my verses: my verses will be *clear* for those who *are able in the art of love*, and they will be *obscure* for

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<sup>66</sup> See Pierre A. Riffard, *op. cit.*, p. 954-955. Beyond the publication of *The Romance of the Rose*, among the most important events in the history of esoteric currents in the Middle Ages, Pierre Riffard mentions the flourishing of the Jewish Kabbalah in Provence and Languedoc (c.1150-1200); Sufism in Andalusia (c. 1150-1200), thanks to figures such as Abû Madyân or Ibn ‘Arabî; the esoteric pantheism of the Amalricians; the Brethren of the Free Spirit; the Beguines; the Adamites of Bohemia or the Apostolic Brethren of Parma (13<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries); the flourishing of the Jewish Kabala in Catalonia (c. 1210-1500) with the publication of the book *Sepher Zohar* by Abulafia; the crusades against the Albigensians (1208) ordered by Innocent III; the condemnation of the Bogomils in 1211, decided by the Council of Tarnovo (Bulgaria); the first mention in 1212 of freemasonry; Frederick II (1212-1250) who was favourable to the occult arts (in Palermo, Sicily); and the third school of translation of esoteric texts (1230) by Alphonse X. See *ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Dante mentions Arnaud Daniel in *Purgatorio* (XXVI, v. 115-1479), and defines him as “miglior fabbro del parlar materno”, “the better workman in his mother tongue” (XXVI, v. 117). Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia*, ed. Natalino Sapegno, Milan, Naples, Riccardo Ricciardi Editore, 1957, p. 694; Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, translated by C. H. Sisson, with an Introduction and Notes by David H. Higgins, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 314. In his *Trionfi*, Petrarch calls Arnaud Daniel “gran maestro d’amor” (“Grand Master of Love”), “Master in love”. Francesco Petrarca, *Rime, Trionfi e Poesie Latine*, eds. Ferdinando Neri, Guido Martellotti, Enrico Bianchi, Natalino Sapegno, Milan, Naples, Riccardo Ricciardi Editore, 1951, p. 503 ; *The Triumphs of Petrarch*, translated by Ernest Hatch Wilkins, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1962, p. 29. “Grand Master” is the highest rank in the Masonic hierarchy. On the rank of “Grand Master” in Freemasonry, see Giuliano Di Bernardo, *Filosofia della Massoneria e della tradizione iniziatica*, Venice, Marsilio, 2016, p. 73, 99, 102-107. Giuliano Di Bernardo’s book presents the Freemasonic tradition, tracing the origins and developments of the esoteric thought that characterised Freemasonry, from Greek Orphism in the sixth century BC to Pythagoreanism, Islamic Sufism, Christian Middle Ages, the Renaissance of Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, John Dee and Shakespeare to the Confraternity of the Rosicrucians, and the Order of the Illuminati founded on 1 May 1776 by Adam Weishaupt and modern Freemasonry. See *ibid.*, p. 43-94. Of particular interest is the section devoted to initiatory secrecy within Freemasonry, in relation to the concept of the incommunicability of the mystery hidden by the Hermetic saying. See *ibid.*, p. 164-165.

<sup>68</sup> “Arnaldo Daniello [...] ha scritto di modo che non si capisce affatto, e si vanta di non volersi far capire se non da alcuni”. Letter from Gabriele Rossetti to Charles Lyell on 22 October 1828, in *Gabriele Rossetti. Carteggi. Volume secondo (1826-1831)*, p. 242.



those who *ignore this science*".<sup>69</sup> The troubadour poet Marcabru (1130-1148) even shows a certain embarrassment for expressing himself so obscurely and to such an extent that it seems absurd: "for wise is he who in my song guesses what each word means, how the theme unfolds, for I myself am embarrassed to clarify my obscure words".<sup>70</sup> Moreover, Peire d'Alvernia (1130-1168) affirms that "[he] puts [his] reader before an enigma",<sup>71</sup> whilst the love poet Alegret simply says: "my verse will appear insensate to the ignorant person who cannot understand the double meaning".<sup>72</sup>

This "double entendre" can be seen in some of the strange verses of medieval love literature, for example, the incoherence of the emotion of love evoked by William IX (1071-1126), Duke of Aquitaine and Count of Poitou, known as the earliest troubadour, who writes that he loves a girl that he has never seen: "a girlfriend, I have one, and I know not who she is, / I have never seen her, [...] / I have never seen her, but I love her dearly".<sup>73</sup> Jaufré Rudel also loves a girl he has never seen: "no one wonders about the fact that I love someone who will never see me, since my heart is glad only of one love, that I have never seen".<sup>74</sup> Similarly, Guillaume de Machaut falls in love with a girl that he has never seen, and he thanks Love because it can penetrate "in hearts who have never seen each other; / from far off they love and desire".<sup>75</sup>

In a twelfth century work by Robert d'Orbigny, *Floire et Blanchefleur* (Flower and Whiteflower), the author speaks of a different kind of love, literally: "loving each other with a love of another nature".<sup>76</sup> Robert d'Orbigny mentions a "school", where the lovers "read pagan books / where they heard speaking of love", and "when they go back to the school, / they exchange some kisses";<sup>77</sup> "they took their tablets of ivory" and "they composed some letters

<sup>69</sup> "Mes vers valent d'autant mieux qu'entre mille personnes il n'y en aura pas dix qui puisse en comprendre le sens: ce seront clairs pour ceux qui son [sic] habiles in Amour, et obscurs pour qui ignore cette science". In *ibid.*, p. 338.

<sup>70</sup> "Pour sage je tiens sans nul doute celui qui dans mon chant devine ce que chaque mot signifie, comment le thème se déroule, car moi-même je suis embarrassé pour éclairer ma parole obscure". Marcabru, *Poésies complètes du troubadour Marcabru* [1909], New York, London, Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1971, p. 182.

<sup>71</sup> "Devant une énigme / je place mes auditeurs". Peire d'Alvernia, "Sobre-l vieill trobar e-l novel", in *Les Troubadours. Anthologie bilingue*, ed. Jacques Roubaud, Paris, Seghers, 1971, p. 185.

<sup>72</sup> "Mon vers paraîtra insensé au sot s'il n'a pas double entendement". In Alfred Jeanroy, *La poésie lyrique des troubadours* [1934], Geneva, Slatkine Reprints, 1998, p. 33.

<sup>73</sup> "Une amie, j'en ai une, et ne sais qui elle est, / jamais je ne la vis, je le dis par ma foi / [...] jamais je ne la vis, pourtant je l'aime fort". Guilhem IX, "Farai un vers de dreyt nien", in *Anthologie de la poésie française. Moyen Âge, XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle, XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, eds. Jean-Pierre Chauveau, Gérard Gros and Daniel Ménager, Paris, Gallimard, 2000, p. 31.

<sup>74</sup> "Que nul ne s'étonne à mon sujet si j'aime ce qui jamais ne me verra, car mon cœur n'a joie d'aucun amour, sinon que de celui que jamais je ne vis". Jaufré Rudel, *Les Chansons de Jaufré Rudel*, Paris, Honoré Champion, 1924, p. 16.

<sup>75</sup> Guillaume de Machaut, *Le Livre dou voir dit (The Book of the True Poem)*, ed. Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, transl. by R. Barton Palmer, New York, Garland, 1998, p. 19.

<sup>76</sup> "S'aimer d'un amour d'une autre nature". Robert D'Orbigny, *Le Conte de Floire et Blanchefleur*, Paris, Honoré Champion, 2003, p. 15.

<sup>77</sup> "Quand ils rentrent à l'école, / ils échantent des baisers". *Ibid.*

and love poems, / inspired by the songs of birds and the flowers”.<sup>78</sup> How can we explain such strange affirmations that seem to have nothing to do with the common feeling of love? Moreover, in this love story between Floire and Blanche fleur the rose plays a pivotal role. On their tomb a significant image depicts the lover offering his beloved wife a rose, and she returns a white lily. The lovers had drifted apart and lost each other during the story, and when they met again the symbol of the rose sanctioned their union.

With regard to the name “Blanche fleur”, in a letter to Charles Lyell on 24 February 1829 Gabriele Rossetti explains the esoteric meaning of the word “whiteflower”, associating it with the “white rose”:

The *white rose* was the emblem of the sect; and for this reason the sect personified was called by Boccaccio *Whiteflower*; and this is the reason why one usually finds this word *Whiteflower* in the ancient rimes, and Dante portrayed Paradise *in the form of a white rose*; and for this reason *white hind*, *white ermine*, etc., represent the sect, as you will see in my manuscript. The romance of Lancelot and Guinevere is sectarian; that of Tristan and Iseut is sectarian; that of Guerin is sectarian. They also exist in English, French and Spanish literature, etc. Ancient literature is in large part masked, which explains its obscurity and its extravagance, and it offers a great conspiracy which was carried out by the savants against the Church.<sup>79</sup>

These examples of obscurities and extravagances, as Rossetti called them, are extremely widespread in French medieval literature, and it is in French love literature that he believes the origin of the Italian *Fedeli d'Amore* is to be found. These were, in Rossetti's view, “branches springing from the sects of Toulouse and of Provence, that were introduced in Italy by Frederick II and by Manfred, who were terrible enemies of the Pope”.<sup>80</sup> In particular, “Frederick introduced [the] courtly language of the sect of Love from the court of the Counts of Provence, which was the hotbed of Albigensian reform. The so-called *Courts of Love* which were held there, had an important objective, which was entirely different from what people believed”.<sup>81</sup> In other words, this is the distinction between the exoteric and the esoteric meaning: “one thing sounded to the initiated seers, and another to the dazzled laymen”,<sup>82</sup> writes Rossetti in the

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<sup>78</sup> “Ils composaient des lettres et des saluts d'amour, / inspirés par le chant des oiseaux et les fleurs”. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>79</sup> “La *rosa bianca* era lo stemma della setta; e perciò la setta personificata fu chiamata dal Boccaccio *Biancofiore*; e perciò di questa Biancofiore si trova spesso parola nelle rime antiche, e Dante dipinse il paradiso *in forma di candida rosa*; è perciò *cerca candida*, *candido ermellino*, ecc. figuravano ancora la setta, come vedrete nel mio manoscritto. Il romanzo di Lancillotto e Ginevra è settario; quello di Tristano ed Isotta è settario; quello di Guerin è settario. Ve ne hanno in inglese, in francese, in spagnuolo, ecc. La letteratura antica è in gran parte mascherata, da che deriva la sua oscurità e la sua stravaganza, ed offre una gran congiura che i dotti avevano fatta contro la Chiesa papale”. Gabriele Rossetti, *Carteggi. Volume secondo (1826-1831)*, p. 399.

<sup>80</sup> “Rami pullulati delle sette di Tolosa e di Provenza e fatte introdurre in Italia da Federico II e da Manfredi, terribili nemici del Papa”. *Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>81</sup> “Federico introdusse [il] linguaggio aulico della setta d'Amore dalla corte de' conti di Provenza, focolaio della riforma albigese. Le così dette *Corti d'Amore*, che in quell'aula si tenevano, avevano un grande oggetto, interamente diverso da quello che si è creduto”. *Ibid.*, p. 178.

<sup>82</sup> “Una cosa sonava ai veggenti iniziati ed un'altra agli abbagliati profani”. Gabriele Rossetti, *Il mistero dell'Amor platonico del Medio Evo*, v. I, p. 12.

*Mistero*. It goes without saying that Rossetti advocates the esoteric reading. Therefore, he did not believe that the troubadours were a group of poets who shared their ideas about the feeling of love since, as Gabriele Rossetti writes in a letter to Charles Lyell on 21 February 1828, “those troubadours, who went with harps in their hands from country to country, from court to court, were sent to make secret proselytes, and indeed they made many proselytes”.<sup>83</sup>

### *The history of an oblivion and the heritage of an idea*

In 1848, Étienne-Jean Delécluze affirmed that Gabriele Rossetti’s interpretation opens an interpretative sanctuary whose doors are still closed:

without adopting completely the ideas of Rossetti about the exclusively political aim conferred by him on the writing of Dante and the other writers of his century, it is impossible to deny that those writings contain an allegorical sense that no one has discovered up to now, and that, amongst all the keys given up to now to enter this sanctuary, the key provided by Rossetti is still the one which opens more doors.<sup>84</sup>

Even a scholar belonging to orthodox and catholic criticism, such as Robert Ludwig John, recognizes the merit of Gabriele Rossetti for his research work on Dante and on love literature. In fact, Robert L. John was a catholic priest and Professor of Romance Literature at the University of Vienna, who in 1946 published the book *Dante*,<sup>85</sup> in which he showed the relations between Dante and the Templar tradition,<sup>86</sup> in the wake of a filiation linking Islamic

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<sup>83</sup> “Que’ *troubadours*, che andavano con le arpe alla mano di paese in paese di corte in corte, erano mandati a far segreti proseliti, e moltissimi ne facevano”. *Ibid.*, p. 179.

<sup>84</sup> “Sans adopter complètement les idées de M. Rossetti sur le but exclusivement politique qu’il donne à tous les écrits de Dante et des auteurs de son siècle, il est impossible de convenir d’une part qu’ils renferment un sens allégorique que personne n’a encore découvert ni saisi, et que de toutes les clés données jusqu’à présent pour pénétrer dans ce sanctuaire, celle qu’a forgée M. Rossetti, est encore celle qui ouvre le plus de portes”. Étienne-Jean Delécluze, *Dante Alighieri ou la poésie amoureuse*, Paris, Adolphe Delahays Libraire, 1854, p. 587. In the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, Étienne-Jean Delécluze published an article, “Dante était-il hérétique?” (“Was Dante a heretic?”), 1854), in which he praised Gabriele Rossetti’s contribution. Étienne-Jean Delécluze, “Dante était-il hérétique?”, in *Revue des Deux Mondes*, Paris, bureau de la Revue des Deux Mondes, Rue des Beaux-Arts, 6, London, chez Baillièrre, 219, Regent Street, 1854, p. 370-406.

<sup>85</sup> Robert Ludwig John, *Dante*, Wien, Springer-Verlag, 1946. The book was only translated into Italian, by Willy Schwarz, with the title *Dante Templare Dante templare: una nuova interpretazione della Commedia* (Milan, Hoepli, 1987). The title of the Italian version [*Dante templare: una nuova interpretazione della Commedia* (Templar Dante: a New Interpretation of the Divine Comedy)] evidences the author’s main argument, namely the relations between Templarism and Dante’s work. In my study, I refer to the Italian version.

<sup>86</sup> In addition to Beatrice, Dante is accompanied in Paradise by another guide, Saint Bernard, who dictated the laws of the Templar Order, and whose standard’s battle cry was “Viva Dio Sant’Amore” (“Long live God’s Holy Love”). See Alfonso Ricolfi, *Studi sui “Fedeli d’Amore”* [1933, 1940], Milan, Luni Editrice, 2013, p. 310; Julius Evola, *Il Mistero del Graal* [1937], Rome, Edizioni Mediterranee, 2002, p. 186. Dante’s interest in the history of Templarism can be seen in his opposition to Philip the Fair and Gregory VII, who pursued and massacred the Templars. His displeasure at the massacre is expressed in the *Comedy* (*Purgatory*, XX, v. 94-96): “O my Lord, when shall I have the happiness / of seeing the vengeance which, though hidden from us, / makes your anger sweet in your secret counsel?” Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, p. 286. It is in Cantos XXXI and XXXII of *Paradise* that Dante contemplates the mystical rose with Saint Bernard, facing the blessed who wear the white cloak, as Beatrice recalls (*Paradise*, XXX, v. 128-129): “Now see how great is, / the great congregation of white robes!” *Ibid.*, p. 485. On the link between the symbolism of the rose and Templarism, it is significant that one of the thirteenth

and Jewish mysticism with Western spirituality imbued with Neoplatonism and prophetic Joachimism. John's contribution represents a sort of watershed in the history of Dantean exegesis, since the recognition of a certain heterodoxy is confirmed by a representative of the ecclesiastical institutions. John received, in fact, the ecclesiastical *Imprimatur*.<sup>87</sup> He affirms that "nowadays one cannot support the ancient opinion, according to which in the *Comedy* there is nothing heretical",<sup>88</sup> and with regard to Rossetti's exegetical contribution, he defends him and criticizes the fact that the academy preferred to forget his work too easily, without giving him the attention he deserved: "it was a big mistake to dismiss as delusional dreams all his [Rossetti's] research, which reveals an exceptional literary-historical competence, combined with a keen intelligence".<sup>89</sup>

Whilst there were among the intellectuals who praised Gabriele Rossetti figures such as Samuel Coleridge (who met him in 1833 and praised him "for the high morale of his writings"),<sup>90</sup> the Italian poet Giosuè Carducci<sup>91</sup> (who edited the collection of Gabriele Rossetti's poems) or Mary Shelley (who established an epistolary correspondence with the author of the *Mistero*),<sup>92</sup> it is also true that Rossetti had many opponents, such as August Wilhelm von Schlegel, Antoine Frédéric and above all Antonio Panizzi (1797-1879).<sup>93</sup> The latter was a particular detractor of Gabriele Rossetti. Panizzi was, like Rossetti, an Italian exile in London after the decree against the Carbonari. He was Professor of Italian Language and Literature at the University of London (now University College London) and Principal Librarian of the British Museum Library, which later became the British Library.<sup>94</sup>

Gabriele Rossetti had to fight during his lifetime to defend his ideas and theories, and after his death he was almost completely ignored and forgotten. His theories were considered as literary extravagances, and in the twentieth century they were also relegated to the margins of academic debate. Rossetti was aware that his revelations would have not been accepted, especially because, as he writes in a letter to Charles Lyell on 3 April 1833, the contents of his

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century Templar ships was called the *Rose of the Temple*. See Alain Demurger, *Vie et mort de l'Ordre du Temple: 1118-1314* [1985], Paris, Seuil, 1989, p. 218.

<sup>87</sup> See Stefano Salzani, *op. cit.*, p. 296.

<sup>88</sup> "Non è oggi più sostenibile l'antica opinione, secondo la quale nella *Commedia* non si troverebbe nulla di eretico". Robert L. John, *Dante Templare*, p. 7.

<sup>89</sup> "È stato un grande errore liquidare come sogni deliranti tutte le sue ricerche [di Rossetti], che rivelano un'eccezionale competenza storico-letteraria, unita a un'intelligenza acuta". *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>90</sup> "He is a poet [Rossetti] who has been driven into exile for the high morale of his writings". *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, v. V, 1956, p. 404.

<sup>91</sup> On the esteem of Giosuè Carducci towards Gabriele Rossetti, see Paolo Peluffo, "Introduzione", in Gabriele Rossetti, *Il mistero dell'Amor platonico del Medio Evo*, v. I, p. XXI-XXIII.

<sup>92</sup> On the correspondence between Mary Shelley and Gabriele Rossetti, see Eric Reginald Pearce Vincent, "Two Letters from Mary Shelley to Gabriele Rossetti", *The Modern Language Review*, v. 27, n. 4, October 1932, p. 459-461.

<sup>93</sup> On Antonio Panizzi's criticism of Gabriele Rossetti, see Tobia R. Toscano, "Introduzione", in *Gabriele Rossetti. Carteggi. Volume secondo (1826-1831)*, p. XII.

<sup>94</sup> The British Library houses the Portrait of Sir Antonio Panizzi, placed close to the entrance of the Humanities Room (first floor of the British Library).

work represented “the greatest injury that can be dealt to religion”,<sup>95</sup> and in the same letter he writes:

what a pity that the nature of my Work is so delicate that I will be obliged to be more attentive in hiding it rather than publishing it. [...] I can predict, without flattering myself, that after my death, that is to say when my work is known, people will speak about it, and it will be a real literary talisman that will change the whole character of European literature.<sup>96</sup>

Gabriele Rossetti was conscious that the content of his works would be refuted and neglected, but he believed in future generations of scholars, as he writes at the end of his work *Sullo spirito antipapale*, in a letter of 1832 addressed to Charles Lyell and inserted in the book:

So why publish a work which cannot expect anything but war and insult? It can also expect something better. Those who limit themselves to the present are miserable spirits. Time is called upon to be the avenger of truth, and this truth is embodied in the sun: there are not always clouds that hide the sun. In years to come there will be a worthy man, and he will read out of curiosity. The material of this work will attract his attention, and he will set out to re-examine it with diligence. Since he will find this material based on truth, he will want to give it to those who love truth; and he will have many advantages over me to give value to it: an easier scrutiny to perform; a more propitious wit in the exposition, a stronger authority in order to gain respect, the sun will come out from the clouds, and that light, which was once denied, will be confessed and admired another time. I conclude: if the truth exposed by me is recognized, its triumph will be my justification; if it is not recognized, its triumph will be deferred, but not lost, and my justification will remain on deposit in the hands of time. Praise or derision are waiting for me, neither the first will make me become frivolous, nor the second will discourage me: and sooner or later I will achieve my aim.<sup>97</sup>

In his works and in his letters, Rossetti constantly repeats and stresses that the transmission of the esoteric doctrine of Love spread not only from antiquity to the Middle Ages, but also in the Renaissance up to his time – the nineteenth century. It is in this respect that

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<sup>95</sup> “La maggior ferita che possa mai farsi alla religione”. Letter from Gabriele Rossetti to Charles Lyell on 3 April 1833, in *Gabriele Rossetti. Carteggi. Volume terzo (1832-1836)*, p. 182.

<sup>96</sup> “Che peccato che la natura dell’Opera sia di tanta delicatezza che mi farà essere più sollecito a nasconderla che a pubblicarla. [...] E posso ben predire, senza molto lusingarmi, che dopo la mia morte, cioè quando sarà più conosciuta, e farà molto parlare, e sarà un vero talismano letterario che cangerà aspetto a tutt’ il regno della letteratura europea”. Letter from Gabriele Rossetti to Charles Lyell on 14 September 1840, in *Gabriele Rossetti. Carteggi. Volume quarto (1837-1840)*, p. 422.

<sup>97</sup> “Perché, dunque pubblicare un lavoro da cui non può attendersi che guerra ed ingiuria? Può attendersene anche qualche cosa di meglio. È spirito meschino chi si limita al presente. Il tempo è chiamato il vindice della verità, la quale è figurata nel sole: non sempre vi sono nuvole che coprono il sole. Verrà nel corso degli anni un uomo di credito, e leggerà per curiosità. La materia di gran momento attirerà la sua attenzione, ed ei si prenderà a riesaminarla con diligenza. Nel trovarla fondata sul vero, vorrà farne dono a coloro che amano il vero; ed avrà su di me parecchi vantaggi per dargli valore: più agevole scrutinio da fare, più felice ingegno nell’ esporre, più autorità per cattivar confidenza; il sole uscirà dalle nuvole, e quella luce, che fu negata una volta, sarà confessata ed ammirata un’altra. Conchiudo: se la verità da me esposta verrà ora riconosciuta, il suo trionfo sarà la mia giustificazione; se non verrà ravvisata, il suo trionfo sarà differito, ma non perduto, e la mia giustificazione rimane in deposito nelle mani del tempo. O elogi o scherni, che ora mi attendono, né quelli m’invaniranno, né questi mi avviliranno: e tosto o tardi sempre ottenuto il mio fine”. Gabriele Rossetti, *Sullo spirito antipapale che produsse la Riforma, e sulla segreta influenza ch’ esercitò nella letteratura d’ Europa, e specialmente d’ Italia*, p. 459-460.

Rossetti's contribution opens up unexplored research opportunities, which herald new discoveries. Such unexplored opportunities concern not only Dante and Italian literature, but also European literature, since Dante profoundly influenced the writers who followed him.

Thus, the vast contribution of Gabriele Rossetti leads to a rethinking of literature, namely the idea that literature (a certain kind of literature) is esoteric. For Rossetti, literary works extend beyond literature. His contribution is not merely literary, but above all, of religious and political significance. Literature is, in Rossetti's view, the key to understanding these two domains, and to showing the links between politics and religion with an alleged occult wisdom. Following Gabriele Rossetti's contribution, many of the literary masterpieces of our culture are esoteric in nature, from *The Romance of the Rose* to Dante, from Chaucer to Shakespeare, and from Milton to Balzac or Victor Hugo. The rethinking of literature proposed by Rossetti suggests that the essence of European literature should be rewritten: a literature in which the influence of esotericism is not a negligible or secondary aspect, but rather the very essence of literature.

The contribution of the author of *Il Mistero dell'Amor Platonico* is still incomplete, as he repeatedly says, and the unexplored research opportunities that he left may yet yield much information about the true nature of literature, which lies dormant just as the many secrets behind political events in the history of society remain unknown, because, as the forgotten man of letters Gabriele Rossetti wrote, "the real part, or rather the unique and real one, of this subject cannot be published, nor here nor elsewhere, nor ever. It must thus remain buried. I have done what I could".<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> "La parte più vera, anzi la sola vera, di quest'argomento non si può pubblicare né qui né altrove, né mai. Resti perciò sepolta. Ho fatto quel che ho potuto". Gabriele Rossetti, *Comento analitico al 'Purgatorio' di Dante Alighieri: Opera inedita a cura di Pompeo Giannantonio*, Florence, Olschki, 1967, p. XXXV.



## CHAPTER II

### THE HISTORY OF A “HETERODOX” IDEA

*Boccaccio: the first heterodox interpreter*

In *La Beatrice di Dante*, Gabriele Rossetti shows that he was not the first interpreter who proposed the symbolic reading of Dante’s work, as other scholars and men of letters had previously tried to show the hidden message of the *Divine Comedy* and love literature: “those who honour me with the title of discoverer of Dantean secrets give me a credit which I do not deserve; there were many scholars who in previous eras knew these truths better than I. They inherited this science through communication; I acquired this science through meditation”.<sup>1</sup>

One of the figures whose contribution aimed to reveal the hidden doctrine of Dante’s work, and of literature more generally, was Giovanni Boccaccio (1312-1375), as confirmed by Nella Coletta who writes that “the first to call for a reading of Dante’s work ‘under the veil’ is his biographer Giovanni Boccaccio in that fundamental text for Dante’s hermeneutics that is [...] the *Trattatello in laude di Dante* (Treatise in praise of Dante)”.<sup>2</sup> In fact, in his *Life of Dante*, Boccaccio stresses that the sense of Dante’s work must not be sought through a literary interpretation as there are other meanings, covered by the veil of the obscure verses: “by admirable suavity of the profound meaning there [in *The Divine Comedy*] concealed”.<sup>3</sup> He affirms, moreover, that generally the works of the poets, as well as the Holy Scriptures, have a

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<sup>1</sup> “Coloro che mi onorano col titolo di scopritore de’ segreti danteschi mi attribuirono un vanto che poco mi compete; molti furono que’ sapienti che nelle trascorse età assai meglio di me li discernevano. In essi la scienza era ereditaria per comunicazione, in me acquisita per meditazione”. Gabriele Rossetti, *Il mistero dell’Amor platonico del Medio Evo*, t. I, p. 193.

<sup>2</sup> “Il primo a invocare una lettura dell’opera di Dante ‘sotto velame’ è il suo biografo Giovanni Boccaccio in quel testo fondamentale per l’ermeneutica dantesca che è [...] il *Trattatello in laude di Dante*”. Nella Coletta, *La pietra dei filosofi. Dall’alchimia alle Petrose di Dante*, Milan, Mimesis, 2020, p. 11. The idea of a hidden meaning in Dante’s work exposed by Boccaccio had been proposed by Luigi Valli, as can be deduced from a typed document discovered by Stefano Salzani in the *Fondo Valli (Casa di Dante)* documentary collection in Rome. In it, Valli writes that “[Boccaccio’s] commentary is a conscious falsification of Dante’s thought accomplished publicly by Boccaccio himself who – induced and perhaps forced to explain Dante publicly – wanted to conceal the true content of the Poem that he knew” (“il commento del Boccaccio è una consapevole falsificazione del pensiero di Dante compiuta pubblicamente dal Boccaccio stesso che, indotto e forse costretto a spiegare Dante pubblicamente volle nascondere il vero contenuto del Poema che egli conosceva”). Luigi Valli, *Appunti su Dante e il linguaggio segreto dei Fedeli d’Amore*, typed text of 18 pages, Rome, Fondo Valli, Casa di Dante Roma, 1-[1 bis]2, in Stefano Salzani, *op. cit.*, p. 188. Furthermore, in this document, Luigi Valli points out that the first commentators on *The Divine Comedy* were Guelphs, such as Graziolo dei Bambagliuoli, who opposed Dante and tried to emphasise the poem’s outward form while avoiding delving into its real and inner meaning. See *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio, *Life of Dante*, New York, The Glorier Club of the City of New York, 1990, p. 97. Boccaccio’s work on the life of Dante (*Trattatello in laude di Dante*) was published in three versions: the first (autographed and preserved in Toledo, Biblioteca Capitular, Zelada 104.6) is the most extensive, while the other two (redactions A and B) are abridged versions. The best-known edition, the *editio princeps*, appeared in 1477 under the title *Vita di Dante (Life of Dante)*.



double meaning: “it [poetry] in the same narrative passage reveals the text and a mystery underneath it. It then at once with one exercises the wise and with the other comforts the simple; it has in public whence to nourish children, and in secret serves this end, that it holds the minds of lofty thinkers rapt in admiration”.<sup>4</sup> Regarding the concept of transmission of the truth by poets, Boccaccio writes:

in order that truth acquired by toil should be more pleasing and that it should be better preserved, the poets concealed it under matters that appear to be wholly different. And therefore they chose fables, rather than any other form of concealment, because their beauty attracts those whom neither philosophic demonstrations nor persuasions could have touched. What then shall we say of poets? Shall we suppose that they are madmen, like these dolts, speaking and not knowing what they say? Certainly not, for they are of profound intelligence in their methods, as regards the hidden fruit, and of an excellent and beautiful eloquence as regards the bark and visible leaves.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, Boccaccio writes that Dante devoted himself to the study of ancient poets, the sense of whose poems he had understood: “and seeing that the works of the poets are not vain and simple fables or marvels, as the foolish multitude thinks, but that under them are concealed the sweet fruit of historical and philosophical truth (for which reason the intent of the poets cannot be wholly understood without history and moral philosophy)”.<sup>6</sup> In these lines Dante confirms that poetry uses an external form (exoteric) in order to cover profound truths (esoteric), both of a historical and philosophical nature.

Boccaccio clearly expresses in his writings that the obscurity of Dante, and of poetry in general, hides certain meanings that cannot be divulged. However, it was Boccaccio who affirmed the real existence (not the symbolic one), of Beatrice, the woman Dante loved. Luigi Valli believed that Boccaccio had deliberately manipulated the real “love story” of Beatrice and Dante in order to prevent Dante’s work from being burned.<sup>7</sup> That Dante was unpopular with the powerful is demonstrated by the fact that he was exiled and his *De Monarchia* was publicly burned in 1329 in Bologna by Cardinal Bertrando del Poggetto, during the papal reign of John XXII.<sup>8</sup> This is confirmed directly by Boccaccio in his *Vita di Dante*, where he claims that the Cardinal even wanted to burn Dante’s bones, together with his book, and that it was only thanks to two influential figures, Pino della Tosa and Ostasio da Polenta, that it did not happen:

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<sup>4</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio, *Life of Dante*, p. 38.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>7</sup> See Luigi Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d’Amore*, p. 484-490. Silvio Panunzio confirms Valli’s theory about the fable invented by Boccaccio concerning the real love between Dante and Beatrice Portinari. See Silvano Panunzio, *Cielo e terra. “Poesia, Simbolismo, Sapienza nel Poema Sacro”* [2008], Rome, Simmetria, 2018, p. 155.

<sup>8</sup> See Stefano Salzani, *op. cit.*, p. 235.

This book, some years after the death of its author, was condemned by Messer Beltrando, Cardinal of Poggetto, and Legate of the Pope in the parts of Lombardy, while John XXII was pope. [...] [T]he said cardinal, there being no one to oppose it, seized the aforesaid book, and condemned it in public to the flames, as containing heretical matter. And similarly he tried to burn the bones of the author, to the eternal infamy and confusion of his memory, and would have succeeded if he had not been opposed by a noble and worthy Florentine knight, whose name was Pino della Tosa, who was then at Bologna, where the discussion was carried on, and with him Messer Ostagio da Polenta, who each of them had influence over the aforesaid cardinal.<sup>9</sup>

It is worth pointing out that, as Stefano Salzani remarks, *The Divine Comedy* was not published in Rome until 1791, or rather it would be more correct to say until 1728. In fact, the first publication in Rome was in 1728, but the book indicated Naples as the city of publication. Moreover, the original work was modified and some parts of it were suppressed since they were considered as “inconvenient”.<sup>10</sup> This shows the many obstacles encountered by Dante and his work due to the contents that it divulged, including the love theme on which Dante’s work was based. Thus, in order to understand the symbolism of the rose, we need to consider what Luigi Valli called “the history of an idea”,<sup>11</sup> meaning the history of the love literature that characterized Dantean esotericism, and of troubadour love poetry. In the history of this “heterodox” idea we find the foundations that enable us to understand not only the esoteric dimension of Dante’s mystical rose, but also the rose of writers and poets of the centuries that followed, who claimed a filiation with the author of *The Divine Comedy* or with the love poetry of the troubadours, such as Gérard de Nerval, William Butler Yeats and Ezra Pound.

#### *From the fourteenth to the eighteenth century*

During the Renaissance, many eminent figures proposed a symbolic and allegoric reading of Dante’s work. Leonardo Bruni (1374-1444), Chancellor of the Florentine Republic (translator of Demosthenes, Plato, Aristotle, Xenophon and Plutarch), in his *Vita di Dante* (Life of Dante) points out the political aspects of Dante’s work and discusses the theme (introduced by Boccaccio) of his love for Beatrice from the age of nine. Francesco Buti (1324-1406) in the three volumes of his *Commento sopra la Divina Commedia di Dante Alighieri* (Commentary on Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy*) excludes the historical and physical reality of Beatrice, which is also avoided by Giammario Fielfo (1426-1480, a humanist who lived in Verona under the protection of Pietro di Leonardo Alighieri, Dante’s nephew) in his *Vita di Dante* (1467). According to Francesco Buti, Beatrice represents the Holy Scriptures, whilst according to

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<sup>9</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio, *Life of Dante*, p. 131-132.

<sup>10</sup> See Stefano Salzani, *op. cit.*, p. 214. See also Luigi Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d’Amore*, p. 507.

<sup>11</sup> Luigi Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d’Amore*, p. 14.

Filelfo, she symbolises the Holy Wisdom, to which the poet-pilgrim Dante aspires through his mystical journey. Cristoforo Landino (1424-1498) provides an important exegetic contribution (appreciated in the Neoplatonic milieu of the fifteenth century), in which he maintains that Dante's allegorical fiction is simply a veiled illustration of hidden truths. He tried to investigate the hidden sense of literary fiction, and on Virgil and Dante, he wrote that "God wanted *ad initio* poets to describe his secrets for all people".<sup>12</sup> In other words, Dante's and Virgil's works hide some teachings of a wisdom of divine inspiration under the veil of poetic image: "arcane and occult but absolutely divine senses",<sup>13</sup> as Landino writes in his *Comento sopra la Comedia* (Comentary of the *Comedy*). Thus, Landino's exegetic perspective points out that Dante's work has a sacred and sapiential value, whose comprehension and application enable human beings to make contact with God. In this Humanist period, another eminent figure who proposed a symbolic reading of Dante's work was Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) who, as Stefano Salzani points out, is the author who alludes to the link (the "air de famille",<sup>14</sup> to use an expression of Antoine Faivre's) between esotericism and the *Fedeli d'Amore*.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, Marsilio Ficino recognized the link between Dante and Plato, as well as between Dante's conception of love and Plato's conception of love,<sup>16</sup> and wrote the *Libro dell'amore* (Book of Love), which was modelled on Plato's *Banquet*. Even the cabalist Francesco Zorzi (also spelled Francesco Giorgi, 1466-1540) in his *Harmonia Mundi* includes Dante amongst the Platonists and, as Stefano Salzani comments, another work by Zorzi, *L'elegante poema* (The Elegant Poem), "seems to confirm an uninterrupted Dantean tradition of the fourteenth and the fifteenth century which was fused with the more recent cabalistic current of Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494). This current will spread in France by Guillaume Postel (1510-1581) and by his disciple Guy Le Fèvre de la Broderie (1541-1598),<sup>17</sup> who would link the cult of Dante to the one of Pico".<sup>18</sup> The Italian Middle Ages, the Florentine Renaissance and the French Humanism seem to be

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<sup>12</sup> "Dio volle che *ab initio* i suoi misteri fossero descritti a tutte le genti pè poeti". Cristoforo Landino, *Comento sopra la Comedia* [1481], Rome, Salerno Editrice, v. I, 2001, p. 219-220.

<sup>13</sup> "Arcani e occulti ma del tutto divinissimi sensi". *Ibid.*, p. 219.

<sup>14</sup> On the concept of "air de famille" (family air) forged by Antoine Faivre, see Antoine Faivre, "Occident moderne", in *Dictionnaire critique de l'ésotérisme*, ed. Jean Servier, Paris, PUF, 1998, p. 962; Antoine Faivre, "Une spécialité nouvelle: 'Histoire des courants ésotériques occidentaux'", *Annuaire École pratique des hautes études, Section des Sciences Religieuses*, t. 113 (2004-2005), 2004, p. 31.

<sup>15</sup> See Stefano Salzani, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

<sup>16</sup> See *Supplementum ficinianum*, Florence, Olschki, v. II, 1937, p. 184-185.

<sup>17</sup> On the esotericism of Guy Le Fèvre de la Broderie, see François Secret, *L'Ésotérisme de Guy Le Fèvre de la Broderie*, Geneva, Droz, 1969.

<sup>18</sup> "Sembra confermarsi una ininterrotta tradizione dantesca quattrocentesca e cinquecentesca fusa con la più recente corrente cabalistica di Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494). Tale corrente sarà ripresa in Francia da Guillaume Postel (1510-1581) e dal suo discepolo Guy Le Fèvre de la Broderie (1541-1598), che legheranno il culto di Dante a quello di Pico". Stefano Salzani, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

linked, whilst Dante is the fundamental intermediary between these different epochs, creating a bridge between the Middle Ages and Humanism by means of Love.<sup>19</sup>

Plato's influence (as well as the Aristotle's) in *The Divine Comedy* was explored by Jacopo Mazzoni (1548-1598), a central figure of the Florentine Academy who enjoyed the esteem of Galileo Galilei.<sup>20</sup> In his *Della difesa della Commedia (On Defence of the Comedy*, where the interest is mainly focused on the stylistic and rhetoric aspect) Mazzoni refers to the concept of "secret" in Dante, writing that, "when the voice has two meanings, one of them is secret, and the other one is vulgar".<sup>21</sup> This is substantially the difference between the esoteric meaning (the secret one) and the exoteric (the vulgar meaning), but the esoteric interpretation of Dante's literary production will start to be more and more evident in the eighteenth century. An example of heterodox interpretation, for instance, comes from Antonio Maria Biscioni (1674-1756), who supported the symbolic-allegorical interpretation of Dante's *Vita Nova* and opposed the idea of the historical reality of Beatrice, stating her historical inexistence: "that name, [...] Beatrice, is not the name of a real woman, but it is an ideal one",<sup>22</sup> a symbol of Solomon's Wisdom, "the real Wisdom".<sup>23</sup> In the eighteenth century, the same interpretative line was followed by Gasparo Gozzi in his *Giudizio degli antichi poeti sopra la moderna censura di Dante attribuita ingiustamente a Virgilio* (Judgements on the Ancient Poets Concerning the Modern Censorship of Dante Unfairly Attributed to Dante, 1758),<sup>24</sup> in which the author glimpses a link between the spiritual and initiatory experience of Orpheus and Eurydice and of Dante and Beatrice. Dante is compared to Orpheus, represented as he who sets humanity back on the right track, and the link "Orpheus-Dante" and "Euridice-Beatrice" is developed by Gozzi to show continuity between the Orphic-Pythagorean tradition and Christian esotericism.

The examples of Antonio Maria Biscioni and Gasparo Gozzi show that, as Stefano Salzani remarks, "between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, these passages reveal at least a semblance of revision of Dante's work which, in the following decades, would appear in more accomplished forms of esoteric interpretation".<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> On the *topos* of love in Humanism, see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "Under the Mantle of Love: The Mystical Eroticism of Marsilio Ficino and Giordano Bruno", in *Hidden Intercourse. Eros and Sexuality in the History of Western Esotericism*, eds. Wouter J. Hanegraaff and Jeffrey J. Kripal, Leiden, Brill, 2008, p. 175-208.

<sup>20</sup> See Stefano Salzani, *op. cit.*, p. 81-82.

<sup>21</sup> "Quando la voce ha due significati, l'uno de quali è segreto, e l'altro è volgare". Jacopo Mazzoni, *Della difesa della Commedia di Dante*, Cesena, Bartolomeo Rauerij, 1587, p. 141.

<sup>22</sup> "Quel nome, [...] Beatrice, non è di donna vera, ma ideale". Antonio Maria Biscioni, *Delle opere di Dante Alighieri*, Venice, Presso Giambattista Pasquali, t. II, 1741, p. 51.

<sup>23</sup> "La vera Sapienza". *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Gasparo Gozzi, *Giudizio degli antichi poeti sopra la moderna censura di Dante attribuita ingiustamente a Virgilio*, Venice, Zatta, 1758.

<sup>25</sup> "Sul crinale tra Settecento e Ottocento, questi passaggi sono perlomeno rivelatori di un clima di revisione dell'opera dantesca che nei decenni successivi è destinato a manifestarsi in forme sempre più compiute di interpretazione esoterica". Stefano Salzani, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

The season of the so-called “Dantean esotericism” spread in a century that was marked, as Stefano Salzani reminds, by the “archeological reinterpretation of the religious doctrines and cults”,<sup>26</sup> which was one of the major motifs of what can be called – as shown by Jean Pierre Laurant – the epoch of esotericism: the nineteenth century.<sup>27</sup> It was mainly in France that this revival of the esoteric tradition took place, and where Gabriele Rossetti’s theories were debated and developed, thanks chiefly to Eugène Aroux (1793-1859), whom I shall discuss in depth in the chapter on Joséphin Péladan. The latter was in fact influenced by Aroux as regards the idea of esoteric love poetry in the Middle Ages, although Aroux’s contribution was the result of plagiarism of Gabriele Rossetti’s work, as we shall see. Beyond Eugène Aroux, in nineteenth-century French literature one author who introduced Dante’s esoteric dimension was Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850). In 1831 he published *The Exiles*, in which the author imagines the Italian poet as an auditor on the course of mystic theology held by Sigieri Brabante. I will discuss Balzac in more detail in the second part of my thesis, where I focus on the esoteric dimension of the rose in the author of *Séraphita*; the same applies to other figures referred to in this chapter, but which are explored in later chapters, such as Joséphin Péladan, Carl Gustav Jung and Ezra Pound. In particular, the latter is closely linked to Gabriele Rossetti by virtue of his friendship with Olivia Rossetti Agresti, daughter of William Michael Rossetti, and therefore granddaughter of the author of the *Mistero dell’Amor Platonico*.

With regard to the French esoteric milieu, a figure who proposed an esoteric Dante, as well as an esoteric interpretation of literature, is Alphonse Louis Constant (1810-1875), alias Éliphas Lévi, considered by the historian Jean-Pierre Laurant as the founder of French occultism.<sup>28</sup> The influence of Lévi on French literature is undeniable, as well as on esotericism – not only in the French context but also in Europe, and in his *History of Magic* (1860) Lévi argues that *The Divine Comedy* “is a declaration of war against the papacy by a daring revelation of mysteries”,<sup>29</sup> whilst stressing the fact that “amidst a great multiplicity of commentaries and studies on the work of Dante, no one, that we are aware, has signalled its characteristic in chief”.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, he points out that there is a filiation between *The Divine Comedy*, the

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<sup>26</sup> “Reinterpretazione archeologica delle dottrine e dei culti religiosi”. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>27</sup> Jean-Pierre Laurant, *L’Ésotérisme chrétien en France au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Lausanne, L’Âge d’Homme, 1992, p. 49-52.

<sup>28</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 101-116.

<sup>29</sup> Eliphas Lévi, *The History of Magic* [1860], translated by Arthur Edward Waite, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 345.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

*Romance of the Rose* and the Rosicrucian movement, by showing the centrality of the symbol of the rose<sup>31</sup> in this initiatory chain:

His heaven [the heaven of Dante] is composed of a series of Kabalistic circles divided by a cross, like the pentacles of Ezekiel; in the centre of this cross a rose blossom, thus for the first time manifesting publicly and almost explaining categorically the symbols of the Rosicrucians. We say for the first time why William of Lorris, who died in 1260, five years before the birth of Dante, did not complete the *Romance of the Rose*, his mantle falling upon Clopinel some fifty years later. It will be discovered with a certain astonishment that the *Romance of the Rose* and the *Divine Comedy* are two opposite forms of a single work – initiation by independence of spirit, satire on all contemporary institutions and an allegorical formula of the grand secrets of the Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross.

These important manifestations of occultism coincide with the fall of the Templars, since Jean de Meung, or Clopinel, a contemporary of Dante in the old age of the latter, flourished during his best years at the court of Philip the Fair. The *Romance of the Rose* is the epic of old France, a profound work in a trivial form, a revelation of occult mysteries as instructed as that of Apuleius. The roses of Flamel, Jean de Meung and Dante belong to the same bush.<sup>32</sup>

This passage confirms the cardinal role played by the symbol of the rose, whose nature is initiatory and is, according to Lévi, strictly linked with Rosicrucianism, *The Romance of the Rose* and the esotericism of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

Beyond Éliphas Lévi, the esoteric milieu at the turn of the twentieth century leads us inevitably to the figure of Joséphin Péladan, who based his literary work on esoteric love, and wrote two works focusing on this aspect in Dante, as well as in the troubadour poets: *Le secret des troubadours de Parsifal à Don Quichotte* (The Secret of the Troubadours from Parsifal to Don Quixote, 1906), and *La Doctrine de Dante* (The Doctrine of Dante, 1908). I will devote an entire chapter to the rose of Péladan in the second part of my thesis, but for now I shall just mention the great interest he had in the esoteric dimension of Dante's work. This interest was transmitted by Péladan to one of his followers, namely Paul Vulliaud (1875-1950), who wrote an article "Enquête sur la pensée dantesque: Dante et les sectes d'amour" (Study on Dantean

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<sup>31</sup> Speaking of "the key to the romance of Clopinel and William de Lorris", namely *The Romance of the Rose*, Éliphas Lévi highlights the occult dimension of the symbol of the rose, stating that: "the rose, which from all times has been the type of beauty, life, love and pleasure, expressed mystically the secret thought of all protests manifested at the oppression of spirit; it was Nature testifying that, like grace, she was a daughter of God; it was love refusing to be stifled by the celibate; it was life in revolt against sterility; it was humanity aspiring towards natural religion, full of reason and love, founded on the revelations of the harmony of being, of which the rose, for initiates, was the living floral symbol. It is in truth a pantacle; the form is circular, the leaves of the corolla are heart-shaped and rest harmoniously on one another; its tint offers the most harmonious shades of the primitive colours; its calyx is of purple and gold. We have seen that Flamel, or rather the *Book of Abraham the Jew*, represents it as the hieroglyphical sign of the fulfilment of the Great Work. Here is the key to the romance of Clopinel and William de Lorris. The conquest of the rose was the problem offered by initiation to science, whilst religion was at work to prepare and to establish the universal, exclusive and final triumph of the Cross.

The problem proposed by high initiation was the union of the Rose and the Cross, and in effect occult philosophy, being the universal synthesis, must take into account all phenomena of being". *Ibid.*, p. 351-352.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 347-346.

thought: Dante and the sect of love),<sup>33</sup> where he focuses on the initiatory and esoteric dimension of the theme of love in Dante's work. Moreover, Paul Vulliaud wrote a book, *La Pensée ésotérique de Léonard de Vinci* (The Esoteric Thought of Leonardo da Vinci, 1910), in which he focuses on the esotericism of Leonardo da Vinci, but also on Dante, and especially on the *Fedeli d'Amore*.<sup>34</sup>

In 1887, with Stanislas de Guaita, Papus and other figures of the French intellectual elite, Péladan set up the "Conseil occulte des douze" (Occult Council of the Twelve) of the Rosy-Cross. Then, in 1890, he left this brotherhood in order to found the "Troisième ordre intellectuelle de la Rose+Croix catholique" (Third intellectual Order of the Catholic Rosy-Cross), and in the manifesto of the cabalistic Rosy-Cross, the *Constitutions de la Rose+Croix, le Temple et le Graal* (the *Constitutions of the Rose-Cross, the Temple and the Grail*, written by Péladan himself and published in 1893), Dante is described as a pivotal figure within an initiatory tradition spread throughout the centuries:

We, for the divine mercy and the assent of our brothers – Grand Master of the  
ROSY+CROSS OF THE TEMPLE AND OF THE GRAAL,  
In Roman catholic communion with JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA, HUGUES  
DE PAYENS AND DANTE<sup>35</sup>

This assertion of an initiatory and spiritual lineage linking the Antiquity to the Middle Ages, Renaissance to the nineteenth century, is expressed elsewhere in the manifesto:

The Rosy+Cross flourishes on the verge of Temple: the swords of the willing  
sparkle amongst the incenses; the wholesome dove can go down to the Grail  
that already glows red.  
Hosannah, Rosy+Cross! Hosannah, Templars! Hosannah, Chevaliers!<sup>36</sup>

Péladan's reading of Dante's work, as well as of medieval love literature, is profoundly influenced by the *fin de siècle* occultist vogue, and it is important to point out that the filiation that he proposed is similar to that claimed by the Italian heterodox school of Dantean studies, whose pioneer was Gabriele Rossetti, although other scholars also made significant contributions in this respect during the nineteenth century. First of all, we should note the exegetical contribution of Carlo Vecchione, who was one of the most important sources for

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<sup>33</sup> Paul Vulliaud, "Enquête sur la pensée dantesque: Dante et les sectes d'amour", *Les Entretiens idéalistes*, n. 9, 1914, in *Charis. Archives de l'Unicorne*. 3, Paris-Milan, Archè Edizioni, 1994, p. 223-224.

<sup>34</sup> Paul Vulliaud, *La Pensée ésotérique de Léonard de Vinci* [1910], Paris, Dervy, 2009, p. 52.

<sup>35</sup> "Nous, par la miséricorde divine et l'assentiment de nos frères – Grand Maître de la ROSE + CROIX DU TEMPLE ET DU GRAAL, / En communion catholique romaine avec JOSEPH D'ARIMATHIE, HUGUES DES PAÏENS ET DANTE". Joséphin Péladan, *Constitutions de la Rose+Croix, le Temple et le Graal*, Paris, Au secrétariat, 2 rue de Commaille, 1893, p. 5.

<sup>36</sup> "La Rose+Croix florit au seuil du Temple: les épées du vouloir étincellent parmi l'encens; la saine colombe peut descendre sur le Graal qui déjà rougeoit. / Hosannah, Rose+Croix! Hosannah, Templiers! Hosannah, Chevaliers!" *Ibid.* p. 16.

Gabriele Rossetti, who quoted from him extensively in his *Mistero dell'Amor Platonico*.<sup>37</sup> Carlo Vecchione was Vice-President of the Supreme Court of Naples and proposed a heterodox interpretation of Dante's work in his *Della sapienza riposte della letteratura antica seguita da Dante* (Of the hidden knowledge of ancient literature followed by Dante, 1850). According to Vecchione, "the Divine Comedy was composed by its author as an imitation of the most illustrious poets of antiquity and it was carried out as a *talete*, namely an initiation to the mysteries".<sup>38</sup> He stresses the filiation with the Egyptian tradition, as well as the continuation of this initiatory chain in the work of Petrarch and Boccaccio:

the primitive wisdom was born in Egypt; [...] the priests of this country were the authors of this wisdom; [...] the same priests kept it mysteriously; [...] for this reason they invented a subtle language, which introduced its meanings amongst all those things said openly; [...] ancient mysteries were composed of this arcane wisdom, accompanied with the arcane language; [...] the first poets came out of this school; [...] with such language the priestly science, and the mysteries passed into Greece; [...] from this school came the first poets; [...] following the examples of the poets, also the philosophers used the artificial language; [...] the rules of this school were learned by the Grammarians; and this way of writing was preserved until the time of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio, who adhered to it in their works.<sup>39</sup>

Other scholars who interpreted Dante's work and love literature in the nineteenth century include Michelangelo Caetani (1804-1882, whom I will discuss in detail in later chapters), who heavily influenced Honoré de Balzac, or Francesco Perez (1812-1892) who focused on the symbolic meaning of Beatrice in his *La Beatrice svelata* (The Beatrice unveiled, 1865). But the most important contributions in terms of esoteric interpretation of Dante's work come from poets – in particular, two of the most important poets in the history of Italian literature: Ugo Foscolo<sup>40</sup> (1778-1827) and Giovanni Pascoli (1855-1912). In 1825, Ugo Foscolo

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<sup>37</sup> The work by Carlo Vecchione that Rossetti quotes on several occasions in *Il Mistero dell'Amor Platonico* is *Della Intelligenza della Divina Commedia, Investigazioni di Carlo Vecchioni, Vice presidente della Suprema Corte di Giustizia, Commendatore del Real Ordine di Francesco Primo. Parte I. Volume I*, Naples, Dalla Stamperia di Fibreno, 1832.

<sup>38</sup> "La Divina Commedia fu composta dal suo autore ad imitazione de' più illustri poeti dell'antichità, e ch'è condotta come una telete, ossia come una iniziazione ai misteri". Carlo Vecchione, *Della sapienza riposta della letteratura antica seguita da Dante*, Naples, 1850, p. 16.

<sup>39</sup> "La primitiva sapienza nacque in Egitto; [...] ne furono autori i sacerdoti di quel popolo; [...] i medesimi la serbarono arcanamente custodita; per l'uopo inventarono un sottile linguaggio, il quale insinuava le sue significazioni fra le cose dette apertamente; [...] di quest'arcana sapienza, accompagnata all'arcano linguaggio, si componevano principalmente i misteri; [...] con siffatto linguaggio la scienza sacerdotale, e i misteri passarono in Grecia; [...] da questa scuola uscirono i primi poeti; [...] ad esempio de' poeti anche i filosofi si avvalsero della elocuzione artificata; [...] le regole della stessa erano insegnate da' Grammatici; e che questo modo di scrivere si conservò sino a' tempi di Dante, del Petrarca, e del Boccaccio, i quali vi si attennero nello loro opere". *Ibid.*, p. 15-16.

<sup>40</sup> Foscolo and Rossetti (both political exiles in London) published their studies almost at the same time, and as Gabriele Rossetti writes in his *Mistero dell'Amor Platonico*: "between me and Foscolo there were no relations; and even though we published at the same time, we did not know about each other" ("tra me e Foscolo non v'era relazione alcuna; e senza che l'uno sapesse dell'altro stampammo nella stessa epoca"). Gabriele Rossetti, *Il mistero dell'Amor platonico del Medio Evo*, v. II, p. 1359.



spoke for the first time of an “occult system”<sup>41</sup> hidden in *The Divine Comedy*, and this concept resurfaced in the 1842 edition of Foscolo’s *La Commedia di Dante Alighieri illustrata da Ugo Foscolo* (Dante Alighieri’s *Commedia* illustrated by Ugo Foscolo), the preface of which was written by one of the fathers of Italian Unity, Giuseppe Mazzini – a major figure in the history of Italian politics, who mentions the link between literature, politics, Pythagoreanism and the Renaissance: “when we become worthy of Dante [...] we will find a Philosophy, a truly national one, a bridge between the Italian School of Pythagoras and the Italian thinkers of the eighteenth century”.<sup>42</sup> These words are pronounced by a figure well versed in the Italian and international political scene, and show that literature goes beyond the literary domain, extending to political circles in an initiatory continuum which runs from Pythagoras to the nineteenth century of Giuseppe Mazzini, a dear friend of George Sand,<sup>43</sup> but also of Gabriele Rossetti.

*The twentieth century in Italy: Giovanni Pascoli, Luigi Valli and Alfonso Ricolfi*

In the early twentieth century a veritable “school” of Dantean exegesis starts to take shape. The reference to “school” applied to the reading of Dante’s work from a symbolic and esoteric viewpoint is provided by Luigi Valli who, on the occasion of the first *lectura Dantis* at the Collegio Nazareno of Rome (29 January 1905), writes a letter to Giovanni Pascoli, dated 2 February 1900, saying: “I am charged to explain the Canto IV of Purgatory for the ‘lectura Dantis’ of Rome, and I am very happy because our small school will therefore have another voice in that very difficult official Dantean world”.<sup>44</sup> Luigi Valli was a disciple of Giovanni Pascoli who, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, gave his opinion on the secret language of Dante in his works *Minerva oscura* (Obscure Minerva, 1889),<sup>45</sup> *Sotto il velame* (Under the Veil, 1900), *La mirabile visione* (The Admirable Vision, 1902). Pascoli confirms the metaphysical nature of Beatrice who, he says, represents the transfiguration of Wisdom that can be achieved only through a mystical death, as in the case of the passage across the Acheron by Dante, who crosses the river and “died to the death, meaning reborn, because this mystical

<sup>41</sup> “Sistema occulto”. Ugo Foscolo, *Discorso sul testo e su le opinioni diverse prevalenti intorno alla storia e alla emendazione critica della commedia di Dante*, London, Guglielmo Pickering, 1825, p. 89.

<sup>42</sup> “Quando saremo fatti degni di Dante [...] troveremo una Filosofia, nazionale davvero, anello tra Scuola Italiana di Pitagora e i pensatori italiani del secolo XVII”. Giuseppe Mazzini, “Prefazione all’edizione”, in Ugo Foscolo, *La Commedia di Dante Alighieri illustrata da Ugo Foscolo*, 2 t., London, Pietro Rolandi, t. I, 1842, p. XVI. The essay written by Giuseppe Mazzini is also present in Giuseppe Mazzini, *Scritti editi e inediti. Letteratura*, v. IV, Milan, G. Daelli, 1862, p. 38-39.

<sup>43</sup> On the epistolary correspondence between Giuseppe Mazzini and George Sand, see Fabio Luzzatto, *Giuseppe Mazzini e George Sand. La relazione e la corrispondenza*, Milan, Fratelli Bocca, 1947.

<sup>44</sup> “Sono incaricato di spiegare il canto IV del Purgatorio per la ‘Lectura Dantis’ di Roma, ne sono molto contento anche perché la nostra piccola scuola nuova avrà così un’altra voce in quel mondo ufficiale dantesco così refrattario”. Letter from Luigi Valli to Giovanni Pascoli on 20 February 1904, in Giovanni Capecechi, “Il carteggio tra Giovanni Pascoli e Luigi Valli (1892-1908)”, *Rivista Pascoliana*, n. 11, 1999, p. 188.

<sup>45</sup> The title *Minerva oscura* is taken from Boccaccio who in one of his writings speaks of an “obscure Minerva”. Giovanni Boccaccio, *Rime* (32), in *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*, Milan, Mondadori, v. I, 1992, p. 112.

death is a nativity”.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, Pascoli affirmed that Dante was a “Western Shakya-Muni”,<sup>47</sup> thus linking the Indian tradition to the Italian one. But despite the importance of Giovanni Pascoli in the Italian cultural context, his theories on an esoteric Dante were not accepted by official critics. In a letter to Luigi Mercatelli (director of the review *Tribuna*) dated 8 June 1900, Pascoli expresses his disappointment for the indifference and the ostracism shown to his work *Sotto il velame*:

I assure you that it [Pascoli’s book *Sotto il velame*] explains the mysteries of *The Divine Comedy* for the first time after 600 years! The meaning of Virgil, Lucia, Cato, Matelda, Beatrice, or the Gentle Woman of the *Banquet*, is completely found or rectified. There are explanations of things which were considered as inexplicable: for example, the character of Acheron. It is a book, believe me, that signals a gigantesque step forward in Dantean studies. But the envy of Dantean specialists and, in general, of the literati and the sloth of all the scholars and their poverty, may reduce it to silence, as they did for a while with the *Minerva Oscura*, a work which is totally confirmed by this book [*Sotto il velame*].<sup>48</sup>

In a letter addressed to Adolfo De Bosis, to whom he dedicated his *Poemi Conviviali* (Convivial Poems), Pascoli speaks of the reception of his works containing the veiled meaning of Dante’s work, namely *La Minerva Oscura*, *Sotto il Velame* and *La Mirabile Visione*, which were forgotten by the official academy: “they were derided and suppressed, outraged and smeared, but they will live. I will die: they will not die. This is what I believe, this is what I know: my grave will not be silent. The Genius of our People, Dante, will show it to his sons”.<sup>49</sup> This demonstrates how even someone like Giovanni Pascoli (one of the most important Italian poets) struggled, like Gabriele Rossetti, to express his ideas about Dante’s work – ideas that refer (to use Pascoli’s words) to some “terrible things of Dante’s thought”, a doctrine which is so terrible “to such an extent that it could light a stake”.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>46</sup> “Muore alla morte, cioè rinasce alla vita, perché quella morte mistica è una natività”. Giovanni Pascoli, *Sotto il velame: saggio di un’interpretazione generale del poema sacro* [1900], Bologna, Zanichelli, 1912, p. 79.

<sup>47</sup> “Shakya-Muni dell’Occidente”. Giovanni Pascoli, *In Or San Michele - Prolusione al Paradiso*, Messina, Muglia, 1903, p. XLII.

<sup>48</sup> “Io ti assicuro che spiega [the work *Sotto il velame*] i misteri della *Divina Commedia* per la prima volta dopo 600 anni! Il significato di Virgilio, Lucia, Catone, Matelda, Beatrice, della Donna Gentile del Convivio, è o trovato del tutto o rettificato. Vi sono spiegazioni di cose che si credevano inspiegabili: per es. del personaggio dell’Acheronte. È un libro, credi, che segna un passo gigantesco negli studi danteschi. Ma l’invidia dei Dantisti e in genere dei letterati e l’ignavia degli studiosi tutti e la povertà loro, possono fare il silenzio intorno ad esso, come lo fecero per un pezzo intorno alla *Minerva Oscura* che da questo libro è confermata totalmente”. In Giuseppe Zuppone Strani, “Lettere inedite di Giovanni Pascoli a Luigi Martelli”, *Nuova Antologia*, Florence, year 62, fasc. 1334, 16 October 1927, p. 430.

<sup>49</sup> “Essi furono derisi o depressi, oltraggiati e calunniati, ma vivranno. Io morirò: quelli no. Così credo, così so: la mia tomba non sarà silenziosa. Il Genio di nostra Gente, Dante, la additerà ai suoi figli”. Letter from Giovanni Pascoli to Adolfo De Bosis on 30 June 1904, in Giovanni Pascoli, *Poemi conviviali* [1904], ed. Maria Belponer, Milan, BUR Rizzoli, 2013, p. 36.

<sup>50</sup> “Terribile del pensier di Dante”; “tale da accendere il rogo”. Giovanni Pascoli, *In Or San Michele - Prolusione al Paradiso*, p. 31.

A follower of Giovanni Pascoli, Luigi Valli,<sup>51</sup> was the representative of the heterodox “school” of Dantean studies who had the greatest impact on European culture, though this aspect is usually overlooked. Valli revised previous work by Foscolo, Pascoli and especially Rossetti (though he disagreed with some aspects, judging them as interpretative exaggerations)<sup>52</sup> and condensed all the effort of his research in the book previously mentioned, *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d’Amore*. Luigi Valli paid particular attention to the initiatory symbolism of the rose and to the relations between the Persian tradition, the love poetry of the Middle Ages and Western esoteric currents. Thus, one can read in Valli’s work that:

The most important heresy which dominated the Middle Ages, which is closely linked to Western literary circles and specifically to the poetry of love, namely the Cathar or Albigensian heresy, which nurtured the spirit of many Provençal poets, *actually originated in Persia* in the form of Manichaeism and *from Persia through Syria*, which was the bridge between East and West, thanks to the Crusades, and re-established even through conflict and massacre close relations with the Arabic-Persian world, and a new expansion of mysticism – *which used to manifest itself in the secret language of love* – also spread to the West.<sup>53</sup>

Elsewhere, with regard to the esoteric symbolism of the rose, Valli affirms:

When the Albigensian crusades devastated Provence with repeated massacres, they spread *love poetry* with the *heresy* across the world. The exiled troubadours, who fought for their faith, no longer had any sign of that faith. On the contrary, they went from town to town, from court to court in order to celebrate the “Rose”, their *eglantine*, the stained rose, the always vague celebration of an indefinite woman, always an object of vague love.<sup>54</sup>

Though some critics did not accept Valli’s esoteric interpretation, it should be pointed out that there was recognition of Valli’s literary criticism by eminent Italians in the early twentieth century. For instance, Sidney Sonnino (1847-1922), Minister of Foreign Affairs, founded the prestigious institution *Casa di Dante* near the Palazzo Anguillara in Rome, and

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<sup>51</sup> On the figure of Luigi Valli, see Stefano Salzani, *op. cit.*; Maria Rosa Naselli, *Luigi Valli. Il primo Novecento attraverso gli affetti, le azioni, gli scritti di un intellettuale*, Reggio Calabria, Città del sole, 2011.

<sup>52</sup> In the notes founded among the documents of Valli, one can read that he reproaches Rossetti for some interpretative exaggerations due to his belonging to Rosicrucianism, and this would have caused a certain interpretative impartiality. See Stefano Salzani, *op. cit.*, p. 186-188.

<sup>53</sup> “La più importante delle eresie che hanno dominato il Medioevo, quella che si congiunge strettamente alla vita letteraria dell’Occidente e proprio alla poesia d’amore, cioè l’eresia dei Catari o Albigesi, della quale si nutri lo spirito di tanti poeti provenzali, *era nata proprio in Persia* sotto forma di Manicheismo e *dalla Persia attraverso la Siria*, che fu il ponte tra l’Oriente e l’Occidente, per opera delle crociate, che ristabilirono pur con la lotta e la strage strettissimi rapporti col mondo arabo-persiano, penetrò nell’Occidente una nuova espansione proprio di questo stesso misticismo *che soleva manifestarsi nel linguaggio segreto d’amore*”. Luigi Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d’Amore*, p. 135.

<sup>54</sup> “Quando la crociata degli Albigesi desolò con le sue ripetute stragi la Provenza, essa disperse per il mondo *insieme la poesia d’amore e l’eresia*. I trovatori esuli, che pure tanto avevano lottato per la loro fede, non avevano più di quella loro fede nessun accento, ma invece portavano di città in città, di corte in corte la celebrazione della loro ‘Rosa’, della loro *eglantina*, rosa di macchia, la celebrazione sempre vaga di una indefinita donna, oggetto di un sempre vago amore”. *Ibid.*, p. 149.

established a Chair which was held by the most influential Dantean scholars of the time. Luigi Valli was by no means insignificant, and he gave lectures on the symbolic and esoteric interpretation of Dante's work.<sup>55</sup> On the occasion of the publication of *La Beatrice di Dante* (which was made possible by Valli, who helped to get Rossetti's work printed), Valli was defined by the Senator and Italian Republic Minister of National Education, Giuliano Balbini, as a "noble amateur philosopher and poet".<sup>56</sup> In an article of 1927, the political expert and journalist Vittorio Beonio Brocchieri (1902-1979) wrote that it would not take Valli's studies long to be deservedly acclaimed by literary criticism:

As far as Valli's critical processes are concerned, carried out using interpretative keys, we will soon have – I think – confirmation of their efficiency and of their sagacity, as soon as the work is published that he has been writing for a long time on the hidden meaning of a certain type of literature of the thirteenth century, that has remained undeciphered until now.<sup>57</sup>

Even Francesco Egidi, who did not subscribe at all to the esoteric and sectarian interpretation, does not deny "the majesty of the research carried out by Valli",<sup>58</sup> commenting, "obviously, all those people who have a superficial understanding of the ancient poetry realize that it is addressed to a closed circle, and has its own special audience which, alone, must and can understand it, while it is not important that others do".<sup>59</sup> Egidi continues by saying:

We have to conclude that one must study better and more profoundly the scope of those vast heretical movements, which had, in Dante's time and before and after him, an importance that has hardly emerged in the investigations of some historians, and these movements could probably have had some great repercussions which are not always evident in art and literature. And there is a lot more to discover. As far as our ancient poetry is concerned, everything has to be revised and remade, even starting from a new study of the formation of the sylloges of the poems themselves in the various codes, and without this great effort it is not possible either to deny or to admit with absolute certainty the hypothesis advanced by Valli. But, since the clues he collected really open a window which it would be silly to deny, we can say that Valli has opened up a vast research opportunity, where we all have to work, all of us who desire, seriously and without preconceptions, to investigate the thought and the art of Dante.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> See Stefano Salzani, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

<sup>56</sup> "Nobile figura di entusiasta pensatore e poeta che è stato Luigi Valli". Balbino Giuliano in his preface to Gabriele Rossetti, *La Beatrice di Dante*, p. XIII.

<sup>57</sup> "Quanto ai procedimenti critici del Valli, condotti sulla base di chiavi interpretative avremo – io credo – ben presto conferma della loro efficacia e della loro sagacità non appena sarà uscita l'opera che da tempo egli sta preparando sui significati reconditi di certa letteratura dugentesca, fino ad oggi intimamente indecifrata". Vittorio Beonio Brocchieri, "La politica di Dante", *Fiera letteraria*, 25 December 1927, in Stefano Salzani, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

<sup>58</sup> "L'imponenza delle ricerche compiute dal Valli". Benedetto Migliore, *Il Fedele d'Amore Luigi Valli*, Rome, Edizioni della Rassegna Italiana, 1932, p. 21.

<sup>59</sup> "Certo tutti coloro che abbiano anche una superficiale cognizione di quell'antica lirica s'avvedono ch'essa è rivolta ad una breve cerchia chiusa, ha un suo pubblico speciale, che, solo, deve e può comprenderla, mentre non importa che comprendan gli altri". Francesco Egidi, "La scuola superiore", 1928, in *ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>60</sup> "Dobbiamo concludere che c'è da studiar meglio e più profondamente la portata di quei vasti movimenti ereticali, ch'ebbero nel tempo di Dante e prima e dopo di lui, un'importanza che è appena affiorata nelle indagini

Nevertheless, conscious of the uncontested supremacy of the positive criticism in the domain of literary studies, Valli declares that the aim of his book is not “having the consensus of everyone or of the majority”, it is sufficient that it draws “the attention of a group of young scholars so that they explore, following the traces indicated here, the subterranean world of this poetry”, namely “the real spiritual content of Italian love poetry”,<sup>61</sup> thus also of European love literature since the latter was deeply influenced by Italian love literature, and they both interweave in the course of the history of ideas.

According to Valli, *The Divine Comedy* is an “initiatory book” and, like all the initiatory books, it risks being interpreted “differently from the way it should be interpreted, which is the fate of all initiatory books”.<sup>62</sup> As we have seen, this dilemma has been brilliantly studied by Arthur M. Melzner, namely the dilemma of reading exoterically works that are esoteric, since “if [one writes] esoterically and we do not read them esoterically, we will necessarily misunderstand them”.<sup>63</sup> One of the causes of this dilemma, as Stefano Salzani aptly points out, derives from the “torment of secrecy” which characterized esoteric writings, and this “torment” is the “ethical and epistemological dilemma that religious and anthropological studies face in the studies of esoteric traditions”.<sup>64</sup> This difficulty in deciphering the sense of obscure works inevitably results in interpretative errors, and the interpretative errors that Valli and his school may have made are clearly admitted by Valli himself, who invites the new generations to pursue the studies undertaken: “I thus call on the young to study this problem and firstly I warn them of the errors that I, myself, have probably made and I suggest that they form a definitive judgement only after having reconsidered the poetic material from which I have deduced my conclusions”.<sup>65</sup>

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di alcuni storici, ma che potrebbero con ogni verosimiglianza aver avuto ripercussioni vivissime e non sempre appariscenti nell'arte e nella letteratura. E c'è molt'altro da scovare ancora. E c'è, intorno alla lirica nostra più antica, tutto da rivedere e da rifare, a partire persino da un nuovo studio della formazione delle sillogi delle liriche stesse nei vari codici senza questo vasto lavoro non è possibile né negare né ammettere con assoluta certezza l'ipotesi che il Valli ha avanzato. Ma, poiché gli indizi da lui raccolti aprono realmente uno spiraglio che sarebbe sciocco negare, si può dire che il Valli abbia insieme aperto un vasto campo di lavoro, in cui dobbiamo metterci tutti, quanti desideriamo, senza preconcetti e seriamente, indagare il pensiero e l'arte dei tempi di Dante”. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>61</sup> “Avere il consenso di tutti e nemmeno della maggioranza”; “l'attenzione di un gruppo di giovani studiosi perché essi esplorino, sulle tracce che qui si indicano, il mondo sotterraneo di questa poesia”; “il vero contenuto spirituale della poesia d'amore italiana”. Luigi Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d'Amore*, p. 27.

<sup>62</sup> “Diversamente da come dovrebbe essere interpretato, questo è il destino di tutti i libri iniziatici”. Luigi Valli, *La struttura morale dell'universo dantesco*, Bologna, Zanichelli, 1922, p. 279.

<sup>63</sup> Arthur Melzner, *op. cit.*, p. XIII.

<sup>64</sup> Stefano Salzani, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

<sup>65</sup> “Chiamo dunque i giovani a studiare questo problema e prima di tutto tengo a metterli in guardia contro gli errori che io stesso posso aver commesso e li consiglio di non formarsi un giudizio definitivo, se non dopo aver seriamente riconsiderato il materiale poetico dal quale io ho dedotto le mie conclusioni”. Luigi Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d'amore*, p. 492.

Beyond Valli's contribution, another important figure of the so-called "heterodox" current of Dantean studies, and of the studies on esoteric love poetry, is Alfonso Ricolfi,<sup>66</sup> who recognizes the esoteric nature of Beatrice (without denying her physical and historical existence), and focuses on the concept of mystical ecstasy, described in his essay "Rapimento mistico e iniziazione nella poesia dei Fedeli d'Amore" ("Mystical Rapture and Initiation in the Poetry of the Faithful of Love") in terms of:

union, that is to say the possible or passive intellect with the active intelligence, according to the doctrine already professed by Aristotle, and derived from him, through Avempace and Avicenna, with several gnostic infiltrations, up to the great Averroes, who had explained it in the two pamphlets whose titles are eloquent, *On the Beatitude of the Soul* and *On the Union of the Abstract Intelligence with Man*. This union, which coincided, according to the Scholastics, with that infusion of the divine Word with the human soul that Saint Augustine and Saint Bernard had perceived in the *Song of Songs*, so read in the twelfth century, namely this marriage, constituted the "blessed joy" of the real "Fedeli d'Amore".<sup>67</sup>

Ricolfi confirms the filiation between the philosophical and mystical currents of Antiquity and those of the French and the Italian Middle Ages, founded on "an initiation based on Averroist and mystical doctrine, meant to obtain the *raptus mentis*, to touch the summits of the 'blessed joy', outside of strictly Christian practices".<sup>68</sup> He adds that:

Several mystical, religious, philosophic currents and traditions, some of which were orthodox, some others heterodox, met in the poetry of the twelfth century, operating in different ways in the spirits of the various poets. Thus, the doctrine of the Woman-Wisdom or Woman-Intelligence refers to two main currents, one is heterodox, the other one is orthodox: the first runs from Aristotle to Avempace, to Avicenna and to Averroes, through Gnosticism and Manichaeism; the second runs from Saint Augustine to Saint Bernard and to Richard of Saint Victor, who is mentioned by Dante in his letter to Cangrande as the key to better understanding of the *raptus mentis*, and defined by his contemporaries as "the column, the torch, the angel of the School".<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> The great part of Alfonso Ricolfi's contribution is contained in *Studi sui "Fedeli d'Amore"* [1933, 1940]. In addition to his critic work, Ricolfi ventures also in the dramaturgic production and the theme of one of his works is the rose: *Una rosa caduta dal cielo* ("A rose fallen from the sky", music by Dino Berruti), Turin, Fratelli Delle Scuole Cristiane, 1939.

<sup>67</sup> "Connubio, cioè dell'intelletto possibile o passivo coll'Intelligenza attiva, secondo la dottrina già professata da Aristotele, e da questo discesa, attraverso Avempace ed Avicenna, con non poche infiltrazioni gnostiche, fino al grande Averroè, che l'aveva spiegata nei due opuscoli dagli eloquenti titoli *Della beatitudine dell'anima* e *Del connubio dell'Intelligenza astratta coll'uomo*. Ora appunto questo connubio, che veniva a coincidere presso gli Scolastici con quella infusione del Verbo divino nell'anima umana che Sant'Ambrogio e San Bernardo avevano visto rappresentato nel *Cantico dei cantici* così letto nel Duecento, appunto questo connubio costituiva la 'beata gioia' dei veri 'Fedeli d'Amore'". Alfonso Ricolfi, "Rapimento mistico e iniziazione nella poesia dei Fedeli d'Amore", *Rivista di sintesi-letteraria*, n. 4, October-December 1935, p. 353. On the intellect of love, see Giorgio Agamben, Jean-Baptiste Brenet, *Intellect d'amour*, Paris, Verdier, 2018.

<sup>68</sup> "Un'iniziazione basata sulla dottrina averroistica e mistica, intesa a ottenere il *raptus mentis*, a toccare i vertici della 'beata gioia', fuori dalle pratiche strettamente cristiane". Alfonso Ricolfi, "Rapimento mistico e iniziazione nella poesia dei Fedeli d'Amore", *Rivista di sintesi-letteraria*, p. 367.

<sup>69</sup> "Assai varie correnti e tradizioni mistiche, religiose, filosofiche, talune ortodosse, tali altre eterodosse, vengono a incontrarsi nella poesia del Duecento, in vario modo operando sulla mente dei diversi poeti. Così la dottrina della Donna-Sapienza o Donna-Intelligenza fa capo a due correnti principali, l'una eterodossa e l'altra ortodossa: la

The peculiarity of Ricolfi, compared to Valli and his predecessors, is that he bases his research mainly on French and Provençal sources, rather than Italian ones. One fundamental text, unknown to Valli, *Des fiez d'Amours* by Jacques de Basieux (thirteenth century), taken from a book published in Belgium by Auguste Scheler, *Trouvères belges du XII<sup>e</sup> au XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Belgian Trouvères from the twelfth to the fourteenth century).<sup>70</sup> Like Gabriele Rossetti and Luigi Valli, Alfonso Ricolfi focuses on the rose described by the twelfth century poets, a rose which is, as he writes, “both an earthly and celestial thing”,<sup>71</sup> and he speaks of “alchemical-initiatory doctrines” which were transmitted from “the Hindu Brahmin to the Orphic and Pythagorean school of the Greek and Alexandrian world, from the Persian Sufis to the precursory groups of the Gnostics, the Therapeutics, the Ebionites and the Essenes, from the Gnostics to the Rosicrucians”.<sup>72</sup>

Beyond the exegetic contributions of Alfonso Ricolfi, Luigi Valli and Giovanni Pascoli, in the early twentieth century, another study worth remembering is by Mario Alessandrini, though, to be precise, his works were published in the 1950s and 1960s. He wrote a work on Dante and the *Fedeli d'Amore*, titled *Dante Fedele d'Amore*,<sup>73</sup> and produced one of the few studies on Cecco d'Ascoli, who was one of the main medieval love poets studied by Rossetti and Valli.<sup>74</sup> However, among the scholars mentioned so far, it was Luigi Valli who had the greatest impact on European culture, influencing many of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century.

### *Eranos: the alternative intellectual history of the twentieth century*

One of the figures influenced by Luigi Valli was Carl Gustav Jung, who is associated with the a particular cultural event, namely *Eranos* – a cycle of lectures that took place in the 1930s near Lake Maggiore, which was the setting for this singular initiative, defined by Walter Robert Corti as a “place of meeting between the East and the West”.<sup>75</sup> This cycle of lectures

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prima, che da Aristotele giunge ad Avempace, ad Avicenna et ad Averroè, attraverso lo gnosticismo e il manicheismo; la seconda, che da Sant'Agostino giunge a San Bernardo e a quel Riccardo di San Vittore, ch'è menzionato da Dante nell'epistola a Can Grande come chiave per meglio intendere il *raptus mentis*, e dai suoi contemporanei definito ‘la colonna, la fiaccola, l'angelo della Scuola’”. *Ibid.*, p. 371-372.

<sup>70</sup> Auguste Scheler, *Trouvères belges du XII<sup>e</sup> au XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle. Chansons d'amour, jeux-partis, pastourelles, dits et fabliaux par Quenes de Béthune, Henri III, duc de Brabant, Gillebert de Berneville, Mathieu de Gand, Jacques de Baisieux, Gauthier le Long, etc.*, Brussels, Closson, 1876.

<sup>71</sup> “Volta a volta cosa terrena e cosa celeste”. Alfonso Ricolfi, *Studi sui “Fedeli d'Amore”*, p. 366.

<sup>72</sup> “Dottrine alchemico-iniziatiche”; “dai bramani indù alle scuole orfiche e pitagoriche del mondo greco e alessandrino, dai Sufi persiani ai gruppi precursori dei Gnostici, Terapeutici, Ebioniti ed Esseni, dai Gnostici ai Rosacroce”. *Ibid.*, p. 368.

<sup>73</sup> Mario Alessandrini, *Dante Fedele d'Amore*, Rome, Atanòr, 1960.

<sup>74</sup> Mario Alessandrini, *Cecco d'Ascoli*, Rome, Gherardo Casini Editore, 1955.

<sup>75</sup> “Begegnungsstätte zwischen Ost und West”. Walter Robert Corti, “Die Eranos-Begegnungsstätte zwischen Ost und West in Moscia-Ascona”, *Schweizer Annalen*, n. I, 1935, p. 52-59. See also Stefano Salzani, *op. cit.*, p. 364-

was organised by Olga Fröbe, Carl Gustav Jung and Rudolf Otto (1869-1937),<sup>76</sup> and was held each year in the villa of Fröbe on Lake Maggiore (at Moscia near Ascona in Switzerland). *Eranos* meetings gathered the world's leading intellectuals who met there to discuss the latest developments in philosophy, history, art, literature and science, focusing their attention in particular on the mystical and symbolic dimension in religion.<sup>77</sup> Each scholar prepared a lecture which had to do with religion. The name *Eranos* comes from the Greek and means a banquet to which each participant brings a meal. It was in this spiritualist and esoteric context that Carl Gustav Jung, having detached himself from Freud and his school, expounded his theories on the psyche based on the archetypes, in which interior integration occurs through the symbol. For Jung, religion and the esoteric currents are the heritage of an archaic system of thought which materializes in the symbol. Amongst these symbols, Jung, in his extremely vast biography, focused on the symbol of the rose and did so making reference to Dante's esotericism through the work of Luigi Valli. The reference to Valli occurs in one of Jung's most important books, *Psychology and Alchemy* – the result of the revision of two lectures held at *Eranos* in 1935 and in 1936, where he explains that the “circle and basin emphasize the mandala, the rose of medieval symbolism”.<sup>78</sup>

Amongst the twentieth century's most influential thinkers who participated in the *Eranos* meetings were some scholars whose research focused on Dante's esotericism and the *Fedeli d'Amore*,<sup>79</sup> for example, Mircea Eliade, Henry Corbin and Elémire Zolla. I will discuss the latter two in detail in the second part of my thesis, when I deal with the rose in the Sufi tradition in relation to Corbin and with the alchemical rose in relation to Zolla. As for Mircea Eliade (1907-1986), in 1958 he published the book *Rites and Symbols of Initiation. The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth* (the result of the Haskell Lectures of 1956), where he devotes a chapter to the relations between literature and the initiatory dimension, and he does so by speaking of the *Fedeli d'Amore*. Drawing on the studies of Luigi Valli and Alfonso Ricolfi, he defines the *Fedeli d'Amore* as a “phenomenon that, though apparently chiefly literary, probably

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365. On *Eranos*, see Hans Thomas Hakl, *Eranos. An Alternative Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century*, Sheffield, Bristol (Conn.), Equinox, 2013. The book was republished in 2014 by Routledge: Hans Thomas Hakl, *Eranos. An Alternative Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century*, Abingdon, Oxon, New York, 2014. It is to the latter edition that I refer in this chapter.

<sup>76</sup> Stefano Salzani, *op. cit.*, p. 364-367. Olga Fröbe was close to theosophical milieus between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries.

<sup>77</sup> The first lecture was held in 1933 and the last one in 1941.

<sup>78</sup> Carl Gustav Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1980, p. 176.

<sup>79</sup> One of the scholars who participated in *Eranos* and who paid particular attention to Dante's work, based on a mystical perspective, was Hans Leisegang in his *Dante und das christliche Weltbild* (Weimar, Hermann Böhlau Nachf., 1941). The title of the book translated into English is *Dante and the Christian Worldview*. See also Hans Thomas Hakl, *op. cit.*, p. 115.



also comprised an initiatory organization”.<sup>80</sup> In particular, Eliade stresses the initiatory value of literature and especially of poetry:

they [the *Fedeli d'Amore*] are chiefly important because they illustrate a phenomenon that will become more marked later – the communication of a secret spiritual message through literature. Dante is the most famous example of this tendency – which already anticipates the modern world – to consider art, and especially literature, the paradigmatic method to communicate a theology, a metaphysics, and even a soteriology.<sup>81</sup>

By focusing on the *Fedeli d'Amore*, Mircea Eliade recognizes the importance of literature in order to spread a spiritual message and, in this respect, the expert on Persian tradition and Shia Islam Henry Corbin (1903-1978) highlights the relations between the Iranian mystical tradition and that of the *Fedeli d'Amore* (called the “Western Sufi”<sup>82</sup> by Elémire Zolla): “the mystical Iranian ‘*Ushshaq* and the *Fedeli d'Amore*, companions of Dante, profess a secret religion that, though free from any confessionary denomination, is none the less common to them all”.<sup>83</sup> By referring to Valli and Rossetti, Corbin speaks of “the delicate and accomplished studies that have shown how the Beatrice of the *Vita Nova* typifies the Active Intelligence or Wisdom-Sophia, and how the arguments that hold for Beatrice hold no less for all the ‘ladies’ of the ‘Faithful in Love’, who resemble her in every point”.<sup>84</sup> He states that “all the ground gained by phenomenology in this domain [of the divine Intelligence-Sophia] from the time of Dante Gabriel Rossetti<sup>85</sup> was in danger of being lost without even being missed”,<sup>86</sup> and what is at stake is, according to Corbin, “one of the most beautiful chapters in the very long ‘history’ of the Active Intelligence, which still remains to be written”.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation. The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth*, New York, Harper & Row, 1958, p. 126.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>82</sup> “Sufi d’Occidente”. Elémire Zolla, *L’amante invisibile. L’erotica sciamanica nelle religioni, nella letteratura e nella legittimazione politica*, Venice, Marsilio Editori, 1986, p. 107.

<sup>83</sup> Henry Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital* [1952], Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1990, p. 267. Among the first scholars who evidenced the relations between Dante and the Islamic tradition, a significant writer is Miguel Asín Palacios who in 1919 published “*La escatología musulmana en La Divina comedia*” (Madrid, Imprenta de Estanislao Maestre, 1919). This book by Palacios has not been translated into French or English, only into Italian, in the recent edition by the Milanese publisher Luni Editrice: Miguel Asín Palacios, *Dante e l’Islam. L’escatologia islamica nella Divina Commedia* [2014], Milan, Luni Editrice, 2020. This work shows the relations between Dante’s *Comedy* and two works by Mohyiddin Ibn Arabi: the *Kitâb el-isrâ* and the *Futûhât el-Mekkiyah*. On the relations between Dante and the Islamic tradition, see also Massimo Campanini, *Dante e l’Islam. L’empireo delle luci*, Rome, Edizioni Studium, 2019; Andrea Celli, *Dante e l’Oriente. Le fonti islamiche nella storiografia novecentesca*, Rome, Carocci, 2013.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> Here Corbin makes a mistake and writes Dante Gabriel Rossetti instead of Gabriele Rossetti.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 268.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 267.

In his study on *Eranos*, Hans Thomas Hakl evokes a “dissenting voice”<sup>88</sup> that opposed the series of lectures organised by Olga Fröbe and Carl Gustav Jung.<sup>89</sup> This “dissenting voice” was that of Julius Evola (1898-1974), who also focuses on the *Fedeli d'Amore* on different occasions, in particular in his works *Il Mistero del Graal* (The Mystery of the Grail, 1931), *La tradizione ermetica* (The Hermetic Tradition, 1937) and in *La Metafisica del sesso* (The Metaphysics of Sex, 1958). Evola points out that “the Worshipers of Love, like the Templars (to whom they may have been linked historically), were an initiatory organization”,<sup>90</sup> and specifies that “the various women celebrated by the Worshipers of Love [*Fedeli d'Amore*], whatever their names might have been, were one single woman, an image of ‘Blessed Wisdom’ or Gnosis, an image of a principle of enlightenment, salvation, and transcendental understanding”.<sup>91</sup> Evola considers the esoteric doctrine of the *Fedeli d'Amore* in relation to “contact with the occult force of womanhood” and points out that “love aroused by real woman could be employed to develop the initiatory process”.<sup>92</sup> Thus, he explains the initiatory concept of *eros* by considering the sexual dimension as obscure power of a metaphysical nature, and sex as a transcendental viaticum. This conception of *eros* seen in metaphysical terms was the focus of other studies linked to the esotericism of the *Fedeli d'Amore*. In fact, in his book *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*, Ioan Petru Couliano (1950-1991) – in addition to recognizing the links between Catharism, Arabic-Persian Mysticism and the *Dolce Stil Novo* poetry – introduces the concept of “erotic pneumophantasmology”,<sup>93</sup> namely a psychology of sex of an initiatory nature characterizing the poetry of Dante and of the *Fedeli d'Amore*. From this perspective, one of the more recent studies on Dante’s esotericism is by Mark Jay Mirsky who, in his book *Dante, Eros and Kabbalah*<sup>94</sup> focuses on the hidden meaning of Dante’s poetry by embracing the medieval culture (in particular of Saint Thomas, the Jewish tradition<sup>95</sup> and

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<sup>88</sup> Hans Thomas Hakl, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>89</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 12, 296.

<sup>90</sup> Julius Evola, *Eros and the Mysteries of Love. The Metaphysics of Sex*, New York, Inner Traditions International, 1991, p. 193. The English version of the book always uses the expression “Worshippers of Love”, but in the original Italian version the expression used by Evola is “Fedeli d'Amore”: “i Fedeli d'Amore [...] come i Templari (coi quali sembra che, del resto, abbiano avuto rapporti reali, storici), erano una organizzazione iniziatica”. Julius Evola, *Metafisica del Sesso* [1958], Rome, Edizioni Mediterranee, 2009, p. 225. The expression *Fedeli d'Amore* is always translated with the expression “Worshippers of Love” in the English version.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 194.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

<sup>93</sup> Ioan P. Couliano, *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*, Chicago-London, The University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 22.

<sup>94</sup> Mark Jay Mirsky, *Dante, Eros and Kabbalah*, Syracuse-New York, Syracuse University Press, 2003.

<sup>95</sup> A work which brilliantly explores the relationship between Dante and Jewish culture is that by Sandra DeBenedetti Stow, *Dante e la mistica ebraica* (Dante and Jewish Mysticism, 2004), which explores the symbolic and exegetic links between Jewish mysticism and Dante’s thought. Another piece of research is by Giorgio Battistoni, *Dante, Verona e la cultura ebraica* (Dante, Verona and the Jewish Culture, 2004), who not only considers the relationship between Jewish culture and Dante, but also sets Dante in the city of Verona in the Middle

highlights the erotic component. It is especially in these three scholars, Julius Evola, Ioan Petru Couliano and Mark Jay Mirsky, that *eros* is considered from a mystical point of view, as a magic power used to reach God. Amongst them, the one most interested in the Dantean heterodox exegesis (in particular, the exegesis of Valli), was Julius Evola. In fact, Mark Jay Mirsky mentions neither the exponents of the “heterodox” current of Dantean studies nor the *Fedeli d’Amore*, which are instead mentioned by Ioan Petru Couliano. It is Evola who explores the subject. He defends Valli’s contribution by criticizing the cultural establishment of his time, which was responsible, he believed, for opposing Valli’s exegetic contribution because of “the obtuse inertia force typical of the habits and the canons of certain official critics which is solidly installed in the place of command of culture and of Italian teaching”.<sup>96</sup> Evola considers the discoveries of Valli as a cultural revolution: “one of the main cultural events of the last quarter of the century, in Italy, is the ‘discovery’ of the secret language of Dante and of the ‘Fedeli d’Amore’, carried out by the late Luigi Valli”.<sup>97</sup> It goes without saying that what Evola calls the “discovery” of Dante’s esotericism and of love poetry was made by Gabriele Rossetti, and not by Luigi Valli, who emphasises in his work his debt to the author of *Il Mistero dell’Amor Platonico*. In fact, it is to Gabriele Rossetti, as well as to Giovanni Pascoli and Ugo Foscolo, that Luigi Valli dedicates his *Linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d’Amore*, underling his debt to them: “I dedicate this book to the glorious memory of Ugo Foscolo, Gabriele Rossetti, Giovanni Pascoli, the three Italian poets who broke the first seals of the mysterious work of Dante”.<sup>98</sup>

### *René Guénon and L’Ésotérisme de Dante*

The contribution of René Guénon on esotericism in Dante merits detailed analysis. Though Rossetti represents, as Stefano Salzani points out, the “point in which the esoteric interpretation of Dante achieves full maturity” with its “gnoseological rhetoric of the unveiling”,<sup>99</sup> it was René Guénon who directly linked Dante’s work with the word

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Ages. Sandra Debenedetti Stow, *Dante e la mistica ebraica*, Florence, Giuntina, 2004; Giorgio Battistoni, *Dante, Verona e la cultura ebraica*, Florence, Giuntina, 2004.

<sup>96</sup> “Della forza ottusa d’inerzia propria alle abitudini e ai canoni di certa critica ufficiale saldamente insediatasi nei posti di comando della cultura e dell’insegnamento italiano”. Julius Evola, “L’altro volto dei ‘Fedeli d’Amore’”, *Il Secolo d’Italia*, 7 May 1953, in Julius Evola, *Il secolo d’Italia (1952-1964)*, eds. Gian Franco Lami and Roberto Guantario, Rome, Libreria Europa, 2001, p. 79.

<sup>97</sup> “Uno degli avvenimenti culturali più notevoli dell’ultimo quarto di secolo, in Italia, è la ‘scoperta’ del linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei ‘Fedeli d’Amore’ compiuta dal compianto Luigi Valli”. Julius Evola, “Il mistero delle ‘Corti d’Amore’”, *Corriere Padano*, 4 March 1937, in Julius Evola, *I testi del Corriere Padano*, Padova, Edizioni di Ar, 2002, p. 235.

<sup>98</sup> “Dedico questo libro alla gloriosa memoria di Ugo Foscolo, Gabriele Rossetti, Giovanni Pascoli i tre poeti d’Italia che infransero i primi suggelli della misteriosa opera di Dante”. Luigi Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d’Amore*, p. 8.

<sup>99</sup> Stefano Salzani, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

“esotericism”. In fact, in 1925 Guénon published his *L'Ésotérisme de Dante* (The Esotericism of Dante), where the title leaves no doubt about the approach adopted by the author. In this book he discusses the links between *The Divine Comedy* and hermetic symbolism (Chapter III), the connections between Dante and the Rosicrucian movement (Chapter IV), the themes of the extraterrestrial journey in different traditions (Chapter V), the description of the three worlds (Chapter VI), the numeric symbolism (Chapter VII), the cosmic cycles (Chapter VIII). Guénon claims that “from Pythagoras to Virgil, and from Virgil to Dante, the ‘chain of the tradition’ was undoubtedly unbroken on Italian soil”,<sup>100</sup> and affirms that it would be misleading to discuss the unsolved dilemma of “whether Dante was Catholic or Albigensian”,<sup>101</sup> or “Christian or pagan”, since “the true esotericism” – which Guénon believes is inherent in Dante – “from outward religion, and if it has some relationship with it, this can only be insofar as it finds a symbolic mode of expression in religious forms. Moreover, it matters little whether these forms be of this or that religion, since what is involved is the essential doctrinal unity concealed beneath their apparent diversity”.<sup>102</sup> With regard to the Middle Ages, Guénon states that “there were in the Middle Ages some organizations whose character was initiatic and not religious, but which had their roots in Catholicism”,<sup>103</sup> and the fact that Dante belonged to such an organization [according to Guénon, the *Fede Santa* (Saint Faith), which was an Order of Templar derivation] is an “indisputable”<sup>104</sup> reality.

For René Guénon, the aim of the initiatory process is “the *active* conquest of the ‘supra-human’ states”,<sup>105</sup> and the defect of literary criticism lies in the confusion generated by ignorance of the initiatory thought and reality. To this ignorance of the initiatory realm, the author of *L'Ésotérisme de Dante* adds what he calls “the constant confusion over the ‘initiatory’ and ‘mystical’ points of view”.<sup>106</sup> He believed that there was also a lack of “initiatory mentality”<sup>107</sup> in the work of Luigi Valli, who confirmed that he was outside the initiatory world: “I have never had contacts with any kind of initiatory traditions. My spiritual and mental education is purely critical and whilst Pascoli and Rossetti did not open my eyes, the scholastic tradition succeeded in imposing its interpretations [on Dante’s work]. But I have to say that I insist on maintaining my critical and historical method”.<sup>108</sup> These comments were confirmed

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<sup>100</sup> René Guénon, *The Esotericism of Dante* [1925], translation by G. B. Bethell, Ghent, NY, Sophia Perennis et Universalis, 1996, p. 8.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>106</sup> “La confusion constante des points de vue ‘initiatic’ et ‘mystique’”. René Guénon, “Le Langage secret de Dante et des ‘Fidèles d’Amour’” (I), *Le Voile d’Isis*, n. 110, Paris, February 1929, p. 113.

<sup>107</sup> “Mentalité ‘initiatic’”. *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>108</sup> “Non ho mai avuto contatti con tradizioni iniziatiche di nessun genere. La mia formazione spirituale e mentale è nettamente critica e finché Pascoli e il Rossetti non mi hanno aperto gli occhi, la tradizione scolastica era riuscita

by Guénon, who criticized “his [Valli’s] point of view as too exclusively [...] that of a historian”, thus representing an obstacle for the “deep understanding” of “medieval ideas”<sup>109</sup> of an initiatory nature. However, his general opinion of Valli’s book is extremely positive. Guénon believed that Valli was “one of those who really deserve to be noticed”,<sup>110</sup> and on the occasion of a second review of *Il linguaggio segreto* (coinciding with Valli’s untimely death), Guénon praised the Italian scholar, pointing out that one must “recognize [Valli’s] great merit – despite the fact that he wants to be and remain a ‘profane’ – of having perceived much of the truth in spite of all the obstacles that his education was naturally bound to bring, and of having told it without fear of the contradictions that he was bound to attract on the part of all those who had good reason for it to be ignored”.<sup>111</sup> Guénon praises not only Valli but also the literary critic current to which Valli belonged, whose members he praises thus:

One must [...] recognize their merit [of the specialists of the “heterodox” current of literary criticism in Dantean studies] to dare to go against the opinions which were officially accepted and the anti-traditional interpretations imposed by the profane spirit which dominates the modern world, and their ability to put at our disposal, by exposing impartially the result of their research, documents in which we can find what they themselves have not seen; and we can only wish we could see other works of the same genres.<sup>112</sup>

The modern world is thus dominated, as Guénon writes, by an anti-traditional approach – a positivist one that overlooks the existence of a higher-order metaphysical reality. René Guénon, like Julius Evola, ranks among the “traditionalists” or “perennialists”, who postulate the existence of this reality of a “supra-human” order that lies at the root of initiatory thought.<sup>113</sup> It is the latter that divides Guénon from the representatives of the so-called “heterodox” school of

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a impormi le sue interpretazioni. Ma debbo dichiarare che io insisto nel tenermi al mio metodo critico e storico”. Luigi Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d’Amore*, p. 665. Though Luigi Valli claims to have nothing to do with the initiatory and esoteric world, it seems that he had frequentations with the filo-esoteric milieu of the beginning of the nineteenth century. See Stefano Salzani, *op. cit.*, p. 317.

<sup>109</sup> “Son point de vue trop exclusivement [...] d’un historien”; “compréhension profonde”; “idées médiévales”. René Guénon, “Le langage secret de Dante et des ‘Fidèles d’Amour’” (I), p. 110.

<sup>110</sup> “De ceux qui méritent vraiment de retenir l’attention”. René Guénon, “Le langage secret de Dante et des ‘Fidèles d’Amour’” (II), *Le Voile d’Isis*, n. 147, March 1932, p. 130.

<sup>111</sup> “Reconnaitre le grand mérite qu’il y a, pour le ‘profane’ qu’il [Luigi Valli] veut être et demeurer, à avoir aperçu une bonne partie de la vérité en dépit de tous les obstacles que son éducation devait naturellement y apporter, et à l’avoir dite sans crainte des contradictions qu’il devait attirer de la part de tous ceux qui ont quelque intérêt à ce qu’elle reste ignorée”. *Ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>112</sup> “Il faut [...] reconnaître le mérite qu’il y a de leur part [les spécialistes du courant de critique littéraire ‘hétérodoxe’ des études dantesques] à oser aller à l’encontre d’opinions officiellement admises et d’interprétations antitraditionnelles imposées par l’esprit profane qui domine le monde moderne, et leur savoir gré de mettre à notre disposition, en exposant impartialement le résultat de leurs recherches, des documents dans lesquels nous pouvons trouver ce qu’eux-mêmes n’y ont pas vu; et nous ne pouvons que souhaiter de voir paraître encore bientôt d’autres travaux du même genre”. René Guénon, “Fidèles d’amour et cours d’amour”, *Le Voile d’Isis*, n. 163, July 1933, p. 292-293.

<sup>113</sup> On the difference between the historical-empirical method and the traditionalist approach as applied to the study of esotericism, see Olivier Santamaria, “Études de l’ésotérisme: aspects méthodologiques”, in *Ésotérisme et initiation. Études d’épistémologie et d’histoire des religions*, eds. Emilie Granjon, Giuseppe Bolzano, Baudouin Decharneux and Fabien Nobilio, Brussels-Fernelmont, E. M. E. (Éditions modulaires européennes) & InterCommunications, 2010, p. 12-20.

Dantean studies, of which Luigi Valli was a major exponent. However, what Guénon and Valli share, even if their approaches are based on different exegetical perspectives, is an esoteric-initiatory interpretation of Dantean obscurity, thus breaking away from the official positivist criticism. Concerning the four interpretative senses of the Holy Scriptures mentioned by Dante in his *Convivio*, Guénon affirms that the fourth sense “can only be a strictly initiatic sense, metaphysical in its essence”.<sup>114</sup> So, according to René Guénon, if we ignore and reject this fourth sense, even the other senses cannot be entirely grasped, and they can only be captured partially, “for this esoteric or initiatic sense stands to the others as their principle – within which their multiplicity is coordinated and unified”.<sup>115</sup> Thus, as Massimo Ciavolella sums up, according to Guénon “the profound meaning of the *Divine Comedy* can be understood only if one begins from this secret message hidden within the text of the poem”.<sup>116</sup>

“It seems that time are mature for discovering the real sense of Dante’s work”,<sup>117</sup> Guénon writes, and this observation leads to another one: if the real sense of Dante’s work has not been yet discovered, this indirectly means that even the sense of other works have not yet been entirely caught, namely the works written by authors influenced by Dante. And the message conveyed by Dante in his *Divine Comedy* is, according to Guénon, of an initiatory nature.

“*La metamorfosi operata dall’iniziazione*” in *The Divine Comedy according to Arturo Reghini*

*The Esotericism of Dante* by Guénon was translated into Italian by Arturo Reghini (1878-1946),<sup>118</sup> with whom the French esotericist established an epistolary correspondence.<sup>119</sup> Reghini was an Italian esotericist, deeply involved with Freemasonry, as well as a mathematician, philosopher, and self-avowed neo-Pythagorean. He wrote about the esoteric dimension of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, affirming that “the subject of the *Comedy* is man, or rather the regeneration of man, his metamorphosis in angelic butterfly, the Psyche of Apuleius”,

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<sup>114</sup> René Guénon, *The Esotericism of Dante*, p. 2.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> Massimo Ciavolella, “Esoteric Interpretations of the *Divine Comedy*”, in *Dantean Dialogues: Engaging with the Legacy of Amilcare Iannucci*, eds. Maggie Kilgour and Elena Lombardi, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2013, p. 221.

<sup>117</sup> “Il semble que le temps soit venu où le vrai sens de l’œuvre de Dante se découvrira enfin”. René Guénon, “Le langage secret de Dante et des ‘Fidèles d’Amour’” (II), p. 121.

<sup>118</sup> René Guénon, *L’esoterismo di Dante*, translation and notes by Arturo Reghini, Acireale (CT), Tipheret, 2018.

<sup>119</sup> On the correspondence exchanged between Arturo Reghini and René Guénon, see Christian Giudice, *Occult Imperium: Arturo Reghini, Roman Traditionalism, and the Anti-Modern Reaction in Fascist Italy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 133-138. This book can be considered as the most complete work on Arturo Reghini, in which the author gives a detailed account of the relationship between Reghini and occultism, as well as his political stance.

and “it is thus the same subject of the mysteries”.<sup>120</sup> According to Reghini, in his symbolic journey, “Dante purifies himself from degree to degree, passes through various and numerous crises and consciousnesses, falls like a dead body, faints, comes to his senses, falls asleep, revives in the Eunoè, his mind comes out of itself”.<sup>121</sup> Thanks to this initiatory pilgrimage, Dante “goes from being human to God, from time to eternity, and finally he detaches his soul from any cloud of mortality”.<sup>122</sup> The initiatory dimension of Dante’s journey from Hell to Paradise is confirmed by his guide since, as Reghini remarks, the author of *The Divine Comedy* “meets [...] Virgil, the personification of the esoteric wisdom”<sup>123</sup> and “Virgil presents himself immediately in his quality of initiate, who has transcended human nature”.<sup>124</sup> Thus, Reghini concludes, “examining Dante’s work without prejudices, one can recognize, in the spiritual rebirth through the metamorphosis operated by the initiation, the fundamental subject of the *Comedy*”.<sup>125</sup>

Thus, according to Guénon’s and Reghini’s points of view, *The Divine Comedy* is an initiatory work. Initiation is its essence, therefore the symbols that convey the message of this work are also initiatory in nature. The rose is the most important symbol of *The Divine Comedy* and it can be considered an initiatory symbol – the initiatory rose. All the mystical roses of the following centuries which are closely linked with Dante’s “candida rosa”, such as in Victor Hugo, Gérard de Nerval, William Blake, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, from William Butler Yeats to James Joyce, Louis Borges or Fernando Pessoa, share this initiatory dimension with the mystical rose of *The Divine Comedy*.

L’idea deforme: *orthodoxy* vs *heterodoxy*

“We have attempted to reflect on what can be defined as a ‘good interpretation’ by analysing the critical discourses of a group of interpreters of Dante Alighieri traditionally considered at times little more and at times little less than idiots”:<sup>126</sup> these are the words written

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<sup>120</sup> “Il soggetto della Commedia è l’uomo, o meglio la rigenerazione dell’uomo, la sua metamorfosi in angelica farfalla, la Psiche di Apuleio. È dunque il medesimo soggetto dei misteri”. Arturo Reghini, “L’allegoria esoterica in Dante”, *Il Nuovo Patto. Rassegna italiana di pensiero e di azione*, September-November 1921, p. 543.

<sup>121</sup> “Dante si purifica di grado in grado, passa per crisi e coscienze varie e numerose, cade come corpo morto, sviene, rinviene, si addormenta, si ravviva nell’Eunoè, la sua mente esce di se stessa”. *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> “Passa al divino dall’umano, all’eterno dal tempo, e finalmente dislega l’anima sua da ogni nube di mortalità”. *Ibid.*, p. 544.

<sup>123</sup> “Incontra [...] in Virgilio la personificazione della sapienza esoterica”. *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> “Virgilio si presenta immediatamente nella sua qualità di iniziato, che ha trasceso la natura umana”. *Ibid.*, p. 545.

<sup>125</sup> “Esaminando l’opera di Dante senza preconcetti e partiti presi, si arriva a riconoscere nella rinascita spirituale mediante la metamorfosi operata dall’iniziazione il soggetto fondamentale della Commedia”. *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> “Abbiamo tentato di riflettere su cosa possa essere definito una ‘buona interpretazione’ andando ad analizzare i discorsi critici di un gruppo di interpreti di Dante Alighieri tradizionalmente considerati a volte poco più e a volte poco meno di mentecatti”. *L’idea deforme. Interpretazioni esoteriche di Dante*, ed. Maria Pozzato, Introduction by Umberto Eco, Postface by Alberto Asor Rosa, Milan, Bompiani, 1989, p. 39. In the above sentence, the word

by Maria Pia Pozzato in the book *L'idea deforme* (The Deformed Idea, 1989), which can be considered the first scientific work on Dantean esotericism. It is the result of a three-year research project by a team of seven researchers from the “Istituto di Discipline della Comunicazione” (Institute of Communication Disciplines) of the University of Bologna under the direction of Umberto Eco, who held a monographic course on the concept of “hermetic semiosis”: Eco’s hermetic semiosis course also included Dantean esotericism.

The research project was directed by Maria Pozzato who, in the *L'idea deforme*, writes a chapter on Luigi Valli. The approach she followed (as well as the other specialists who contributed essays to the *L'idea deforme*) is critical towards the Dantean heterodox school, and particularly towards Luigi Valli, though she admits “not to have found any real auto-contradictions in Valli’s writing”.<sup>127</sup>

Maria Pia Pozzato speaks of “ermetismo complottardo”, that can be translated into English “conspiracy hermeticism” or “hermeticism of the conspiracy” – a concept also shared by Umberto Eco who wrote the introduction to *L'idea deforme*, where he refers to the “complottardi” [the “complottardi (Rossetti, Aroux, Valli)],<sup>128</sup> the “conspiracy theorists”, meaning Gabriele Rossetti and Luigi Valli.<sup>129</sup>

The approach of Umberto Eco towards the representatives of the esoteric current of Dantean studies (and, more generally, the esoteric interpretation of literature) is deliberately critical, though his literary production is entirely based on esotericism. But I will discuss this aspect in the chapter on Eco’s rose. Suffice to say, I highlight the fact that the contribution of *L'idea deforme* represents a fundamental step in the history of ideas, with relation to the esoteric interpretation of Dante’s work and of literature.

Eco defines Rossetti, Valli and all the other “heterodox” interpreters as “adepti del velame”,<sup>130</sup> which means the “followers of the veil”. The title of the book “Idea deforme” also reveals a certain irony, since it is merely an anagram of “Fedeli d’Amore”. By introducing the concept of “semantic isotopy”, Eco speaks of an “infinite interpretation”<sup>131</sup> reproached to the “follower of the veil” and, therefore, an “unstoppable shift of the sense”.<sup>132</sup> Eco defines the “followers of the veil” as a “current of Dantean interpreters, who have not been accepted by the

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“mentecatti” is difficult to translate into English in its entirety, with all its nuances in the original language. It can be translated with the English words “madmen” and “idiots”.

<sup>127</sup> “Non abbiamo riscontrato nel discorso di Valli delle vere e proprie autocontraddizioni”. *L'idea deforme. Interpretazioni esoteriche di Dante*, p. 159.

<sup>128</sup> “I complottardi (Rossetti, Aroux, Valli)”. Umberto Eco, “Introduzione”, in *ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>129</sup> The word “complottardo” does not exist in Italian. It is a neologism coined by the authors of *L'idea deforme*. The word cannot be translated into English exactly, but it equates more or less “conspiracy theorist”. Thus, “ermetismo complottardo” can be rendered “conspiracy hermeticism” or “hermeticism of the conspiracy”.

<sup>130</sup> “Adepti del velame”. *Ibid.*, p. 29, 34-36.

<sup>131</sup> “Interpretazione infinita”. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>132</sup> “Slittamento inarrestabile del senso”. *Ibid.*, p. 14.



official critics, because they saw in Dante more things than the others and especially they saw what there was not (according to the official critics)".<sup>133</sup> He specifies that "a good part of these followers of the veil identify a secret jargon, on the basis of which each reference to love facts and to real people is to be interpreted as cyphered invective".<sup>134</sup>

However, despite the critical approach to the esoteric interpretation of Dante's work (and of literature in general), it must be acknowledged that it was due to Umberto Eco and Maria Pozzato's *L'idea deforme* that the heterodox interpretive current of Dantean studies was, for the first time, debated at academic level, since the question of the "followers of the veil" had until then (the 1980s) been just a "thread of Dante criticism [...] that scholars have always briefly liquidated".<sup>135</sup> These are the words of one of the most famous literary critics in Italian academia, Alberto Asor Rosa, who wrote them as an afterword to *L'idea deforme*, where he expresses himself cautiously on the question of Dante's esotericism, even if, in a veiled and indirect way, he confirms the undeniable esoteric and initiatory nature of Dante's poetry and of the medieval love poets:

If one must speak of esotericism with regard to these origins of modern European culture, it will certainly not be the esotericism of improbable secret sects or anti-ecclesiastical conspiracies, but the esotericism connected with the sacred cult of poetry and with the idea, typically elitist, of the superior role played by the literati and in particular the poets in relation to the vile mechanics and even the learned of technical-scientific origin [...]. If we cannot speak, in the proper sense of the term, of the foundation (or re-foundation) of a Freemasonry of poets, it is certainly legitimate to think of the conscious constitution of a true elite of superior spirits, who do not even lack the courage [...] to feel that they are sitting at the same table, and on the same level as the "science of God" [...].<sup>136</sup>

Alberto Asor Rosa spoke of the "Freemasonry of the poets" whilst Gabriele Rossetti and Luigi Valli spoke of real Freemasonry, as well as of the secret societies and esoteric currents that spread in the history of ideas, and which would become the basis of the literature of love.

As we have seen so far, the current of studies inaugurated by Gabriele Rossetti had many opponents both in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This subject deserves a separate study,

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<sup>133</sup> "Filone di interpreti danteschi, i quali non sono stati accettati dalla critica ufficiale, perché in Dante leggevano più che tutti gli altri e specialmente ciò che (secondo la critica ufficiale) non c'era". *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>134</sup> "Buona parte degli adepti del velame individuano un gergo segreto, in base al quale ogni riferimento a fatti amorosi e a persone reali è da interpretare come invettiva cifrata". *Ibid.*

<sup>135</sup> "Un filone della critica dantesca [...] che gli specialisti hanno sempre liquidato in poche battute". Alberto Asor Rosa, "Postfazione", in *ibid.*, p. 296.

<sup>136</sup> "Se di esoterismo si deve parlare a proposito di queste origini della cultura europea moderna, non si tratterà certo dell'esoterismo di improbabili sette segrete o delle congiure anti ecclesiastiche, ma dell'esoterismo connesso al culto sacro della poesia e con l'idea, tipicamente elitistica, del ruolo superiore svolto dai letterati e in particolare dei poeti nei confronti dei vili meccanici e perfino dei dotti di origine tecnico-scientifica [...]. Se non si può parlare, nel senso proprio del termine, della fondazione (o rifondazione) di una massoneria dei poeti, certo è lecito pensare alla costituzione cosciente di una vera e propria élite di spiriti superiori, a cui non manca neppure il coraggio [...] di sentirsi assisi allo stesso tavolo, e sullo stesso piano della 'scienza di Dio'". *Ibid.*, p. 309.

given its complexity, and I refer here to the work by Eleonora Lizzul, *Dante e la critica esoterica* (Dante and the esoteric criticism),<sup>137</sup> in which the author describes the phases of the esoteric current of Dantean studies in the history of ideas, focusing on the debates that this event produced. In this chapter I shall limit myself to quoting from Benedetto Croce, one of the most important critics in the Italian academic context of the twentieth century. On the subject of Dantean esotericism and medieval love poetry, Croce considers allegory as an “encumbrance” which is detrimental to the lyrical and artistic aspect: “whatever the investigators and conjecturists of Dante’s allegories may claim and boast, in poetry and in the history of poetry, explanations of allegories are quite useless and, as useless, detrimental”.<sup>138</sup> Despite his opposition to the esoteric interpretation, Benedetto Croce nevertheless recognises the cryptic nature of Dante’s work.<sup>139</sup> He acknowledges the existence of “cryptographic communications”<sup>140</sup> in Dante’s literary production, while another authoritative Italian critic, Natalino Sapegno, speaks of “incomprehensible jargon”.<sup>141</sup> Why then communicate, in a cryptographic way, something incomprehensible? Elsewhere, Sapegno adds: “all the obscurities of love poetry are reduced to allusions, unknown facts or formal devices”.<sup>142</sup> One might ask: “What are these ‘unknown facts’”? Another seminal figure of Italian criticism who opposed the esoteric reading of Dante’s work was Francesco De Sanctis, who stated: “there remain seven or eight volumes by him [by Gabriele Rossetti], which no one has read and, I can state frankly that I have not read them either”.<sup>143</sup> De Sanctis disagreed with Rossetti’s interpretation, or rather he attacked Gabriele Rossetti and his successors, but at the same time admitted that he had never read the seven or eight volumes written by Rossetti. He judged works that he did not read.

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<sup>137</sup> Eleonora Lizzul, *Dante e la critica esoterica*, Belgioioso (Pavia), Divergenze, 2022.

<sup>138</sup> “Checchè pretendano e vantino gli investigatori e congetturisti delle allegorie dantesche, nella poesia e nella storia della poesia le spiegazioni delle allegorie sono affatto inutili e, in quanto inutili, dannose”. Benedetto Croce, *La poesia di Dante*, Bari, Laterza, 1921, p. 13.

<sup>139</sup> Notwithstanding his opposition to the esoteric interpretation of Dante’s work, Benedetto Croce showed a certain interest in esoteric culture. In 1919, the journal he founded, *La Critica*, published a review (written by Giovanni Gentile) of the essay *The Philosophy of Freedom* (1894) by one of the most important figures in European occultism: the theosophist and founder of anthroposophy Rudolf Steiner. Croce was also interested in sacred numbers, esoteric mythology and the works of Julius Evola, whose work is undeniably esoteric in nature. On the relationship between Benedetto Croce and esoteric culture, see Giorgio Galli, *La magia e il potere. L’esoterismo nella politica occidentale*, Turin, Lindau, 2012, p. 231.

<sup>140</sup> “Comunicazioni criptografiche”. Benedetto Croce, “Camille Mauclair - Le protestantisme et les romans de chevalerie”, *La Critica*, v. 26, 1926.

<sup>141</sup> “Gergo incomprensibile”. Natalino Sapegno, “Sulla scuola poetica del dolce stil novo”, in *Archivum Romanicum*, v. XIII, n. 2/3, April-September 1929, p. 276.

<sup>142</sup> “Tutte le oscurità della poesia d’amore si riducono ad allusioni, a fatti ignoti o ad artifici formali”. *Ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> “Ci rimangono di lui sette od otto volumi, che nessuno ha letti e, lo dichiaro francamente, non li ho letti nemmeno io”. Francesco De Sanctis, “Gabriele Rossetti”, in Francesco De Sanctis, *La letteratura italiana nel secolo XIX. La scuola liberale e la scuola democratica*, ed. Franco Catalano, Bari, G. Laterza e figli, 1953, p. 385. In *Lezioni e saggi su Dante*, Francesco De Sanctis mentions “Rossetti’s trivial remarks” (“triviali osservazioni del Rossetti”). Francesco De Sanctis, *Lezioni e saggi su Dante*, Turin, Einaudi, 1955, p. 377.

At any rate, while it is true that there have been opponents of the esoteric interpretation of Dante and of the *Fedeli d'Amore*, it is also true that illustrious Dante scholars have spoken out in its favour. Erich Auerbach, for instance, expresses his praise for *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d'Amore* by Luigi Valli, defining it as “a very interesting book”<sup>144</sup> and pointing out that Valli developed the ideas of Rossetti which had fallen into oblivion, forgotten by the critics: “Valli reverts to an attempt made almost a hundred years ago by Gabriele Rossetti, which since then (apart from a few rare scholars) has met with general disapproval, and fallen into oblivion”.<sup>145</sup> Auerbach points out also that “many of the relationships that Valli establishes are noteworthy and can be fruitful for more cautious research”,<sup>146</sup> and the same opinion is voiced by Ernst Robert Curtius (1886-1956) who, on Valli’s research work, affirms that “his work deserves more serious studies, especially the *Linguaggio segreto*”.<sup>147</sup> Moreover, Auerbach affirms that one must “get accustomed to interpretation which seems at first sight improbable” since “in this domain, many improbable things have already proved to be true”.<sup>148</sup> Confirming the thesis of Luigi Valli, Auerbach also explains why the critics did not accept Valli’s theories on the esoteric nature of love in literature:

That the devotees of the “cor gentil” also cultivated certain common ideas in the political and religious spheres is quite possible; that an esotericism, still very enigmatic, is manifested in them, cannot be denied; and the strong bond between the members of that circle, as well as the codification of concepts and words, are more comprehensible if one admits in those young people, coming from the ruling classes of their municipalities, a slightly more concrete vision than pure amorous mysticism. This approach is new and can bear excellent fruit: it is a pity that Valli formulates it in a way that is too cut and one-sided, more than is reconcilable with our current knowledge; and it is especially a pity that he presents his hypothesis (capable of enriching and modifying the understanding of the spirituality of the *Stil Nuovo* that we have long since arrived at) as a decisive victory over the positivists. It is for this reason that in deposing this undoubtedly rich and fascinating work, one cannot escape a sense of unease.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> “Interessantissimo libro”. Erich Auerbach, *San Francesco, Dante, Vico ed altri saggi di filologia romanza*, Bari, De Donato, 1970, p. 198.

<sup>145</sup> “Luigi Valli [...] riprende un tentativo compiuto quasi cent’anni fa da Gabriele Rossetti, e incorso, dopo d’allora (a prescindere da qualche raro studioso), nella generale disapprovazione, quindi caduto in oblio”. *Ibid.*, p. 198.

<sup>146</sup> “Molti dei rapporti che Valli istituisce sono degni di nota e possono risultare fecondi per una ricerca più cauta”. *Ibid.*, p. 199.

<sup>147</sup> Ernst Robert Curtius, “Neue Dante-Studien I”, *Romanische Forschungen*, 60/2, 1947, p. 288. See also Stefano Salzani, *op. cit.*, p. 257.

<sup>148</sup> “Far l’abitudine ad interpretazioni a prima vista inverosimili”; “in questo campo, già molte cose inverosimili si sono poi rivelate vere”. Erich Auerbach, *San Francesco, Dante, Vico ed altri saggi di filologia romanza*, p. 200.

<sup>149</sup> “Che i cultori del ‘cor gentil’ coltivassero determinate idee comuni anche in campo politico e religioso, è possibilissimo; che in essi si manifesti un esoterismo ancora molto enigmatico, non lo si può negare; e il forte vincolo fra gli appartenenti a quella cerchia, nonché la codificazione dei concetti e delle parole risultano più comprensibili se si ammette in quei giovani, provenienti dalle classi dirigenti dei loro Comuni, una visione un poco più concreta che non il puro misticismo amoroso. Questa impostazione è nuova e può dare ottimi frutti: peccato che Valli la formuli in modo troppo preciso ed unilaterale, più di quanto non sia conciliabile con le nostre attuali conoscenze; e peccato soprattutto che egli presenti la sua ipotesi (capace di arricchire e di modificare la cognizione della spiritualità dello Stil Nuovo cui siamo giunti da tempo) come una decisa vittoria sui positivisti.

Confirming the esoteric language of the Italian *Dolce Stil Novo* poetry, as well as the love poetry of the Provençal poets, Erich Auerbach states that one cannot “deny the obscurity of most of the poems of the *stil nuovo*, or [...] look for historical explanations in each single case: for that there are too many oddities, the correspondences in content and expression between different poets are too patent, and there is too much evidence of a secret meaning accessible only to the elect”.<sup>150</sup> In this regard, he specifies that:

All the poets of the *stil nuovo* possessed a mystical beloved; all of them had roughly the same fantastic amorous adventures; the gifts which Love bestowed upon them all (or denied them) have more in common with illumination than with sensual pleasure; and all of them belonged to a kind of secret brotherhood which molded their inner lives and perhaps their outward lives as well – but only one of them, Dante, was able to describe those esoteric happenings in such a way as to make us accept them as authentic reality even where the motivations and allusions are quite baffling.<sup>151</sup>

For his part, the eminent Professor at Sorbonne, Paul Renucci, affirms that “the fundamental hypothesis that there is in the *Comedy* an esoteric content, with its appropriate method of expression, is not at all absurd”,<sup>152</sup> since Dante’s work contains a symbolism whose characteristics are those of the esoteric literature, namely “the ‘initiatism’, the premise of a classification of knowledge with levels which are more and more reserved, the use of a language which, though published, remains devoid of true meaning for the ‘profane’ or the ‘inept’: all this is present in the *Comedy*”.<sup>153</sup> It is for this reason that, according to Renucci, “the association of the word ‘esotericism’ with the name of Dante is remarkably relevant to our times, and that mystagogical Danteism has all but disappeared after so much criticism and censure levelled against it by the most authoritative scholars”.<sup>154</sup> Thus, Paul Renucci concludes, “behind the hypothesis of the esoteric sense a domain opens up which is anything but imaginary, in which

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E’ per questo che nel deporre quest’opera, senza dubbio ricca ed affascinante, non ci si può sottrarre ad un senso di disagio”. *Ibid.*, p. 201-202.

<sup>150</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Dante: Poet of the Secular World* [1929], Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1974, p. 27.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60-61.

<sup>152</sup> “L’ipotesi fondamentale che esista nella *Commedia* un contenuto esoterico, col suo metodo di espressione adatto, non è per niente assurda”. Paul Renucci, “Dantismo esoterico nel secolo presente”, in *Atti del Congresso internazionale di studi danteschi a cura della Società Dantesca Italiana e dell’Associazione Internazionale per gli Studi di Lingua e Letteratura Italiana e sotto il patrocinio dei Comuni di Firenze, Verona e Ravenna (20-27 aprile 1965)*, 2 v., Florence, Sansoni, v. 1, 1965, p. 316.

<sup>153</sup> “L’iniziatismo, la premessa di una graduatoria della conoscenza con livelli sempre più strettamente riservati, l’uso di un linguaggio che, per quanto sia pubblicato, resta privo di significazione vera per i ‘profani’ o gli ‘ineti’: tutto questo è presente nella *Commedia*”. *Ibid.*, p. 313.

<sup>154</sup> “L’incontro della parola ‘esoterismo’ col nome di Dante ha conservato una notevole efficacia nei tempi in cui siamo, e che il dantismo mistagogico è tutt’altro che scomparso dopo tante critiche e censure mosse contro di esso dagli studiosi più autorevoli”. *Ibid.*, p. 305-306.

one can discover historical and cultural realities which were little known up to forty or fifty years ago and which are not still sufficiently explored by the Danteists".<sup>155</sup>

With regard to an esoteric dimension in Dante's work, as we have already seen, a pioneering scholar of Western Esotericism, Antoine Faivre, affirms that "it does not take much effort of imagination to pick out an esoteric theme here and there"<sup>156</sup> in *The Divine Comedy*, and a plausible reply to the diatribe between the heterodox and the orthodox school can be that of the British scholar Robert Glynn Faithfull, who wrote in 1950 that "the first writer to treat of the esoteric interpretation of Dante was, in a sense, Dante himself".<sup>157</sup> It was Dante who wrote in his *Divine Comedy* the following words which do not need any interpretation:

O voi ch'avete li 'ntelletti sani,  
mirate la dottrina che s'asconde  
sotto 'l velame de li versi strani.<sup>158</sup>

O you whose interest are sane and well,  
Look at the teaching which is here concealed  
Under the unfamiliar veil of verses.<sup>159</sup>

#### *The last decades of the history of a heterodox idea*

In recent decades, interest in Dantean esotericism has continued to grow.<sup>160</sup> More generally, the interest in esotericism has widened, as has the interest in the relations between literature and esotericism, which has always been a neglected or overlooked research topic. Regarding the esotericism of Dante and of the *Fedeli d'Amore*, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, the most comprehensive and accurate work on the subject is by Stefano Salzani, *Luigi Valli e l'esoterismo di Dante*. In addition to this excellent work there have been other studies, providing the academic world with a solid basis for future research. For example, the work of

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<sup>155</sup> "Dietro l'ipotesi dei sensi esoterici si apre un campo tutt'altro che immaginario, in cui si affacciano delle realtà storiche e culturali poco note fino a quaranta o cinquant'anni fa e non ancora abbastanza esplorate dai dantisti". *Ibid.*, p. 326-327.

<sup>156</sup> Antoine Faivre, "The Divine Comedy; Alchemy and Literature; The Imagination of Chivalry", in *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, p. 61.

<sup>157</sup> Robert Glynn Faithfull, "The Esoteric Interpretation of Dante", *Italica*, v. 27, n. 2, 1950, p. 82.

<sup>158</sup> Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia*, p. 108.

<sup>159</sup> Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, p. 82.

<sup>160</sup> Among the other interesting studies on the symbolic and esoteric dimension before the 1980s, it is worth pointing out the following ones: Alfonso De Salvo, *Dante and Heresy*, Boston, Dumas, 1936; Charles S. Singleton, *Dante studies. 1. Commedia: Elements of Structure*, Cambridge Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1954; Jacques Breyer, *Dante alchimiste. Interprétation alchimique de la Divine Comédie. I. L'Enfer*, Paris, La Colombe, 1957; Antonio Coen, *Dante et le contenu initiatique de la Vita Nuova*, Paris, J. Vitiamo, 1958; Margarete Lochbrunner, "Paralleli fra Dante e Mani", *Conoscenza Religiosa*, Nuova Italia Editrice, n. 2, April-June 1973; Margarete Lochbrunner, "La grande spirale nella *Divina Commedia* di Dante (II)", *Conoscenza Religiosa*, Nuova Italia Editrice, n. 3, July-September 1974; Margarete Lochbrunner, "La Grande Spirale nella *Divina Commedia* di Dante (II)", *Conoscenza Religiosa*, Nuova Italia Editrice, n. 1, January-March 1975; Philippe Guiberteau, *L'Énigme de Dante*, Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 1974; René-Albert Gutmann, *Dante et son temps*, Paris, Nizet, 1977.

Catherine Guimbard, a specialist who wrote the entry “Fedeli d’Amore” in the *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*.<sup>161</sup> She proposed an alchemical reading of *The Divine Comedy* in her book *Une lecture de Dante* (A reading of Dante), specifically in the chapter “La quête du poète. Essai d’interprétation alchimique” (“The quest of the poet. An attempt at an alchemical interpretation”).<sup>162</sup> She wrote a PhD thesis at the Sorbonne on Francesco Da Barberino, one of the main figures of the *Fedeli d’Amore*, where detailed studies of the esoteric dimension are lacking. Catherine Guimbard is credited with introducing the figure of Francesco da Barberino to the Francophone academic world, as well as the subject of the *Fedeli d’Amore*.<sup>163</sup>

Among the other studies on Dante’s esotericism, it is worth pointing out the one by Bruno Cerchio, *L’ermetismo di Dante* (The Hermeticism of Dante),<sup>164</sup> whose methodological research approach was also praised in the *Idea deforme* by Maria Pia Pozzato, who stated that Cerchio “has proposed his esoteric interpretation of Dante with epistemological lucidity”.<sup>165</sup> Beyond Bruno Cerchio’s work, other useful contributions are by Silvano Demarchi (*Poesia e iniziazione da San Francesco a Dante*),<sup>166</sup> Adriano Lanza (*Dante e la Gnosi. Esoterismo del Convivio*),<sup>167</sup> Gabriella Bartolozzi (*Exoterismo e esoterismo nell’opera dantesca*),<sup>168</sup> Edi Minguzzi (*L’enigma forte: il codice occulto della Divina Commedia; La struttura occulta della Divina Commedia*),<sup>169</sup> Nuccio D’Anna (*La sapienza nascosta di Dante. Linguaggio e simbolismo dei Fedeli d’Amore*),<sup>170</sup> Maria Soresina (*Libertà va cercando. Il catarismo nella Commedia di Dante; Le segrete cose. Dante tra induismo ed eresie medievali*),<sup>171</sup> Renzo Manetti (*Beatrice e Monnalisa; Dante e i Fedeli d’Amore; Cavalieri del mistero. Templari e*

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<sup>161</sup> *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, in collaboration with Antoine Faivre, Roelof van den Broek, Jean-Pierre Brach, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2006, p. 357-360.

<sup>162</sup> Catherine Guimbard, *Une lecture de Dante*, Paris, Presses de l’Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2004, p. 365-389.

<sup>163</sup> Catherine Guimbard, “Regimento e costumi di Donna” de Francesco da Barberino: recherches, PhD Thesis – Paris 4, 1986, published by Lille 3, Atelier national de reproduction des thèses, 1988. See also the essay by Catherine Guimbard, “I fedeli d’amore: une mystérieuse secte?”, in *Les Fous d’amour au Moyen Âge*, eds. Claire Kappler and Suzanne Thiolier-Méjean, Paris, L’Harmattan, 2007, p. 291-302.

<sup>164</sup> Bruno Cerchio, *L’ermetismo di Dante*, Rome, Edizioni Mediterranee, 1988.

<sup>165</sup> “Con lucidità epistemologica ha proposto la sua interpretazione esoterica di Dante”. Maria Pia Pozzato, “Luigi Valli”, in *L’idea deforme*, p. 187.

<sup>166</sup> Silvano Demarchi, *Poesia e iniziazione da San Francesco a Dante*, Albano Terme, Piovani Editore, 1990.

<sup>167</sup> Adriano Lanza, *Dante e la Gnosi. Esoterismo del Convivio*, Rome, Edizioni Mediterranee, 1990.

<sup>168</sup> Gabriella Bartolozzi, *Exoterismo e esoterismo nell’opera dantesca*, Florence, Atheneum, 2001.

<sup>169</sup> Edi Minguzzi, *L’enigma forte: il codice occulto della Divina Commedia*, Genoa, Edizioni culturali internazionali Genova, 1988; Edi Minguzzi, *La struttura occulta della Divina Commedia*, Milan, Libri Scheiwiller, 2007. See also Edi Minguzzi, *Il dizionarietto dantesco. Le parole ermetiche della Divina Commedia*, Brescia, Scholé/Morcelliana, 2021.

<sup>170</sup> Nuccio D’Anna, *La sapienza nascosta di Dante. Linguaggio e simbolismo dei Fedeli d’Amore*, Sesto San Giovanni (Mi), Iduna, 2021. Nuccio D’Anna has also devoted his research to relations between troubadour poetry and esotericism. See Nuccio D’Anna, *Il Segreto dei Trovatori. Sapienza e poesia nell’Europa*, San Marino, Il Cerchio, 2005; Nuccio D’Anna, *Guglielmo IX, duca d’Aquitania. I fondamenti esoterici della poesia provenzale*, San Demetrio Corone (CS), Irfan Edizioni, 2018.

<sup>171</sup> Maria Soresina, *Libertà va cercando. Il catarismo nella Commedia di Dante*, Bergamo, Moretti&Vitali, 2009; Maria Soresina, *Le segrete cose. Dante tra induismo ed eresie medievali* [2002], Bergamo, Moretti&Vitali, 2010.

*Fedeli d'Amore in Toscana*),<sup>172</sup> Franco Galletti (*La bella veste della verità. La dottrina iniziatica/sapienziale di Dante e dei Fedeli d'Amore e la loro influenza intellettuale e politica*)<sup>173</sup> and Nella Coletta (*La Pietra dei Filosofi. Dall'Alchimia alle Petrose di Dante*).<sup>174</sup>

In addition to various books published in recent decades,<sup>175</sup> an important conduit for spreading knowledge about Dantean esotericism has been certain academic articles. One of the most complete and exhaustive articles in this respect is by Massimo Ciavolella, “Esoteric Interpretations of the *Divine Comedy*”, which was published in both English and Italian, with the title “Il testo moltiplicato: interpretazioni esoteriche della *Divina Commedia*”.<sup>176</sup> Moreover, Massimo Ciavolella is particularly interesting for my study of the symbolism of the rose, not only for his brilliant essay which perfectly sums up the history of the esotericism of Dante’s and the *Fedeli d'Amore*, but also because his academic work was one of the main sources of *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco, who expressed his debt to Ciavolella (Italian Professor at UCLA, the University of Los Angeles) by basing a character in the novel on him. But I will provide more details of this in the chapter on the rose in Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*.

Regarding Massimo Ciavolella’s contribution to Dante’s esotericism, another of his merits is to have presented the scientific community with works that cannot be considered

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<sup>172</sup> Renzo Manetti, *Beatrice e Monnalisa*, Florence, Edizioni Polistampa, 2005; Renzo Manetti, *Dante e i Fedeli d'Amore*, Florence, Mauro Pagliai Editore, 2018; Renzo Manetti, *Cavalieri del mistero. Templari e Fedeli d'Amore in Toscana*, Florence, Le Lettere, 2011.

<sup>173</sup> Franco Galletti, *La bella veste della verità. La dottrina iniziatica/sapienziale di Dante e dei Fedeli d'Amore e la loro influenza intellettuale e politica*, Milan, Mimesis, 2020.

<sup>174</sup> I already mentioned Nella Coletta’s work at the beginning of this chapter. Her contribution is very interesting, since it focuses on the concept of “stone” in Dante’s *Rime Petrose*. Nella Coletta carries out an epistemological reflection and comparative analysis of alchemical, philosophical, mythological, religious and literary sources that leads her to link Dante’s notion of stone to the alchemical concept of the philosopher’s stone. It is also worth noting that Nella Coletta devotes particular attention to Elémire Zolla’s exegetical contribution, which I shall analyse in the chapter on the alchemical rose in the twentieth century.

<sup>175</sup> I would like to highlight two other recent works devoted to Dante’s esoteric dimension: Andrea Cuccia, *Il pensiero esoterico nella Commedia di Dante*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino Editore, 2009; Chiara Dainelli, *Il codice astronomico di Dante. Il sapere proibito della Divina Commedia*, Cisterna di Latina (LT), Eremon Edizioni, 2012. In addition, I would like to point out a novel that evokes the tradition of the *Fedeli d'Amore*, namely *Il volo del pellicano* by Giovanni Francesco Carpeoro (Turin, Melchisedek Edizioni, 2016). This work has not yet received attention from the critics, but it is very interesting with regard to the history of the *Fedeli d'Amore*, as well as the Rosicrucians. One of the merits of this novel is that it is not just narrative fiction, but can also be seen as a treatise on the history of esoteric currents. The author speaks about the Rosicrucians and the *Fedeli d'Amore*, tracing a filiation between the two traditions: “the brotherhood, which had only emerged under the name Rose+Cross with the works of Andreae, had previously taken on different names, *Fedeli d'Amore*, *Milizia Crucifera Evangelica*, *Jordanites*” (“la fratellanza, che era emersa con il nome Rosa+Croce, solo con le opere di Andreae, in precedenza aveva assunto nomi diversi, *Fedeli d'Amore*, *Milizia Crucifera Evangelica*, *Giordaniti*”). *Ibid.*, p. 71. The symbolism of the rose plays a significant role in this novel, and one passage states that the *Fedeli d'Amore* knew the secret of the mystical rose, which was also guarded by “the abbot Gioacchino da Fiore, the poet Durante, known as Dante, of Alighieri, the master Leonardo da Vinci, the abbot Ruggero Bacone, and all the others, who over the centuries had secretly and humbly worked for the mystical knowledge of the Rose and the resurrecting sacrifice of the Cross” (“l’abate Gioacchino da Fiore, il vate Durante, detto Dante, degli Alighieri, il maestro Leonardo da Vinci, l’abate Ruggero Bacone e via tutti gli altri, che nei secoli avevano segretamente e umilmente lavorato per la conoscenza mistica della Rosa e il sacrificio resuscitante della Croce”). *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>176</sup> Massimo Ciavolella, “Il testo moltiplicato: interpretazioni esoteriche della *Divina Commedia*”, *Tenzone: Revista de la Asociación Complutense de Dantología*, n. 11, 2010, p. 227-246; Massimo Ciavolella, “Esoteric Interpretations of the *Divine Comedy*”, in *Dantean Dialogues: Engaging with the Legacy of Amilcare Iannucci*, eds. Maggie Kilgour and Elena Lombardi, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2013, p. 215-230.

scientific, which therefore have not attracted the attention of academic studies, and which belong to the category of works whose aim is to demonstrate Dante's esotericism and his membership of secret societies in the Middle Ages. For example, the anonymous author Æ Philalethes, who published (with the publishing house Bastogi, specialising in Freemasonry) his work *L'esoterismo rosacroce nella "Divina Commedia"* (Rosicrucian esotericism in the "Divine Comedy"),<sup>177</sup> or the book by Emma Cusani *Il grande viaggio nei mondi danteschi. Iniziazione ai Misteri Maggiori* (The great journey into Dante's worlds. Initiation into the Major Mysteries).<sup>178</sup> Cusani's work and the author herself deserve particular consideration. The work is a theosophical interpretation of Dante's work, which is extremely interesting because it approaches Dante from the perspective of an initiatory dimension directly linked to the theosophical occult wisdom. Although this work by Emma Cusani has been completely ignored by critics, it is worth noting that it was a source for the historian Giorgio Galli, who – in his study on the relationship between politics and esoteric culture *La magia e il potere* (Magic and Power) – acknowledges that some of the arguments she proposed are correct.<sup>179</sup> As far as the literary aspects are concerned, the parallel that Cusani draws between Dante and other authors steeped in esotericism, such as Edward Bulwer Lytton, is fascinating.<sup>180</sup> Cusani herself is also interesting: an Italian theosophist who has not been studied to my knowledge.

Another interesting work that has not received enough attention, and has been completely forgotten by literary studies, is the anthroposophical interpretation of Dante's work proposed by Willy Schwarz, who published a book, *Studi su Dante e spunti di storia del cristianesimo* (Studies on Dante and insights into the history of Christianity),<sup>181</sup> in which the theories of Rossetti and Valli are interwoven with the ideas of Rudolf Steiner, the founder of anthroposophy. In fact, Steiner also addressed the esoteric dimension of Dante's work in a series of lectures he held in the early twentieth century. Steiner was a scholar of Goethe, and his contribution on Dante highlights the points of contact between the two authors.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Æ Philalethes, *L'esoterismo rosacroce nella "Divina Commedia"*, Foggia, Bastogi, 1995.

<sup>178</sup> Emma Cusani, *Il grande viaggio nei mondi danteschi. Iniziazione ai misteri maggiori*, Rome, Edizioni Mediterranee, 1993.

<sup>179</sup> Giorgio Galli mentions Emma Cusani's book *Il grande viaggio nei mondi danteschi. Iniziazione ai misteri maggiori* in another work, *Storia delle dottrine politiche* (History of political doctrines, 1995), where the Italian historian also refers to Edi Minguzzi's book, *L'enigma forte. Il codice occulto della "Divina Commedia"*. In this work, Giorgio Galli devotes a chapter to Dante's esotericism, "Dante esoterico" (Esoteric Dante), in which he discusses the exegetical contribution of Gabriele Rossetti, Giovanni Pascoli, René Guénon, Eugène Aroux and Eliphas Lévi, as well as the *Fedeli d'Amore* and the symbolism of the rose. See Giorgio Galli, *Storia delle dottrine politiche*, Milan, Bruno Mondadori, 1995, p. 46-48.

<sup>180</sup> Emma Cusani, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

<sup>181</sup> Willy Schwarz, *Studi su Dante e spunti di storia del cristianesimo*, Milan, Editrice Antroposofica, 1983.

<sup>182</sup> The works of Rudolf Steiner and Willy Schwarz on the esotericism of Dante were published together in 2021 by the Italian publishing house of the Anthroposophical Society, Editrice Antroposofica: Rudolf Steiner, Willy Schwarz, *La visione divina di Dante. Studi su Dante*, Milan, Editrice Antroposofica, 2021. Another interesting work of research, from a Steinerian and anthroposophical perspective, is the following book: Willem Frederik Veltman, *Dante's Revelation. A Study of the Life and Work of Dante Alighieri* [2001], translated from Dutch by Philip Mees, Spencertown, New York, Lindisfarne Books, 2023.



In concluding this paragraph, I stress that Emma Cusani's theosophical interpretation of *The Divine Comedy* and the anthroposophical interpretations of Rudolf Steiner and Willy Schwarz deserve greater attention, as they have been neglected and actually represent an important advance in the history of ideas concerning the relationship between esotericism and literature. There are no detailed studies of these forgotten exegetical contributions, thus research in this area would be useful and beneficial for the academic community.

### *Cielo e terra: the forgotten work of Silvano Panunzio*

A work that has gone almost unnoticed and has not received the attention it merits, was written by Silvano Panunzio (1918-2010): *Cielo e terra. "Poesia, Simbolismo, Sapienza nel Poema Sacro"* (Heaven and earth. "Poetry, Symbolism, Wisdom in the Sacred Poem").<sup>183</sup> Silvano Panunzio is, rather like Rossetti, a forgotten intellectual. He was an Italian poet, writer, philosopher and metaphysician, deeply involved in the Italian political context. The friendship of his father Sergio Panunzio with Benito Mussolini, thus his family's association with the Fascist regime, earned him the hostility of the academic world, and prevented him from pursuing an academic career. He was a professor at La Sapienza University in Rome for twelve years before working in Italian high schools until 1975, when he was appointed by Aldo Moro's government as Foreign Press Officer at the Presidency of the Council of Ministers.<sup>184</sup> He was not merely a specialist with a passion for esotericism, but one of the most influential figures in the cultural and political context of the 1970s – the years called "gli anni di piombo" (the Years of Lead), a period of tension in Italy during which Minister Aldo Moro was brutally killed by the "Brigate Rosse", the Red Brigades, an Italian far-left terrorist organisation.<sup>185</sup> Beyond this very important aspect, which sheds light on the stature and importance of Silvano Panunzio in the Italian cultural and political context, his profound knowledge of esoteric circles and thought should be highlighted. He was a follower of René Guénon's traditionalism, but Panunzio's singularity is that he combines this traditionalist thought with Catholicism. His vision is profoundly Christian, and one of Panunzio's great merits was to combine Christian thought with Eastern metaphysics. Another merit was to rediscover the forgotten work of Gabriele

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<sup>183</sup> Silvano Panunzio's book, *Cielo e terra. "Poesia, Simbolismo, Sapienza nel Poema Sacro"*, was published late in 2008 by the Metapolitica publishing house (Rome) and recently in 2018 by Simmetria (Rome). It is this latter edition that I refer to in my study. Other interesting works by Panunzio include: Silvano Panunzio, *Contemplazione e Simbolo* [1975], Rome, Simmetria Edizioni, 2014; Silvano Panunzio, *Metafisica del Vangelo Eterno* [2007], Rome, Simmetria Edizioni, 2018. On Silvano Panunzio, see Aldo La Fata, *Silvano Panunzio. Vita e pensiero*, Chieti, Edizioni Solfanelli, 2021; *Dalla metafisica alla metapolitica. Omaggio a Silvano Panunzio nel centenario della nascita*, ed. Aldo La Fata, Rome, Simmetria Edizioni, 2019.

<sup>184</sup> Foreign Press Officer at the Presidency of the Council of Ministers.

<sup>185</sup> The lifeless body of Italian Prime Minister Aldo Moro was found in a red Renault in Via Michelangelo Caetani, and Michelangelo Caetani was one of the representatives of the group of scholars that interpreted the work of Dante and the *Fedeli d'Amore* esoterically. Michelangelo Caetani is discussed in the chapter on Balzac.

Rossetti,<sup>186</sup> opening up as yet unexplored horizons of research, since the exegetical contribution of the author of *La Beatrice di Dante* has been associated, by Panunzio, with European literature, as well as with Eastern literature and tradition. This openness towards European and Eastern literature is, without doubt, one of Silvano Panunzio's merits.

Thus, in *Cielo e terra*, Panunzio shows the links between Dante's work and European literature, Arab-Persian poetry and the Hindu tradition.<sup>187</sup> In particular, he proposes what he calls "comparative symmetries"<sup>188</sup> in the *Divine Comedy* and Goethe's *Faust* between Dante's Beatrice and Goethe's Marguerite,<sup>189</sup> with regard to "the Eternal Woman, *Evau*, combined with the *Jod* in the Divine Name and Tetragrammaton (IHVH)".<sup>190</sup> Dante's Beatrice and Goethe's Marguerite correspond, according to Panunzio, to the women mentioned in Cavalcanti, Petrarch, Ficino, Tasso, Leopardi and D'Annunzio.<sup>191</sup> A passage from *Cielo e terra* is very significant, since it shows the link between Beatrice, Guinevere in medieval French literature, the Chiara of Francis of Assisi and Laura of Petrarch:

Between Guinevere (etymologically meaning *White Spirit*, ergo the mystical Dove) and Beatrice, stands the Clare (white, luminous) of a troubadour and knight and poet called Francis of Assisi. And in the "temple" of Santa Chiara – as Rossetti ingeniously notes – Petrarch, receiving his Initiation, will weave the mystery of the symbolic and not at all carnal Laura, whose false Avignonese identity is invented from scratch.<sup>192</sup>

According to Panunzio, woman is an image with an initiatory value, and in describing his quest for the woman he loves, the poet conveys an initiatory message, the aim of which is the mystical fusion with God, as the author of *Cielo e terra* states: "the Poet, that is, the Troubadour (he who not only seeks, but finds) recreates the external earthly Woman by reabsorbing her into himself; or by projecting her from inside to outside and making her ascend to the heights of heaven, where he will be reunited with her, forming one indissoluble and sole reality: the Two in One".<sup>193</sup> This latter is "Dante's mystery of Beatrice".<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> It was Silvano Panunzio who edited Gabriele Rossetti's *La Beatrice di Dante* in 1982, published by the Italian freemason publishing house Atanòr.

<sup>187</sup> Silvano Panunzio, *Cielo e terra*. "Poesia, Simbolismo, Sapienza nel Poema Sacro", p. 18.

<sup>188</sup> "Simmetrie comparative". *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>189</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>190</sup> "La Donna Eterna, *Evau*, unita allo *Jod* nel Nome Divino e Tetragramma (IHVH)". *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>191</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 92-101.

<sup>192</sup> "Tra Ginevra (che significa etimologicamente *Spirito bianco*, ergo la Colomba mistica) e Beatrice, sta in mezzo la Chiara (bianca, luminosa) di un trovatore e cavaliere e poeta che si chiama Francesco di Assisi. E nel 'tempio' di Santa Chiara – come annota genialmente Rossetti – Francesco Petrarca, ricevendo la sua Iniziazione tesserà il mistero della simbolica e niente affatto carnale Laura, la cui falsa identità avignonese è inventata di sana pianta". *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>193</sup> "Il Poeta, ossia il Trovatore (colui che non solo cerca, ma trova) ricrea la Donna esterna terrestre riassorbendola in sé; oppure proiettandola dall'interno all'esterno e facendola salire in alto nei cieli, dove con lei si ricongiungerà formando un'indissolubile e sola realtà: il Due in Uno". *Ibid.*

<sup>194</sup> "Il mistero dantesco di Beatrice". *Ibid.*

Silvano Panunzio links Dante with an esoteric tradition embracing different figures from every era, from Plato, whom he calls “the universal Initiator”,<sup>195</sup> to Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Pascal, Goethe, Beethoven, Manzoni, Dostoevsky and Wagner.<sup>196</sup> The connection between Dante and the poet he calls “the mystery prophet of Europe’s multifaceted complexity”,<sup>197</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, is one of Panunzio’s major insights, and whilst Goethe is the prophet of the multifaceted Europe, Dostoevsky is, as Panunzio remarks, “the evangelical prophet, in the mystical Russia”.<sup>198</sup> Discourse on Russian mysticism is another of Silvano Panunzio’s insights, as he highlights interesting links well worth studying between the esoteric doctrine of love in Dante and the *Fedeli d’Amore* and the Russian author Vladimir Sergeevič Solov’ëv (1853-1900). In fact, he refers to “the tragic yet creative love story of Solov’ëv: the formulator of that ‘sophianic’ doctrine that brings together the Hellenic Venus, the Egyptian Isis and the Christian Mary in the superior, Platonic and Dantean synthesis of a perfect Faithful of Love”.<sup>199</sup>

Therefore, the contribution of Silvano Panunzio to the history of the esotericism of Dante and of the *Fedeli d’Amore* extends well beyond Italy, opening up perspectives that no representative among Rossetti’s followers had highlighted. The links with Goethe or Solov’ëv are a pertinent example. Gabriele Rossetti’s theories are thus developed in a new perspective, embracing European literature. This encounter with the different traditions and literatures in Europe is enhanced by another encounter, with the East. Panunzio showed that the *Fedeli d’Amore*, whom he defines as “Christians”,<sup>200</sup> derive from Persian Sufism,<sup>201</sup> which in turn derives from the Indian Vedanta tradition.<sup>202</sup> Therefore, there appears to be a correlation between the Vedanta tradition, the Sufi tradition and, consequently, the *Fedeli d’Amore*, whose most significant interpreter was Dante, and who – as Panunzio points out – was writing at a time when at least seven spiritual currents converged: Joachimism, Franciscanism, Templarism (defined by Panunzio as the “chivalrous mission of the occult France”),<sup>203</sup> alchemical hermeticism (which from Egypt spread to Morocco and Spain), Persian Sufism, prophetic Kabbalism (notably of Abulafia) and Vedantism.<sup>204</sup>

<sup>195</sup> “L’Iniziatore universale”. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>196</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>197</sup> “Il vate misterico della poliedrica complessità dell’Europa”. *Ibid.*

<sup>198</sup> “Il vate evangelico, nella Russia mistica”. *Ibid.*

<sup>199</sup> “Vicenda amorosa, tragica ma creatrice, di Wladimir Solov’ëv: il formulatore di quella dottrina ‘sofianica’ che riunisce la Venere ellenica, l’Iside egizia e la Maria cristiana nella sintesi superiore, platonica e dantesca di un perfetto Fedele d’Amore”. *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>200</sup> “Fedeli d’Amore cristiani”. *Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>201</sup> On Sufism, it is worth noting the connection between Dante and Ibn Arabi, highlighted by Silvano Panunzio. See *ibid.*, p. 45-80.

<sup>202</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 133, 160. Silvano Panunzio adds another interesting correlation, between the Eastern concepts of Tantric Yoga and biblical and troubadour mystique. See *ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>203</sup> “Missione cavalleresca della Francia occulta”. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>204</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 55-56.

Silvano Panunzio concisely and fluently addresses all the most important topics of the history of the *Fedeli d'Amore* and the esotericism attributed to Dante and the medieval love poets, giving explanations that clarify many obscure points of this phenomenon in the history of ideas. Panunzio's explanation derives from his extensive knowledge of both mystical realities and initiatory circles. Thus, the question of the *Fedeli d'Amore* is approached from both these angles – the mystical dimension and implications of connections with the initiatory context, whilst the singularity of Panunzio's contribution is, in fact, to rehabilitate the role of Catholicism. It does not imply a clear opposition between the Catholic Church to a “heretical” doctrine of love, rather a doctrinal continuity between the two parties, marked over the course of history by schisms and divergences, the boundaries of which are porous. Panunzio also explains the need for the Church to exercise control over alleged heretical movements or sects. The title of one chapter in *Cielo e terra* is significant in this respect: “Il perché legittimo degli interventi dell'autorità religiosa” (“The legitimate reason for interventions by religious authority”).<sup>205</sup> He writes that “the difference between the exoteric and esoteric aspects of the same traditional system provides justification for the vigilance that religious authority rightfully exercises, in terms of its ‘creed’, on the level of associate life”.<sup>206</sup> Panunzio held that “the inner fire that feeds the secret life (‘the heart’) of a Mystic or an initiate can in no way, with undue ardour, alter the face of a ruling Religion. The first and most repeated error of the ‘heretics’ lies in wanting to perform in the public domain”.<sup>207</sup> This is true, for example, for the Sufi poet Al-Hallâj (858-922), who was barbarously executed in public by the Islamic religious authority, and whom Panunzio uses as an example to confirm his arguments. He states that “a truly ‘pneumatic’ Being does not seek the favourable judgment of men [...]. On the contrary, he accomplishes everything while awaiting the ineffable and most severe judgment of the Angels”.<sup>208</sup> With reference to Angels, Panunzio points out, “of course, there are not only the ‘Angels of persons’, there are also – see the Old Testament and Revelation – ‘Angels of the nations’ and ‘Angels of the churches’; then there are the supreme Angels who scrutinise us and mark us on the forehead as in the progressive ascent of the Dantean journey”.<sup>209</sup> This classification of Angels was developed by Dion Fortune in her book *The Magical Battle of*

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<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>206</sup> “La differenza tra gli aspetti exoterici e quelli esoterici di uno stesso sistema tradizionale porta a riconoscere il perché legittimo della vigilanza che l'Autorità religiosa esercita di pieno diritto, in ordine del suo ‘credo’, sul piano della vita associata”. *Ibid.*

<sup>207</sup> “Il fuoco interno che alimenta la vita segreta (‘il cuore’) di un Mistico o di un iniziato non può in alcun modo, con indebite vampate, alterare il volto di una Religione regnante. Il primo è più ripetuto errore degli ‘eretici’ sta nel volersi esibire sulla pubblica piazza”. *Ibid.*

<sup>208</sup> “Un Essere veramente ‘pneumatico’ non cerca di procurarsi il giudizio favorevole degli uomini [...]. Egli invece compie ogni cosa attendendo l'ineffabile e severissimo giudizio degli Angeli”. *Ibid.*

<sup>209</sup> “Beninteso, non ci sono solo ‘gli Angeli delle persone’, esistono anche – vedi l'Antico Testamento e l'Apocalisse – ‘gli Angeli delle nazioni’ e ‘gli Angeli delle chiese’: infine gli Angeli supremi che ci scrutano e ci segnano in fronte come nell'ascesa progressiva del viaggio dantesco”. *Ibid.*, p. 107.

*Britain*,<sup>210</sup> where the English poetess and occultist speaks of the Second World War, underlining the role and influences of non-human entities (Angels of the Race and Nations) on events during the conflict. Dion Fortune's book influenced the historian Giorgio Galli in his book *La magia e il potere*, in which he deals with the relationship between politics and esoteric thought.<sup>211</sup> Whilst the matter of the Angels is not the main focus of my research, it shows the complexity of the argument, because when we reference the mystical dimension we also deal with the dimension of the invisible world. An intellectual like Silvano Panunzio, even respected at government level (under Minister Aldo Moro), spoke openly about the invisible. However, academic research has its limitations, as these matters cannot be proved, and can only record fact in the history of ideas. This aspect is underlined by Panunzio himself, when he deals with the esotericism of Dante and the *Fedeli d'Amore*. He remarks that "we are in a transcendental realm where human documents do not exist", adding: "moreover, there are words escaped here and there from the author's pen which, read subtly, confirm that he has had an encounter at the highest level with the residues not of the abused *Fedeli d'Amore*, but rather with the invisible masters of them".<sup>212</sup> One passage is very significant for this invisible world, which can be seen by studying the question of the *Fedeli d'Amore*:

Let us be clear. There is an invisible prophetic community, *kadmic*, that is to say "original", which goes back to the beginnings of pre-adamic humanity: it silently emits its rays on the Church, on the religious Orders, on the chivalric Orders. The Pontiff Clemente Romano, in one of his epistles, says that it is "older than the sun and the moon". This explains why Father Dante, disappointed and inconsolable, entrusted him at the end of his life with the *supra-sense* of his creations for 500 years. And this explains the revelation that took place in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, not in the decadent and already equivocal Knights Templar and their so-called heirs, but in the Johannine Order and in the orthodox and older Order of Malta. This explains how Dante entrusted his ideal testament *with hope* to the "Spirits of the Prophets" (*Ap 22:6*) who are also the Guardian Angels of the true Poets exposed to martyrdom. (Incidentally, the much-repeated *Fedeli d'Amore* today is a pale parody of the above-mentioned Community of Light, which is in no way transcendent. They contain the most mature of Poets who, not by chance, placed them in Hell)!

Specifically, there was no personal "discovery by Rossetti" on the island, but an *ingenious reconstruction* of the authentic data that was mysteriously offered to him by the Sacred Singer himself.<sup>213</sup>

<sup>210</sup> Dion Fortune, *The Magical Battle of Britain*, ed. Gareth Knight, Bradford on Avon, Golden Gates, 1993.

<sup>211</sup> See Giorgio Galli, *La magia e il potere. L'esoterismo nella politica occidentale*, p. 351-358.

<sup>212</sup> "Siamo in un campo trascendentale in cui i documenti umani non esistono. Del resto, vi sono parole sfuggite qua e là dalla penna dell'Autore le quali, lette in modo sottile, confermano che egli ebbe un incontro ai più alti livelli con i residui non già degli abusati Fedeli d'Amore, semmai con i maestri invisibili dei medesimi". *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>213</sup> "Sia chiaro. Esiste una invisibile Comunità Profetica, *cadmica*, ossia 'originaria' che risale ai primordi umani pre-adamitici: la quale, in silenzio, emana i suoi raggi sulla Chiesa, sugli Ordini Religiosi, sugli Ordini Cavallereschi. Il Pontefice Clemente Romano, in una sua Epistola, la dice 'più antica del Sole e della Luna'. Ciò spiega come mai il Padre Dante, deluso e sconcolato, abbia alla fine della vita affidato a questa, per 500 anni, il *soprasenso* delle sue creazioni. E spiega la rivelazione avvenuta nel Sette-Ottocento non presso i decaduti, già equivoci Templari e loro pretesi eredi, bensì nell'ortodosso e più antico Ordine Giovannita e di Malta. Spiega

In this passage, Panunzio points out that the group of *Fedeli d'Amore* was characterised by internal schisms (as we shall see in Chapter IV), which would explain why some of the *Fedeli d'Amore* are placed by Dante in the *Inferno* of his *Divine Comedy*, as in the case of Guido Cavalcanti (VI circle).<sup>214</sup> Yet, as Panunzio comments, “it is wrong to believe that the *Fedeli d'Amore* were a compact and homogeneous group. The dominant contrast (which no modern author has been able to identify) lies in the two interpretations of Platonism”.<sup>215</sup> In fact, “there is a Platonism and, more generally, an ancient initiation, which flows back into Christianity and into the New Initiation. And there is a later and extremist Platonism – which Hegel called ‘Neo-Platonism’ – which is and remains pre-Christian and for that very reason anti-Christian”.<sup>216</sup> According to Panunzio, “there is therefore an ancient Initiatism that rejects the perfecting of the new or evangelical one”,<sup>217</sup> and it is the approach to this double initiatory conception that would characterise the creed of the *Fedeli d'Amore*, who, according to the author of *Cielo e terra*, “were not a ‘sect’ but an ‘initiatory and spiritual community’”.<sup>218</sup> More specifically, “the *Fedeli d'Amore* were pupils and not spiritual masters: these were the invisible Envoys of true fourteenth-century Rosy-Cross in Italy”.<sup>219</sup> The *Fedeli d'Amore* are associated here by Panunzio with fourteenth-century Rosicrucianism and the invisible world, which is the basis of

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come Dante abbia affidato *con speranza* il suo testamento ideale agli ‘Spiriti dei Profeti’ (Ap 22, 6) che sono anche gli Angeli Custodi dei Poeti veri esposti al martirio. (Tra l’altro, i tanto ripetuti, oggi, ‘Fedeli d’Amore’, sono una pallida parodia della indicata *Comunità della Luce*, affatto trascendente. Essi contengono il più maturo Poeta che, non a caso, li ha collocati all’Inferno!)

All’atto pratico, non ci fu nell’Isola una personale ‘scoperta di Rossetti’, ma una sua *ricostruzione geniale* sui dati autentici offertigli, misteriosamente, dallo stesso Cantore sacro”. *Ibid.*, p. 77-78.

<sup>214</sup> Silvano Panunzio quotes, in *Cielo e terra*, a passage from a letter that he received from the linguist and specialist in cosmology and symbolism André l’Eclair (pseudonym of Adriano Carelli): “it has been twenty years – *vox clamantis in deserto* – that I have been shouting to the ‘Dantists’ [the specialists of Dante] that the *Fedeli d’Amore* have been placed by the Poet, not as individuals but as a sect, in perennial (Inferno) or temporary (Purgatory) fire. Is it possible that no one has noticed this?” (“Sono vent’anni – *vox clamantis in deserto* – che grido ai ‘dantisti’ che i Fedeli d’Amore sono stati posti dal Poeta, non come singoli ma come setta, nel fuoco perenne (Inferno) o temporaneo (Purgatorio). Possibile che nessuno se ne sia accorto?”). *Ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>215</sup> “È errato credere che i Fedeli d’Amore costituissero un gruppo compatto ed omogeneo: non è mai avvenuto in nessuna scuola. Il contrasto dominante (che nessun autore moderno ha saputo individuare) sta nelle due interpretazioni del Platonismo”. *Ibid.*, p. 175.

<sup>216</sup> “Esiste un Platonismo e, più in genere, una iniziazione antica, che rifluisce nel Cristianesimo e nella Iniziazione Nuova. E c’è un Platonismo successivo ed estremista – che Hegel ha chiamato con il nome di ‘Neo-platonismo’ – il quale è e rimane pre-cristiano e per ciò stesso anti-cristiano”. *Ibid.* On the esoteric dimension of Hegel, see Glenn Alexander Magee, *Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition*, Ithaca (N.Y.), Cornell University Press, 2001. See also the Preface by Massimo Donà, “LOGOS ERMETICO. Lo ‘speculativo’ hegeliano e la tradizione magico-ermetica come forma stessa della razionalità”, in the Italian version of the work by Magee: Glenn Alexander Magee, *Hegel e la tradizione ermetica. Le radici “occulte” dell’idealismo contemporaneo*, Rome, Edizioni Mediterranee, 2013, p. 13-21. It is worth pointing out that the rose symbolism is also linked to the figure of Hegel, who, as Gerd Heinz-Mohr and Volker Sommer remind us, alludes to the Rosicrucian rose. See Gerd Heinz-Mohr, Volker Sommer, *La Rosa. Storia di un simbolo*, Milan, Rusconi, 1989, p. 50-51 (the original title of the German version is: Gerd Heinz-Mohr, Volker Sommer, *Die Rose Entfaltung eines Symbols*, Eugen Diederichs Verlag, München, 1988). On the rose and the cross in Hegel (as well as in Goethe), see Karl Löwith, *De Hegel à Nietzsche*, Paris, Gallimard, 1969, p. 30-38.

<sup>217</sup> “C’è dunque un Iniziatismo antico che rifiuta il perfezionamento di quello nuovo o evangelico”. *Ibid.*

<sup>218</sup> “Non erano una ‘setta’ ma una ‘comunità iniziatica e spirituale’”. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

<sup>219</sup> “I ‘Fedeli d’Amore’ erano allievi e non maestri spirituali: questi furono gli Inviati invisibili della vera Rosa-Croce del Trecento in Italia”. *Ibid.*, p. 150.

Dante's work, and where we find the "Minor Mysteries", the "Medium Mysteries", the "Major Mysteries" and the "Supreme Mystery".<sup>220</sup> In particular, as Panunzio states, the Minor Mysteries "correspond to the political-religious vision veiled in the Sacred Poem", and reflect "the level reached, predominantly, by literary geniuses such as Ugo Foscolo and Giovanni Pascoli, and, in their wake, Luigi Valli", whilst the Medium Mysteries "correspond to the theological-moral framework, namely the great representation of the invisible realms made openly in the *Comedy*", and "here the ecclesiastical interpreters and, in general, Catholics are right: [...] Paradise is real, and not a screen as Rossetti assumed".<sup>221</sup> On this last point, therefore, Panunzio disagrees with Rossetti, and on the subject of the mysteries of the invisible world, he stresses the importance of the symbol of the rose – "the profound mysteries of the White Rose".<sup>222</sup> The rose is of seminal importance in Panunzio's work when he refers to the "'initiatory-mystical course', namely the highest order of the mysteries contained in Dante's *Comedy*",<sup>223</sup> which references "the reunion of the Cross and the Rose".<sup>224</sup> "the Cross is the active and penetrating Force of the avataric Sacrifice, it is the male moulding Divinity; the Rose is the Wisdom of Love, cosmic Beauty, universal plasticity, or the female receptive Divinity".<sup>225</sup> In particular, the mystery of the "initiatory-mystical course" evoked by Panunzio lies in the white rose linked, once again, to the occult reality of the invisible:

This Rose is "candid": and to understand its whiteness, one must have understood the mysteries of the prophet Hosea (the first to speak of it biblically), of the very ancient and "heavenly" Iran, and of the Origins of the "White Spirit". This, in a word, is tantamount to crossing the boundary, hence infinite, between the "faithful of love" (*fedele d'amore*) written in small letter, in inverted commas, and the all-capital Faithful of Love (*Fedele d'Amore*) of the ultra-maximum Love that *moves the Sun* – the Eternal Christ – and the *other Stars* – the angelic or divine Beings.<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 71-72.

<sup>221</sup> "Misteri Minori: corrispondono alla Visione politico-religiosa racchiusa con veli nel Poema Sacro. È il livello cui sono pervenuti, in prevalenza, letterati di genio come Ugo Foscolo e Giovanni Pascoli, e, sulla loro scia, Luigi Valli"; "Misteri Medi: corrispondono al Quadro teologico-morale, ossia alla grande rappresentazione dei regni invisibili fatta apertamente nella *Commedia*.

Qui han ragione gli interpreti ecclesiastici e, in genere, i cattolici: [...] il Paradiso è reale, e non uno schermo come ha supposto Rossetti". *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>222</sup> "I profondissimi misteri della Rosa bianca". *Ibid.*, p. 170.

<sup>223</sup> "'Corso iniziatico-mistico' che è l'ordine più alto dei misteri racchiusi nella 'Commedia' dantesca". *Ibid.*, p. 66-67.

<sup>224</sup> "La riunione della Croce e della Rosa". *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>225</sup> "La Croce è la Forza attiva e penetrante del Sacrificio avatarico, è la Divinità plasmatrice maschile; la Rosa è la Sapienza d'Amore, la Bellezza cosmica, la plasticità universale, o la Divinità ricettiva femminile". *Ibid.*

<sup>226</sup> "Questa Rosa è 'candida': e per intendere tale suo candore bisogna aver inteso i misteri del profeta Osea (il primo a biblicamente parlarne), dell'Iran antichissimo e 'paradisiaco', e delle Origini dello 'Spirito Bianco'. Il che, in una parola, equivale al passaggio al limite, dunque infinito, tra il minuscolo 'fedele d'amore' tra virgolette e il Fedele tutto maiuscolo dell'Amore ultramaiuscolo che *move il Sole* – il Cristo Eterno – e *l'altre Stelle* – gli Esseri angelici o divinizzati". *Ibid.*, p. 128.

Thus, the rose that Dante passes on to successive generations of poets is a rose that guards an occult knowledge, the occult Wisdom and, according to Panunzio, the great merit of Gabriele Rossetti is to have shown the “penetration of this occult Wisdom”<sup>227</sup> in literature, in Dante and in the love poets. More precisely, to arrive at his discoveries, “Rossetti used the masonic keys, even the Scottish ones freshly churned out in the early nineteenth century, to better shine through Dante’s universal Initiatism. But this Rossettian exegetical process by no means entails an equation of identity between modern Freemasonry and Dante”.<sup>228</sup> And on Freemasonry, Panunzio reveals a “little known *punctum dolens*, a sore point”,<sup>229</sup> namely the fact that “the new stance adopted by Freemasonry between 1717 and 1723 is, in contrast to the past, both anti-Roman and anti-Catholic (with a semblance of generic pro-Christianity). In fact, this is a reversal that was achieved by the burning of all previous archives, attesting to the ‘catholicity’ of the institution itself”.<sup>230</sup> This statement overturns the idea that we have of Freemasonry. It is not an initiatory organisation that opposes the Church, rather an Order that originally derived from it and which, over the centuries, became detached from the ecclesiastical creed. It is therefore evident that this aspect highlighted by Panunzio contrasts with all the other interpretations of the critical current initiated by Rossetti, which see Freemasonry as an organisation completely opposed to, and contrary to, the Catholic Church. According to Panunzio, it is not a question of a clear opposition between the two parties, a sort of simple “right-left” dichotomy, but of a much more nuanced and complex reality of reciprocal influences. *Cielo e terra* also offers a new perspective on other aspects of the history of the *Fedeli d’Amore*. Thus, regarding the “secrecy” among the *Fedeli d’Amore*, Panunzio proposes a different explanation from the representatives of the current initiated by Rossetti, namely that:

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<sup>227</sup> “Una proiezione della Sapienza occulta”. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>228</sup> “Rossetti ha utilizzato le chiavi muratorie, anche quelle scozzesi sfornate di fresco nel primo Ottocento, per meglio far risplendere l’Iniziatismo universale di Dante. Ma tale processo esegetico rossettiano non comporta affatto un’equazione di identità tra la Muratoria moderna e Dante”. *Ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>229</sup> “*Punctum dolens* [...] poco noto”. *Ibid.*, p. 162. As far as Freemasonry is concerned, it is interesting to note that, quoting some poems of the eighteenth century, Jacques Brengues point out that the concept of “fidelity to love” is associated with Freemasonry: “the mason, lover, husband, is a model of fidelity: the esoteric fraternity does not prevent the Freemason from being an exoteric follower of Love [...]. The Mason is faithful in love, and Masonic poetry will never cease to say that ‘Our Masons have been, / from all antiquity, / discreet and faithful / to a beautiful woman’ [...]. ‘Charming sex [...] / no one ever leaves with you / only discreet, faithful and sincere’ (cantata of 1738). Four decades later, the same refrain: ‘[the mason] is likewise a faithful lover! And the knight of beauties’ (1779)” {“le maçon, amant, époux, est un modèle de fidélité: la fraternité ésotérique n’empêche pas le franc-maçon d’être un adepte exotérique de l’Amour [...]. Le maçon est fidèle en amour, la poésie maçonnique ne cessera plus de dire que ‘Nos Maçons ont été, / De toute Antiquité, / Discrets et fidèles / Auprès d’une belle’ [...]. ‘Sexe charmant [...] / l’on ne sort jamais d’avec vous / que discret, fidèle et sincère’ (cantate de 1738). Quatre décennies plus tard, même refrain: “[le maçon] est de même amant fidèle! Et des Belles le chevalier” (1779)”. Jacques Brengues, “La guerre des sexes et l’amour-maçon dans la poésie”, *Dix-huitième Siècle: La franc-maçonnerie*, n. 19, 1987, p. 112.

<sup>230</sup> “La nuova veste costitutiva assunta dalla Muratoria con il 1717-1723 è, in contrasto al passato, sia anti-romana sia anti-cattolica (con una parvenza di filo-cristianesimo generico). Ora ciò è un’inversione che si è ottenuta con il bruciamento di tutti gli Archivi precedenti, attestanti La ‘cattolicità’ dell’Istituzione stessa”. Silvano Panunzio, *Cielo e terra. “Poesia, Simbolismo, Sapienza nel Poema Sacro”*, p. 162.



The allegorist school's version of the arcane motifs observed by Dante and his friends is not the authentic one. That Luigi Valli and other scholars argue that this rule is to be attributed to "sectarian" secrecy and the need for defence against the inquisitorial gaze of the Church and Power in general, can also pass, as these are scholars who have opined all this from the outside. But it cannot fail to amaze that a spiritual man of Gabriele Rossetti's calibre, deeply immersed in the inexpressible mysteries,<sup>231</sup> inviolable in themselves, of the Initiatory Way and the Mystical Way, would, without delving deeper, have considered the same thing.

To interpret the "secrecy" of the *Fedeli d'Amore* as the concealment of sectarians and heretics is to confuse superficial planes of friction with inner experiences that are intangible. The Initiate is not heterodox in doctrine, nor rebellious in his behaviour. If by a sudden "fall" he became such, it would mean that his initiation was very imperfect. And it is no coincidence that such instruments happen to "neophytes" or those who are walking on lower crags. In the initiate from above (which has nothing to do with the exhibitionist degrees bestowed by horizontal associations, bar none) there can be neither substantial nor formal opposition to publicly constituted religious institutions. He knows better than anyone else, and at least to the same extent as the members of the Priesthood in office, that such entities are of unimpeachable divine origin. Nor is their decadence sufficient reason to move on to revolt and contestation of a, precisely, heretical nature. This unduly mixes empirical facts and individual cases with transcendent principles and perennial organisms: in a word, the subjective with the objective, the particular with the universal. It will not go without saying here that *airèmoni* – whence "heresy" and "heretic" – literally means in Greek "I choose a side" [...].<sup>232</sup>

Panunzio believed that the secret of love poetry had other explanations, which go beyond the purely sectarian one and which can be summarised in two main reasons: "the first is precisely the opposite of the state of mind of those who would like to rise up and that is,

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<sup>231</sup> Pietro Negri (*alias* Arturo Reghini) confirms Panunzio's comments about the sources of Gabriele Rossetti, who "was led to his interpretation by knowledge of ancient secret traditions" ("fu condotto alla sua interpretazione dalla conoscenza di antiche tradizioni segrete"). Pietro Negri, "Il linguaggio dei Fedeli d'Amore", in *Introduzione alla magia. A cura del Gruppo di UR* [1971], 3 v., Rome, Edizioni Mediterranee, v. 2, 2006, p. 99. In this respect, Panunzio affirms that these are "ancient and authoritative sources, yet living ones of a higher level" ("fonti antiche e autorevoli, e pur tuttavia viventi di superiore livello"). Silvano Panunzio, *Cielo e terra. "Poesia, Simbolismo, Sapienza nel Poema Sacro"*, p. 163.

<sup>232</sup> "La versione della scuola allegorista sui motivi della disciplina arcani, osservata da Dante e dai suoi amici, non è quella autentica. Che Luigi Valli ed altri letterati sostengano come tale regola sia da imputare al segreto 'settario' e alla necessità di difesa dagli sguardi inquisitoriali della Chiesa e del potere in genere, può anche passare, in quanto si tratta di studiosi i quali hanno opinato tutto ciò dall'esterno. Ma non può non meravigliare che un Uomo spirituale della tempra di Gabriele Rossetti, profondamente addentro ai misteri inesprimibili, inviolabili in sé, della Via iniziatica e della Via mistica, abbia, senza approfondire, ritenuto la stessa cosa.

Interpretare la 'segretezza' dei Fedeli d'Amore, come il nascondimento dei settari e degli eretici, significa confondere i piani superficiali di attrito con le esperienze interiori che sono intangibili. L'Iniziato non è eterodosso quanto alla dottrina, né ribelle per il suo comportamento. Se per un'improvvisa 'caduta' divenisse tale, ciò vuol dire che la sua Iniziazione era molto imperfetta. E non è un caso che tali strumenti capitino ai 'neofiti' o agli incamminati su balze inferiori. Nell'Iniziato dall'alto (cosa che non ha niente a che fare con i gradi esibizionistici elargiti da associazioni orizzontali, nessuna esclusa) non ci può essere opposizione né sostanziale né formale alle Istituzioni religiose pubblicamente costituite. Egli sa benissimo, meglio di ogni altro, e almeno nella stessa misura dei membri del Sacerdozio in carica, che tali entità sono di ineccepibile origine divina. Né la decadenza delle medesime è ragione sufficiente per passare alla rivolta e alla contestazione di tipo, appunto, ereticale. Questa mescola indebitamente fatti empirici e casi individuali con principi trascendenti e organismi perenni: in una parola, il soggettivo con l'oggettivo, il particolare con l'universale. Non sarà qui inutile ricordare che *airèmoni* – donde 'eresia' ed 'eretico' – significa letteralmente in greco 'scelgo una parte'. Silvano Panunzio, *Cielo e terra. "Poesia, Simbolismo, Sapienza nel Poema Sacro"*, p. 103.

precisely, religious respect”, whilst “the second is the sense of ineffable experience”.<sup>233</sup> In particular, “the second reason for the secret of the *Fedeli d’Amore* is more subtle”,<sup>234</sup> because “the ‘jargon’ [...] is used both to train and refine spiritual intelligence – which would be contaminated by ordinary language, weakened by the necessary tension – and to protect the essential sacredness of the Mystery from the profane”.<sup>235</sup> Thus, it follows that “the evangelical ‘do not give holy things to dogs’, namely strangers, and ‘do not throw pearls to swine’, that is to say the unbelieving and undeserving materialists”,<sup>236</sup> and as Panunzio comments: “the most dangerous profane and profaner is oneself. Those who have mystical experience know and understand this very well”.<sup>237</sup> The sentence “those who have mystical experience know and understand this very well” is very significant as Panunzio shows he is familiar with a reality from which the vast majority of people are excluded, namely mystical life.

In conclusion, this chapter on the history of this “heterodox” idea of esoteric love in literature shows that Silvano Panunzio’s contribution is proof of the complexity of this subject, the boundaries of which are not well defined. Compared to other interpretations, from Pascoli to Valli, from Guénon to Ricolfi, Panunzio’s is one of the most original and little known. He certainly deserves to be studied in his own right, research which is still lacking and which would be useful both for literary criticism and studies on the history of esoteric currents. The *excursus* I have outlined in this chapter, from Boccaccio to the twenty-first century, is of fundamental importance not only for understanding Dante and medieval love literature, but also for European literature from the Middle Ages to the present day. To understand the symbolism of the rose in nineteenth and twentieth century authors such as Hugo, Nerval, Péladan, Valéry, Blake, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Yeats, Joyce, Pound, Goethe and Pessoa, we should also consider one of the main sources of their literary works, namely the love literature of the Middle Ages, especially of Dante. This means delving into a complex phenomenon in the history of ideas, of the *Fedeli d’Amore*, starting with the work considered the *summa* of the doctrine of love: *The Romance of the Rose*, to which the next chapter is devoted.

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<sup>233</sup> “Il primo è proprio il contrario dello stato d’animo di chi vorrebbe insorgere ed è, precisamente, il rispetto religioso. Il secondo è il senso dell’esperienza ineffabile”. *Ibid.*

<sup>234</sup> “Il secondo motivo della segretezza dei Fedeli d’Amore è più sottile”. *Ibid.*

<sup>235</sup> “Il ‘gergo’ [...] viene adoperato sia per allenare e affinare l’intelligenza spirituale – che dal linguaggio ordinario verrebbe contaminata, affievolita dalla tensione necessaria – sia per proteggere dai profani la sacralità essenziale del Mistero”. *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>236</sup> “L’evangelico ‘non dare le cose sante ai cani’ ossia agli estranei, e ‘non gettare le perle ai porci’, cioè ai materialisti increduli e immeritevoli”. *Ibid.*

<sup>237</sup> “Il più pericoloso profano e profanatore è rappresentato da se stessi. Chi ha esperienza mistica lo sa e lo capisce benissimo”. *Ibid.*



## CHAPTER III

### THE ROMANCE OF THE ROSE AND IL FIORE

#### *Spiritual reading of The Romance of the Rose*

The source of the reflection on Dantean esotericism and love literature that spread from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance is a particular work: *The Romance of the Rose*. Gabriele Rossetti, Luigi Valli and Alfonso Ricolfi constantly mention *The Romance of the Rose* as a fundamental text for understanding the esoteric scope of love literature.<sup>1</sup> On *The Romance of the Rose*, Gabriele Rossetti writes that “its interpretation will turn out to be difficult for everyone, apart from those who understand the mysteries of that very old society which was excommunicated by the popes, and whose last degree takes the denomination of Rose”.<sup>2</sup> In France, this idea was followed up by scholars such as René Herval who, based on the studies of Luigi Valli, confirmed that the doctrine of the *Fedeli d'Amore*, from Dante to Guido Cavalcanti and the Sicilian poets of Frederick II's court, was the same doctrine expressed in poetic form by the *trobar cluz* of love poets such as Arnaut Daniel and Guilhem Figueira, and especially by *The Romance of the Rose*.<sup>3</sup> Though this interpretation was considered at the time as heretical, or often ignored, in reality the reflections on the initiatory and esoteric dimension of *The Romance of the Rose* proposed by the heterodox school started by Gabriele Rossetti have been confirmed in recent studies by historians of esotericism. For example, in the *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, the work by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meung is often mentioned as a reference point for medieval esotericism.<sup>4</sup> Jean-Paul Corsetti speaks of *The Romance of the Rose* in terms of “hermeticism of love”,<sup>5</sup> in which the nature of this love is initiatory. He also points out that in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, figures such as the occultist Éliphas Lévi and the alchemist Eugène Canseliet remarked on the hermetic and alchemical component that is present in *The Romance of the Rose*.<sup>6</sup> In further confirmation,

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<sup>1</sup> On the allegory of love in medieval literature, see Clive Staples Lewis, *The Allegory of Love. A Study in Medieval Tradition* [1936], Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013; Annarosa Mattei, *L'enigma d'amore nell'occidente medievale*, preface by Franco Cardini, Rome, La Lepre Edizioni, 2017. In *L'enigma d'amore nell'occidente medievale*, Annarosa Mattei devotes a section to the *Fedeli d'Amore*. See Annarosa Mattei, *op. cit.*, p. 257-281.

<sup>2</sup> “La sua interpretazione riuscirà difficile a tutti, fuorché a coloro che capiscono i misteri di quella società antichissima la quale fu anch'essa dai papi scomunicata, il cui ultimo grado prende la denominazione dalla Rosa”. Gabriele Rossetti, *Il mistero dell'Amor platonico del Medio Evo*, v. I, p. 170-171.

<sup>3</sup> René Herval, *Une Curieuse Thèse Littéraire. Dante, “Le Roman de la Rose” et les “Fidèles d'Amour”*, Rouen, Lestringant Editeur, Caen, Jouan & Bigot, 1931.

<sup>4</sup> See *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, p. 41, 169, 298, 527, 610.

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Paul Corsetti, *Histoire de l'ésotérisme et des sciences occultes*, Paris, Larousse, 1992, p. 159.

<sup>6</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 160.

Antoine Faivre comments that in *The Romance of the Rose* the science of Hermes is very evident, as well as the initiatory logic and alchemical thought.<sup>7</sup> In fact, the allegorical and symbolic universe described by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meung exists at a time in history when alchemical works became widespread. *The Romance of the Rose* was written between 1230 and 1285 – a period that produced works such as *Der Junge Titurel*, written by Albrecht von Schwarzenberg around 1260, the *Turba Philosophorum* attributed to Geber (a work in which we can discern the concept of *philosophia prisca* or *philosophia perennis*), the *Aurora consurgens* attributed to Thomas Aquinas, and the *Rosarium Philosophorum* – an alchemical treatise from the thirteenth century attributed to the Catalan writer Arnaldus de Villa Nova (1235-1315).

However, whilst historians recognize the esoteric component of *The Romance of the Rose*, literary critics have not given this aspect the attention it deserves. The only study on the esotericism of *The Romance of the Rose* is, to my knowledge, by Georgette Kamenetz, who focuses on the work of Guillaume de Lorris, rather than Jean de Meung.<sup>8</sup> Kamenetz refers (without dwelling on the subject) to the heterodox current of Dantean exegesis, in particular to Luigi Valli and René Guénon. In her opinion, *The Romance of the Rose* by Guillaume de Lorris hides a spiritual truth and a personal and mystical experience. According to Kamenetz, the lover in search of the rose enclosed in the fortress can be considered as a spiritual traveller who retreats into himself, freeing himself from any contact with the world outside so that he can experience a love which resembles spirituality.<sup>9</sup> Thus, seen this way, the journey of the lover of *The Romance of the Rose* is a “spiritual pilgrimage”,<sup>10</sup> whilst the rose is the aim of this spiritual quest. Georgette Kamenetz believes that the search for the rose by the lover is a quest for spiritual development, a harmonization of the inner being, freed from its more brutal and bestial traits. The rose becomes the medium that leads to knowledge of the Divine. It corresponds to other symbols which have represented this search, such as the Grail, the philosophical stone of the alchemists, the Golden Fleece or the birds, which are all themes that will be revived in nineteenth and twentieth century literature. A good example is Novalis who,

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<sup>7</sup> See Antoine Faivre, *Accès de l'ésotérisme occidental*, v. I, p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> Georgette Kamenetz, *L'Ésotérisme de Guillaume de Lorris*, PhD Thesis, Paris, Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 1980.

<sup>9</sup> On the spiritual dimension of *The Romance of the Rose*, see Alan M. F. Gunn, *The Mirror of Love. A Reinterpretation of the “Romance of the Rose”*, Lubbock, Texas, Texas Tech press, 1952; Jacques Ribard, “Introduction à une Étude Polysémique du Roman de la Rose de Guillaume de Lorris”, in *Études de langue et de littérature du Moyen-âge: offertes à Félix Lecoy par ses collègues, ses élèves et ses amis*, Paris, Champion, 1973, p. 519-528; Jean-Charles Payen, “A Semiological Study of Guillaume de Lorris”, *Yale French Studies*, n. 51, 1974, p. 170-184; Jacques Ribard, “De Chrétien de Troyes à Guillaume de Lorris: ces quêtes que l'on dit inachevées”, in *Voyage, quête, pèlerinage dans la littérature et la civilisation médiévale*, Aix-en-Provence, Presses universitaires de Provence, 1976, p. 313-321; Jean-Charles Payen, *La Rose et l'Utopie*, Paris, Éditions Sociales, 1976; Georgette Kamenetz, “La promenade comme expérience mystique”, in *Études sur le Roman de la rose de Guillaume de Lorris*, ed. Jean Dufournet, Paris, Honoré Champion, 1984, p. 83-104.

<sup>10</sup> Georgette Kamenetz, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

in his *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, tells the story of a troubadour poet in search of a blue flower, or Maurice Maeterlinck who, in his *L'Oiseau bleu* (The Blue Bird), speaks of a girl who seeks a bird, symbolizing the search for God. Therefore, according to Georgette Kamenetz, Guillaume de Lorris's work aims to focus on the spiritual part of individuals, so that they can seek and find their own Grail. It is a journey into the meanders of the soul, allowing pilgrims to find themselves. The soul returns to its original source, free from everything physical, in order to achieve the spiritual ideal. The transformation of the being, the union between a human being and God, the hidden God in every person, is described in a cryptic way as the marriage of the soul or a spiritual marriage by Saint Teresa of Avila.<sup>11</sup> This love mysticism emerges in *The Romance of the Rose* through the story of a quest: the search for the rose.

Guillaume de Lorris prefaces his story by stressing that it is a dream and, relying on the *auctoritas* of Macrobius, invites the reader to believe in dreams and to drill down into the text. He affirms that dreams are not lies and describes his dream, of which he is the protagonist. The story runs that one morning in May a young man walks along a river and arrives at the entrance of an orchard surrounded by a wall. Outside the wall there are ten sculptures representing vices, faults, sins and human imperfection: Hatred, Felony, Baseness, Covetousness, Avarice, Envy, Sorrow, Old Age, Hypocrisy and Poverty. The man wishes to enter the garden and discovers a small door which is closed and symbolizes, as Luigi Vanossi points out, an initiatory dimension.<sup>12</sup> He knocks and a damsel, Lady Idleness, opens the door and leads him to the orchard, which seems to be a heavenly place. The young walker sees some characters taking part in a ring-dance. These characters are Joy, Courtesy (who invites the hero to enter the ring-dance), Sweet Looks, Beauty, Wealth, Generosity, Lady Openness, Lady Idleness, Youth and the God of Love. The young man wants to explore the garden, so he leaves the dancers and arrives at the fountain – the one in which Narcissus perished. He sees in the reflection of the water a rose bush and a rosebud, and falls madly in love with it. The God of Love fires five arrows at him. These arrows are called Beauty, Simplicity, Courtesy, Company and Fair Seeming. Thus, the lover devotes entirely himself to the God of Love and, by doing so, becomes his servant: “thereupon I joined my hands and became his liegeman, and you may be sure that I was very proud when his mouth kissed mine; it was this that gave me the greatest joy” (v. 1952-1955).<sup>13</sup> In order to ensure the loyalty of his vassal, Love locks the Lover's heart with a golden key, and utters the ten commandments of Love. After doing so and informing the lover of the suffering that he will have to endure, the God of Love disappears (v. 1681-2764) and the

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<sup>11</sup> On the concept of spiritual marriage, in particular in Saint Teresa of Avila, see John Beevers, *St. Teresa of Avila*, New York, Doubleday and Company, 1961, p. 156; Georgette Kamenetz, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

<sup>12</sup> On the initiatory content of *The Romance of the Rose*, see Luigi Vanossi, *Dante e il “Roman de la Rose”*. *Saggio sul “Fiore”*, Florence, Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1979, p. 12-15.

<sup>13</sup> Guillaume de Lorris, Jean de Meung, *The Romance of the Rose*, ed. Frances Horgan, p. 30.

Lover meets Fair Welcome who allows him to approach the rosebud. But just then Danger appears. He is the guardian of the rose bush and is the personification of resistance to Love. Dangers is accompanied by Shame, Fear and Evil Tongue (who spreads the backbiting and slander of evil tongues). Danger opposes the Lover and Fair Welcome, Reason appears and tries to convince the Lover, accompanied by Fair Welcome, to renounce Love, but the Lover resists temptation and finally Love prevails over Reason. A friend who acts as guide helps the Lover and advises him to fight all adversities and to reach his goal: the rose. Therefore, Jealousy builds a fortress with a tower in which she locks Fair Welcome, who is looked after by an Old Woman. Outside the fortress the Lover despairs. This is the way *The Romance of the Rose* by Guillaume de Lorris ends (v. 4028), with the desperation of the Lover who does not pick the rose.

Jean de Meung seems to distance himself from the storyline, but in fact he continues the work of Guillaume de Lorris.<sup>14</sup> He starts the story where Guillaume de Lorris ends it, namely in the scene where the Lover despairs outside the fortress built by Jealousy. Reason profits from the Lover's moment of weakness, attempting to change his mind and convince him not to pursue his search for the rose. But Reason is cast aside a second time. It is a friend who helps the Lover by comforting him and by giving him valuable advice (v. 7231-10002), for example, pretending to love Evil Tongue. Many obstacles stand in the Lover's way; however, at the end of the story he is able to pick the rose.<sup>15</sup>

On his journey the Lover must face obstacles, suffering and overcome difficulties, but these difficulties are necessary for the spiritual progression of the Lover's soul. This journey recalls that of the mystics. In fact, all mystics have described their spiritual experience as a progression by degrees. Similarly, in *The Romance of the Rose*, as Georgette Kamenetz has shown, the Lover's spiritual progression occurs in several stages: awakening, purification, enlightenment, identification, and union with God.<sup>16</sup> The stage of purification or detachment, is followed by enlightenment, truth and divine union. This is why the rose is presented as a difficult goal to achieve. The search for the rose suggests a spiritual progression, which moves from the bush (the perception of the object) to the rosebud and finally to the blossoming rose (metaphor of the vision). The rosebud is the initial stage and the main focus of the search, whilst the blossoming rose is the final one.<sup>17</sup> This last stage is the most difficult to reach: the object tends to disappear, thwarting the Lover's efforts. It is here that despair can lead to renunciation.

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<sup>14</sup> See Mariantonia Liborio, Silvia De Laude, *La letteratura francese medievale* [2002], Rome, Carocci, 2004, p. 227-228.

<sup>15</sup> For a comprehensive overview of *The Romance of the Rose*, see Antonio Viscardi, *Le letteratura d'oc e d'oïl*, Milan, Edizioni Accademia, 2007, p. 413-426.

<sup>16</sup> See Georgette Kamenetz, "La promenade comme expérience mystique", in *Études sur le Roman de la rose de Guillaume de Lorris*, p. 86.

<sup>17</sup> René Guénon highlights that the blossoming of the rose represents in many traditions the action of spiritual influence, which is transmitted invisibly. See René Guénon, "Les fleurs symboliques", in René Guénon, *Symboles de la science sacrée*, Paris, Gallimard, 1962, p. 73-77. See also Georgette Kamenetz, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

As in the case of Dante in his *Divine Comedy*, the Lover of *The Romance of the Rose* has to suffer by experiencing Hell before reaching the rose. Therefore, the two pilgrimages could be considered as paths of purification, where the pilgrim fights the obscure part of his soul, his demons, eliminating everything that obstructs his progress. He frees himself from every vile passion, from every carnal and immoral desire, from every impure idea, in order to reach the peace of the spirit. To achieve this goal the pilgrim must be patient and, most importantly, he must be able to suffer, as the knowledge of the Divine entails constant mental torment.<sup>18</sup> In fact, it is the suffering that leads to the ontological transformation of the being – to a second birth, a mystical rebirth.<sup>19</sup> It is the path to being born again. Kierkegaard affirmed that the price to pay for attaining knowledge of the self is suffering.<sup>20</sup> “The suffering is the cross of gold on which the rose of the soul unfolds”,<sup>21</sup> wrote the Egyptian Pharaoh Amenhotep IV in a papyrus in 1360 BCE, highlighting the esoteric value of the rose in the ancient Egyptian tradition and its fundamental role in the act of suffering, which recalls Baudelaire’s words: “sorrow is a nobleness”.<sup>22</sup> This supreme nobility is only possible after living through a period of impotence and desolation, a period during which the self feels abandoned. It is what Saint John of the Cross calls the “obscure night” or “the mystical death”.<sup>23</sup> It is metaphysical anguish which, after the liberation of the senses and the victory over passion, leads to union with God, the spiritual marriage. When the self meets divine Love, it meets ecstasy, the *excessus mentis* – a state of contemplation of the Divine. The mystical union is oneness with God, the meeting with the infinite, the Absolute, the return to the original source. The Lover experiences mystical time, when man leaves himself.<sup>24</sup> He knows the divine time, the unlimited and eternal one, and extra-temporal and immutable reality. The Lover discovers a place of peace and happiness, which is reminiscent of Baudelaire’s heterotopia: “there, all is order and leisure, / luxury, beauty, and pleasure”.<sup>25</sup> Thus, following the interpretation of Georgette Kamenetz the rose leads to this discovery, which resembles the alchemical process of the Great Work, whose aim is the transformation of base metals into gold. In other words, the physical man becomes a

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<sup>18</sup> Georgette Kamenetz, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

<sup>19</sup> See Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation. The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth*.

<sup>20</sup> On the relation “suffering-knowledge” in Kirkegaard, see Honor Matthews, *The Hard Journey. The Myth of Man's Rebirth*, New York, Barnes & Noble Inc., 1968, p. 77.

<sup>21</sup> In Jean Gordon, *Pageant of the Rose*, Woodstock, Vermont, Red Rose Publications, 1961, p. 194. The sentence by Amenhotep IV, quoted by Jean Gordon, has been translated into French by Georgette Kamenetz (*op. cit.*, p. 83).

<sup>22</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *Benediction*, in Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, translated with Notes by James McGowan, with an Introduction by Jonathan Culler, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 15.

<sup>23</sup> See Georgette Kamenetz, “La promenade comme expérience mystique”, in *Études sur le Roman de la rose de Guillaume de Lorris*, p. 101-102.

<sup>24</sup> On the concept of “mystical time” and “mystical union”, see Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* [1911], London, Methuen, 1930, p. 211, 432; Marie-Madeline Davy, *Initiation à la Symbolique Romane (XII<sup>e</sup> siècle): nouvelle édition de l'Essai sur la Symbolique Romane* (1955), Paris, Flammarion, 1964, p. 96; Georgette Kamenetz, *op. cit.*, p. 142-145.

<sup>25</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *Invitation to a Journey*, in Charles Baudelaire, *op. cit.*, p. 109.



spiritual one, completely absorbed in the Whole. On awakening, he realizes that there is another reality which is different from the one he knows: the invisible reality of the spirit. In order to understand it, one must search and find it, but in this search there is a price to pay, since it requires the destruction of the ego and the elimination of the vices and passions which encumber the senses. It is through this tortuous path that the pilgrim will be purified and will be able to walk through the narrow portal that will allow him to reach enlightenment.<sup>26</sup> It is the winter of the soul, followed by the spring. The passing of winter is the death of the old soul, which is replaced by the spring, namely spiritual rebirth. This *topos* was already present in Origen, who considered winter as the state of the soul still hampered by its carnal vices: “the soul is in its winter when it has not got rid of its vices, but when it abandons them, in that moment it enters the illuminating spring, in the time of Love, in the time of the ‘song of the birds’”.<sup>27</sup> Hence, the knowledge of oneself requires the elimination of the attachment to the ego, since it implies knowledge of the fact that the ego does not exist. The ego does not allow man to raise himself, to see what he really is. This is why the fountain in *The Romance of the Rose*, as Georgette Kamenetz remarks, is a “perilous mirror”.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the fountain becomes the place in which one must forget oneself, in order to know oneself through the loss of oneself. The myth of Narcissus is none other than the symbol of this knowledge of the self, and the Lover who dies in the fountain is, in reality, the Lover who is born again.

When the Lover goes to the God of Love, he completely submits to him and receives the promise of a privileged pathway – a royal one: “since you have placed yourself in my following, I will readily accept your service, and will raise you to high rank” (v. 2022-2024).<sup>29</sup> This “haut degré”<sup>30</sup> (“high degree”) can have a mystical or spiritual meaning, but it could also mean a degree in an initiatory Order. This cannot be confirmed, but one can at least suggest it. The terrible tests that the young Lover must face can be considered a necessary step for the transformation of the being, as Georgette Kamenetz has shown, but these tests can also be read as different stages of an initiation, which entails a transformation of the being, a transformation of the spirit of the initiate. In fact, whilst it is evident that *The Romance of the Rose* can be read as a guide to a personal spiritual initiation, it is also true that this aim represents the goal of all

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<sup>26</sup> See Georgette Kamenetz, “La promenade comme expérience mystique”, in *Études sur le Roman de la rose de Guillaume de Lorris*, p. 87.

<sup>27</sup> “L’âme est dans son hiver lorsqu’elle n’est pas débarrassée de ses vices, mais qu’elle les abandonne, alors elle entre dans un printemps illuminatif, dans le temps de l’amour, le temps du ‘chant des oiseaux’”. Origène, *Homélie sur le Cantique des Cantiques*, Paris, Éditions du Cerf, 1966, p. 36.

<sup>28</sup> On the “perilous mirror” in *The Romance of the Rose*, see Georgette Kamenetz, “La promenade comme expérience mystique”, in *Études sur le Roman de la rose de Guillaume de Lorris*, p. 94; Georgette Kamenetz, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

<sup>29</sup> Guillaume de Lorris, Jean de Meung, *The Romance of the Rose*, ed. Frances Horgan, p. 31.

<sup>30</sup> Guillaume de Lorris, Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la Rose*, ed. Armand Strubel, Paris, Librairie Générale Française, p. 140.

initiations to secret Orders, starting from the initiatory cults of Isis, where the rose was the flower to which the adept aspired.<sup>31</sup>

### *Heterodox and initiatory allusions*

*The Romance of the Rose* is imbued with allusions which refer to a form of heterodoxy. An example is the figure of the Antichrist introduced by the character of False Seeming, who speaks about the fight of William of Saint-Amour (Saint Love) against the Church and Power which let themselves be lured by the followers of the Antichrist.<sup>32</sup> False Seeming also mentions a particular book, considered as diabolical at that time. This book was *The Eternal Gospel* by the Italian Joachim of Fiore (between 1130 and 1135-1202), a Cistercian monk, theologian and philosopher who preached the imminent coming of the Holy Spirit, incarnated in the form of a woman. What we should consider is the name: Joachim of Fiore. The real name of Joachim of Fiore was Joachim da Celico (from Celico),<sup>33</sup> but he changed his name from “da Celico” into “da Fiore” (“from the Flower”). When he withdrew to the Sila, near Cosenza (a city in the South of Italy), he founded the Abbey of “San Giovanni del Fiore” (Saint John of the Flower). Once again the flower symbolism plays an important role, but this time it is associated with Saint John. In his book, Joachim affirmed that the Church of St. Peter does not allow the Church of Saint John to manifest itself. The Holy Spirit of the Eternal Gospel can manifest itself, according to Joachim because of Saint John, and not Saint Peter.<sup>34</sup> However, as René Herval reminds, Saint John is also the patron of Freemasonry,<sup>35</sup> since he established the first masonic lodge near the River Jordan.<sup>36</sup>

Joachim of Fiore appears in *The Romance of the Rose* and also in *The Divine Comedy*, where Dante praises the prophetic spirit of the Italian monk: “and there shines at his side / the abbot from Calabria, Joachim, / who was endowed with a prophetic spirit” (*Paradiso*, XII, v. 139-141).<sup>37</sup> Whilst Saint John is present throughout the history of literature, from *The Romance*

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<sup>31</sup> On the initiatory meaning of the rose in the initiatory cults of Isis, see Edouard Schuré, *Les grands initiés. Esquisse de l'histoire secrète des religions. Rama, Krishna, Hermès, Moïse, Orphée, Pythagore, Platon, Jésus* [1889], Paris, Perrin, 1921, p. 139; Georgette Kamenetz, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

<sup>32</sup> See Marianonia Liborio, Silvia De Laude, *La letteratura francese medievale* [2002], Rome, Carocci editore, 2004, p. 230.

<sup>33</sup> Celico is a village in Calabria, a region of Southern Italy.

<sup>34</sup> Adriano Lanza states that “esoteric Christianity has always preferred to refer to John. Peter is not only the one who denies Jesus three times, but also the one to whom Jesus addresses the cruellest of reproaches: ‘Away from me, Satan, because you do not reason according to God, but according to men’ (Mark, VIII, 33)” [“il cristianesimo esoterico ha sempre preferito richiamarsi a Giovanni. Pietro non è solo colui che rinnega tre volte Gesù, ma anche colui al quale Gesù rivolge il più crudo dei rimproveri: ‘Vattene via da me, Satana, perché non ragioni secondo Dio, ma secondo gli uomini’ (Marco, VIII, 33)”]. Adriano Lanza, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

<sup>35</sup> On the importance of Saint John in Freemasonry, see Paul Naudon, *Les Loges de Saint-Jean et la Philosophie Ésotérique de la Connaissance*, Paris, Dervy, 1974.

<sup>36</sup> See René Herval, *op. cit.*, p. 25-26.

<sup>37</sup> Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, p. 404.

of the Rose to Mallarmé, Joachim of Fiore also influenced the thought and literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as can be seen in Villiers de l'Isle d'Adam or Jules Laforgue, where this influence relates to a mystical idea of the floral symbolism and the *topos* of the woman.<sup>38</sup>

The figure of the woman is fundamental in *The Romance of the Rose*, and some critics have considered the work by Jean de Meung as an apology of misogyny.<sup>39</sup> However, we need to consider if this hated woman is a real woman or, on the contrary, a symbolic woman who embodies a completely different meaning. The literary interpretation speaks of misogyny, whilst the symbolic-initiatory reading would completely change the interpretative framework. There is an emblematic passage in *The Romance of the Rose* which unequivocally sums up this misogyny towards women: “all of you women are, will be, and have been whores, in fact or in desire” (v. 9159-9160).<sup>40</sup> The hatred for women is evident, but in another passage, Jean de Meung expresses the contrary, stating that women must be respected (v. 15199-15213):

I pray all you worthy women, whether girls or ladies, in love or without lovers, that if you ever find set down here any words that seem critical and abusive of feminine ways, then please do not blame me for them nor abuse my writing, which is all for our instruction. I certainly never said anything, nor ever had the wish to say anything, either through drunkenness or anger, in hate or envy, against any woman alive. For no one should despise a woman unless he has the worst heart among all the wicked ones.<sup>41</sup>

Jean de Meung underlines that he follows a tradition in his work which goes back to the books of ancient poets (v. 15217-15232):

Besides, honorable ladies, if it seems to you that I tell fables, don't consider me a liar, but apply to the authors who in their works have written the things that I have said and will say. I shall never lie in anything as long as the worthy men who wrote the old books did not lie. And in my judgment they all agreed when they told about feminine ways; they were neither foolish nor drunk when they set down these customs in their books. They knew about the ways of women, for they had tested them all and had found such ways in women by testing at various times. For this reason you should the sooner absolve me; I do nothing but retell just what the poets have written between them, when each of them treats the subject matter that he is pleased to undertake, except that my treatment, which costs you little, may add a few speeches. For, as the text witnesses, the whole intent of the poets is profit and delight.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> On the influence of Joachim of Fiore on European culture in later centuries, see Marjorie Reeves, Warwick Gould, *Joachim of Fiore and the Myth of the Eternal Evangel in the Nineteenth Century*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1987; Marjorie Reeves, Warwick Gould, *Gioacchino da Fiore e il mito dell'Evangelo eterno nella cultura europea*, with an essay by Fulvio De Giorgi, transl. Andrea Settis Frugoni, Rome, Viella, 2000.

<sup>39</sup> See Armand Strubel, “Introduction”, in Guillaume de Lorris, Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la Rose*, ed. Armand Strubel, p. 6.

<sup>40</sup> Guillaume de Lorris, Jean de Meung, *The Romance of the Rose*, translated by Charles Dahalberg, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1971, p. 140.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 258-259.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 259.

And in another passage (v. 7163-7180):

He who understood the letter would see in the writing the sense which clarifies the obscure fable. The truth hidden within would be clear if it were explained. You will understand it well if you review the integuments on the poets. There you will see a large part of the secrets of philosophy. There you will want to take your great delight, and you will thus be able to profit a great deal. You will profit in delight and delight in profit, for in the playful fables of the poets lie very profitable delights beneath which they cover their thoughts when they clothe the truth in fables.<sup>43</sup>

We can see that this last concept would be used by Boccaccio – as we have seen in chapter II – with regard to the hidden truth in fables, namely the necessary lie in order to tell the truth. This expedient, as Jean de Meung writes, has been used by all the poets who have spoken of love, and he specifies, basing himself on Sallust, that he must speak in such a manner since it is the matter of the subject which implies such a language: “my subject matter demanded these things; it draws me toward such things by its own properties, and therefore I have such speeches” (v. 15177-15180).<sup>44</sup> Thus, love becomes the bearer of a message of different type. This would explain, for example, the strange allusion in *The Romance of the Rose* to the inability of a woman to keep a secret: “no man born of woman, unless he is drunk or demented, should reveal anything to a woman that should be kept hidden, if he doesn’t want to hear it from someone else” (v. 16353-16357).<sup>45</sup> The same applies to the kiss of the Lover, who loves the rose and obtains a kiss thanks to the Goddess of Love, Venus: “he who kisses a flower so pleasant, so very fragrant, is quickly cured” (v. 3494).<sup>46</sup> All these peculiarities find a possible explanation if we follow the underlying idea of the heterodox current represented by Gabriele Rossetti and Luigi Valli, namely that in *The Romance of the Rose* the personification of the Divine Wisdom and the mystical-erotic language were used allegorically to deceive the corrupted Church and the Inquisition, and to hide an occult knowledge at the same time – the knowledge that links man to God. The Church of Rome, which preserved the real doctrine of Christ, would hide this truth from the masses. The search for worldly goods would lead to the corruption of the ecclesiastical institutions and to the persecution of those who seek the truth jealously kept by the Church. Thus, the rose that the Lover would seek would not be the longed-for woman. The Lover is, in fact, the mystical lover of Saintly Knowledge, of the rose. But this rose, this real and eternal doctrine, is obstructed by Jealousy (the corrupted Church) that locks it up in a castle whose guardian is Evil Tongue (the inquisitor). It is an anonymous friend (the initiator of the Order) who advises and helps the Lover not to despair and to continue his search for the rose.

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 258.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 276.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

The God of Love (the initiatory Order itself) uses False Seeming who, by dissimulating his own faith, misleads and kills Evil Tongue. Thereby, the Lover obtains the desired Flower, and he can attain Saint Wisdom.<sup>47</sup> Gabriele Rossetti and Luigi Valli believed that this occult knowledge is obtained from the teaching provided in the initiatory Orders or Schools. *The Romance of the Rose* refers, in fact, to a particular school, the “school of Love”<sup>48</sup> (v. 128006) where the science of Love is taught. Moreover, there is a passage that alludes to a school in which the teaching would be transmitted to future literary works, giving the idea of a knowledge which is passed on from one era to the next, and which has as its reference point the rose of *The Romance of the Rose*: “all those alive should call this book *The Mirror for Lovers*, so much good will they see there for them, provided that Reason, that wretched coward, be not believed” (v. 10653-10659).<sup>49</sup> In another passage, the author refers to the concept of companionship associated with the art of love, which implies finding a faithful friend in whom to confide the secret of love: “Love had told me that I should seek out a companion to whom I might say quite openly what I thought” (v. 3101-3103),<sup>50</sup> since “Love wants to hide his treasures, except from loyal companions who also want to keep them quiet and hide them” (v. 9865-9868).<sup>51</sup> Is he a friend to confide in, or is he a companion with whom he shares the secrets of the Order of the God of Love? It is impossible to answer this question because there are, to my knowledge, no documents that prove the links between the work by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meung and an esoteric tradition transmitted via initiatory Orders. Nonetheless, various elements suggest some analogies with aspects that characterize the esoteric currents of future centuries. For example, there is a passage (v. 11191-11200) in *The Romance of the Rose* which runs:

I know very well how to change my garment, to take one and then another foreign to it. Now I am a knight, now a monk; at one time I am a prelate, at another a canon at one hour a clerk, at another a priest; now disciple, now master, now lord of the manor, now forester. Briefly I am in all occupations. Again I may be prince or page, and I know all languages by heart.<sup>52</sup>

False Seeming affirms that he can adapt himself to any situation, and that he can speak all languages. We recall that this linguistic ability was one of the characteristics of the Rosy-Cross. In fact, in the Rosicrucian manifestos that appeared during the Renaissance, the Rosicrucians publicized the fact that they knew all languages. The Renaissance was also the period when Platonism was revived, in which love was imbued with hermeticism but it was also and, more

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<sup>47</sup> On the symbolic-initiatory interpretation of *The Romance of the Rose*, see Luigi Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d'Amore*, p. 139-140; Gabriele Rossetti, *Il mistero dell'Amor platonico del Medio Evo*, v. I, p. 163-172; René Herval, *op. cit.*, p. 20-25.

<sup>48</sup> Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meung, *The Romance of the Rose*, transl. Charles Dahalberg, p. 222.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196-197.

importantly, when Shakespeare was writing, whose work frequently speaks of love and roses. In Shakespeare's work the links with the symbolism of *The Romance of the Rose* are also evident as, for example, in *Romeo and Juliet* the definition of love based on the clash of opposites. "O brawling love! O loving hate"<sup>53</sup> (v. 170, act I, scene I) is similar to the definition of love provided by Jean de Meung: "Love is hateful peace and loving hate" (v. 4290-4291).<sup>54</sup> These oppositions of contraries recall the result of the hermetic androgyne, namely the result of every initiatory path, in which double becomes a single unit. In fact, the concept of androgyny refers to the esoteric tradition, and the authors of *The Romance of the Rose* and Shakespeare demonstrate their familiarity with this hermetic doctrine. We can see how, starting from some allusions in *The Romance of the Rose*, it is possible to find unexpected links: the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the *topos* of love, Hermetic Androgyny, medieval poetry and the Rosicrucian movement – all these themes are interlinked. All these aspects combine and result in the Lover's search for the rose, which leads to the discovery of the truth: "the truth, which is hidden, will be quite open to you" (v. 2071-2072);<sup>55</sup> "when I have revealed the mystery, you will never hear the truth of the matter better described" (v. 1598-1600).<sup>56</sup> The language of love in *The Romance of the Rose* therefore appears to hide a truth. But what is this truth? It is not explicitly defined, but it is undoubtedly a truth that has to do with the symbolism of the rose and with love – one that is not understood by the profane, and a love defined by Jean de Meung as "another, little-known love" (v. 4660).<sup>57</sup> This reminds us of another unknown love referred to in the nineteenth century by William Butler Yeats in his *Secret Rose*, in which the Irish poet speaks of a love that common man does not know and has never known: "no man or woman from the beginning of the world has ever known what love is".<sup>58</sup>

In the case of *The Romance of the Rose*, Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meung hid the truth of love under the form of a rose. Guillaume de Lorris died prematurely in mysterious circumstances before finishing his work, whilst Jean de Meung succeeded in finishing his co-author's work. But Jean de Meung was not only a poet; he was also a savant belonging to the cultural elite of the period, and having translated the *Consolatio* by Boethius, he sent his translation to the King of France, Philip IV the Fair (blamed by Dante in *The Divine Comedy*), the king who ordered the destruction of the Templars. Jean de Meung addressed these words in a letter to King Philip: "I, Jean de Meung who once, in *The Romance of the Rose* [...] taught

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<sup>53</sup> William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. Gwynne Blakemore Evans, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 76.

<sup>54</sup> Guillaume de Lorris, Jean de Meung, *The Romance of the Rose*, transl. Charles Dahalberg, p. 94.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>58</sup> William Butler Yeats, *Stories of Red Hanrahan: with the Secret Rose and Rosa Alchemica*, New York, Dover Publications, 2013, p. 110.

the way to take the castle and to pick the rose”.<sup>59</sup> Thus, the author affirms he can take the castle and pick the rose. Addressing a king and referring to picking a rose obviously has a specific meaning, but a hidden one, linked to the political world of the time. It is, in fact, highly unlikely that one of the most influential kings of the Middle Ages would be interested in knowing how to pick a rose.<sup>60</sup>

## Il Fiore

The Italian version of the French *Romance of the Rose* is called *Il Fiore* (The Flower),<sup>61</sup> and it was written in the Middle Ages by a certain Messer Durante. Critical studies (especially those by Ferdinand Castets, Guido Mazzoni, Francesco D’Ovidio and Gianfranco Contini) attribute the authorship of this work to Dante.<sup>62</sup> In fact, at a thematic level *Il Fiore* proposes the same *topoi*, characters (like False Seeming or Evil Tongue) and symbols of *The Romance of the Rose*. Following *The Romance of the Rose*, the Lover of *Il Fiore* enters the garden of the Flower and finally succeeds, though with many obstacles, in kissing the Flower. Jealousy builds a castle where the Flower is locked up and guarded by Evil Tongue, who prevents the Lover from kissing the Flower. But Evil Tongue is finally killed, and the Lover can pick the desired Flower. As in *The Romance of the Rose*, in *Il Fiore* the God of Love strikes the Lover with the bow and pierces him with the arrows (“the God of Love, who, with the bow / because I was looking at a flower I liked”),<sup>63</sup> and he “locks the heart [of the Lover] with a gold key”<sup>64</sup> and imposes secrecy – the rule of all associations obliged to operate underground or based on an initiatory secret. Moreover, the God of Love demands loyalty from the Lover: “I am your God; / and you must put aside all beliefs, / and you must not believe Luke, nor Matthew, / nor Mark, nor John”.<sup>65</sup> In addition to the requirement of being faithful to Love, the God of Love imposes

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<sup>59</sup> “Je, Jehans de Meun, qui jadis ou Rommant de la Rose, [...] enseignai la manière dou chastel prendre et de la rose cuillir”. Guillaume de Lorris, Jean de Meung, *Le Roman de la Rose*, p. 20.

<sup>60</sup> On the relationship between floral symbolism and political Power in the Middle Ages, a poem by the Tuscan love poet Bonagiunta Orbicciani da Lucca (1220-1290) evokes the flower that governs the world, a flower that also governs love: “the whole world is kept by the flower: / [...] love is kept by the flower [...] / and I have become the servant of the flower” (“tutto lo mondo si mantien per fiore: / [...] per lo fiore si mantene amore [...] / e della fior son fatto servidore”). Bonagiunta Orbicciani, *Tutto lo mondo si mantien per fiore*, in *I rimatori lucchesi del secolo XIII. Bonagiunta Orbicciani, Gonnella Antelminelli, Bonodico, Bartolomeo Fredi, Dotto Reali*, ed. Amos Parducci, Bergamo, Istituto italiano d’arti grafiche, 1905, p. 48. Therefore, based on the words of this poet of the Italian Middle Ages, if the world is governed by a flower, and love is also governed by a flower, this means that there are close links between the world (the political Power of the world) and the mysterious doctrine of love summed up in a flower.

<sup>61</sup> On the work *Il Fiore*, see *Du Roman de la Rose au Fiore attribué à Dante*, ed. C. Perrus, Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 1992.

<sup>62</sup> On the authorship of the work *Il Fiore*, see Luigi Vanossi, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

<sup>63</sup> “Lo Dio d’Amor con su’ arco mi trasse / perch’i’ guardava un fior che m’abellia” (sonnet I). Dante, *Il Fiore. Detto d’Amore*, ed. Luca Carlo Rossi, Milan, Mondadori, 2021, p. 3.

<sup>64</sup> “Con una chiave d’oro mi fermò il core” (sonnet 4). *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>65</sup> “I’ son tu’ deo; / ed ogn’ altra credenza metti a parte, né non creder né Luca né Matteo / né Marco né Giovanni” (sonnet 5). *Ibid.*, p. 9.

not believing in the faith of the Gospel “you must not believe Luke, nor Matthew, / nor Mark, nor John”. We also find this concept in Persian poetry, in poets such as Rumi, who remarked that, “the foolish adore the Mosque and ignore the real Temple which is in their heart”,<sup>66</sup> or ‘Attar and wrote: “you worship the idols, burn the Koran, drink wine”.<sup>67</sup> This revolt against institutionalized religion confirms the continuity between the Arabic/Persian poetry and the European one in the Middle Ages.

Moreover, *Il Fiore* contains heretical elements, sectarian hints and explicit references to historical facts linked to that medieval heterodoxy. For example, the persecutions against the Patarins (the Italian Cathars) of Tuscany, who are mentioned in sonnet CXXVI.<sup>68</sup> Lombardy and Tuscany are the Italian regions where the heresy developed and flourished, and it is here that the Flower is kept, as Chastity remarks in her discussion with Jealousy: “you are the best guardian that / I could ever find in this world. / You are well known in Lombardy and Tuscany. / In the name of God, please guard the Flower!”<sup>69</sup> (sonnet XXII). In other words, it is in Lombardy and Tuscany that the Holy Wisdom was kept at the time – the occult doctrine of love poetry, whose secret is preserved in the form of a flower. It is perhaps no coincidence that Florence, the capital city of Tuscany, is described as the “city of flowers”, and its Cathedral is called Santa Maria del Fiore, where Giotto is buried – the great artist who immortalized Dante in his masterpieces which evidence the esoteric component.<sup>70</sup> But it is not only in Italy that the heresy evoked by *Il Fiore* flourished. The Lover, in fact, succeeds in reaching the place where the flower is, having sailed there on a ship buffeted by a strong wind blowing from Provence. This appears to point to the Cathars of Provence – the land notorious for persecutions against medieval heretics. Another interesting element concerns Sigieri Brabante (“Master Sigieri”),<sup>71</sup> a figure present in *The Romance of the Rose* who would be praised by Dante, and would be a major theme in Balzac, who can be considered a meeting point between the nineteenth century and the heterodox Middle Ages. Once again, it is noticeable how the Middle Ages converses with later centuries, in particular the nineteenth century via Balzac and his character Sigieri Brabante.

Luigi Valli shows that *Il Fiore* is a sectarian work, which would explain why the dissimulation of the *Fedeli d’Amore* is represented by the figure of False Seeming. Consequently, it would appear to be a work in which the language hides an initiatory sense, as

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<sup>66</sup> See Italo Pizzi, *Storia della Poesia Persiana*, Turin, Unione Tipografico-Editrice, v. I, 1894, p. 192.

<sup>67</sup> Farid-ud-Din’ Attâr, *La Conférence des oiseaux*, Paris, Seuil, 2002, p. 97.

<sup>68</sup> See Dante, *Il Fiore. Detto d’Amore*, p. 142.

<sup>69</sup> “Donde vo’ siete la miglior guardiana / ch’i’ ‘n esto mondo potes[s]e trovare. / Grand luogo avete in Lombardia e’n Toscana. / Perdio, ched e’ vi piaccia il firo guardare!” *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>70</sup> On the esotericism of Giotto, see Renzo Manetti, *Le sette colonne della Sapienza. Arti e Alchimia nel Campanile di Giotto*, Florence, Mauro Pagliai Editore, 2014.

<sup>71</sup> “Mastro Sighier” (sonnet XCII). Dante, *Il Fiore. Detto d’Amore*, p. 105.



well as a political and religious one.<sup>72</sup> In effect, it is the same logic as *The Romance of the Rose*, interpreted by the Dantean heterodox school in mystical and sectarian terms. The confirmation of such a perspective can be seen, for example, in Sonnet LIV, where the author writes that in order not to be understood, one must speak of love, and he recommends the greatest caution in letters between the Faithful of Love, the *Fedeli d'Amore* members: “if you cannot talk to the woman you love, / you must send her a letter to let her know how you feel”.<sup>73</sup> More specifically, it says, strangely enough, that the names of the sender and the recipient should not be mentioned in the letter: “but in the letter you must not put your name; / you will say ‘he’ to indicate the woman to whom you are sending the letter, and you will say ‘she’ to indicate yourself: / it is worth doing this in order to change pears into apples”.<sup>74</sup> Once again, the strange nature of this enigmatic love is confirmed, with its epilogue locked in the mystery of the Flower.

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<sup>72</sup> On the esoteric interpretation of *Il Fiore*, see Luigi Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d'Amore*, p. 139-140.

<sup>73</sup> “Se tu non puo’ parlar a quella ch’ami, / sì lle manda per lettera tu’ stato” (sonnet 54). Dante, *Il Fiore. Detto d'Amore*, p. 63.

<sup>74</sup> “Ma nella lettera non metter nome; / di lei dirai ‘colui’, di te ‘colei’: / così convien cambiar le pere a pome” (sonnet 54). *Ibid.*

## CHAPTER IV

### THE ROSE OF DANTE AND OF THE *FEDELI D'AMORE*

#### *Love and initiation in the Middle Ages*

“Courtly love is initiatory”,<sup>1</sup> this is how Antoine Faivre describes the love literature of the Middle Ages (in particular, the twentieth century), and underlines the importance of the *Fedeli d'Amore*, whom he defines in the following terms:

A veritable secret militia spread across various European countries, it expresses itself through a hidden language. The “Faithful” (the *Fedeli d'Amore*) devote themselves to the cult of the One Woman and initiation into the mystery of love. This is also the century that saw the emergence of esotericism in the sense of secret language or teachings, which probably did not exist before on the same scale. Lovers, like members of religious sects, have their own signs, symbols and passwords.

Initiation, secrecy, love, knowledge and mysticism are all rooted in chivalric mythology.<sup>2</sup>

The existence of the *Fedeli d'Amore*, the Faithful of Love, is attested in the works of the *Dolce Stil Novo* poets, whose ideas can be found in the *Vita Nova* by Dante, in *Il Fiore* by Ser Durante (as we have seen, Dante himself), in the *Acerba* by Cecco d'Ascoli, in the *Intelligenza* by Dino Campagni, and in the *Documenti d'Amore* by Francesco da Barberino. Dante mentions them on various occasions as, for example, in the *Vita Nova*. In the latter, he addresses the *Fedeli d'Amore* (“I mean to call on Love’s faithful”;<sup>3</sup> “I call upon Love’s faithful that they might listen to me”)<sup>4</sup> by highlighting the fact that the verses written by him cannot be understood by everyone, but only by those who were able to understand: “and this obscurity cannot be resolved by one who is not, to a similar degree, one of Love’s faithful”.<sup>5</sup> Dante hints that between the lines there is an allegorical message whose meaning can only be understood by those who possess the key to understanding it, whilst those who possess the key to interpretation are the *Fedeli d'Amore* – the Faithful of Love.

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<sup>1</sup> “Initiatique est l’amour courtois”. Antoine Faivre, *Accès de l’ésotérisme occidental*, t. I, p. 93-94.

<sup>2</sup> “Véritable milice secrète répandue en divers pays d’Europe, elle s’exprime à travers une langue cachée. Les ‘Fidèles’ se consacrent au culte de la Femme unique et à l’initiation au mystère de l’amour. Aussi bien est-ce le siècle qui voit apparaître un ésotérisme au sens de langage ou d’enseignements secrets, ce qui n’existait sans doute pas auparavant avec la même ampleur. Les amoureux comme les membres de sectes religieuses possèdent leurs signes, leurs symboles, leurs mots de passe. Initiation, secret, amour, connaissance et mystique se fondent dans la mythologie chevaleresque”. *Ibid.*, p. 93-94.

<sup>3</sup> Dante, *Vita Nova* (VII), in Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nova*, translation, introduction and notes by Andrew Frisardi, Evanston, Illinois, Northwestern University Press, 2012, p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Dante, *Vita Nova* (XXXII), in *ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>5</sup> Dante, *Vita Nova* (XIV), in *ibid.*, p. 18.

One of the distinguishing features of these *Fedeli d'Amore* poets is that they are also “women”, as Dante explains in a song, in which he writes: “I spoke about my lady while she lived, / my gracious women, willingly to you, / I’ll speak to no one new, / save to the open heart that women give”.<sup>6</sup> Referring again to his beloved Beatrice, he writes:

It happened that, as I was travelling along a road beside which flowed a brook of clear water, I was seized by an impulse to compose a poem. I started to consider what manner and style I might use, and thought that it wouldn’t be fitting to talk about her without addressing my words to other women – and not just to any women but to those who are noble and gracious.<sup>7</sup>

This sentence is intriguing to analyse since it is claimed that the “cuori gentili” (the gentle and noble hearts, namely the poets who write verses of love) are women, but not females. What does it mean that these women are not females? The question invites the reader to reflect on an apparent contradiction and to understand that there is something which goes beyond the simple concept of “woman” or “femininity”. In the commentary of the song *Donne ch’avete intelletto d’amore* (Women who understand the truth of love),<sup>8</sup> Dante remarks that he wants to speak about his lady and that what he says cannot be said to anyone else: “women who understand the truth of love, / I want to talk with you a while about / my lady [...]. / I’ll talk about her [...] / to you, the amorous and wise of us, since no one else can grasp what we discuss”.<sup>9</sup> Significantly, he adds: “it does not bother me if anyone who is not insightful enough to understand the poem by using the divisions already provided leaves off trying, since in fact I fear I have already communicated its meaning to too many people”.<sup>10</sup> With these words Dante wants us know that he has communicated knowledge which should not be imparted, especially to those who are not worthy of understanding it. The love sung by Dante, in fact, seems to have not only a literary meaning, but also a “secret” one. Moreover, the author of *The Divine Comedy* states that he wants to speak to women, because they are the only ones who can understand him; on reflection, though, the love sonnets are addressed only to men, to poets like him, and not to women. It is a paradox that suggests that the real meaning of the love poems is, in fact, a vehicle for an undefined secret.

### *The love letters and the strange loves disseminated in the cities of Europe*

Many poems written by the Italian love poets actually seem to be informative letters on what appear to be love matters that are veiled with secrecy, but which have little to do with the

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<sup>6</sup> Dante, *Vita Nova* (XXXI), in *ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>7</sup> Dante, *Vita Nova* (XIX), in *ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22-23.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

sentimental side of love. In an enigmatic love poem, Cino da Pistoia asks Dante for advice about the girl that he needs to love: “Dante, what shall I do? ‘Look up!’ Love cries, / but all the same, I tremble in dismay / lest green should try me harder than does gray”.<sup>11</sup> Cino asks Dante if it is better to love the older woman (the dark woman) or the younger one (the green woman). Dante replies that he should not trust the green woman: “a half-grom woman, green in just this way, / may reach, once she is seen, a place that lies / so far inside, she’s slow to leave her prize. / From women dressed in green great perils rise: / therefore you’ll find it safer, I should say, / to drop this hunt before she turns at bay”.<sup>12</sup> It seems rather odd that men of the calibre of Dante and Cino da Pistoia exchange poems about discovering which girl they should love, and to ask for advice on managing their feelings – by definition, a personal experience. In this letter, although the names of the sender and the recipient are clear, in other cases they are anonymous, following a precept expressed in *Il Fiore*, in which it is indicated that one must send letters to communicate about love matters when one is unable to speak to the beloved (“if you cannot talk to the woman you love, / you must send her a letter to let her know how you feel”),<sup>13</sup> but it is strange that in the letter one must not mention the name of the person who sends and receives it: “in the letter you must not put your name; / you will say ‘he’ to indicate the woman to whom you are sending the letter, and you will say ‘she’ to indicate yourself: / it is worth doing this in order to change pears into apples”.<sup>14</sup> These words only make sense if one accepts the existence of a secret language about matters of the heart.

Another rather unusual feature of the women loved by the *Fedeli d’Amore* is that they have ‘clones’ spread throughout Europe. In their journeys, the love poets meet other women who look like the woman they love in their own city, and they immediately fall in love with these women who live in other cities. Gianni Alfani, for example, writes that in Venice he met some women who resembled his girlfriend in Florence. He speaks to these Venetian women, saying that he wants to describe to them the beauty of his beloved that he has temporarily left in Tuscany: “I would like to sing with you of my girl, with you, women of Venice, because she has the same beauty as you” (*Rimes*, V).<sup>15</sup> What is strange in the case of Gianni Alfani is that he does not find just one girl who resembles his Tuscan girl, but finds several like her. This seems to suggest, following the heterodox interpretation, a brotherhood which is similar to the

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<sup>11</sup> Cino da Pistoia to Dante Alighieri, *Novellamente Amor mi giura e dice* (Just now, Love swore on oath that if I fix), *Rime* XCIV, in Dante Alighieri, *Dante’s Rime*, translated by Patrick S. Diehl, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1979, p. 209.

<sup>12</sup> Dante to Cino da Pistoia, *I’ ho veduto già senza radice* (I’ve seen the thing before), *Rime* (XCV), in *ibid.*, p. 211.

<sup>13</sup> Dante, *Il Fiore. Detto d’Amore*, p. 63.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> “De la mia donna vo’ cantar con voi, / madonne da Vinegia, / però ch’ella vi fregia d’ogn’adorna bellezza che vo’ avete”. Gianni Alfani, *De la mia donna vo’ cantar con voi*, in *Poesie dello stilnovo*, ed. Marco Berisso, Milan, BUR Rizzoli, 2011, p. 343.

Tuscan one. Thus, the poet seems to address the members of the new brotherhood that he has met whilst staying in Venice and speaks to them of the Florentine community which would share the same doctrine of love with the Venetian brotherhood. Moreover, there is a strange exchange of letters between Guido Cavalcanti and Gianni Alfani (the two poems are *Guido quel Gianni che a te fu l'altrieri* by Gianni Alfani and *Gianni quel Guido salute* by Guido Cavalcanti), featuring a younger girl from Pisa who, via Gianni, asks Guido to protect her.<sup>16</sup> Guido replies affirmatively, reassuring his friend that the young Pisan girl will be welcomed and that he will personally look out for her. Guido Cavalcanti writes in an enigmatic poem that he has left Florence to go on a pilgrimage to Saint James of Compostela, but he ends up stopping at Toulouse (city of the Cathar heresy *par excellence*, “la ville rose”, the pink rose),<sup>17</sup> where he falls in love with a girl who resembles his beloved Giovanna. However, he does not want to reveal the name of Florentine woman because he is frightened:

a young Lady of Tolosa  
 beautiful, boble, of virtuous grace  
 so perfect and resembling something  
 in her sweet eyes of my Lady

that she made my desiring soul in  
 my heart leave  
 and go to her – but so fearful  
 that it couldn't tell whose girl it was.<sup>18</sup>

On returning to Florence, Guido writes a ballad to the girl from Toulouse, and we discover that her name is Mandetta:

my heart died  
 when I was in Tolosa  
 [...]  
 I remember in Tolosa  
 a Lady appeared to me tightly corseted  
 Love called her Mandetta  
 she came so quickly and strong  
 inside she fatally  
 wounded me  
 [...]

<sup>16</sup> See the two poems, *Guido, quel Gianni ch'a te fu l'altrieri* (Guido, that Gianni who was visiting you the day before yesterday), *Rime* XLIII, by Gianni Alfani to Guido Cavalcanti and *Gianni, quel Guido salute* (Guido, Gianni greets), *Rime*, XLIII. Guido Cavalcanti, *Rime*, ed. Roberto Rea and Giorgio Inglese, Rome, Carocci, 2016, p. 230-233. Guido Cavalcanti, *The Complete Poems*, translated with an Introduction and Notes by Marc A. Cirigliano, New York, Italica Press, 1992, p. 112-113.

<sup>17</sup> On Toulouse as “la ville rose”, the pink city (the English word “pink” corresponds to the French word “rose”, as well as the Italia word “rosa”), see Henry Montaigu, *Toulouse. Mythes & symboles de la ville rose*, Paris, Claire Vigne, 1995. In particular, the introduction to this book is written by Luc-Olivier d'Alange, who speaks of Toulouse as a pink city, specifying that “the pink city is a Lady” (“la Ville rose est une Dame”), and refers to “the *Fedeli d'Amore*, for whom Toulouse is a sort of capital” (“les Fidèles d'Amour, dont Toulouse est une sorte de capitale”). *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> Guido Cavalcanti, *Una giovane donna di Tolosa* (A young Lady of Tolosa), *Rime* (XXIX), in Guido Cavalcanti, *The Complete Poems*, p. 71.

go to Tolosa, my ballatetta,  
and enter Notre-Dame de la Daurade  
and ask if by courtesy  
a particular beautiful Lady is there  
it's before her I ask you to go  
and if she receives you  
tell her out loud –  
I come to you for Mercy.<sup>19</sup>

The ballad is sent by Guido specifically to the “Dorata”, “Notre-Dame de la Daurade” (the Gilded One), where there should be the person to deliver the letter of the Italian lover addressed to Mandetta. But the “Dorata” is a church in Toulouse, Notre Dame de la Dorée, as René Guénon points out in a letter to Alfonso Ricolfi.<sup>20</sup> It is unusual for a lover to send a message of his love to a church, which corroborates the hypothesis proposed by the heterodox current of Dantean studies claiming that the woman from Toulouse actually refers to the initiatory brotherhood of this French city.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, if Toulouse is a reference to French Catharism, it is noteworthy that Cavalcanti, before stopping in the French city, was headed for Saint James of Compostela. This place has a precise esoteric meaning – not as a pilgrimage to a specific location, rather a journey through the meanders of the soul to find oneself, to know oneself, and to find God: know thyself.<sup>22</sup>

From the literary point of view, these strange verses appear to indicate poets who love a girl in their own city, yet when they go to other cities they immediately fall in love with other girls in those cities; the poets then tend to confide their new and sudden love to their original girlfriend, who accepts this act of infidelity by their lover. The perspective changes completely if we consider the sectarian explanation, that these girls are merely communities which share the same heterodox ideas in different European cities; the only way to communicate being secrecy and crypticity, as Dante writes: “where the most secret things are concerned our companions must be few”.<sup>23</sup> There is a “we” in this sentence that identifies a group of persons, and distinguishes them from other people. Moreover, the secret things they know must not be shared with “other” people. This is one of the rules of every initiatory Order which shares esoteric doctrines by covering them with the veil of secrecy, since this knowledge should

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<sup>19</sup> Guido Cavalcanti, *Era in penser d'amor quand' i' trovai* (I was deep in thoughts of Love when I found), in Guido Cavalcanti, *Rime*, p. 73-75.

<sup>20</sup> See Alfonso Ricolfi, *Studi sui “Fedeli d'Amore”*, p. 210.

<sup>21</sup> On the esoteric interpretation of the sonnet *Una giovane donna di Tolosa* by Guido Cavalcanti, see Luigi Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d'Amore*, p. 75-77, 264-267; Alfonso Ricolfi, *Studi sui “Fedeli d'Amore”*, p. 209-212.

<sup>22</sup> Compostela = *campus stellae*. Compostela is the journey towards the star, our own star, towards ourselves. On the esoteric meaning of Compostela, see Bruno Cerchio, *L'ermetismo di Dante*, Rome, Edizioni Mediterranee, 1988, p. 66-67.

<sup>23</sup> Dante, *Convivio* (II, I), in Dante, *Convivio. A Dual-Language Critical Edition*, edited and translated by Andrew Frisardi, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, p. 59.

remain inaccessible to the profane, and, following Valli and Rossetti's interpretation, in the medieval context, secrecy was also a way to hide from Power.

Confirmation that the writings of the *Fedeli d'Amore* represented a danger for the powerful of that period is shown by the fact that some *Fedeli d'Amore* adepts paid with their lives for the boldness of their ideas. For example, Cecco d'Ascoli was burned at the stake by the Inquisition because of the content of his works, particularly in his *Acerba*, in which he propounds the doctrine of love.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps no-one was more explicit than Cecco d'Ascoli, who in his sonnets addressed to Dante, Cino or Petrarch, under the threat of the stake, expresses his anguish for not being able to tell the truth, for remaining silent and acting as if blind, though he knew perfectly well that he was not: "I am not blind, and it is better for me to be blind; [...] So I live by smiling and crying, / like the phoenix I sing in the death. / Alas! The black mantle leads me here! Death is sweet, because I will die by loving / the pleasant view covered by a veil, / which was produced by the sky for my sorrow".<sup>25</sup> With these strange words, Cecco d'Ascoli says that he dies by loving and that he is obliged to hide under a veil. Elsewhere, he advocates care in using the word, and awareness of how to use words: "war in the soul, and peace in the mouth!"<sup>26</sup> In fact, he did not retract his words even when he was about to die, and at the age of sixty when facing the stake he confirmed his ideas: "I have said it, I have taught it, I believe it!"<sup>27</sup> What Cecco d'Ascoli imparted was that his woman corresponded to his self, and that this transformation took place in the "terzo cielo", "the third sky" (which Dante speaks of in his *Divine Comedy*):<sup>28</sup> "I am transformed by the third sky / in this woman, whom I did not know, / for this reason I now feel blessed. / My intellect took form from her, / showing salvation in her eyes, / and aiming at virtue in her presence, / whence I am she".<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> See Luigi Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d'Amore*, p. 317; Anna Maria Partini, Vincenzo Nestler, *Cecco d'Ascoli poeta occultista medievale* [1979], Rome, Edizioni Mediterranee, 2002, p. 127-171. On the figure of Cecco d'Ascoli, see also *Atti del I Convegno di Studi: Ascoli Piceno, Palazzo dei Congressi, 23-24 novembre 1969*, ed. Basilio Censori, Florence, Giunti-Barbéra, 1976.

<sup>25</sup> "Cieco non son, e cieco convien farne; [...] Sì ch'io ridendo vivo lagrimando, / come fenice nella morte canto. / Ahimé! Sì m'ha condotto il negro manto! / Dolce è la morte, po' ch'io moro amando / la bella vista coverta dal velo, / che per mia pena la produsse il cielo". Cecco d'Ascoli, "Sonetto. Estratto dal codice 1103 riccardiano", in *Poesie italiane inedite di dugento autori dall'origine della lingua infino al secolo decimosettimo raccolte e illustrate da Francesco Trucchi*, ed. Francesco Trucchi, Prato, Ranieri Guasti, v. I, 1846, p. 269. This sonnet is also present, under the title *A Francesco Petrarca*, in Cecco d'Ascoli, *L'Acerba. Con prefazione note e bibliografia di Pasquale Rosario e, in appendice, i sonetti attribuiti allo Stabili*, Lanciano, Carabba, 1916, p. 156.

<sup>26</sup> "Nell'alma, guerra, e nella bocca, pace!". Cecco d'Ascoli, *A Messer Cino da Pistoia*, in Cecco d'Ascoli, *L'Acerba. Con prefazione note e bibliografia di Pasquale Rosario e, in appendice, i sonetti attribuiti allo Stabili*, p. 269.

<sup>27</sup> "L'ho detto, l'ho insegnato, e lo credo". In Cecco d'Ascoli, *L'Acerba*, ed. Achille Crespi, Milan, La Vita Felice, 2021, p. 26.

<sup>28</sup> "All you who, knowing, make the Third Sphere move". Dante, *Convivio* (II, I), in Dante, *Convivio. A Dual-Language Critical Edition*, p. 55.

<sup>29</sup> "I' son dal terzo cielo trasformato / In questa donna, che non so chi foi, / Per cui me sento onn'ora plù beato. / De lei prese forma el meo intellecto, / Mostrandome salute li occhi soi, / Mirando la virtù del so cospecto, / Donqua, io so ella". Cecco d'Ascoli, *L'Acerba. Con prefazione note e bibliografia di Pasquale Rosario e, in appendice, i sonetti attribuiti allo Stabili*, p. 83.

## *The “sect” of Love*

The word “woman” in the obscure language of Love has different meanings: woman intended in the sense of esoteric doctrine, woman intended as members of the brotherhood or as a symbol of the brotherhood itself. In fact, it was the latter aspect, namely the sectarian dimension applied to love poetry, that alienated the critics of the heterodox school of Dantean and *Fedeli d’Amore* studies. But there is here a question of linguistic prejudice, as the word “sect” has a negative connotation. If Gabriele Rossetti or Luigi Valli had used the word “brotherhood” or “Order” instead of “sect”, the language would have appeared more substantive, serious, scientific and academic to the critics. However, the word “sect” has acquired a sinister connotation, whose immediate association (especially in contemporary times) is with Satanism. But saying “sect”, “brotherhood” or “Order” implies identifying a group of people who share ideas. In the case of the love poets, they constitute a group of intellectuals who share ideals and insist on the necessity of maintaining secrecy, as the subjects they address cannot be divulged. The fact that these subjects have to do with love should make us reflect how these people saw the concept of love. It was a love based on crypticity, and it would not be until the Renaissance that literature would reveal the meaning of the mysterious concept of Love, as seen in the writings of Pico della Mirandola or Marsilio Ficino who, in his *De Amore*, defines the mysticism of the love doctrine – one which would be strongly revived in nineteenth-century literature.<sup>30</sup>

Studying the relations between Dante and the *Fedeli d’Amore* means accepting the contact between the “Sommo poeta” (the Supreme poet),<sup>31</sup> and an esoteric organization. Finding the links between Dante and previous writers entails recognizing the existence of a current of esoteric thought in literature. The collective imagination does not accept that Dante, the greatest Italian poet of all times, had actively belonged to a clandestine Order that operated underground to survive and pass on its ideas through the art of writing. This is one of the reasons why the question of the *Fedeli d’Amore*, and the presumption that Dante was a follower, has been almost completely ignored by literary historians. As Luigi Valli writes, the critics did not agree with the hypothesis that the Italian medieval love poems expressed “some secret ideas of a sect with an occult symbolism”.<sup>32</sup> Of course, the almost total lack of historical documents does not help to demonstrate the existence of the *Fedeli d’Amore*. One of the few historical hints comes from

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<sup>30</sup> On the relations between the *topos* of Love-Eros and Literature (in particular, French Literature) in the nineteenth century, see Michel Brix, *Éros et littérature. Le discours amoureux en France au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Louvain-Paris-Sterling-Virginia, Peeters, 2001.

<sup>31</sup> Dante is known in Italy as “Sommo poeta”.

<sup>32</sup> “Con un occulto simbolismo idee segrete di una setta”. Luigi Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d’Amore*, p. 29.



Giovanni Villani: in his *Cronica* (Chronicle) of 1308 he mentions the members of a brotherhood who, for the celebration of Saint John in Florence in 1283, paraded through the city streets with the members dressed from head to toe in white, led by “a Lord called Love”.<sup>33</sup> That said, the absence of historical documentation concerning the *Fedeli d'Amore* is largely compensated by the extraordinary abundance of literary evidence. Literature thus becomes a means of historical documentation: literature becomes history.

The poem-letters of love mention the word “sect” on various occasions (thus confirming the thesis of Gabriele Rossetti, who did not coin the term “sect” but had taken it from love poetry), and sometimes, in these letters, we can deduce that not all the *Fedeli d'Amore* adepts got on well. There were some who abandoned the brotherhood, which shows that it was a group of people apparently united by poetry and who, for one reason or another, left due to disagreements in the organization. Among the dissidents in the group was a certain Bacciarone, who railed against the group of the *Fedeli d'Amore* in a song – a group he defined as a “sect” of Love which demanded total devotion and so much so that they forgot their relatives and friends, even God:

They will not take me in this sect [the sect of Love]! [...] More than once, I was tied up by them... but it [Love] is no longer my God, and I have ceased to be his slave, from the moment that I understood the dangerous step that I was taking. I left it [Love] when I realized that I was forgiving God. Be careful, all of you, not to fall into this slavery which causes much evil and destroys present and future life. Oh, poor men! Pay attention to the path where your love will lead, because one day you will hate it, more than the devil!<sup>34</sup>

It was Gabriele Rossetti who evidenced the polemical and dissident nature of this strange song, which attests the existence of a sect of Love, at least in Pisa, Bacciarone’s city. Étienne Jean Delécluze (1781-1863) was among the first to confirm the accuracy of Gabriele Rossetti’s intuition, affirming that:

all sincere readers will agree that, without the indication given by Mr Rossetti, that is to say the admission of a sect and of a figured language, these verses written by Bracciarone [*sic*], which are quite clear, become an inexplicable and absurd piece of writing. Now, I affirm without fear of being contradicted, that there are many passages, and even whole volumes of Dante, Petrarch and

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<sup>33</sup> “Un signore detto Amore”. Giovanni Villani, *Istorie Fiorentine*, Milan, Società Tipografica dei Classici Italiani, v. III, 1802, p. 159.

<sup>34</sup> “Non già me coglieranno a QUELLA SETTA! / Alcuna volta fui a sua distretta... Ne suo servo era, ne signor ben meo / Onde m'accorsi del doglioso passo... / E quasi Deo venia dimenticando, / Onde del tutto gli aggio dato bando. / Miri, miri catuno, e ben si guardi, / Di non in tal sommettersi servaggio, / Che adduce quanto dir puossi di male. / Che questa vita tolle e l'Eternale. / O miseri, dolenti e sciagurati, / Ponete cura bene u'vi conduce / Il Vostro amore, ch'al malvagio conio / Odiar via più l'areste ch'l demonio”. Bacciarone di Messer Bacone, “Non m'è volontà nel cor creata”, in Étienne Jean Delécluze, *Dante Alighieri ou la poésie amoureuse*, Paris, Delahays, 1854, p. 589.

Boccaccio, which offer precisely the same kind of obscurity as the Songs of Bracciarone [*sic*].<sup>35</sup>

Another love poet, Onesto Bolognese, wrote to Cino da Pistoia about the “amorous root” or the “ruthless swindler” which “leads me to die”, thus warning the reader about Love: “I have seen how Love behaves / I really advise you to pay attention to it”.<sup>36</sup> As for Guido Cavalcanti, he addresses all love poets so that “they do not leave” Love, and threatens that if the dissidents are disobedient they “will end up badly”: “so I advise each lover / not to leave; all lovers have to repress the desire / [...] otherwise they will end up badly”.<sup>37</sup> The love sect is described by some poets as an organization with binding and despotic systems, whose members are subject to these rigid rules. This may explain those complaints made by the French troubadours and trouvères about the rigidity and punishments inflicted by the God of Love. These examples show the existence of a sect of Love, namely of an organization with rigid rules to respect, but not always accepted by its members.

It appears that the contrasts in the initiatory Order also interested Dante, who at some point probably distanced himself from the Order of the *Fedeli d'Amore*. In fact, as Luigi Valli has observed in one of his most obscure songs, *Poscia ch'Amor del tutto m'ha lasciato* (Now that lord Love has quite abandoned me),<sup>38</sup> Dante seems to be hinting that he has been expelled from the Order of Love, whose members cannot understand his behaviour, meaning that he simulates a certain reverence towards the Church (as imposed by the Order itself).<sup>39</sup> According to Luigi Valli, Dante had a rapprochement with the Church, to the extent that he feigned love for the Holy Wisdom and was accused by his brotherhood of being a follower of the corrupt Church. This is why Beatrice declines to greet him. In other words, in Valli's view, the Order of Love excludes Dante, and Beatrice refusing to greet him sanctions this exclusion. Dante is judged unworthy and for this reason he does not deserve the salutation.<sup>40</sup> This probably induced him to leave the Order, which sued him (*Vita Nova*, XVII).<sup>41</sup> This trial reminds us of the trials

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<sup>35</sup> “Tout lecteur sincère conviendra que, sans l'indication donnée par M. Rossetti, c'est-à-dire sans l'admission d'une secte et d'un langage figuré, ces vers du Bracciarone [*sic*], de fort clairs qu'ils sont, deviennent un amphigouri inexplicable. Or, j'affirme sans crainte d'être contredit, qu'il y a une foule de passages, et même des volumes entiers de Dante, de Pétrarque et de Boccace, qui offrent précisément le même genre d'obscurité que les Chansons de Bracciarone [*sic*]”. Étienne Jean Delécluze, *op. cit.*, 1854, p. 590.

<sup>36</sup> “Amorosa radice”; “dispiegata ingannatrice”; “a morir m'ha condotto”; “haggio ben visto, Amor, com'si comparte. / Ben ti consiglio, di lui servir guarte”. Onesto Bolognese to Cino da Pistoia, *Quella che in cor l'amorosa radice*, in Cino da Pistoia, *Le Rime*, préface de Giosuè Carducci, Milan, Istituto editoriale italiano, 1862, p. 54.

<sup>37</sup> “Perch'io consiglio a ciascun amadore / che non si parta, ma fermi 'l disire / [...] perché mal finire / de' quei, che n' vuol già mai partir su' core”. Guido Cavalcanti, *Quando l'amore il su' servo partito (I sonetti vaticani)*, in *La poesia giovanile e la canzone d'amore di Guido Cavalcanti. Studi di Giulio Salvadori col testo dei sonetti vaticani e della canzone e due facsimili*, ed. Giulio Salvadori, Rome, Società Editrice Dante Alighieri, 1895, p. 115.

<sup>38</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Dante's Rime*, p. 136-137.

<sup>39</sup> See Luigi Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d'Amore*, p. 217.

<sup>40</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 341.

<sup>41</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 349.

of the French Courts of Love which were held in the Middle Ages. The Court of Love summoned Dante, just as the troubadours were summoned by the French Courts of Love. The trial may not actually have anything to do with matters of love. The women who appeared in it seem to be members of an unknown Order of Love. Dante writes in his *Vita Nova* (XVIII): “because of the expression on my face many people had guessed the secret in my heart. And certain women who were gathered together enjoying each other’s company saw into my heart completely”.<sup>42</sup> These female adepts knew the secrets of his heart and questioned him, as if it were a trial in a Court – a Court of Love, which has nothing to do with love. It was a court where the judges would speak amongst themselves, some would smile, and they would wait for explanations by the defendant:

There were lots of women, and several of them were laughing. Others looked at me as if waiting for me to say something. Still others were talking to each other, one of whom looked directly at me and called me by name, saying: “What is the point of your love for this lady considering that you endure her presence? We’re curious, since the goal of such a love must be unusual, to say the least.”

After these words, not only she but all the other women there were poised for my response.<sup>43</sup>

Dante replies (*Vita Nova*, XVIII): “Ladies, the point of my love at one time was the greeting of my lady – to whom, I take it, you are referring – since that greeting was home to the blessedness that all my desires were seeking. But because she chooses to deny it to me, my Lord Love, in his mercy, has transformed my bliss to that which cannot fail me”.<sup>44</sup> In other words, Dante follows and secretly loves the Holy Wisdom (his woman) in his own way, and leaves the Order to which he belonged. Another example that Luigi Valli analyses to support his argument is the sonnet *Io vengo il giorno a te infinite volte* (I daily come to thee uncounting times) in sonnet XXIII by Guido Cavalcanti who, as an authority on the brotherhood of Love, addresses Dante and reproaches him for surrounding himself with “noiosa gente”<sup>45</sup> (boring people or “rabble” as Ezra Pound translates),<sup>46</sup> implying people of the Church: “I daily come to thee uncounting times”,<sup>47</sup> Cavalcanti writes in the name of Love and remarks that Love refuses Dante, and the brotherhood of Love has cast him out.<sup>48</sup> Hence, Dante in his *Vita Nova* (XII) writes a ballad, *Ballada, i’ voi che tu ritrovi amore* (Ballad, I wish you’d find where Love has gone),<sup>49</sup> in which

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<sup>42</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nova*, p. 11.

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

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Guido Cavalcanti, *Rime*, p. 224.

<sup>46</sup> Guido Cavalcanti, *Io vengo il giorno a te infinite volte* (sonnet XXIII) in *Pound’s Cavalcanti. An Edition of the Translation, Notes and Essays*, ed. David Anderson, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993, p. 91.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> See Luigi Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d’Amore*, p. 342-343.

<sup>49</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nova*, p. 13.

he explains that he has followed the orders of the brotherhood of Love. In fact, among the precepts of Love dictated by Guido Cavalcanti, there is the one of “keeping religion”,<sup>50</sup> which according to Luigi Valli means “appearing obsequious to the Church”. This precept is reflected in the figure of False Seeming, without whom, as *The Romance of the Rose* and *Il Fiore* suggests, it is not possible to reach the rose. Dante would have followed this commandment by hiding his real love for the Holy Wisdom and by pretending to be faithful to the Church. His real feeling is thus dissimulated, as prescribed by the Order: “Lord Love is here, who through your loveliness / makes him, on cue, assume a different face: / as to why he made him eye another’s grace, / consider that his heart’s not changed its song”.<sup>51</sup> Elsewhere, Dante recognizes that whilst the real Wisdom is the religion of Love (“Love is good because it draws his faithful away from base concerns”),<sup>52</sup> it is also true that Love inflicts a great deal of pain and suffering on its members: “the lordship of Love is *not* good because the greater the faith of Love’s devotee the more difficult and painful are the points he has to pass through”.<sup>53</sup> This confirms the rigid discipline imposed by the Order of Love that requires the total submission of its members. By acting this way, in Valli’s view, the Order acted exactly as its sworn enemy: ecclesiastical Power.<sup>54</sup> Significantly, in medieval French poetry many troubadours renounced Love as it was the cause of such suffering.<sup>55</sup> It goes without saying that such an enlightened spirit as Dante could not accept the limitation and deprivation of liberty. To some extent, in Valli’s view, Dante also distances himself from the *Fedeli d’Amore*: “I needed to take up new and nobler subject matter than that of the past”.<sup>56</sup> He is a faithful of love *sui generis*; he does not need to subject himself to the iron rules imposed by the Order, and his genius can proceed along the path to knowledge alone – without hierarchical impositions. Dante can be considered a sort of Rimbaud of the Middle Ages, who defies conventions and the imposition of rules to experience spiritual and poetic moments in solitude, as any solitary and mysterious bohemian would do.

Confirmation of these contrasts amongst the poets of Love in the Middle Ages is evident from the harsh words of Cecco d’Ascoli against Dante, who remarks that Dante has never been

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<sup>50</sup> “Religion guardar”. Guido Cavalcanti, *Otto comadamenti face Amore (I sonetti vaticani)*, in *La poesia giovanile e la canzone d’amore di Guido Cavalcanti*, p. 95.

<sup>51</sup> Dante, *Vita Nova* (XII), in Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nova*, p. 14.

<sup>52</sup> Dante, *Vita Nova* (XIII), in *ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Luigi Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d’Amore*, p. 344-345.

<sup>55</sup> On the suffering caused by Love in the poetry of the French troubadours, see Claude Lachet, “Une conquête difficile”, in *L’Amour courtois. Une anthologie*, ed. Claude Lachet, Paris, Flammarion, 2017, p. 82-86. Some good examples of French medieval texts in which the “poet-Faithful of Love” evokes the sufferings and punishments inflicted by Love (a Love characterised by his inflexible rigidity), can be found in poetic compositions like the love song *Si-m sentis fizels amics* by Guiraut de Borneil (in Francesco Zambon, *Il fiore inverso. I poeti del trobar clus*, Milan, Luni Editrice, 2021, p. 258-259), *Ajostar e lassar* by Peire Vidal and the anonymous poem *Celui qu’Amors conduit et maine* (see *Lettres d’amour du Moyen Âge. Les Saluts et Complaintes*, eds. Sylvie Lefèvre and Hedzer Uulders, Paris, Le Livre de Poche, Librairie Générale Française, 2016, p. 246-247).

<sup>56</sup> Dante, *Vita Nova* (XVII), in Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nova*, p. 21.

in Paradise with “his Beatrice” – a view shared by Cino da Pistoia, who believes that Dante dwells in hell.<sup>57</sup> It is not my intention to explore the internal dynamics of the group, from its inception to its disintegration, probably caused by internal dissent. But what interests me is the doctrine transmitted through the initiatory channel by the Order of the *Fedeli d'Amore*; nor does the mystical-sectarian interpretation, whether true or false, affect the fact that there is something beyond the literary meaning of the words. Thus, if we read the enigmatic love poems through the lens of the cryptic and initiatory language, we realize that they cease to be incomprehensible and become coherent. We realize that these poems could be only understood by those who possessed the key to decoding the message, namely the group of initiates who shared mystical ideas, calling them “woman”, “love”, or “rose”.

### *The poetry of the Fedeli d'Amore*

There are some specific features that characterize the poems of the *Fedeli d'Amore* and which can be found in the medieval French poetry. First of all, the *Fedeli d'Amore*, like the troubadours, read the book of Love by Gualtieri, that is the book by Andreas Capellanus, as Cino da Pistoia says: “I study from the book of Gualtieri, in order to acquire true and new understanding”.<sup>58</sup> Lapo Gianni also refers to a book of Love in which he features: “as I am recorded in the book of love”.<sup>59</sup>

The lovers often meet near a fountain, called the “fountain of teaching”, as we read in an anonymous poem, *Ben aggia l'amoroso e dolce core* (How happy is the loving and gentle heart), written in response to Dante’s song: “finally I reach the fountain of / teaching, you sovereign woman”.<sup>60</sup> Luigi Valli remarks that this “fountain of teaching” was the symbol of the initiatory tradition through which the Holy Wisdom was transmitted.<sup>61</sup> The love between the two lovers is usually immediate, a thunderbolt, and for Valli those “sudden fallings in love”,<sup>62</sup> which almost always took place at Easter, are simply initiations. Beyond this sudden falling in love, as in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, the women of these poets usually die before their

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<sup>57</sup> On the contrasts between Cecco d’Ascoli and Dante, and between Dante and Cino da Pistoia, see Luigi Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d’Amore*, p. 310-311.

<sup>58</sup> “Studio sol nel libro di Gualtieri, per trarne vero e novo intendimento”. Cino da Pistoia, *Perché voi state, forse, ancor pensivo* (sonnet CLXX), in *Le Rime di Cino da Pistoia*, ed. Guido Zaccagnini, Geneva, Leo S. Olschki, 1925, p. 234. According to the heterodox interpretation, the “true and new understanding” (“vero e novo intendimento”) evoked by Cino da Pistoia only refers to the secret knowledge of the doctrine of love. See Luigi Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d’Amore*, p. 285.

<sup>59</sup> “Com’i’ son scritto nel libro d’amore”. Lapo Gianni, *Dolce è ’l pensier che mi notrica il core*, in *Poesie dello stilnovo*, p. 394.

<sup>60</sup> “Fin ched i’ giungerò a la fontana / di’ nsegnamento, tua donna sovrana”. *Ibid.*, p. 433.

<sup>61</sup> See Luigi Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d’Amore*, p. 59. On the symbolic meaning of the “fountain of teaching” according to the “traditional” current, see René Guénon, *Insights into Christian Esoterism*, Hillsdale NY, Sophia Perennis, 2004, p. 27.

<sup>62</sup> “Innamoramenti subitanei”. Luigi Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d’Amore*, p. 54

lovers – a characteristic not only relevant to the Middle Ages. For example, Juliet dies before Romeo who, in turn, will die in order to be reunited with her. However, this concept linking love with death and mystical rebirth was also present in Catholic orthodox mysticism, where Rachel – as Saint Victor explained, dies in order to give birth to Beniamino.<sup>63</sup> The symbolic death of the beloved girl is accompanied by an *excessus mentis*, namely an extasis, an intuition which enables perception of the divine truth.<sup>64</sup> Therefore, it is an ascent towards the contemplative perfection that materializes in the death of the beloved girl, as in the case of Beatrice for Dante or in the death of Rachel for Saint Victor.<sup>65</sup> The death sung in love poetry is not a real death, rather giving oneself up to God and uniting with Him in a death which is not physical but mystical – a death of the soul, the oblivion of everything that is worldly, a detachment from the world in order to participate in the divine extasis. As a lover idealizes his beloved to such an extent that he loses his reason until he gives in to himself, so the *Fedeli d'Amore* poets (like the Persian mystics or the Provençal poets) lost contact with reality in order to merge with the divine ecstasy.

The women described by the *Dolce Stil Novo* poets seem, in fact, to allude to a spiritual experience, as Dante confirms: “she is no mere mortal woman; rather, she is one of the beautiful angels in heaven”,<sup>66</sup> “so open and so self-possessed appears / my lady when she’s greeting everyone, / that every tongue, in trembling, falters dumb, / and eyes don’t dare to watch her as she nears. / She senses all the praising of her worth, / and passes by benevolently dressed / in humbleness, appearing manifest / from heaven to show a miracle on earth”.<sup>67</sup> This conception of the Holy Wisdom of the *Fedeli d'Amore* is, according to Luigi Valli, the result of different traditions: the tradition of Averroist Aristotelianism, where the woman represented the “active intelligence” or universal intelligence that must be combined with human passive intellect to attain the knowledge of the eternal and intangible things that cannot be perceived through the senses, namely the pure contemplation of God; the mystical-Platonic tradition set out in the *Song of Songs* where God is symbolised by a woman, and the death by kiss (*mors osculi*) of the lovers who aspire to the rose is the realization of such ascent; the tradition of orthodox Catholic mysticism of Saint Augustin and Richard of Saint Victor, in which Rachel, the prototype of the Dantean Beatrice, symbolises the Holy Wisdom; the amphibological tradition of the double language, largely spread by Manicheism in Persia that penetrated the heretical French milieu of

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<sup>63</sup> On the relationship of “death of Rachel-birth of Benjamin-mystical contemplation”, see Francesco Perez, *La Beatrice Svelata*, Palermo, Stabilimento Tipografico di Franc. Lao, 1865, p. 225-235; Luigi Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d'Amore*, p. 109-113, 599.

<sup>64</sup> On the “mystical rapture”, see Alfonso Ricolfi, “Rapimento mistico e iniziazione ermetica nella poesia dei fedeli d'Amore”, *Rivista di sintesi letteraria*, fasc. 4, 1935, p. 337-375.

<sup>65</sup> See Luigi Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d'Amore*, p. 94, 107, 114, 118-119, 178, 203-204, 363, 372-373, 388, 400, 599.

<sup>66</sup> Dante, *Vita Nova* (XXVI), in Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nova*, p. 38.

<sup>67</sup> Dante, *Vita Nova* (XXV), in *ibid.*, p. 39.

the Cathars and Albigensians.<sup>68</sup> The woman of Dante – Beatrice – represents the path to bliss, to the Wisdom, the equivalent of the spouse of the *Song of Songs*. Beatrice is the initiatory Wisdom, with whom Dante crowns and seals the journey that leads him to the Initiatory Knowledge, and to the rose – the mysterious rose celebrated by Eastern poets. Dante’s Beatrice, Boccaccio’s Fiammetta, Petrarch’s Laura, Guido Cavalcanti’s Giovanna, Lapo Gianni’s Lagia, Cino da Pistoia’s Selvaggia, Dante da Maiano’s Nina, Francesco da Barberino’s Costanza, and Fazio degli Uberti’s Rosa<sup>69</sup> – all these women are the same woman, namely the Holy Wisdom which assumes different names for each poet-lover. Thus, speaking in mystical terms, love is seen as the meeting point of the passive intellect with the active Intelligence, namely attainment of the Holy Knowledge. The mind which slept is awakened, and that part of man attached to low and worldly things, to affections and passions, dies. But what revives is that latent part of the self – the divinity that man is unaware he possesses.

Thus, the metaphor of love for a woman, of sexual intercourse, the union of the spouses, and the death of the beloved girl, are none other than mystical concepts that express the search for God and joining Him, the awakening of the “sleeping” man, the enlightenment. The union with God is preceded by a path full of obstacles, torment and anxiety, of pain and deprivation which initially discourage and weaken the pilgrim who has started this journey. But once he overcomes the tests, he will emerge stronger and completely transformed: he will be an initiate. It goes without saying that this personal path of spiritual elevation is not mediated by any religious institution. This is why the edifice of orthodoxy saw the doctrine of love as a danger to be eliminated, and openly persecuted these ideas of freedom and refinement of the soul. The same happened in the East where, for example, some representatives of Sufism<sup>70</sup> paid with their lives for their “heretical” ideas. A good example is Al-Hallaj, who was crucified like Jesus Christ. In his poems he exalted the figure of Jesus and on the verge of death, like Cecco d’Ascoli, he did not retract his beliefs: “Ana al haqq”, “I am God!”<sup>71</sup> The God of Al-Hallaj was the Sufi gnosis, which can only be reached through Love. In the Sufi tradition, like the French troubadours and the poets of the Italian Middle Ages, Love is that energy that leads to discovery of the hidden Sophia, namely the image of God that lies dormant in everyone. It is rooted in human beings, who have to find it through a spiritual path that originates from reason: individuals abandoned themselves through reason to achieve sublime mystical states. This

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<sup>68</sup> See Luigi Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d’Amore*, p. 94-95.

<sup>69</sup> Fazio degli Uberti kept the ancient name of the mystical Rose and called his beloved woman Rose.

<sup>70</sup> Sufism is the esoteric tradition of Islam. One of the representatives of the Sufi tradition, the poet Rûmî, expressed the concept of a personal religion, with no institutional intermediary: “for the Sufis, the master is God, with no intermediary” (French translation: “pour les Soufis, le maître est Dieu, sans intermédiaire”). Mawlânâ Djâlâl Od-Dîn Rûmî, *Odes mystiques. Dîvân-e Shams-e Tabrîzî*, Paris, Éditions Kincksieck, 1973, p. 74.

<sup>71</sup> On the martyrdom of Al-Hallaj, see Alberto Ventura, *Il crocifisso dell’Islam. Al-Hallaj, storia di un martire del IX secolo*, Brescia, Morcelliana, 2000; Soraya Ayouch, “La passion de Husayn Mansûr Al-Hallaj”, *Topique*, n. 113, 2010, p. 133-147.

hidden image of God is symbolised in Sufi mysticism by a girl, just like the women of the *Fedeli d'Amore*. Ecstasy is merely the encounter with the mysterious power that links man to God, in which the self meets the sempiternal alter ego. The self dies, the senses die, and the self unites with the eternal alter ego, as Al-Hallaj writes: “I am whom I love, whom I love is me / two souls occupying my body. / [...] If you see me, you see Him”.<sup>72</sup> This recalls the words of Cecco d’Ascoli: “Io son ella”<sup>73</sup> – “whence I am she”, and reveals surprising similarities between Medieval Eastern and Western poetry of love which exalted the rose of the East. The religion of love in which lovers aspire to a rose is a universal religion, one that distanced itself from positive religion, as real religion lies in the heart. The religion professed by the mystics and the poets of love blend all the other religions into one – a religion with a single God, a God that is equal for everyone but is sought in different ways from one culture to another. The concept of a single religion – the religion of love which lies in the heart – is confirmed by Al-Hallaj: “I have thought a great deal about religions in order to understand them, and I have discovered that they are different branches of the same Source. I do not expect people to profess one religion, because in doing so they would not have access to the safe source”.<sup>74</sup> This is why Al-Hallaj was punished with the crucifixion, which he himself had prophesied: “my death will be the religion of the Cross, / I no longer desire Mecca nor Medina”.<sup>75</sup> Thus, Al-Hallaj preached his death while rejecting the dogmas of his religion, confirming the same words of the poet Rûmî who, as we saw in the previous chapter, wrote that the “fool” worships God in the mosque but ignores the true temple, the God that is in the heart: “fools exalt the Mosque, and ignore the true temple in the heart”.<sup>76</sup>

This opposition between Eastern love poets and the religious establishment was the focus of Gabriele Rossetti and the Dantean heterodox school with regard to the relations between Western love poets and the Church. In fact, according to Gabriele Rossetti and Luigi Valli, the *Fedeli d'Amore* considered the Church a corrupt institution, but one which possessed the truth, the secret of incorruptible knowledge, that the clergy hid to serve its base financial and worldly interests.<sup>77</sup> The vessel that was destined to reveal the Holy Wisdom had been

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<sup>72</sup> Al-Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallaj (858–922), *I Am Whom I Love*, in *Baghdad: The City in Verse*, translated and edited by Reuven Snir, foreword by Roger Allen, afterword by Abdul Kader El Janabi, Cambridge, MA and London, England, Harvard University Press, 2013, p. 119.

<sup>73</sup> Cecco d’Ascoli, *L’Acerba*, p. 2043.

<sup>74</sup> Al-Hallaj in Alberto Ventura, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>76</sup> Rûmî in *Masnavi I Ma’navi. The Spiritual Couplets of Maulána Jalálu-'D-Dín Myhammad Rúmi* [1898], translated and abridged by E. H. Whinfield, London, Routledge, 2002, p. XXXIV.

<sup>77</sup> See Luigi Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d'Amore*, p. 106, 457-460, 471-473. The same concept of a corrupt Roman Catholic Church guarding esoteric knowledge that it had hidden and perverted is expounded by Eugène Canseliet. In the preface to the third edition (1967) of Fulcanelli’s *Le Mystère des Cathédrales* (The Mystery of the Cathedrals), Canseliet wrote that the Catholic Church had betrayed its true mandate, since it was the holder of the so-called occult doctrine, and had used this knowledge for diabolical ends: “when Freemasonry is still searching for the lost word (*verbum dimissum*), the universal Church (*καθολική*)



broken and entrusted by Christ to the Church: “the vessel which the serpent broke”,<sup>78</sup> Dante writes in the last chapter of Purgatory (XXXIII). Hence, the Church had deviated from the aim for which it was originally established by disseminating a corrupt doctrine, thus betraying its spiritual mission. It had spread a spiritual metastasis which must be healed by freeing the flower from the castle, in which the rose (the Holy Truth) is incarcerated. This idea is reflected in the literature of the Italian and French love poets, or in Nicolò Malpegni’s woman who sleeps and waits to be awakened, as in “the ungrateful synagogue has turned the arch / to Simon Magus and Beatrice sleeps”.<sup>79</sup> This recalls the fairy tales, in which the Princess waits for the Prince to wake her from the spell that holds her prisoner. Petrarch was even more direct in expressing his disgust with the Church, which he described as the:

Fountain of sorrow, dwelling place of wrath,  
the school of errors, heresy’s own temple  
once Rome, now false and wicked Babylon,  
the cause for sighing and for so much weeping,

O foundry of deceit, O horrible prison  
where the good dies and bad is born and nourished,  
a living hell; more than a miracle  
if Christ does not at last show you his anger.<sup>80</sup>

In order to fight the heresy, this “fountain of sorrows”, as Petrarch defines it, made use of militant religious Orders, such as the Iesu Christi militia (created in 1220), the Ordo Militiae Iesu Christi (established in Parma in 1233) and the Ordo Beatae Mariae Virginis (Bologna, 1261).<sup>81</sup> The Church of Rome professed love but actually caused death, despite its name: Roma is the anagram of Amor (“Amore” in Italian, which means “love”) as Giuseppe Conte points out in his book *Fedeli d’Amore*: “it is said that first AMOR reigned, then ROMA came and inverted the letters and the meaning”.<sup>82</sup>

It was not only the Church but also the Empire that betrayed its mission, seduced by cupidity, which resulted in disorder that afflicted people, deprived of a spiritual guide. One thinks of Dante’s words in *The Banquet*: “Oh, you wretches who rule at present! And oh, you

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katholic), which possesses this Word, is itself in the process of abandoning it in the ecumenism of the devil” [“quand la Franc-Maçonnerie recherche toujours la parole perdue (verbum dimissum), l’Église universelle (καθολική catholique) qui possède ce Verbe, est elle-même en voie de l’abandonner dans l’œcuménisme du diable”]. Eugène Canseliet, “Préface de la troisième édition”, in Fulcanelli, *Le Mystère des Cathédrales et l’interprétation ésotérique des symboles hermétiques du grand œuvre* [1926], Paris, Pauvert, 1964, p. 31.

<sup>78</sup> Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, p. 344.

<sup>79</sup> “L’ingrata sinagoga ha voto l’arco / a Simon Mago e Beatrice dorme”. Nicolò Malpegni in *Le Rime del Codice Isoldiano*, ed. Lodovico Frati, Bologna, Romagnoli-Dall’Acqua, v. 2, 1913, p. 122.

<sup>80</sup> Petrarch, *The Canzoniere or Rerum bulgarium fragmenta*, translated into verse with notes and commentary by Mark Musa, Introduction by Mark Musa with Barbara Manfredi, Bloomington-Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1999, p. 203.

<sup>81</sup> See Alfonso Ricolfi, *Studi sui “Fedeli d’Amore”*, p. 341.

<sup>82</sup> “AMOR regnò per primo nel mondo, si dice, poi venne ROMA che ne capovolve le lettere e il senso”. Giuseppe Conte, *Fedeli d’Amore*, Milan, Rizzoli, 1993, p. 328.

poor wretches who are rules! For no philosophical authority combines with your governing, either through study or through counsel”.<sup>83</sup> From this point of view, the discourse on initiatory doctrine also becomes political, a discourse concerning the control of the masses. Nevertheless, according to the interpretation of the Dantean heterodox school, the *Fedeli d'Amore* were basically not opposed to the Catholic Church, though they criticised its corruption, and the fact that it would hide the Holy Wisdom and persecute those who searched for it independently.<sup>84</sup> This Wisdom is the “Rose”, also called “Flower”, “Star” (by Guido Guinizelli, for example, who praised his woman by identifying her with the “rose” and the “stella diana”,<sup>85</sup> “the dawn star”: “I want to praise my lady truly / and compare the rose and lily to her: / she appears and outshines the dawn star; / and I compare her to everything beautiful on high”),<sup>86</sup> or conventionally the name of the lover, and this multiplicity of meaning contained in a same symbol renders the poetic language of love even more obscure. In fact, saying Flower often corresponds to saying Rose, as Lapo Salterello writes in one of his sonnets in which Love, the religion of Love, is considered as a “cautious thing” and remarks that “I often call ‘flower’ the ‘rose’”.<sup>87</sup> But it is always amounts to the same thing: the eternal doctrine.

### *Beatrice: the guide towards the rose*

With Beatrice, Dante crowns and seals his initiatory journey – one which has led him to the initiatory Wisdom, and to the rose. But the figure of Beatrice seems to have little sense if considered as a person who really existed. However, she acquires meaning if we see her as the symbolic narration of a spiritual experience. There is an unusual association of Beatrice with the number “nine”, the mystical number *par excellence*, the square of the three, the number of divine perfection.<sup>88</sup> The name Beatrice recurs nine times in the *Vita Nova*, from the first apparition of Beatrice to the final vision of her; it also recurs nine times in rhyme in *The Divine Comedy*, in which the three reigns are structured by the number nine: nine circles for Hell, nine circles for Purgatory, nine skies for Paradise. Beatrice herself is a nine, as Dante affirms in the

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<sup>83</sup> Dante, *Convivio* (IV, VI), in Dante, *Convivio. A Dual-Language Critical Edition*, p. 243.

<sup>84</sup> See Luigi Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d'Amore*, p. 188.

<sup>85</sup> Guido Guinizelli, *Io vo' del ver la mia donna laudare*, in Guido Guinizelli, *The Poetry of Guido Guinizelli*, edited and translated by Robert Edwards, New York & London, Garland Publishing, 1987, p. 40.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>87</sup> “Accorta cosa”; “spesse volte appello fior la rosa”. In *Poeti del primo secolo della lingua italiana in due volumi raccolti*, 2 v., Florence, v. 2, 1816, p. 435. The identification “Flower-Rose” can also be found in Dante da Maiano, who defines the Rose as the “flower of Love”. On this, see Luigi Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d'Amore*, p. 211.

<sup>88</sup> On the symbolism of the number “nine”, see Jean-Pierre Brach, *La Symbolique des nombres*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 1994, p. 34, 50, 58-59, 123, 129-130. On the symbolism of the number “nine” in Dante, see Sandra Debenedetti Stow, *op. cit.*, p. 151, 186. The symbolism of the number “nine” can even be found in the Mysteries of Eleusis. On this subject, see *Le religioni dei misteri. Volume I. Eleusi, Dionisismo, Orfismo* [2002], ed. Paolo Scarpi, Milan, Fondazione Lorenzo Valla Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 2012, p. 455.

*Vita Nova* (XXIX): “she was a nine”.<sup>89</sup> The number nine is frequently associated with the figure of Beatrice, and in the *Vita Nova* all the encounters between Dante and his beloved are marked by this number. Aged nine years old, Dante meets Beatrice for the first time (at the beginning of her ninth year and at the end of Dante’s ninth year, so Beatrice was born nine months before the poet): “nine times, the heaven of the light had returned to where it was at my birth, almost to the very same point of its orbit, when the glorious lady of my mind first appeared before my eyes – she whom many called Beatrice without even knowing that was her name”.<sup>90</sup> There is something illogical in this sentence. The name Beatrice is used by those (quite a few, in fact) who do not know what to call her otherwise. What can this mean? Moreover, if one considers what Boccaccio writes, Beatrice has a name: Bice, the daughter of Folco Portinari. It is another conundrum that would have a meaning if we considered “the glorious lady of [his] mind” as a spiritual concept, not a physical one. In fact, in her presence Dante starts to tremble, which seems to foreshadow a strong spiritual experience, to the extent that he says: “Ecce deus fortior me, qui veniens dominabitur mihi”.<sup>91</sup> This concept of trembling can be found in the *Pimandrus*, one of the best-known hermetic dialogues attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, which describes the encounter between man and his *nous* (also called *logos* or *pneuma*, namely that divine and immortal part which humans possess) in terms of a vision that causes the body to tremble, where the senses darken and abandon themselves to the spiritual truths.<sup>92</sup> As the *nous* assumes the function of guide towards divine enlightenment, so Beatrice – the archetype of the “girl-angel”, leads to knowledge of the Absolute – the divine image which is present and hidden in everyone, and which manifests itself to those who strive to find it.

Whilst the first encounter with Beatrice takes place when Dante is nine years old, the second one takes place nine years later, precisely at the ninth hour of the day. It seems somewhat improbable that the two lovers meet in time intervals always marked by the same number: nine. But his death will also occur on the ninth day of the ninth month of a year “in which the perfect number had come round nine times”:

I tell you that, according to the custom of Arabia, her wholly noble soul departed in the first hour of the ninth day of the month; and according to the custom of Syria, she separated in the ninth month of the year, since the first month there is Tixryn the First, which for us is October; and according to our custom, she departed in that year of our indiction – that is, the years of our Lord – in which the perfect number had come round none times an that century in which she had been placed in this world, and she was a Christian of the thirteenth century.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nova*, p. 42.

<sup>90</sup> Dante, *Vita Nova* (II), in *ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> On the concept of the *nous* in the *Pimandrus*, see Jean-Paul Corsetti, *Histoire de l’ésotérisme et des sciences occultes*, p. 59-67.

<sup>93</sup> Dante, *Vita Nova* (XXIX), in Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nova*, p. 42.

Why should a poet with the cultural calibre of Dante delight in putting all these coincidences in his works? For pure amusement? Moreover, there is a song in the *Rime* (LXVII), in which Dante writes that he had mysteriously fainted when a baby girl was born:

The day that she was sent into this world,  
If truth is what is shown  
In memory's book that fades as I handle it,  
My infant self, yet ignorant, uncurled  
To passion then unknown,  
Such that I felt fear fill me every whit  
And on my powers fasten rein and bit  
So unexpectedly, I fell to earth  
Struck to my heart by light I could not bear.<sup>94</sup>

But how is it possible for Dante to succumb to such an emotion on the day of her birth? It is inconceivable that an infant (Dante) could fall madly in love with another child (Beatrice). It is obvious that such an emotional shock should be read in symbolic terms and not literally, since the latter interpretation leads to an incorrect understanding of the text.

Concerning the death of Beatrice, Luigi Valli, following Rossetti, glimpses in the death of the beloved woman the idea of an initiatory path that leads to ecstasy due to the contemplation of the Absolute. The same state was defined by the cabbalists as the “death by kiss”, the *mors osculi* (“osculetur me osculo oris sui”: “let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth”),<sup>95</sup> the kiss of the *Song of Songs*, namely the state in which the soul receives the Spouse and joins it: Beatrice would thus be the Bride in the *Song of Songs*. However, the French troubadours also spoke of the “kiss” that they awaited from their girl.<sup>96</sup> It is the kiss in which an ecstatic fusion with God takes place, when the Intellect joins the Absolute, the contemplation of which leads to the death of the soul, which is stricken by the “marvelous vision”.<sup>97</sup> The death of the woman, in the case of Beatrice for Dante, would thus correspond to entry into a state of higher consciousness, a state of contemplation which cannot be expressed in words: “my mind was struck by a flash / in which what it desired came to it. / At this point high imagination failed : / but already my desire and my will / were being turned like a wheel, all at one speed, / by the love which moves the sun and the other stars” (*Paradiso*, XXXIII, v. 141-145).<sup>98</sup> Moreover,

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<sup>94</sup> Dante, *E' m'incresce di me sì duramente* (Of self-compassion now I bear such weight), in Dante Alighieri, *Dante's Rime*, p. 77-79.

<sup>95</sup> *The Song of the Songs. Interpreted by Early Christian and Medieval Commentators*, translated and edited by Richard A. Norris Jr., Cambridge, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003, p. 22. See also *Le Zohar. Cantique des Cantiques*, ed. Charles Mopsik, Lagrasse, Verdier, 1999, p. 78; Origène, *Homélie sur le Cantique des cantiques*, Paris, Édition du Cerf, 1966, p. 72-73; Origène, *Commentaire sur le Cantiques des Cantiques*, Paris, Les Éditions du Cerf, 1991, p. 190-191.

<sup>96</sup> On the kiss in the French troubadours, see Claude Lachet, “Le baiser”, in *L'amour courtois. Une anthologie*, p. 188-191.

<sup>97</sup> Dante, *Vita Nova* (XLII), in Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nova*, p. 58.

<sup>98</sup> Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, p. 499.

when Beatrice dies Dante writes to the powerful of the world (“principi de la terra”)<sup>99</sup> to announce the demise of his beloved: “I, still shedding tears in this desolate city, wrote to the rulers of the land something about its condition, using that opening of the prophet Jeremiah, ‘How doth the city sit solitary.’”<sup>100</sup> So what is the sense of addressing the powerful men of the world in order to inform them about the death of the beloved? Does it perhaps mean that this death has, in some way, a link with the powerful men of the world? And what is the nature of this relationship? Why should the powerful of the earth be interested in the death of his beloved Beatrice? Moreover, what is the meaning of the prophetic tone of the sentence due to the comparison with the prophet Jeremiah? Dante also addresses the powerful to inform them about his adulterous love. The third commandment of Love forbids loving another man’s woman, as set out in the *Dottrina d’Amore* (*Doctrine of Love*, a collection of sonnets attributed to Guido Cavalcanti): “the third commandment is not to love another man’s woman”.<sup>101</sup> Thus, if the third commandment forbids loving the woman of other men, why does Dante love Bice Portinari, the wife of Simone de’ Bardi? By doing so, Dante disobeys the precept, in addition to being married to Gemma Donati. How could Dante express his love for Beatrice if he was married to Gemma Donati? It seems unthinkable that an historical figure such as Dante would express his adulterous love by putting it into verse so that everyone could read about it. This confirms, yet again, the esoteric meaning of the beloved Beatrice, who is mystical and initiatory, just like the woman in the *Song of Songs*. In particular, the link between Dante’s Beatrice and Solomon’s *Song of Songs* seems to be confirmed, as Dante puts Beatrice in ninth place among the sixty most beautiful women, just like the sixty women-queens of whom Solomon speaks (“there are sixty queens”).<sup>102</sup> Moreover, Dante associates Beatrice with the Bride of Lebanon (“and one of them, as if sent from heaven, / shouted in a singing voice, three times, *Veni / Sponsa de Libano*, and the rest after him”),<sup>103</sup> and the same Bride of Lebanon appears in the *Song of Songs*.

Beatrice is the woman that leads Dante “to the yellow of the sempiternal rose”.<sup>104</sup> The Dantean rose is the symbol of achieving the state of bliss in which the opposites cancel each other out; they melt away, die, and are born again to new life. The rose is the aim of a long journey, which leads from Hell to Paradise, to enlightenment, on a path with trials to overcome

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<sup>99</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Vita nuova*, introduction by Edoardo Sanguineti, notes by Alfonso Berardinelli, Milan, Garzanti, 2007.

<sup>100</sup> Dante, *Vita Nova* (XXX), in Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nova*, p. 42.

<sup>101</sup> “Non amar donna altrui è ‘l terzo onore”. *Dottrina d’Amore, sonetti ined. tribuiti a G. Cavalcanti* (sonnet CMXLIX), in *Le antiche rime volgari secondo la lezione del codice Vaticano 3793*, ed. Alessandro D’Ancona, Domenico Comparetti, Tommaso Casini, Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca apostolica vaticana, 1875, p. 234.

<sup>102</sup> *The Song of Songs. Interpreted by Early Christian and Medieval commentators*, translated and edited by Richard A. Norris Jr., Grand Rapids, Michigan / Cambridge, U. K., William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003, p. 235. See also Origène, *Commentaire sur le Cantiques des Cantiques*, p. 78-89; Renzo Manetti, *Beatrice e Monnalisa*, p. 24-26.

<sup>103</sup> *Purgatorio*, XXX, v. 10-13. Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, p. 329.

<sup>104</sup> *Paradiso*, XXX, v. 124. *Ibid.*, p. 485.

that become increasingly difficult. The latent state of human potentialities experiences a transformation, it evolves, it improves itself and the final destination is symbolized by the flower of the rose: the initiatory rose. Dante's "candida rosa" is the initiatory rapport between Dante and his beloved, who will lead him to the Empyrean: "in form then of a shining white rose / the holy army of those of whom, in his blood, / Christ made his spouse, made its appearance to me".<sup>105</sup> This idea of the rose which leads to an accomplishment can also be inferred in the *Convivio* (IV, XXVII): "a man should open like a rose, as it were, which can no longer stay shut, spreading the perfume that is produced within".<sup>106</sup>

Thus, following the esoteric interpretation of Dante's work, the rose is revealed as the symbol of an initiatory achievement, of arrival after a long journey and the *Divine Comedy*, like all the works involving a descent into hell, is a journey towards a higher knowledge – the knowledge of God. It is given by degrees, just like the initiations which promote a gradual advancement of knowledge: each specific degree corresponds to a specific type of knowledge, more complete than the previous one but incomplete compared to the following one. The final degree is the rose, the completion of the initiatory journey towards supreme knowledge and the truth. Thus, there is a progression of knowledge: the more one advances in initiatory degrees, the more one acquires knowledge. The mysteries are unveiled gradually, degree by degree. Those who do not know, those who have not been initiated, are called "blind": "I am going up from here in order to be blind no longer".<sup>107</sup> This final enlightenment is achieved through the rose, which restores his sight and enables him to be born again.

### *The amorous polysemant*

In studying the *Fedeli d'Amore*, an aspect which emerges is the duality (or rather multiplicity) of meanings that a word has, which vary if the message is hidden to an ignorant person or to the Power. We have seen that the *Fedeli d'Amore* affirm that they sometimes avoid the "gente grassa" (vulgar people) and the illiterate, also the powerful on occasion, whether spiritual or temporal. Rendering the meaning obscure to the profane is deemed necessary, as they do not have the mental training to understand the esoteric knowledge imparted to them, whilst the literal interpretation of the obscure verses preserves the esoteric content from those who cannot understand it, as reminded by the first Imam, Ali Ibn Abi Talib, who remarks: "there is an immunity which keeps prophecy from being desecrated, which is that ordinary people do

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<sup>105</sup> *Paradiso*, XXXI, v. 1-3. *Ibid.*, p. 486.

<sup>106</sup> Dante, *Convivio. A Dual-Language Critical Edition*, p. 343.

<sup>107</sup> *Purgatorio*, XXVI, v. 58. Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, p. 312.

no more than discuss its literal outer meaning”.<sup>108</sup> Origen (and previously Clement of Alexandria), in his commentary of the *Song of the Songs* pointed out that the revelation of the truth must take into account the different degrees of understanding of people, which must be expressed in language that they understand. This is why, on Mount Tabor (which recalls the mountain that separated Nietzsche from the crowd), Jesus Christ revealed himself to just a few disciples, and not to those who remained below. Saint Paul spoke of the knowledge shared only by those who are “perfect” (*Corinthians*, 2, 6). This difference in people’s ability to understand is stressed by Guido Guinizelli, who recommended silence as an antidote to the ignorance of the populace: “God made nature and the world in different degrees and created different minds and abilities of understanding, therefore one should not reveal what one really thinks”.<sup>109</sup>

The second reason that would explain the obscurity of certain love verses is to be found, according to the “heterodox” critical current, in the fact that dissimulation was crucial in eluding oppression by the powerful, since direct exposure would only lead to persecution.<sup>110</sup> The third reason concerns the subjects of love poetry, namely the mystical and spiritual truths, for which common language is not appropriate to explain the divine mystery. In the nineteenth century, Rimbaud was one of the “poètes maudits”, the “accursed poets” who would attempt to put into verse the mystery of divine enlightenment. However, transposing the mystery of divinity into verse does not mean that the reader is equipped to understand it. It is as though someone who has their sight tries to explain to a blind person what the world is like.

In the case of the complex poetry of the *Fedeli d’Amore*, there is also the question of the different meanings of the same word. For example, we have seen that the girl of the *Fedeli d’Amore* represents both the mystical idea of the Holy Wisdom and the initiatory Order that pursued this aim. The same applies to “lovesickness” which has two connotations, referring to the pain suffered in the initiation as well as the pains of love seen as suffering caused by the rigidity of the Order of Love. Death could, in some cases, be a literary device for the Church, but it also represented the concept of initiatory death, namely the rebirth of the adept who dies in profane life to be born again in the life of the initiate. Luigi Valli suggests that the poet of love who exhibits ecstatic inclinations refers to the concept of Holy Wisdom, whilst he refers to the sect of love when his verses are harsh and tumultuous.<sup>111</sup> Moreover, as Luigi Valli points out, the *Fedeli d’Amore* “hide themselves from the Inquisition under the pretext of hiding

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<sup>108</sup> Henry Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth. From Mazdean Iran to Shī’ite Iran* [1953], translated by Nancy Pearson, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1989, p. 205-206.

<sup>109</sup> “Deo natura e ‘l mondo in grado mise / e fe’ dispari senni e intendimenti / perzò ciò ch’omo pensa non dé dire”. Guido Guinizelli, *Omo ch’è saggio non corre leggero*, in *Poeti del Dolce stil nuovo*, ed. Mario Marti, Florence, Le Monnier, 1969, p. 980.

<sup>110</sup> The use of “esoteric writing” to escape persecution by the Power has been brilliantly studied by Arthur M. Melzer in his book *Philosophy Between the Lines: the Lost History of Esoteric Writing*.

<sup>111</sup> See Luigi Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d’Amore*, p. 81-82.

themselves from the populace”.<sup>112</sup> This is rather obscure language and each word needs interpreting, as it varies according to the context and the level of understanding. For example, in the *Documenti d'Amore* (Documents of Love) by Francesco da Barberino, the word “death” seems to allude to the contrast between the profane world and the initiatory one and to the contrast between ecclesiastical Power and the Brotherhood of Love, but this “love-death” can also allude to an esoteric doctrine. In effect, there are two levels of reading: the first is opposition to the prevailing Power which punishes the heresy of love, whilst the second implies that this “love-death” is, in fact, the alleged secret doctrine, accorded only to the initiates. Therefore, we should be cautious in this regard, because it can be seen not only from the political, social and religious point of view, but also from the spiritual and initiatory one, as the eternal truth which allows the common mortal to experience the mystical path. A single literary expression may comprise multiple or double meanings (both literary meaning and symbolic); thus, the literary work would be accessible to everyone (the overt literary denotation), but also to the few initiates (the hermetic and symbolic connotation).

There is not enough space here to explore the *Fedeli d'Amore* through the work of other Italian love poets, such as Petrarch and Boccaccio, as this would entail a study exclusively dedicated to the love poetry of the medieval poets, which is not the focus of my doctoral thesis. Nevertheless, I would like to consider an idea proposed by Gabriele Rossetti in his *Mistero dell'Amor Platonico*. In fact, he included among the *Fedeli d'Amore* poets such as Boccaccio and Petrarch (in particular, he dedicated an entire chapter to Petrarch and his beloved Laura),<sup>113</sup> noticing that the same symbolism was present in the work of Italian Renaissance poets like Boiardo, Ariosto, Poliziano and Tasso. In fact, all these authors feature the same characteristics and symbolism that Rossetti, followed by Valli, highlighted in the poetry of Dante and of the *Fedeli d'Amore*. This symbolism runs not only through the Middle Ages, but also the Italian Renaissance. With regard to this period, I should mention an author that neither Gabriele Rossetti nor his successors have explored in depth, namely Curzio Gonzaga (1533-1599) and his work *Il fido amante* (The Faithful Lover, 1582), whose title clearly evokes the concept of fidelity in love, the faithful love, the faithful lover.<sup>114</sup> Fidelity in love of also present in Giovan

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<sup>112</sup> “Con la scusa di nascondersi alla plebe si nascondevano anche all’Inquisizione”. *Ibid.*, p. 575.

<sup>113</sup> See Gabriele Rossetti, *Il mistero dell'Amor platonico del Medio Evo*, t. II, p. 661-831.

<sup>114</sup> To my knowledge, the only study linking Curzio Gonzaga to the *Fedeli d'Amore* is *Cavalieri ed eroi alla corte di Mantova: il Fido Amante di Curzio*, ed. Anna Maria Razzoli Roiolo, Rome, Verso l'Arte Edizioni, 2008. This book contains two particularly interesting essays: “Il poema del Gonzaga e il messaggio cifrato ai Fedeli d'Amore” (“Gonzaga’s Poem and the Ciphred Message to the Faithful of Love”) by Razzoli Raiolo and “Curzio Gonzaga Fedele d'Amore” (“Curzio Gonzaga Fedele d'Amore”) by Giovanni Barbero. See *ibid.*, p. 83-110. One passage in Razzoli Roiolo’s essay is particularly significant for the links between Curzio Gonzaga’s work and the *Fedeli d'Amore*: “*Il Fido Amante*, composed by Gonzaga between 1575 and 1582, ostensibly aims to celebrate the dynasty of Mantua and the families related to it, among which the House of Austria stands out. On closer reading, however, the work reveals a more cryptic message addressed to the circle of the *Fedeli d'Amore*: Gonzago, a faithful lover who, for the love of Vittoria, overcomes increasingly arduous initiatory trials, adumbrates in fact the virtual



Battista Marino in his *Adone*, in Petrarch, Torquato Tasso and Ariosto in the *Orlando furioso*. This is an untouched field of research that offers potential new discoveries, and the father of these studies, which need to be carried out scientifically and rigorously, is Gabriele Rossetti.

Les Fiefs d'amour by Baisieux and I Documenti d'Amore by Barberino

There are two texts which provide a detailed description of the principles upon which the Brotherhood of the *Fedeli d'Amore* was founded: *Les Fiefs d'amour* (The Fiefs of Love), written in the mid thirteenth century by the Belgian poet Jacques de Baisieux, and the *Documenti d'Amore* (composed between 1308 and 1313) by the Italian Francesco da Barberino. These two works can effectively be considered handbooks of the Brotherhood.<sup>115</sup> They attest the existence of the *Fedeli d'Amore* and describe the rules of the Order, confirming that it is a community organized as a hierarchy which held a knowledge that was accessible by degrees.<sup>116</sup>

Baisieux explains the etymology of the word "Amor" (Love), which he says derives from *A-mor*, namely "death" ("mor") preceded by the privative "a", implying the absence of love, the death of death, immortality:

A signifies  
without and mor signifies death;  
put them together and we have "without death".<sup>117</sup>

Moreover, Jacques de Baisieux suggests that the weapons of the *Fedeli d'Amore* are words and knowledge. They must not reveal the secrets of love but must hide them: "[one] must not reveal

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projection of the author in his ascent towards a moral perfection understood as an allegory of the unequal struggle of an intransigent Catholic against the most corrupt Church, while Vittoria, symbol of the Cross of Christ and its sufferings, as well as of the triumphant Church (IV 23-72), rises to a constant point of reference from which Curzio-Gonzaga draws strength and vitality" ["*il Fido Amante*, composto dal Gonzaga tra il 1575 e il 1582, apparentemente si prefigge la celebrazione della dinastia di Mantova e delle famiglie ad essa imparentate su cui spicca casa d'Austria. Ad un'attenta lettura, l'opera rivela tuttavia un più criptico messaggio rivolto alla cerchia dei Fedeli d'Amore: Gonzago, amante fedele che per amore di Vittoria supera prove iniziatiche sempre più ardue, adombra infatti la proiezione virtuale dell'autore nella sua ascesa verso una perfezione morale intesa come allegoria dell'impari lotta di un cattolico intransigente contro la più corrotta Chiesa, mentre Vittoria, simbolo della Croce di Cristo e delle sue sofferenze, oltre che della Chiesa trionfante (IV 23-72), assurge a punto di riferimento costante da cui Curzio-Gonzaga trae forza e vitalità"]. Anna Maria Razzoli Raiolo, "Il poema del Gonzaga e il messaggio cifrato ai Fedeli d'Amore", in *Cavalieri ed eroi alla corte di Mantova: il Fido Amante di Curzio*, p. 65.

<sup>115</sup> On the figure of Francesco da Barberino and his work *I Documenti d'Amore*, in addition to the studies (already mentioned) by Catherine Guimbar, see also Antoine Thomas, *Francesco da Barberino et la littérature provençale en Italie au moyen âge*, Paris, E. Thorin, 1883; Jean Canteins, *Francesco da Barberino. L'homme et l'œuvre au regard du soi-disant "Fidèle d'Amour"*, Milan, Archè Edizioni, 2007; Lilian Sulac, "Inspiration mystique et savoir politique: les conseils aux veuves chez Francesco da Barberino et chez Christine de Pizan", in *Mélange à la mémoire de Franco Simone. France et Italie dans la culture européenne*, Geneva, Slatkine, t. I, 1980, p. 113-141.

<sup>116</sup> I wish to thank Stefano Salzani for pointing out to me the importance of the *Documenti d'Amore* by Barberino, for a holistic understanding of the symbolism and themes of the poetry and principles of the *Fedeli d'Amore*.

<sup>117</sup> "A senefie en sa partie / Sans, et mor senefie mort ; / Or l'asemblons, s'aurons 'sans mort'". Jacques de Baisieux, *C'est des Fiez d'Amours*, in *Trouvères belges du XII<sup>e</sup> au XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Geneva, Slatkine Reprints, 1977, p. 186. Mircea Eliade referred to this passage in his anthropological study *Rites and Symbol of Initiation*. See Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbol of Initiation*, p. 165.

Love's counsels, but hide them with care".<sup>118</sup> Baisieux repeatedly refers to meetings, rituals, investitures, rewards, punishments and fiefs, which are divided into celestial and terrestrial ones and seem to have nothing to do with the way love is usually seen. More precisely, Baisieux describes the Faithful of Love, who secretly meet to discuss love (v. 1-88); he speaks about the quality of the faithful (v. 89-118) and their immortality (v. 119-134); he distinguishes between celestial and worldly fiefs (v. 135-190); he describes the ritual of investiture through the glove (a clear masonic symbol) and the kiss (a mystical and initiatory symbol, as we have already seen with regard to the *Song of Songs*) through an oath based on secrecy (v. 191-258, 424-461); he highlights the punishments inflicted on those who violate the rules of Love (v. 265-315, 611-619); he mentions Lancelot as an example of the Faithful of Love (v. 316-330) and this aspect seems to confirm the initiatory nature of the love and chivalric poetry of French medieval literature; he speaks about the eternity of the fief of Love (v. 538-581); he specifies that the *Fedeli d'Amore* are a combative militia (v. 462-482), whose weapon is "speaking wisely" (v. 483-487);<sup>119</sup> and finally, he highlights the subterfuge that the author had to use when speaking about love (v. 659-666).

Like Baisieux, Francesco da Barberino (a contemporary of Dante) writes that his works cannot be understood by everyone: "I say and declare that all my works dealing with Love are intended by me in spiritual terms, but not all of them can be understood by everyone".<sup>120</sup> Thus, Barberino speaks about works that use the artifice of secrecy, to be decoded and understood only by those who understand what Love is: "I say to you sirs, wise and covered, who hear me: you women, only a few of you are left, to whom Love can now enlighten the spirit, since Love has now lost blood and honour".<sup>121</sup> It is evident that these words do not refer to women, as they are also referred to as "Sir". Women are the "wise and covered" Sirs who understand the poet, and who, like him, know what Love really means. These are the same ideas expressed by Dante, as I have shown at the beginning of the chapter, and it is obvious that here we are not speaking of physical women or of love as generally understood. The élitist character strongly emerges in this circle of wise men called "women" who shared the knowledge of love. Barberino specifies that it is obligatory to refer cryptically to questions of love: "no one should wonder if I speak in an obscure way / because fate has put me in this situation".<sup>122</sup> He adds that the obscurity of his verses is intended to hide the content of his writings on Love:

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<sup>118</sup> "D'amour ne doivent reveler / les consiaus, mas tres bien celer". Jacques de Baisieux, *C'est des Fiez d'Amours*, in *Trouvères belges du XII<sup>e</sup> au XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle*, p. 199.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198.

<sup>120</sup> "Dico et profiteor quod omnia opera per me facta, tractantia de Amore, spiritualiter intelligo; sed non omnia omnibus possunt glosari". Francesco da Barberino, *I Documenti d'Amore*, ed. Francesco Egidi, 4 v., Rome, Società Filologica Romana, v. I, 1905-1927, p. 36-37.

<sup>121</sup> "Dicol signor avoi saggi e coperti pero che mintendete voi donne poche sete, achui omai la mente avrisse amore tant a perduto di sangue e donore". Francesco da Barberino, *I Documenti d'Amore*, v. III, p. 401.

<sup>122</sup> "Non maravigli alchun soscuo tracto / poi chatal punto ma fortuna tracto". *Ibid.*

As the rules give access / to all teaching, / so, in order to enter, it is appropriate  
for us too / to use certain sayings / in a way that we do not want to be known  
/ by those who are not like us / and not by others / since Love celebrates / the  
aim of these sayings / which are obscure, nice / and double as one can clearly  
see / those who are able to use their minds / and their intellect can penetrate  
the gloss / they can have the honour and receive the fruit [of the teaching].<sup>123</sup>

The author is basically saying that his words should only be understood by those who belong to the circle of Love, not by others.

In the preamble to the song *Se più non raggia il sol* (If the sun no longer shines), which appears in an early version (1640) of *I Documenti d'Amore*, Barberino affirms that men who have an “acute mind” (“sottil mente”), and who are able understand it [the song], only live in Tuscany: “Barberino wrote this obscure composition, dealing with the Nature of Love, so that it could only be understood by some of his friends, certain noble men of Tuscany”.<sup>124</sup> Here it is made clear that Love can only be understood by superior and exceptional minds, especially those of Tuscany. And this concept is repeated in the last stanza of Barberino’s song: “this complaint is of such a nature that it cannot be understood by people who have neither the subtle mind nor the key to understanding”.<sup>125</sup> Moreover, Barberino affirms that Love has been beaten but not killed, hinting at the fact that though part of it has been wounded, there is another part that – though weak, dispersed and a prisoner – continues to survive. Therefore, this would confirm the interpretation proposed by Gabriele Rossetti and Luigi Valli, who thought that Barberino spoke of the sect of Love which was defeated but not destroyed, since the worthiest part was still alive. This would explain the verses in which Love is beaten by Death, without being killed: “that blow did not kill it (Love), but it dissolved the worthiest part, which no longer reigns among us, the other part painfully left, tied up faraway in prison and in chains”.<sup>126</sup>

There is a strange passage in the *Documenti d'Amore* in which Barberino says what a lover must do when on a journey by sea where his woman is going to die, and affirms that he cannot give any further explanation (“et ammodo lictera glosam non habet quia ista instructio non posset apertius glosari”).<sup>127</sup> This confirms that one could not speak openly about the

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<sup>123</sup> “Come le regule danno intramento / in ogni insegnamento / così convien ancor noi per intrare / certi mottetti usare / li quali intesi non voliam che sieno / da quei che con noi eno / o se d’alcun dagli altri non talora / sì ch’esto Amor honora / la fine d’esta parte ora di quegli / coverti oscuri e begli / e doppi alquanti; come chiaramente / chi porrà ben la mente / e lo intelletto a le chiose vedere / porà di lor honor e fructo avere”. Francesco da Barberino, *I Documenti d'Amore*, v. II, p. 258-261.

<sup>124</sup> “Fece il Barberino questa composizione oscura, trattante della Natura d’Amore, perché ella fosse solamente intesa da certi suoi amici, nobili uomini di Toscana”. Francesco da Barberino, *I Documenti d'Amore*, Rome, Stamperia di Vitale Mascardi, 1640, p. 363.

<sup>125</sup> “Questo lamento edi cotal natura, che non si puo intender dala gente, che non a sottilmente, ne an da quella chave lointellecto, se non avesse ben ferito il pecto”. Francesco da Barberino, *I Documenti d'Amore*, v. III, p. 403.

<sup>126</sup> “Enon ancise in quel colpo costui, ma dissolvette la parte piu degna, che tra noi piu non regna, laltra lasso per sola sua piu pena, lontan legata in pregon ecatena”. *Ibid.*, p. 401-402.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

shipwreck, about this beloved woman who dies.<sup>128</sup> For Barberino, Love is a secret that must be defended, as confirmed at the end of the book, where there is a threat to smite the breast with a sword of whoever opens the book of Love: “I am the one who watches with vigour and I am on the alert in case someone comes / and opens the book. / And if he is not worthy of opening it / I will strike his breast with my sword”.<sup>129</sup>

The distinguishing feature of Barberino’s *Documenti d’Amore* is that the text is accompanied by illustrations produced by Barberino himself, which explain and corroborate what the verses say. These illustrations are accompanied by explanatory sentences which reveal the evident initiatory character of the work. In the prologue, the author draws the figure of Love standing naked, with arrows and a bunch of roses in his hand. He draws thirteen characters, arranged in descending order by height from the periphery to the centre, forming a triangle. At the top of this triangle is a figure with two heads (the left side is female and the right side male), representing the hermetic androgyne, or final result of every initiatory path, in which duality is returned to the original unity. This recalls the saying 22 in the gnostic Gospel of Thomas: “when you make the two into one, and when you make the inner like the outer, and the upper like the lower, and when you make the male and female into a single one, so that the male will not be male nor the female be female, [...] then you will enter [the Kingdom]”.<sup>130</sup> But the hermetic androgyne, as Luigi Valli points out, also refers to the alchemical image of the king that joins the queen, and this union will produce the Philosophical Stone: from the Rebis to the Phoenix, to the Philosophical Stone. Here we see how alchemy is associated with the hermeticism of love poetry, confirming that alchemical hermeticism and love poetry are linked. Barberino’s androgyne seems to coincide with that final initiatory phase, which takes place when the Bride of the *Song* receives the kiss from the Spouse, as we have already seen: “osculetur me osculo oris sui”, “let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth”<sup>131</sup> – this is the ecstasis arising from the encounter with the Absolute. It is at this moment that the lover experiences the *excessus mentis* which leads to knowledge of the Absolute. Thus, Barberino’s androgyne is a man who, through the initiatory path joins his woman, combining passive intellect with active Intelligence. This spiritual marriage is accompanied in Barberino’s drawing with the symbol of the rose, whilst the legend associated with the drawing says: “Love that transforms two things in one thing, with supreme virtue via marriage”.<sup>132</sup> Man and woman are thus joined, and the man finds the woman inside him: the gnostic Wisdom. Therefore, the knowledge of the Absolute implies an

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<sup>128</sup> See Luigi Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d’Amore*, p. 207.

<sup>129</sup> “Io son vigor e guardo sel venisse, / alcun che libro aprisse. / E se non fosse cotal chente e detto / degli di questa spada lo petto”. Francesco da Barberino, *I Documenti d’Amore secondo i manoscritti originali*, v. III, p. 405.

<sup>130</sup> *The Gospel of Thomas*, ed. Richard Valantasis, London and New York, Routledge, 1997, p. 71.

<sup>131</sup> *The Song of the Songs. Interpreted by Early Christian and Medieval Commentators*, p. 22.

<sup>132</sup> “Amor che ci hai di due facta una cosa, con superna vertù per maritaggio”. Francesco da Barberino, *I Documenti d’Amore secondo i manoscritti originali*, v. III, p. 408.

initiatory death, in which man meets his hidden divine part – it is the death of the lover, the death of Beatrice that leads to the vision of the Divine.

The androgyne figure at the centre of Barberino's drawing is the final stage of an initiatory ladder, where the preceding stages are symbolised by the characters placed on either side. The thirteen figures below the central one are aligned by ascending height, from the periphery to the centre: the *religious man* and the *religious woman* correspond on the right to the *dead man* and the *dead woman*; the figure of the *young girl* on the left corresponds to the *young man* on the right, and further up we find the male infant and the female one, the adolescents, the married man and woman, the married knight and the widow with a rose in her hand; finally, there is a double figure that is both man and woman, holding a rose in its hand. The rose held by this double figure is a symbol of the supreme initiation. In the drawing, Barberino put words into the mouth of the religious man and woman that allude to the search for the rose, explaining in the Latin commentary that the rose symbolises Paradise, as in Dante's *Comedy*. The rose is the secret of Barberino's work and confirmation of this is the enigmatic sentence "Donne cosa, donne rosa"<sup>133</sup> (literally translated into English as "Woman thing, women rose"), an expression that Luigi Valli interprets as: "of each thing the woman is rose",<sup>134</sup> namely the Rose is the Lady of all things, and associated with the concept of woman.

The Barberino drawing confirms the initiatory meaning of the rose associated with the *topos* of love, highlighting that the progressive spiritual perfection is obtained by initiatory degrees, starting with a conventional childhood (in which the child falls in love with the young girl, as happens in the *Vita Nova* by Dante) and continuing to the mystical marriage, in which the lover joins with his beloved, meaning that the male rational part merges with the female spiritual part. The degree of final perfection is the rose (the rose in the hand, the symbol of the Holy Wisdom), which can be obtained only after a long and tortuous path.

In both the work of Francesco da Barberino and Jacques de Baisieux, the initiatory symbolism of the rose uses the artifice of secrecy. In this respect, there is an anonymous erotic-initiatory poem of the fifteenth century that is virtually unknown called *La fabula del Pistello de l'Agliata* (The fable of Pistello de l'Algiata), which showed that the initiatory ideas presented in the *Fiefs d'Amour* and in the *Documenti d'Amore* survived in the Renaissance. This fifteenth century work is linked to the *Fedeli d'Amore* since it starts by paraphrasing the verses of the *Fedele d'Amore* Francesco da Barberino, and which highlights the need to write hermetically.<sup>135</sup> It ends by paraphrasing the same verses in Dante which refers to the hidden secret doctrine

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<sup>133</sup> Francesco da Barberino, *I Documenti d'Amore secondo i manoscritti originali*, v. II, p. 283.

<sup>134</sup> "D'ogni cosa donna è rosa". Luigi Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d'Amore*, p. 289.

<sup>135</sup> The verses from the *Documenti d'Amore* in question are the following: "no one should wonder if I speak in an obscure way / because fate has put me in this situation".

obscured by strange verses: “O you, who have sane arguments, / look at the other part which is hidden / under the guise of strange verses”.<sup>136</sup> But what is the theme of this mysterious and little-known poem? The anonymous author says he cannot tell the truth (Fortune opposes him, as happens in *The Romance of the Rose*), so he tells his story using cryptic language: “I cannot tell you of my misfortune, / because I am given to Fortune by chance: / but I will tell you of an adventure, / that has happened to me since I was born”,<sup>137</sup> which tells of the adventures of a young lover who, having overcome many difficulties, meets an old lady, or rather a lady who is old during the day and at night is “young, beautiful, rugged and well made”.<sup>138</sup> The woman tells the young man her story, which is the story of a woman married to an evil old man (the corrupt priesthood that holds the key to Holy Wisdom, according to Luigi Valli’s interpretation), who is jealous of the woman’s love for a shepherd (corresponding to the secret Order of Love). The old woman tells the young man that he must be patient (like the lover in *The Romance of the Rose* who had to suffer before seizing the flower): “when it is the right time, you will see me”.<sup>139</sup> But the young lover is eager to see her, and he blows out a light during the night to contemplate the woman’s beauty. He admires this beautiful woman but she suddenly turns into a snake and flees. This implies that those who aspire to the truth must learn to wait and even to suffer, as initiates who have acquired knowledge by degrees after overcoming difficult tests. Moreover, the unknown author concludes with a sentence in Latin which explains that Wisdom has been stolen: “Finis. Philomatis Furtum”,<sup>140</sup> meaning “theft of the man who loves Wisdom”. This anonymous poem is situated between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance and demonstrates how Italian literature has hidden initiatory doctrines similar to those of the *Fedeli d’Amore*, underpinning a principle which would be fundamental to the Rosicrucian creed, namely the process of initiatory evolution through experiencing the pain and suffering of the Cross in order to reach the Rose: *Per Crucem ad Rosam*. In the nineteenth century, Péladan would relate this to the Rosicrucian motto, stressing that the rose can only be obtained through pain and sacrifice, by overcoming obstacles, by facing continuous and discouraging tests that lead to the death of the old persona and the emergence of the new one, from death to life, from the Cross to the Rose. This is the path described in the Hindustani romance *The Rose of Bakavali*, or in the initiatory romance by Apuleius, *The Metamorphoses*, where the protagonist first becomes an ass, then changes to a man after eating a garland of roses.

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<sup>136</sup> *La fabula del Pistello de l’Aglia e la quistione d’Amore*, Bologna, Presso Gaetano Romagnoli, 1878, p. 35.

<sup>137</sup> “Io non posso narrar la mia sciagura, / ché son per gioco alla fortuna dato: / però vengo a contarvi una ventura, / la qual sol’ ebbi da poi che son nato”. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>138</sup> “Giovin bella, gagliarda e ben fatta”. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>139</sup> “A tempo me vedrai”. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

It is also the path described in *The Romance of the Rose*, which leads Dante to admire the rose in Paradise.

## CHAPTER V

### THE ROSE OF THE RENAISSANCE<sup>1</sup>

#### *The mystery of Platonic love in the Renaissance*

The rose of the troubadours, of the trouvères and of the *Fedeli d'Amore* in the Middle Ages also continued to be the “flower of the flowers” during the Renaissance, associated with the mystery of Platonic love. Gabriele Rossetti pointed out repeatedly, both in his works and in his letters, that the secret medieval doctrine of love was transmitted to the Renaissance:

In the era of Frederick II and of his son Manfred, there were many writings in jargon [the jargon of esoteric love], both in verse and in prose [...]; there were more writings in this era than the era of Dante and Petrarch; but from the fifteenth century onwards, in sayings of the sixteenth century, I have encountered many examples, so prolix, that they can discourage the most intrepid examiner; I have only mentioned those examples which are sufficient to show the trace throughout the centuries.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, according to Rossetti, the esoteric doctrine of Platonic love had also spread to the fifteenth century, “in the platonizing sixteenth century”,<sup>3</sup> as he defined it, and in the seventeenth century – the century when the Rosicrucian Brotherhood appears in Europe. Covering the sixteenth century to the eighteenth century, Gabriele Rossetti focuses on figures such as Lorenzo dei Medici, Pico della Mirandola, Marsilio Ficino, Giordano Bruno, Edmund Spenser and Philip Sidney. All these savants of the Renaissance contributed to transmitting the so-called *philosophia perennis*, namely the primal wisdom. According to the historian Antoine Faivre, this transmission represents the founding act of esotericism, in which the Renaissance period plays a crucial role: “this autonomization of a body of knowledge, increasingly considered

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of the Renaissance poses problems of definition in terms of chronological limits. The Italian Renaissance, for instance, lasts from the fifteenth to the sixteenth century, while in the English context the Renaissance also includes the seventeenth century. Scholars, too, are divided on this subject. Some restrict the chronological limits to between 1400 (or the end of the fourteenth century) and 1550, others to between 1492 and 1600. See *Lessico universale italiano di lingua lettere arti scienze e tecnica*, Rome, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana fondata da Giovanni Treccani, 1978, p. 90-96; Peter Burke, Luke Clossey, Felipe Fernández Armesto, “The Global Renaissance”, *Journal of World History*, v. 28, n. 1, 2017, p. 1-30. In this chapter, I will use the term “Renaissance” to indicate a broader period of time, which lasts from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century. Therefore, I do not limit the Renaissance to a particular national context but to the European one.

<sup>2</sup> “Nella sola epoca di Federico Secondo e di Manfredi suo figlio, moltissimi sono gli scritti in gergo, sì in verso che in prosa [...]; più che altrettanti in quella di Dante e Petrarca; ma dal Quattrocento in poi, in massime nel Cinquecento, ne ho incontrati in tal numero e di tanta prolissità, da intepidire fin l’ardente voglia del più intrepido esaminatore; ne ho perciò recati sol quanti bastino a continuare la traccia de’ secoli”. Gabriele Rossetti, *Il mistero dell’Amor platonico del Medio Evo*, v. II, p. 1250.

<sup>3</sup> “Nel platonizzante cinquecento”. *Ibid.*, v. I, p. 623.



‘exoteric’ in relation to the official religion is truly in the sixteenth century, the point of departure for what can be called ‘esotericism’ in this third sense of the word”.<sup>4</sup>

In both the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Italy played a fundamental role in the transmission of the *philosophia perennis*, which continued to exist in the shape of love and of a rose. Renaissance Neoplatonism, in fact, had its origin in the Italian Renaissance and from the Italian peninsula it spread to Europe, in a context marked by an esoteric background imbued with magic, cabbala, Egyptian hermeticism and the Jewish hermetic mysticism. And it is in this historical context that we see the birth of literary works based on the *topos* of love and of a vague rose which accompanies it, that vague rose evoked, for instance, by Alberto Orlandi (Chancellor of Count Francesco, Duke of Milan) in a song of 1446, in which the author speaks of “the fresh and vague rose”,<sup>5</sup> associating it with the usual concept of love, the “amorous reign”.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, in the Renaissance the rose and love continued to flourish in Italy, which was a meeting point between the East and the West. In fact, after the capture of Constantinople in 1453, Greek culture and philosophy penetrated the Italian peninsula. Moreover, with the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492 the Jewish tradition spread to Italy, and with it the occult knowledge of the cabbala. Thus, Platonic love started to be influenced by the cabalistic tradition as well. An example of this fusion is provided by Leo the Hebrew who had to leave Spain in 1492 and take refuge in Naples, where he wrote the *Dialogues of Love* (1502), a work in which he combined the cabbala and the theory of Platonic love. Gabriele Rossetti saw in the work of Leo the Hebrew a continuation of the esoteric love of the *Fedeli d’Amore* and defined the *Dialogues of Love* a “prolix sectarian work of the sixteenth century”, in which “*Philosophy* is divided into two people, the lover and the beloved, Mr *Filo* and Madonna *Sofia* who, in their dialogues, expose the jargon of the whole occult science”.<sup>7</sup>

In Florence, the city of Dante, Cosimo dei Medici had created the Platonic Academies, commissioning from Marsilio Ficino the translation of Plato’s works. Ficino translated Plato, Plotinus, Proclus, Iamblichus, Dionysius the Areopagite, as well as the *Corpus Hermeticum* by Hermes Trismegistus, thus bringing together Platonism and the hermetic tradition of ancient Egypt. This association was to profoundly influence the literature of that period (as well as the religious thought). In the *Teologia Platonica* (1482), Marsilio Ficino establishes a genealogy that links Hermes to Zoroaster, Pythagoras and Plato. This is the primal tradition, namely the primigenial revelation that would be transmitted through the centuries, from one school to

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<sup>4</sup> Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, New York, State University of New York Press, 1994, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> “La frescha e vagha rosa”. Alberto Orlandi, *O maligna tirampna, o crudel serpe*, in *Le Rime del Codice Isoldiano*, p. 81.

<sup>6</sup> “Amoroso regno”. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>7</sup> “Prolissa opera settaria del cinquecento”; “la *Filosofia* è divisa in due persone, l’amante e l’amata, Messer *Filo* e Madonna *Sofia*, che fra lor discorrendo espongono in gergo tutta la scienza occulta”. Gabriele Rossetti, *Il mistero dell’Amor platonico del Medio Evo*, v. 1, p. 277.

another, from one initiate to another. This is the *philosophia perennis* (an expression coined by Agostinus Steuchus in 1540 and later adopted by Leibniz)<sup>8</sup> that George Sand in the nineteenth century would call the “eternal doctrine”:<sup>9</sup> the eternal truth.

With regard to the transmission of this esoteric knowledge that would spread from ancient Egypt to Europe, developing first in Greece then extending to France and Italy during the Middle Ages, Robert L. John points out the importance of Marsilio Ficino, outlining the filiation between the esoteric love of the Middle Ages and that of the Renaissance, between the medieval *Fedeli d'Amore* and the Renaissance doctrine of Love:

It was surely the right idea, that of Marsilio Ficino, about an interrupted and secret traditional chain which from ancient Egyptian Hermes Trismegistus, passing through Pythagoras, Plato and Seneca, extended up to Plotinus and Iamblichus [...]. Via Arnaud Daniel, the Sicilian poets and the Tuscan *Fedeli d'Amore*, through Gemistus Pletho it reached the Platonic Academy, of which, Ficino himself was the major glory. We now know that gnosis was not only an ancient heresy, but a spirituality that arose in the centuries around the birth of Christ, which had lasting irradiations on paganism, on Judaism and on Islam. There was also a Christian gnosis, and even an ecclesiastical gnosis.<sup>10</sup>

Rossetti also mentions, both in his *Mistero dell'Amor Platonico* and his letters, the importance of Ficino for the mystery of the doctrine of platonic love. In fact, Rossetti starts his *Mistero dell'Amor Platonico* by quoting Marsilio Ficino: “Socrates revealed this SACRED MYSTERY of Love to Plato; Plato, PIOUS philosopher amongst the other philosophers, composed a book for the Greeks”.<sup>11</sup> It is with this quotation that Rossetti introduces his revelation on the esoteric nature of love evoked by the poets of the Middle Ages, stating that the *topos* of love is a sacred mystery and that Socratic Love and Platonic Love are, in reality, the same thing. Ficino talks about this strange love in his works, and in his *De Amore* he recalls that the day Plato died was the same day as his birthday,<sup>12</sup> thus confirming the concept of initiatory death: the death which leads to a rebirth in the shape of love, as it occurred in medieval love poetry. As for the link with the medieval tradition, it is no coincidence that Marsilio, in his *Commentary on Plato's*

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<sup>8</sup> See Charles B. Schmitt, “Perennial Philosophy: from Agostino Steuco to Leibniz”, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, v. 27, n. 4, 1966, p. 505-532.

<sup>9</sup> George Sand, *Consuelo. La Comtesse de Rudolstadt*, eds. Léon Cellier and Léon Guichard, Paris, Garnier, t. III, 1959, p. 564.

<sup>10</sup> “Fu certo un'idea giusta di Marsilio Ficino quella di un'ininterrotta e segreta catena tradizionale che dall'antico Ermete Trismegisto egizio, passando per Pitagora, Platone e Seneca si estese fino a Plotino e Giamblico [...]. Attraverso Arnaldo Daniello, i poeti siciliani e i Fedeli d'Amore toscani, attraverso Gemisto Pletone si estese poi fino all'Accademia platonica di cui egli stesso, il Ficino, fu la gloria maggiore. Oggi sappiamo che la gnosi non fu solamente un'antica eresia cristiana, ma una spiritualità sorta nei secoli intorno alla nascita di Cristo, che ebbe durevoli irradiazioni nel paganesimo, nel giudaismo e nell'islam. Vi fu anche una gnosi cristiana, e perfino una gnosi ecclesiastica!”. Robert L. John, *op. cit.*, p. 348.

<sup>11</sup> “Socrate rivelò questo SACRO MISTERO d'Amore a Platone; Platone, filosofo sopra gli altri PIO, subito un libro per comodo de' Greci ne compose”. Gabriele Rossetti, *Il mistero dell'Amor platonico del Medio Evo*, v. 1, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> See Marsilio Ficino, *Sopra Lo Amore ovvero Convito di Platone*, Milan, SE, 2003, p. 17.

*Symposium on Love*,<sup>13</sup> Ficino declared his debt to Guido Cavalcanti who, as we have seen in previous chapters, was a Faithful of Love, a *Fedele d'Amore*. Rossetti highlights how Marsilio Ficino was interested in the secrets of love by explaining them through the work of Guido Cavalcanti, thus confirming the continuity between medieval poetry of love and theory of Renaissance love,<sup>14</sup> as found in sixteenth century works, including *El Libro dell'amore* (1491) by Marsilio Ficino or the *Commento sopra una Canzone d'Amore di Girolamo Benivieni* (Commentary on a Love Song by Girolamo Benivieni, 1486) by Pico della Mirandola, but also in figures such as Lorenzo dei Medici who, like Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, linked love with the search for knowledge, by associating love with the flower: "if love is the flower, the fruit deserves love".<sup>15</sup> Thus, as Gabriele Rossetti repeatedly pointed out, all these men of letters of the Renaissance had been influenced by the earlier love poetry of Dante and Petrarch, which would be confirmed in the twentieth century by scholars such as Frances Yates.<sup>16</sup>

In the studies by Gabriele Rossetti and Frances Yates there is an element which is by no means insignificant and which, to my knowledge, has not yet been mentioned by the critics, namely the fact that, in her studies on the Rosicrucians, Yates speaks of an initiatory society which was present in the seventeenth century and which seems to have many points in common with the *Fedeli d'Amore* studied by Gabriele Rossetti or Luigi Valli; curiously, the name of this initiatory society recalls that of the *Fedeli d'Amore*: the "Family of Love". On this Family of Love, Frances Yates writes:

We know that the Family of Love was a secret society, which undoubtedly had a real existence and organization, arising out of the situation in the Netherlands in the late sixteenth century. We know that many well-known people were secretly members of this sect or society, which allowed its members to belong ostensibly to any religious denomination whilst secretly maintaining their affiliation with the Family. These attitudes of the Family of Love have something in common with those of Freemasonry. We know that secret membership of the Family was widespread among printers, that, for example, the great Antwerp printer, Plantin, was a member of this sect and keen on propagating it through publishing works of those in sympathy with it. It has been suggested earlier that the De Bry family of printers, who had connections with the Plantin firm, might have been Familists, and that the movement of this firm into Palatinate territory where it published, at Oppenheim, works of persons in the "Rosicrucian" interest – Fludd and Maier – might have been because of secret sympathy with movements in the Palatinate.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> See Marsilio Ficino, *Commentary on Plato's Symposium on Love*, edited and translated by Sears Jayne, Dallas, TX, Spring Publications, 1999, p. 177-178.

<sup>14</sup> See Gabriele Rossetti, *Il mistero dell'Amor platonico del Medio Evo*, v. 1, p. 362.

<sup>15</sup> "Se Amore è il fior, d'amore il frutto merita". *Opere di Lorenzo De' Medici detto Il Magnifico*, Florence, Per Giuseppe Molini Co' Tipi Bodoniani, v. 2, 1825, p. 230.

<sup>16</sup> See Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964, p. 110-120. In particular, on the influence of Dante on Marsilio Ficino, see *ibid.*, p. 119-120.

<sup>17</sup> Frances A. Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* [1972], London and New York, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 2002, p. 273-274.

It is not possible to prove whether Frances Yates had read the work of Gabriele Rossetti or not. In her studies on the Renaissance, she never mentions him, and it is impossible to speculate on any works she might have read. However, the Family of Love – of which Yates speaks – is discussed at length by Gabriele Rossetti in his *Mistero dell'Amor Platonico*. He defines the Family of Love as a “sect of enthusiastic Christians that spread from the Netherlands to England in 1580” and “published, among other works, a book titled *The Prophecy of the Spirit of Love*”.<sup>18</sup> In speaking of this Family of Love, Rossetti also focuses on the “Feasts of Love”, which were held in London and, in order to confirm the veracity of his comments, he quotes the *Gangræna or Discovery of Many of the Errors, Heresies &c.* (London, 1646) by the puritan clergyman Thomas Edwards, in which the author provides a detailed description of these mysterious feasts of love held by English sectarians. With regard to the English Puritans, Rossetti points out how the word “Puritan” is etymologically linked to the word “Cathar”, since Cathar meant “pure” and the Puritans were “pure” (though he condemned their excessive and intransigent rigour).<sup>19</sup> These analogies were evidenced by Gabriele Rossetti who, as in the case of the English Renaissance context, linked the facts by means of esoteric love and the heretic sects who spread it. It seems that one of these sects was the Family of Love, which was confirmed by the historian Frances Yates. She speaks of this Family of Love born in the Netherlands and alludes to its links with Rosicrucianism (linked, in turn, to the Palatinate), with the English political and religious context and with future freemasonry. The latter was also highlighted by Rossetti concerning both the *Fedeli d'Amore* and the Family of Love. In fact, it was this link that Rossetti proposed between literature and freemasonry that exposed him to harsh criticism from the academic establishment. Frances Yates had more credit than Rossetti, but they both stressed the same aspect: the link between history, politics, religion, literature and freemasonry. Yates mentions it in passing, without expanding on the subject, whilst Rossetti was sure about it, since he was himself a member of the initiatory milieu. The *Fedeli d'Amore* for Rossetti and the Family of Love (linked to the Rosicrucians) for Frances Yates would thus seem to be linked to the masonic tradition, at least as far as the transmission of an initiatory knowledge is concerned. However, we cannot affirm that the Family of Love studied by Frances Yates has any connection with the *Fedeli d'Amore*. Notwithstanding, it is surprising that this secret society of the Renaissance, the Family of Love, shared with the *Fedeli d'Amore* of the Middle Ages a similar name and initiatory character. Frances Yates adds an important detail, namely the link between the Family of Love and the Rosicrucian movement, by pointing out the relations

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<sup>18</sup> “Setta di cristiani entusiastici che dall’Olanda si sparsero in Inghilterra nel 1580”; “pubblicarono fra gli altri un libro intitolato *La profezia dello Spirito d’Amor* (Nightingale, *The Religions, &c.*, art. *The Family of Love*)”. Gabriele Rossetti, *Il mistero dell’Amor platonico del Medio Evo*, v. 1, p. 149.

<sup>19</sup> See *ibid.*

between this secret and initiatory organization and the historical, political and literary context of France and England during the Renaissance. In fact, Frances Yates suggests that the Academy described by Shakespeare in *Love's Labour's Lost* is an allusion to the initiatory and transversal currents spread in France and England through academies composed of intellectuals of the time.<sup>20</sup> In particular, Yates discusses in depth the secret sect of the Family of Love, led by François D'Alençon, brother of Henry III of France.<sup>21</sup> According to her, these Renaissance academies probably also inspired the principles of those French poets that formed *La Pléiade*, which included Ronsard and Guy Le Fèvre de la Boderie.<sup>22</sup>

Whilst Frances Yates in her works affirmed the importance of these initiatory Academies and Brotherhoods in the cultural, political and religious context of the Renaissance, Gabriele Rossetti had quite openly done so a century before. However, Yates was extremely cautious in approaching such themes. Rossetti overtly speaks “of the so many thousands of Academies, which in the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, under the propitious auspices of magnanimous gentlemen, were spread and flourished throughout Italy, many of them had the ostensible part and the secret one”.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, he specifies: “literary or scientific associations outwardly, but substantially masonic lodges, had, in their dual character, periodical lessons for illuding the public, and periodical initiations for instructing the proselytes: such was the Platonic Academy, such was the Florentine Academy that followed it; and such were, amongst others, those Academies of Giovanni Pontano in Naples and the Academy of Pomponio Leto in Rome”,<sup>24</sup> or the Accademia Palladia (Palladium Academy) of Capo d'Istria which, as he

<sup>20</sup> Beyond the Academies present in *Love's Labour's Lost*, Shakespeare also mentions the “brotherhoods in cities” in the monologue of Ulysses in *Troilus and Cressida* (I, II, 104), thus confirming the presence in the city of brotherhoods during the Renaissance. William Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, ed. John Dover Wilson, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 20.

<sup>21</sup> On the Family of Love, see Frances A. Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* [1979], London and New York, Routledge, 2001, p. 78-79. On the Academies (particularly the Academies of Love) in sixteenth-century France, see Frances A. Yates, *The French Academies of the Sixteenth Century*, London, Warburg Institute, 1947. See also Frances A. Yates, *Shakespeare's Last Plays. Selected Works of Frances Yates. Volume VI*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975, p. 1-4.

<sup>22</sup> Guy Le Fèvre de la Boderie was among the major experts of his epoch with regard to the Jewish and cabbalistic studies. Moreover, as I have shown in chapter II, the figure of Guy Le Fèvre de la Boderie (together with that of Guillaume Postel) played a fundamental role in linking Dante to Renaissance and, in particular, to Pico de la Mirandola. Ronsard, on the contrary, consecrated his verses to the rose in his sonnets *Quand vous serez bien vieille* (When you are old) and *Comme on voit sur la branche* (As one sees on its branch), in which he associates the rose to the month of may, to love, and to the dichotomy life/death, which are characteristics of the medieval love poetry: “as one sees on its branch, in May, the Rose [...] in its petal, grace and love repose, [...] so that alive / and dead, your body shall all roses be” (“comme on voit sur la branche au mois de mai la rose / [...] la grâce dans sa feuille, et l'amour se repose, / [...] afin que vif et mort ton corps ne soit que roses”. Pierre de Ronsard, *Comme on voit sur la branche*, in Pierre de Ronsard, *Œuvres complètes*, eds. Jean Céard, Daniel Ménager and Michel Simonin, Paris, Gallimard, t. I, 1993, p. 254-255.

<sup>23</sup> “Delle tante migliaia di Accademie, le quali nel Cinquecento e nel Seicento, sotto i fausti auspici di signorj magnanimi, erano sparse e fiorenti per l'Italia tutta, moltissime aveano la parte ostensiva e la segreta”. Gabriele Rossetti, *Il mistero dell'Amor platonico del Medio Evo*, v. 2, p. 1251.

<sup>24</sup> “Letterarie o scientifiche associazioni in apparenza, muratorie logge in sostanza, avean esse, nel lor duplice carattere, periodiche lezioni per illudere il pubblico, periodiche iniziazioni per istruire i proseliti: tale era la Accademia platonica, tale la Fiorentina che le successe; e tali fra le altre erano pure quelle di Giovanni Pontano in Napoli, e quella di Pomponio Leto in Roma”. *Ibid.*

writes, “was not at all different from the *Platonic one*”.<sup>25</sup> Rossetti affirms that “a great many aspects of the occult science of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio came from the pens of erudite members of those various societies”,<sup>26</sup> and he adds that not only men of letters but also artists such as Michelangelo or Raphael belonged to these initiatory associations.<sup>27</sup> He called these associations “meetings under a literary disguise”,<sup>28</sup> which spread all over Italy.<sup>29</sup> In particular, based on Marziale Reghellini’s studies, he claims that they represent the embryonic masonic lodge of the nineteenth century. According to Reghellini and Rossetti, the Platonic Academy would become a masonic lodge – a truth that literature (a certain literature) would seek to hide:

As long as we do not persuade ourselves that the current secret society is really so ancient as it swears to be; as long as we do not persuade ourselves that it – whose historical trace in past years cannot be demonstrated – could not reach us without using fallacious masks, changed according to the necessity of the time; as long as we do not persuade ourselves that it – since its first appearance in the last century – counted innumerable proselytes everywhere, could not do what it did without the patient work of previous eras; as long as we do not persuade ourselves that the most illustrious men of letters and the most munificent princes of the past were its pupils and promoters, [...] as long as we do not persuade ourselves about these and other things, the appearances will always hide the reality from us, and falsehood, which sits on the throne of truth, will always face us to hide from us the view of its enemy [the truth].<sup>30</sup>

In effect, Rossetti highlights the need to change the way love literature is considered, since it hides initiatory secrets under the mask of love. The Academies of Love were literary only in appearance, but in reality these were initiatory centres harbouring esoteric truths. In addition to the Italian Renaissance, he focuses on the English one and refers to Philip Sidney (1554-

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<sup>25</sup> “Non era per certo diversa dalla *Platonica*”. *Ibid.*, v. 1, p. 632.

<sup>26</sup> “Dalle penne dei dotti membri di quelle varie società uscirono moltissimi tratti intorno alla scienza occulta di Dante, Petrarca e Boccaccio”. *Ibid.*, v. 2, p. 1251.

<sup>27</sup> See *ibid.* It is worth noting that both Michelangelo and Raphael wrote love poems, and in his *Mistero dell’Amor Platónico*, Gabriele Rossetti states that the “platonic rhymes” (“rime platoniche”, *ibid.*) of the two artists are of the same nature as those of the *Fedeli d’Amore*. See *ibid.* In a letter to Charles Lyell dated 21 July 1840, Gabriele Rossetti speaks about Michelangelo and Raphael in the following terms: “I could send you a hundred things of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that I have amassed in my extracts. I would like to limit myself to two sonnets by the famous Raphael of Urbino, and show that he was of the sect, like his contemporary Michelangelo Buonarroti; and many others who were in the Pope’s circle” (“io potrei mandarvi cento cose del Cinquecento e Seicento che ho ammassate ne’ miei estratti. Vo’ limitarmi a due sonetti del famoso Raffaello d’Urbino, e vedere se egli non era della setta, come il suo contemporaneo Michelangelo Buonarroti; ed altri moltissimi ch’eran intorno al papa”). *Gabriele Rossetti. Carteggi. Volume quarto (1837-1840)*, p. 392.

<sup>28</sup> “Adunanze sotto aspetto meramente letterario”. Gabriele Rossetti, *Il mistero dell’Amor platonico del Medio Evo*, v. 1, p. 344.

<sup>29</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 632.

<sup>30</sup> “E finché non ci persuadiamo che l’attuale società segreta è realmente così antica com’ella giura di essere; finché non ci persuadiamo ch’ella, di cui mal possiamo additar la traccia storica nel campo degli anni remoti, non poté giungere sino a noi se non sotto fallaci maschere, cambiate secondo la necessità dei tempi; finché non ci persuadiamo ch’ella la quale, fin dal suo primo appalesarsi nel secolo or passato, vantava innumerevoli proseliti da per tutto, non poté mai giungere a tanto se non per la lenta opera dell’età precedenti; finché non ci persuadiamo che i letterati più illustri, ed i principi più munificenti de’ tempi andati, furono suoi alunni e promotori, [...] finché di queste cose e di altre non ci persuadiamo, le apparenze ci nasconderanno sempre le realtà, e il falso, che s’è assiso sul seggio del vero, ci starà sempre insormontabile incontro per involarci alla vista il suo atterrato rivale”. *Ibid.*, p. 344.

1585),<sup>31</sup> who comments that Plato and Boethius “made mistress Philosophy very often borrow the masking raiment of poesy”.<sup>32</sup> In fact, Sidney speaks not of Academies but of “Schools of Love”, and in one of his sonnets evokes a School of Love where Venus learns chastity: “the schools where Venus hath learned chastity”.<sup>33</sup> Sidney refers to a School of Love, which evokes those Schools of Love that spread in the French and Italian Middle Ages or those Platonic Academies that flourished in Italy in the Renaissance. The medieval Courts and Tribunals of Love, the Medieval and Renaissance Schools of Love, the *Fedeli d’Amore* in the Middle Ages and the Family of Love in the Renaissance: all these societies or Brotherhoods are always united by this mysterious Love.

With regard to the mystery of love hidden in poetry, Gabriele Rossetti quotes an entire passage of *The Defence of Poesy* by Philip Sidney:

I conjure you all that have had the evil luck to read this ink-wasting toy of mine, even in the name of the nine Muses, no more to scorn the sacred mysteries of poesy; no more to laugh at the name of poets, as though they were next inheritors to fools; no more to jest at the reverent title of a rhymer; but to believe, with Aristotle, that they were the ancient treasurers of the Grecians’ divinity; to believe, with Bembo, that they were first bringers-in of all civility; to believe, with Scaliger, that no philosopher’s precepts can sooner make you an honest man than the reading of Virgil; to believe, with Clauserus, the translator of Cornutus, that it pleased the heavenly Deity, by Hesiod and Homer, under the veil of fables, to give us all knowledge, logic, rhetoric, philosophy natural and moral, and *quid non?* to believe, with me, that there are many mysteries contained in poetry, which of purpose were written darkly, lest by profane wits it should be abused; to believe, with Landino, that they are so beloved of the gods that whatsoever they write proceeds of a divine fury; lastly, to believe themselves, when they tell you they will make you immortal by their verses.

[...]

[T]hus doing, your soul shall be placed with Dante’s Beatrice, or Virgil’s Anchises. But if (fie of such a but) you be born so near the dull-making cataract of Nilus that you cannot hear the planet-like music of poetry; if you have so earth-creeping a mind that it cannot lift itself up to look to the sky of poetry, or rather, by a certain rustical disdain, will become such a mome as to be a Momus of poetry; then, though I will not wish unto you the ass’s ears of Midas, nor to be driven by a poet’s verses, as Bubonax was, to hang himself, nor to be rhymed to death, as is said to be done in Ireland; yet thus much curse I must send you, in the behalf of all poets, that while you live, you live in love, and never get favour for lacking skill of a sonnet; and, when you die, your memory die from the earth for want of an epitaph.<sup>34</sup>

Sidney writes that the mystery of the love poetry that he expressed in verse can be found in the works of Dante and Virgil, by pointing out the continuity of a tradition founded on the secret

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<sup>31</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 495.

<sup>32</sup> Philip Sidney, *Astrophil and Stella* (Sonnet 42), in *Sir Philip Sidney. A Critical Edition of the Major Works*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones, Oxford, New York, Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 227.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 249-250.

of love which links the Italian Middle Ages (and the French one) to the English Renaissance. But there is a fundamental figure who, in turn, links the Italian Renaissance to the English one: Giordano Bruno.

The author of the *Eroici Furori* (Heroic Frenzies, 1585) has been studied in detail by Frances Yates in her book *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (1964), but Gabriele Rossetti had also stressed on various occasions, both in his letters to Charles Leyll and in the *Mistero dell'Amor Platonico*, the importance of Bruno in terms of the esoteric doctrine of love that was transmitted from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, and from there to the nineteenth century. In a letter to Charles Leyll on 7 January 1837, Rossetti defines Giordano Bruno as “a real storeroom of secret science”,<sup>35</sup> and it may not be a coincidence that Bruno dedicated his *Eroici Furori* to Philip Sidney. By dedicating the *Eroici Furori* to Sidney, Bruno creates a bridge between the Italian and English culture of the Renaissance. As Frances Yates remarks, Philip Sidney was “the initiator of the Elizabethan poetic Renaissance”,<sup>36</sup> and it is also thanks to Sidney that English poets came into contact with Petrarchism and thus medieval Italian love literature. In fact, the love poems dedicated by Bruno to Philip Sidney are imbued with Petrarchan mannerisms and accompanied by comments which explain the nature of love evoked by Giordano Bruno, a philosophical love, a mystical one, which is not the love commonly intended for a woman but love for the most intellectual part of the soul. Bruno confirms the mystical aims of his love poetry by comparing them (in his dedication to Sidney) to Solomon’s *Song of Songs* which, as we have seen in previous chapters, is closely linked to the love poetry of Dante and of the *Fedeli d’Amore*, and especially so to the symbol of the rose, which is the emblem of the mystical love in the *Song of Songs*: “I am the rose of Sharon, the wild lily of the valley”.<sup>37</sup> Bruno cites Solomon’s words: “*en ipse stat post parietem nostrum, respiciens per cancellos, et prospiciens per fenestras*”.<sup>38</sup> This is the image of a window that we find in the biblical text of *Proverbs* (II, 6), which tells of the deception of the prostitute at the window, but this image of the window as a meeting place can also be found in Dante (who in his *Banquet* praises Solomon) in the *Vita Nova* (XXXV), where he introduces the image of the gentle woman: “then I saw a gracious woman, young and very beautiful, who was watching me from her window so compassionately, to judge by her look, that all compassion seemed gathered in

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<sup>35</sup> “Vero ripostiglio di scienza segreta”. Letter from Gabriele Rossetti to Charles Leyll on 7 January 1837, in Gabriele Rossetti, *Gabriele Rossetti. Carteggi. Volume quinto (1841-1847)*, p. 6.

<sup>36</sup> Frances A. Yates, “The Emblematic Conceit in Giordano Bruno’s *De gli eroici furori* and in the Elizabethan Sonnet Sequences”, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, v. 6, 1943, p. 110.

<sup>37</sup> *The Song of Songs. A new translation with an introduction and commentary*, eds. and translation by Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch with an Introduction and Commentary, Afterword by Robert Ater, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1998, p. 55. On the symbolism of the rose in *The Song of songs*, see Guido Ceronetti, “Le rose del cantico”, in *Il Cantico dei Cantici*, ed. Guido Ceronetti, Milan, Adelphi, 1975, p. 47-115.

<sup>38</sup> Giordano Bruno, *The Heroic Frenzies*, a translation with Introduction and Notes by Paul Eugene Memmo Jr., Chapel Hill, The University of Carolina Press, 1964, p. 66.



her”.<sup>39</sup> We also find the image of a window in the author that perhaps, more than any other, praised the rose in English literature: William Shakespeare. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the *topos* of the window, or rather of the balcony, seals the love between the two lovers. From the *Song of Songs* to Dante, from Dante to Bruno, from Bruno to Shakespeare: love through a window.

Moreover, it is particularly interesting to highlight the recurrence, in Bruno’s *Heroic Frenzies*, of the theme of mystical death associated with the image of a woman’s glance, which has the power to kill (*Heroic Frenzies* II, i, 47; I, iv, 19). This is the mystical death of the soul, according to the canon of Petrarchan poetry and, therefore, of the Italian medieval tradition.<sup>40</sup> It is a theme that I have already discussed in previous chapters with regard to the poetry of the troubadours and of the *Fedeli d’Amore*, and this *topos* is repeated in the Renaissance. The death of Bruno’s lovers is the same death that the Cabbalists called *mors osculi*, and which in Eastern Sufi poetry was considered as the path towards eternal life. Bruno combines ordinary love with spiritual love. He describes the torments inflicted by the woman on her lover to show the tortuous and painful path of spiritual experience, where Cupid’s darts are a manifestation of the Divine, who pierces the soul of the man and makes him suffer, die and rise again.<sup>41</sup> Once again, as in medieval love poetry, love is a form of initiation, and the love for a woman is nothing more than the viaticum of this spiritual initiation. A sentence of Giordano Bruno seems to recall directly the Italian *Fedeli d’Amore*, who spoke of women who were not women: Bruno spoke of women who “are not women, they are not ladies, but, in the guise of ladies, they are nymphs, goddesses and of celestial substance”.<sup>42</sup>

The quotations by Giordano Bruno from Petrarch and from the *Song of Songs* confirm that the *Heroic Frenzies* belong to that chain which links love literature to an initiatory nature from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. The confirmation is given by Frances Yates, who writes: “however much it [the sonnet sequence of the *Heroic Frenzies*] might appear to be addressed to an ‘ordinary love’, it would in fact be a record of spiritual experience, a translation of the images of the *Canticle* into Petrarchan conceits used as hieroglyphs”.<sup>43</sup> These are practically the same intuitions that Gabriele Rossetti and Luigi Valli expressed with regard to Dante and the love poets of the Middle Ages.

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<sup>39</sup> Dante, *Vita Nova*, p. 49.

<sup>40</sup> See Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, p. 275-276; Adriano Lanza, *op. cit.*, p. 103-105.

<sup>41</sup> See Frances A. Yates, “The Emblematic Conceit in Giordano Bruno’s *De gli eroici furori* and in the Elizabethan Sonnet Sequences”, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, p. 101-121.

<sup>42</sup> Giordano Bruno, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

<sup>43</sup> Frances A. Yates, “The Emblematic Conceit in Giordano Bruno’s *De Gli Eroici Furori* and in the Elizabethan Sonnet Sequences”, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, p. 108.

“What’s in a name: that which we call a rose”: the Shakespearean rose

I have spoken thus far of the esoteric love of the Italian Renaissance and its dissemination in Europe in previous chapters, mentioning William Shakespeare on several occasions, whom Gabriele Rossetti defined as “the British Dante”,<sup>44</sup> highlighting the metaphysical scope of the works written by the two geniuses of Italian and English literatures. In the letters between Gabriele Rossetti and Charles Lyell, the name of Shakespeare is evoked on several occasions and is related to the initiatory dimension of the love literature.<sup>45</sup> In the letters between Gabriele Rossetti and Charles Lyell, Shakespeare’s name is mentioned several times in relation to the initiatory dimension of love literature. Of the two writers, it is mainly Lyell who mentions Shakespeare. Rossetti did not explore the esoteric dimension of Shakespeare’s work, although in Shakespearean criticism one encounters all those elements we have seen in medieval love poetry; but above in all his works we find the enigma of the rose.

However, we must bear in mind that the historical context in which Shakespeare was writing was the Elizabethan age, a period which, as Gabriela Dragnea Horvath remarks, “is definible through various analogies: with the Middle Ages in which it was born, with the Italian Renaissance which has influenced it, with the Northern European Renaissance, that links England, Germany and the Netherlands and partially France under the reign of the reform”.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, Gabriele Dragnea Horvath observes that “approaching the religious Elizabethan thought means going into the philosophy of the time, strictly linked to theology, but also to esotericism, which was a system of thought adopted by the cultural elite, and Shakespeare could not be extraneous”.<sup>47</sup> Shakespeare, in fact, lived at a time when the English intellectual elite was interested in cabbala, hermeticism and magic. For example, Dee, Bacon, Fludd, Harriott, Heywood and Chester, to name but a few, were involved, to a lesser or greater extent, with these subterranean currents in the history of ideas.<sup>48</sup> In reality, esoteric science interested not only the English intellectual elite, but also, and more generally, the European one. Nonetheless, compared to the rest of Europe, England presented an extremely complex political situation, characterized by the break with Rome and by colonial expansion. Such instances have also had

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<sup>44</sup> “Il britannico Dante”. Gabriele Rossetti, *Il mistero dell’Amor platonico del Medio Evo*, v. 2, p. 1234.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Gabriele Rossetti, *Gabriele Rossetti. Carteggi. Volume secondo (1826-1831)*, p. 428; *Gabriele Rossetti. Carteggi. Volume quinto (1841-1847)*, p. 342.

<sup>46</sup> “Il profilo culturale del periodo elisabettiano è definibile attraverso varie analogie: col Medioevo da cui nasce, con il Rinascimento italiano che l’ha influenzato, col Rinascimento Nord europeo, che riunisce Inghilterra, Germania, e Paesi Bassi e parzialmente la Francia sotto il regno della riforma”. Gabriela Dragnea Horvath, *Shakespeare, ermetismo, mistica, magia*, Rome, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2003, p. 4.

<sup>47</sup> “Abbordare il pensiero religioso elisabettiano significa addentrarsi nella filosofia del tempo, strettamente connessa alla teologia, ma anche all’esoterismo, sistema di pensiero adottato dalle élites culturali, cui Shakespeare non poteva essere estraneo”. *Ibid.* See also Paul Arnold, *Ésotérisme de Shakespeare*, Paris, Mercure de France, 1955, p. 85.

<sup>48</sup> See Paul Arnold, *Ésotérisme de Shakespeare*, p. 7-9, 68; Paul Arnold, *Clef pour Shakespeare*, Paris, Vrin, 1977, p. 18.

a remarkable influence on literature, as Frances Yates has demonstrated with regard to works by Spenser, Sidney and Shakespeare – in particular, Shakespeare’s late works.<sup>49</sup> In these authors the rose is always present, and this symbol also acts as a background to the historical and political context of the time. A good example is the War of the Roses, whose echo resounds in Shakespeare’s verses and who, on various occasions, evokes the white and red colour of the two opposing factions, for example, in *Henry VI* (II, IV):

And here I prophesy: this brawl to-day,  
Grown to this faction in the Temple-garden,  
Shall send between the Red Rose and White  
A thousand souls to death and deadly night.<sup>50</sup>

As Frédéric Portal points out, the red and white colours that make up pink have a mystical significance, since “red is the symbol of divine love, white is the symbol of divine wisdom” and so “the union of these two colours will mean: love of the divine wisdom”:<sup>51</sup> in Shakespeare, the hermeticism concealed in the colours of the rose is intertwined with the political context of Elizabethan England, rendering the symbol of the rose even more complex and charged with meaning: not only in literary fiction, or hermetic science, but also in politics.

The Shakespearean rose, as in the case of the Troubadours and the *Fedeli d’Amore* poetry of the Middle Ages, is associated with a *topos* which is at the centre of all of Shakespeare’s work: love. His sonnets, tragedies and comedies are constantly imbued with the theme of love.<sup>52</sup> His work is linked to the Platonic tradition, as demonstrated by Frances Yates, who was one of the first to notice the esoteric dimension in Shakespeare.<sup>53</sup> In Shakespeare’s

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<sup>49</sup> See Frances A. Yates, *Shakespeare’s Last Plays*, p. 60-64.

<sup>50</sup> William Shakespeare, *The First Part of King Henry VI*, ed. John Dover Wilson, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 39.

<sup>51</sup> “Le rouge est le symbole de l’amour divin, le blanc, de la sagesse divine”; “la réunion de ces deux couleurs signifiera: amour de la sagesse divine”. Frédéric Portal, *Des couleurs symboliques. Dans l’Antiquité, le Moyen-Age et les temps modernes* [1857], Paris, Éditions de la Maisnie, 1975, p. 217.

<sup>52</sup> See Frances A. Yates, “Shakespeare and the Platonic Tradition”, *University of Edinburgh Journal*, v. 12, n. 1, 1942, p. 2-12. In this essay, Frances Yates explores the relations between the English medieval Platonic tradition (revised by the group of Thomas Moore) and Florentine Neo-Platonism. See also Gabriela Dragnea Horvath, *op. cit.*, p. 53-108.

<sup>53</sup> On the esoteric dimension of Shakespeare’s work, see Paul Arnold, *Ésotérisme de Shakespeare*; Paul Arnold, *Clef pour Shakespeare*; Frances A. Yates, *Shakespeare’s Last Plays*; William Knight, *The Imperial Theme. Further Interpretations of Shakespeare’s Tragedies Including the Roman Plays*, London, Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1931; Florin Mihaescu, *Shakespeare si teatrul initiatic*, Bucarest, Rosmarin, 1998; Sebastiano Caracciolo, *La science hermétique: considérations sur la tradition de l’antique et primitif rite oriental de Misraïm et Memphis; suivi de L’ésotérisme dans “Le marchand de Venise” de William Shakespeare*, Paris, L’Originel, 1999; Alberto Cesare Ambesi, *L’enigma dei Rosacroce. La saggezza nascosta*, Rome, Edizioni Mediterranee, 1980, p. 119-145; Domenico Rotundo, *Le origini italiane di Shakespeare. J. Florio e la Rosacroce. Scienza ed esoterismo nella Calabria del seicento*, Carmagnola, Edizioni ARKTOS, 2005; Gabriela Dragnea Horvath, *Shakespeare, ermetismo, mistica, magia*; Claude Mourthé, *Shakespeare*, Paris, Gallimard, 2006, p. 211-243; *Shakespeare e Tradizione. Miti ed eroi del teatro*, essays by Eduardo Ciampi, Gabriele Dragnea Horvath, Martin Lings, Withall N. Perry, Rome, Irfan Edizioni, 2017. Among the studies mentioned, Sebastiano Caracciolo’s work is, to my knowledge, one of the few to link Shakespeare to the esoteric dimension of the *Fedeli d’Amore* and the Troubadours. See Sebastiano Caracciolo, *op. cit.*, p. 156-160. The original Italian title of Caracciolo’s book is *L’esoterismo ne “Il Mercante di Venezia” di William Shakespeare* (Bologna, Lo Scarabeo,

works one can find all the themes that we have encountered in previous chapters in relation to medieval love poetry, in particular those themes which refer to the symbolism of the initiatory tradition. According to Paul Arnold, Shakespearean love is an initiatory love, a spiritual marriage which leads, through love initiation, to occult transcendence.<sup>54</sup> These themes can be found, for example, in *Venus and Adonis*, in the *Rape of Lucrece*,<sup>55</sup> and especially in *Love's Labours Lost* – a play in which Shakespeare speaks of a mysterious Academy devoted to the study of the wisdom of eternal truths. Frances Yates considers this reference to the Academy as an allusion to the initiatory cenacles in Italy, whilst Abel Lefranc sees an allusion to the French Academies, particularly those in Paris where the Parisian elite met.<sup>56</sup> Beyond these hypotheses, which cannot be confirmed, I am interested in the nature of these academies where the *topos* of love combines with the concept of truth and with the initiatory tradition. *Love's Labours Lost* tells the story of the King of Navarre who retreats from the world for three years with his trustworthy courtiers, with whom he founds an academy consecrated to science, to wisdom and to spiritual initiation. Biron, one of the king's courtiers, demonstrates that wisdom is acquired through love, and that the eye of the woman symbolises this wisdom.<sup>57</sup> Thus, *Love's Labour's Lost* is a history of love which requires sacrifice, suffering and tests to overcome. In fact, the Princess of France forces the King to accept her conditions if he wants to marry her, by spending one year as a hermit; during this year he must be patient and bear the austerity, the absence of worldly pleasures, the pleasures of the senses, abstinence from food, and the lack of female company. Love will be recompensed after having borne these sufferings and overcoming all the trials. This concept of suffering and tests associated with love is also evoked by Shakespeare in *The Tempest*, for example, when Prospero utters the following words: “all

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1993). The author published the Italian version of this book under the pseudonym of Vergilius. Another work that links Shakespeare's esotericism to Dante's, evoking the studies of Gabriele Rossetti and Luigi Valli, is Domenico Rotundo's *Le origini italiane di Shakespeare. J. Florio e la Rosacroce. Scienza ed esoterismo nella Calabria del Seicento*. In this study, which postulates Shakespeare's Italian origins, the author highlights the relationship between the mystical-initiatory ideal of Dante and of the *Fedeli d'Amore* and the works of Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton and Giambattista Marino. He also refers to Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Rosicrucian tradition. See Domenico Rotundo, *op. cit.*, p. 27-28. It is interesting to note that Domenico Rotundo's analysis of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, and in particular one of its characters, *Fidelia*, whose name clearly alludes to the concept of fidelity, touches on the possible relationship between Shakespeare and the esotericism of Dante and of the *Fedeli d'Amore* theorised by Rossetti and Valli. We can therefore see a possible link between *Fidelia* and the *Fedeli d'Amore*.

<sup>54</sup> See Paul Arnold, *Ésotérisme de Shakespeare*, p. 206.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>56</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 90, 226; Abel Lefranc, “Les Éléments français de ‘Peines d’amour perdues’ de Shakespeare”, *Revue Historique*, t. 178, fasc. 3, 1936, p. 411-432.

<sup>57</sup> “But love, first learned in a lady's eyes, / lives not alone immured in the brain; / but, with the motion of all elements, / courses as swift as thought in every power, / and gives to every power a double power, / above their functions and their offices. / It adds a precious seeing to the eye”. William Shakespeare, *Love's Labours Lost* (IV, III, v. 327-334), in William Shakespeare, *Complete Works*, edited with a glossary by W. J. Craig, London, New York, Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1966, p. 159.

thy vexations / were but my trials of thy love” (I, II, v. 5-6).<sup>58</sup> It is a love which is always thwarted and which requires obstacles to be overcome: thus, an initiatory love.<sup>59</sup> Likewise, in *Romeo and Juliet*, the love of the two protagonists is constantly menaced, undermined and hampered. Various obstacles hinder this impassioned love of Romeo and Juliet, and these obstacles are determined by both the external world and their respective families. *Romeo and Juliet* is the work above all others that features all the elements of the Platonic tradition of medieval love poetry. As Agostino Lombardo remarks, in *Romeo and Juliet*, one can see the convention of courtly love.<sup>60</sup> The influence of Petrarch is evident when Shakespeare speaks of “the numbers that Petrarch flowed in” (II, III, v. 39),<sup>61</sup> in addition to analogies with the French troubadours and the *Fedeli d’Amore*. In particular, as in the French Troubadours and the Italian *Fedeli d’Amore*, Shakespeare evokes the emblematic “book of love” [“this precious book of love” (I, III, v. 89)],<sup>62</sup> which represents one of the seminal moments of the love story between Romeo and Juliet: the lovers’ kiss. Juliet kisses Romeo, making reference to the “book of love”: “you kiss by th’book” (I, IV, v. 220).<sup>63</sup> But the *topos* of love in *Romeo and Juliet* is associated with another theme which is important in initiatory literature: death. “Thus with a kiss I die” (V, III, v. 120):<sup>64</sup> these are the words uttered by Romeo to Juliet when he thinks she is dead, and a kiss will also be given by Juliet when she awakes from the poison-induced sleep to find her lover dead:

What’s here? a cup, closed in my true love’s hand?  
 Poison, I see, hath been his timeless end:  
 O churl! drunk all, and left no friendly drop  
 To help me after? I will kiss thy lips;  
 Haply some poison yet doth hang on them,  
 To make die with a restorative.  
 Thy lips are warm.<sup>65</sup> (V, III, v. 161-167)

As we have seen in the medieval love poetry of the troubadours and the *Fedeli d’Amore*, the death by a kiss linked the verse of Eastern love poets to poetry of the Western tradition, and Juliet comes from the East: “what light through yonder window breaks? / It is the east, and Juliet is the sun” (II, I, v. 44-45).<sup>66</sup> This is another characteristic that links the love evoked by Shakespeare to that of the medieval *Fedeli d’Amore*. Moreover, in this passage, Juliet addresses

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<sup>58</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, with an Introduction by Burton Raffel, with an essay by Harold Bloom, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2006, p. 96.

<sup>59</sup> See Paul Arnold, *Ésotérisme de Shakespeare*, p. 226.

<sup>60</sup> See Agostino Lombardo, “Introduzione”, in William Shakespeare, *Romeo e Giuletta*, ed. Agostino Lombardo, Milan, Feltrinelli, 2005, p. X-XI.

<sup>61</sup> William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, p. 121.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 202.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105-106.

the dead Romeo, calling him “true love”. In fact, the adjective “true” can mean both “real”, “loyal” or “faithful”.<sup>67</sup> In the Italian version of *Romeo and Juliet* by Agostino Lombardi (as well as in the “Bibliothèque la Pléiade” French translation by Jean-Michel Déprats), the expression “true love” is translated “fedele d’amore”,<sup>68</sup> that is to say “faithful love”, and the concept of “faithfulness to love” is repeated various times in the work by Shakespeare, such as in the case of the “true love’s rite” (V, III).<sup>69</sup>

We have already seen how love was often associated with the concept of wisdom. Juliet’s love is also characterized by the fact of being “wise”, a “wise” love, connected with the concept of ecstasy (the *excessus mentis* which Luigi Valli highlighted in his *Linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d’Amore*), as one can read in the words of Romeo: “she is too fair, too wise, wisely too fair, / to merit bliss by making me despair” (I, I, v. 215-216).<sup>70</sup> But this ecstasy arising from the wisdom linked to love is not the only characteristic that connects Shakespeare with the love of the Troubadours and the *Fedeli d’Amore*. A good example is the *coup de foudre*, the overwhelming love at first sight that affects the lovers in medieval Italian and French love poems, and those in the Eastern Sufi tradition. We can find the same *topos* in *Romeo and Juliet*, where Juliet describes her feelings for Romeo: “it is too rash, too unadvised, too sudden, / too like the lightning which doth cease to be / Ere one one can say ‘It lightens’” (II, I, v. 160-163).<sup>71</sup>

Moreover, the concept of the unity of opposites, in terms of the *topos* of androgyny (a theme that is central to esotericism, which would be explored in the nineteenth century by authors such as Péladan), pervades the whole of *Romeo and Juliet*. In fact, the two lovers come from two feuding families [“two households both alike in dignity / in fair Verona (where we lay our scene) / from ancient grudge break to new mutiny” (Prologue, v. 1-3)],<sup>72</sup> and it is their love that negates the hatred between the two families. Juliet expresses her opposed love (the “love-hate”) for Romeo: “my only love sprung from my only hate, / too early seen unknown, and known too late. / Prodigious birth of love it is to me / that I must love a loathed enemy” (I, I, v. 248-251).<sup>73</sup> It is love that brings together the opposites – a love expressed by Shakespeare in his floral symbolism, where love and death combine in the shape of flower: “our bridal flowers serve for a buried corpse, / and all things change them to their contrary” (IV, V, v. 89-90).<sup>74</sup> The flower is the supreme symbol of this unity of opposites, in which love and death are

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<sup>67</sup> See *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, ed. A. S. Hornby, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 1658.

<sup>68</sup> See William Shakespeare, *Romeo e Giuletta*, p. 227; William Shakespeare, *Tragédies. I. Œuvres complètes*, ed. Jean Michel Déprats with the collaboration of Gisèle Venet, Paris, Gallimard, t. I, 2002, p. 438-439.

<sup>69</sup> William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, p. 196.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

a single thing: “love in death” (IV, V, v. 58),<sup>75</sup> says Paris in *Romeo and Juliet*. We have already encountered this concept of “love-death” in medieval love poetry, and in particular in the work of the *Fedele d’Amore* Jacques de Basieux, where “love” is “a-mors”, the demise of death through love. Thus, the eternal love between Romeo and Juliet is sealed by death, a love which leads to death – the death which allows the immortality of the lovers.

So, can we speak of initiatory love in Shakespeare? Can we find any connection with the medieval French and Italian court of Love, in which mysterious rites of love took place? There is obviously insufficient evidence to support this idea, but it is undeniable that Shakespeare, in the Renaissance, mentions these enigmatic rites of love, as he himself called them in *Romeo and Juliet*: “true love’s rite” (V, III).<sup>76</sup> In an enigmatic passage, in Juliet’s words the “amorous rite” converged with the concept of darkness and sun, which would be adored by the world, foreshadowing a form of religious connection (III, II):

Lovers can see to do their amorous rites  
By their own beauties; or, if love be blind,  
It best agrees with night. (v. 8-10)  
[...]  
Come, gentle night, come, loving, black-brow’d night,  
Give me my Romeo; and when I shall die,  
Take him and cut him out in little stars,  
And he will make the face of heaven so fine  
That all the world will be in love with night  
And pay no worship to the garish sun.<sup>77</sup> (v. 20-25)

In this passage, there is a clear reference to amorous rites, therefore it can be inferred that love would be dictated by a precise ritual, and just as in the poetry of the *Fedeli d’Amore*, of the Troubadours and of the Trouvères, the rose is central to *Romeo and Juliet* and, more broadly, to Shakespeare’s work.<sup>78</sup>

Floral symbolism is found throughout Shakespeare’s work. For example, *The Winter’s Tale* is a play imbued with references to floral symbolism. Here he introduces mysterious allusions to flowers, evoking winter flowers, narcissus, lilies and primula, and associates this symbolism with the month of March, and with the eyes of Juno and Cytherea.<sup>79</sup> Another example is *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, where one finds the same motif of the white and red flower encountered in Dante: “little western flower, / before milk-white, now purple with love’s

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<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196. The concept of the “love’s rite” can even be found in Shakespeare’s sonnet 23: “so I, for fear or trust, forget to say / the perfect ceremony of love’s rite”. William Shakespeare, *The Complete Sonnets and Poems*, ed. Colin Burrow, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 427.

<sup>77</sup> William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, p. 144-145.

<sup>78</sup> It is also noteworthy that “The Rose” was the name of the London theatre where Shakespeare presented some of his first plays. See David Lucking, *The Shakespearean Name. Essays on Romeo and Juliet, The Tempest, and Other Plays*, Bern, Peter Lang, 2007, p. 37.

<sup>79</sup> See Paul Arnold, *Clef pour Shakespeare*, p. 205.

wound” (II, I, v. 166-167).<sup>80</sup> There are frequent floral images in *Romeo and Juliet*, and the flower that contained the mystery of this work is the rose – the same flower that embodied the mystery of medieval love, from *The Romance of the Rose* to Dante.

The whole mystery of the symbolism of Shakespeare’s rose can be seen in the famous sentence uttered by Juliet: “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other word would smell as sweet” (II, I, v. 85-86).<sup>81</sup> Moreover, in Shakespeare the rose, as in the case of the *Fedeli d’Amore*, is typified by its vagueness, but there is a detail that Shakespeare adds, namely that the rose, referred to another way, would always have the same scent, and always be the same. Is it possibly a doctrine, maybe an initiatory one? Obviously, it is not possible to confirm this hypothesis, but it is one that is feasible. Whilst it is true that a number of scholars, starting from Frances Yates, have identified elements belonging to the esoteric tradition, it is also true that this concept is expressed by the symbols which are present in Shakespeare’s work, obviously including the enigmatic flower of the rose.

The rose also appears indirectly in Shakespeare’s works in the name of one of his protagonists: Rosaline. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Rosaline represents a source of sadness for Romeo, as a love that he does not want to remember because it makes him sad. When Friar Lawrence asks Romeo “wast thou with Rosaline” (II, II, v. 44),<sup>82</sup> Romeo replies: “With Rosaline, my ghostly father? No, / I have forgot that name and that name’s woe” (II, II, v. 45-46).<sup>83</sup> Romeo abandons Rosaline, whom he once loved. He no longer feels any love for Rosaline. The pure love is for Juliet, as Romeo says to Friar Lawrence: “Her I love now / doth grace for grace and love for love allow: / the other did not so” (II, II, v. 85-87).<sup>84</sup>

Rosaline is an enigmatic character, and though frequently named she never appears, she is never seen, she is invisible as pointed out by David Lucking, who speaks of her in terms of “obstinate invisibility”.<sup>85</sup> But Rosaline, whose name clearly refers to the symbol of the rose, is present in another work by Shakespeare: *Love’s Labour’s Lost*. Once again, love and the rose go hand in hand in the same work. Frances Yates considers *Love’s Labour’s Lost* as “an astonishing example of the incredible virtuosity with which Shakespeare uses esoteric imagery”,<sup>86</sup> and in this play the character of Rosaline appears in the guise of a woman loved by Biron. It is Rosaline who allows the beloved Biron to experience melancholy accompanied by the *furor* (the frenzy), and encounter universal harmony, in the form of love: “when Love

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<sup>80</sup> William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, ed. Reginald A. Foakes, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 176.

<sup>81</sup> William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, p. 107.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>85</sup> David Lucking, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

<sup>86</sup> Frances A. Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, p. 179.



speaks, the voice of all the gods / makes heaven drowsy with the harmony” (IV, III, v. 317-318).<sup>87</sup>

The rose associated with the name of the protagonists in Shakespearean works also appears in *As You Like It* with Rosalind, a name phonetically linked to Rosaline and which is present in the work by Thomas Lodge *Rosalynde, Euphues Golden Legacie* (1590), where the male protagonist is also associated with the floral symbolism of the rose, since his name is Rosador.<sup>88</sup> Rosalind appears in another work that was published after Lodge’s book: *Love’s Martyr: or Rosalins Complaint* (1601) by Robert Chester.<sup>89</sup> In this work, the truth of love is allegorically explained by the union of the phoenix and the turtle (“so they lov’d, as love in twaine. / Had the essence but in one, / two distincts, division none. / Number there in love was slain”),<sup>90</sup> and by the floral symbolism implied in the name of Rosalind. The figure of Rosalind is also associated in the work by Chester with a mysterious secret gathering: is this an allusion which hides its initiatory character in the shape of love and roses? It is undeniable, at least from the literary point of view, that there is a literary filiation with the works of the Middle Ages, in which the concept of a secret and the mystery of love had the rose as a common feature.

#### *Shakespeare Fedele d’Amore: from Romeo e Giulia by Matteo Bandello to Romeo and Juliet*

I shall conclude this parenthesis about the rose in Shakespeare’s work by mentioning a point which, to my knowledge, has been overlooked by the critics and which links Shakespeare with the question of the *Fedeli d’Amore*. In fact, the studies carried out by Mariella Di Brigida on Gabriele Rossetti’s unpublished documents in the archives of the British Columbia Library in Vancouver (the “Fondo Angeli-Dennis” archives) reveal an unexpected filiation between William Shakespeare and the esoteric love of the *Fedeli d’Amore*. In the Vancouver archives,

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<sup>87</sup> William Shakespeare, *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, in *Shakespeare. Complete Works*, edited with a Glossary by W. J. Craig, M. A., London, Oxford University Press, 1966, p. 159.

<sup>88</sup> See David Lucking, *op. cit.*, p. 78. It is interesting to note that Rosador corresponds to “Rose of gold” (“Rosa” = “Rose”, “dor” = “of gold”), and the nineteenth century saw the spread of an initiatory Order called the Order of the Rosy Cross of Gold (founded in the sixteenth century in Germany), which had an important influence on the literary production of the nineteenth century. See Robert Ambelain, *Templiers et Rose-Croix. Les survivances initiatiques. Documents pour servir à l’histoire de l’illuministe*, Paris, Adyar, 1955.

<sup>89</sup> The full title of the work by Chester is *Love’s Martyr: or Rosalins Complaint. Allegorically shadowing the truth of Love, in the constant Fate of the Phoenix and Turtle. A Poeme enterlaced with much varietie and raritie; now first translated out of the venerable Italian Torquato Caeliano, by Robert Chester. With the true legend of famous King Arthur the last of the nine Worthies, being the first Essay of a new Brytish Poet: collected out of diuerse Authentick Records. To these are added some new compositions of seuerall moderne Writers whose names are subscribed to their seuerall workes, vpon the first subiect viz. the Phoenix and Turtle*, London, Richard Field, 1601.

<sup>90</sup> Robert Chester, *Loves Martyr, or, Rolsalins Complaint. With its supplement, “Diverse Poeticall Essaies” on the Turtle and Phoenix by Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, George Chapman, John Martson, etc.*, edited, with introduction, notes and illustrations by the Rev. Alexander B. Grosart, LL.D., F.S.A., St. George’s, Blackburn, Lancashire, publish for The New Shakespere Society by N. Trübner & Co., 57, 59, Ludgate Hill, Lonodn, E. C., 1878, p. 182-183.

Mariella Di Brigida discovered many texts in which Gabriele Rossetti set out his theories on esoteric love in literature, focusing not only on Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio or French medieval poetry, but also on minor authors. One of the writers studied by Gabriele Rossetti is Matteo Bandello.<sup>91</sup> Why is Matteo Bandello important with regard to Shakespeare? Gabriele Rossetti did not mention Shakespeare in his study on Matteo Bandello, but this latter is extremely important for Shakespeare's literary production. In fact, he is one of the main sources of inspiration, or rather more than a source, because *Romeo and Juliet* is none other than the faithful reproduction of a novel by Bandello, where the protagonists are Romeo and Giulia.<sup>92</sup> Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet are a carbon copy of the lovers in Bandello's novel, set in Verona during the feud between the Montagues and the Capulets. According to Gabriele Rossetti, Matteo Bandello's novel is a sectarian work which expressed the same concepts as the *Fedeli d'Amore*: "Bandello's *Novels* are equally sectarian, but they are written with an art of dissimulation which is almost impossible to notice".<sup>93</sup> In Rossetti's opinion Matteo Bandello was a "faithful of love", a *Fedele d'Amore*. Thus, the love between Romeo and Giulia (Shakespeare changed the Italian name "Giulia" to "Juliet") in Bandello's novel and its mysterious rose are the same symbols that expressed the secret esoteric doctrine of the Italian *Fedeli d'Amore* or the French troubadours. If it is true that Bandello's novel contains the esoteric doctrine of love hidden in the love story of Romeo and Giulia, as well as in the rose, this would mean that Shakespeare was influenced (consciously or unconsciously) by the work of an Italian *Fedele d'Amore*, a Faithful of Love, thus spreading the esoteric doctrine of love from the Italian Middle Ages to the English Renaissance. No scholar has pointed out this particular aspect, which represents, if confirmed, an important discovery in literary scholarship as it would demonstrate the filiation between Shakespeare and the *Fedeli d'Amore* and thus, indirectly, between Shakespeare and Dante. The two centres of Western literary tradition, as Harold Bloom has defined them,<sup>94</sup> Dante and Shakespeare, the two greatest figures of world literature, who strongly influenced literature in the following centuries, shared the same

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<sup>91</sup> See Gabriele Rossetti, *Taccuini inediti*, p. 32-34, 166-167, 306-312, 382-388. Gabriele Rossetti hinted at the figure of Matteo Bandello (without studying Bandello's literary production in depth) in a note in his *Mistero dell'Amor Platonico*. See Gabriele Rossetti, *Il mistero dell'Amor platonico del Medio Evo*, v. 1, p. 598). On Matteo Bandello, see Ernesto Masi, *Matteo Bandello o Vita italiana in un novelliere del cinquecento*, Bologna, Zanichelli, 1900; *Matteo Bandello. Studi di Letteratura Rinascimentale*, eds. Delmo Maestri and Ludmilla Pradi, Alessandria, Edizioni dell'Orso, v. I-II, 2007, v. III, 2010.

<sup>92</sup> See *Novelle di Matteo Bandello*, Florence, Tipografia Borghi e Compagni, 1832; *Romeo and Juliet before Shakespeare. Four Early Stories of Star-Crossed Love by Masuccio Salernitano, Luigi da Porto, Matteo Bandello and Pierre Boaistuau*, translated, with introduction and notes, by Nicole Prunster, Toronto, Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2000; Jill L. Levenson, "Romeo and Juliet before Shakespeare", *Studies in Philologies*, vol. 81, No. 3, 1984, p. 325-347.

<sup>93</sup> "Le *Novelle* del Bandello sono egualmente settarie, ma fatte con un'arte di dissimulazione che è quasi impossibile scorgerlo". Gabriele Rossetti, "Taccuino I", in *Gabriele Rossetti. Taccuini inediti*, p. 166.

<sup>94</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon. The Books and School of the Ages*, New York, San Diego, London, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994.

doctrine: the doctrine of esoteric love disguised in the symbol of the rose. For Gabriele Rossetti, Dante's work spread the same doctrine as Matteo Bandello's novel on the love story between Romeo and Giulia – a love story of Romeo and Giulia that is the same love story as Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet: is it only literary filiation or is it a filiation of an initiatory and esoteric nature? Research in this field would open up unexplored directions, which would have been unthinkable until a few decades ago. This is the most interesting point with regard to Shakespeare's literary production based on Gabriele Rossetti's contribution; it is also the most fascinating line of investigation that I propose in my research in this chapter on the Renaissance rose. The mystery of Platonic love also concerns Shakespeare and the key to understanding it is the symbol of the rose.

### *The emblem of the rose*

The Shakespearean rose is a symbol which, in the period between the Middle Ages and Shakespeare's time, is continuously present in the works of English, French and Italian literature, and more generally in European literature. Between the fifteenth and the seventeenth centuries, the rose was not only a symbol in literary works, but also the emblem chosen by illustrious personalities of the period who had a pivotal role in the cultural, political and religious domain. The rose is the symbol of Spinoza who, as reminded by Jean Marquès-Rivière, always held his rose-shaped seal tied with a key symbolising access to the hidden truth.<sup>95</sup> Before Spinoza, a cross with a rose at the centre was also the emblem of Luther<sup>96</sup> who, referred to the double meaning of the *Song of Songs*, revealing that princes used the language of love to express, in a hidden way, truth of a political nature:

Solomon resorted to a figurative style so that common people could understand, in his magnificent words and double entendre, a meaning which was completely different from the usual meaning. This is what princes used to do when they wrote verses about love, which common people saw as poems addressed to a bride or to a beloved girl, while, in fact, these princes spoke about the state and the governance of their peoples. The same thing happened when they used words and terms taken from the language of the hunt.<sup>97</sup>

Gianbattista della Porta, in his *De Furtivus Litterarum Notis*, confirms the amphibological sense of love discourse used by those in power to hide political matters: “writing of *politics* by

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<sup>95</sup> See Jean Marquès-Rivière, *Histoire des doctrines ésotériques*, Paris, Payot, 1940, p. 346.

<sup>96</sup> Arthur Edward Waite, *The Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross. Being Records of The House of The Holy Spirit in Its Inward and Outward History* [1961], New Jersey, Secaucus, University Books, 1973, p. 101, 234.

<sup>97</sup> *Luther in cantico canticorum* (1570) quoted by Eugène Aroux in *Dante hérétique, révolutionnaire et socialiste, révélations d'un catholique sur le Moyen-Âge*, Paris, J. Renouard, 1854, p. 26. This passage is quoted also in Pierre Dujols, *La Chevalerie amoureuse, troubadours, félibres et rose-croix* [1991], Grenoble, Le Mercure dauphinois, 2014, p. 194.

pretending to write about Love”,<sup>98</sup> as Gabriele Rossetti remarks in his *Mistero dell’Amor Platonico*. However, it seems that those in power did not only speak of love, but also of roses. A good example is the manuscript presented by Michael Maier to King James I (VI of Scotland) in 1611, known as the “King James’s Christams Card”<sup>99</sup> since it was sent at Christmas time. This document describes a rose with eight petals at the centre, and Maier greets James in a rather strange manner: “VIVE IACUBE DIU REX MAGNE BRITTANNICE SALVE TEGMINE QUO VERE SIT ROSA LAETA TUO” which means “Long live James, King of Great Britain, hail, may the Rose be joyful under thy protection”.<sup>100</sup> Maier makes a link between James and the Rose, and further on in the text he pledges that Eros must replace Eris, namely the Goddess of Discord. The implication of the rose is obviously political in this case, and another passage of the document makes it even more enigmatic: “Rosa nec erucis sit Rosa, nec Borea”, which means “May the Rose not be gnawed by the canker of the North Wind”.<sup>101</sup> As Susanna Åkermann has pointed out, Adam McClean translates the second rose as “cancer”, but the meaning of “center” is also valid.<sup>102</sup> Beyond the fact that “canker” could be translated with the word “cancer” or “centre”, what is worth pointing out is that the symbolism of the rose is linked to a political reference, which describes the wind of the North (the Power of the North?) as negative and dangerous. This is why Maier hopes that the rose can be protected from the sinister and mysterious wind of the North, with the obvious link to political Power, since the document is addressed to one of the most important kings of the Renaissance. In previous chapters, I have shown that in the Middle Ages there were strange letters between poets and kings which alluded to love and roses. But whilst in the Middle Ages epistolary exchanges occurred between troubadours or the *Fedeli d’Amore* and the kings, here the exchange is between a supposed Rosicrucian (Maier) and a king (James I), thus the mysterious meaning of the rose has to do with the Rosicrucian movement, as Cristopher McIntosh has pointed out: “here is Maier in 1612 addressing King James in terms that suggest the existence of a Rosicrucian-type movement in Britain of which James was apparently seen as protector. [...] The document can therefore possibly be seen as a very early example of the rose (with or without the cross) being used as a kind of recognition among people of Hermetic interests”.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> “Scriver di *politica* fingendo scriver d’Amore”. Gabriele Rossetti, *Il mistero dell’Amor platonico del Medio Evo*, v. 1, p. 370.

<sup>99</sup> The document is preserved in the Scottish Record Office of Edinburgh (reference GD 242/212). See Adam McClean, “The impact of the Rosicrucian Manifestos in Britain”, in *Das Erbe der Christian Rosencreutz*, ed. Franciscus Antonius Wilhelmus Gerard Janssen, Amsterdam, In the Pelikaan, Stuttgart, Ernst Hauswedel Verlaag, 1988, p. 170-179.

<sup>100</sup> See Susanna Åkermann, *Rose Cross over the Baltic. The Spread of Rosicrucianism over the Europe*, Leiden, Boston, Köln, Brill, 1998, p. 133.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> Cristopher McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians. The History, Mythology, and Rituals of an Esoteric Order*, San Francisco, Newburyport, Weiser Books, 1997, p. 33.

Hence, political Power, literary hermeticism and Rosicrucianism converge in the flower of the rose, which was also the emblem of the supposed author of the Rosicrucian manifestos, Johann Valentin Andreae, whose coat of arms featured a rose, precisely the image of Saint Andrew's cross united to the rose.<sup>104</sup> The symbolic roses characterize the symbol of *The Chemical Wedding*, whose motto evoked the centrality of the rose symbol: "Arcana publicata vilescunt et gratiam prophanata amittunt: / Ideo ne margaritas objice porcis, seu asino substerne rosas"<sup>105</sup> (tr. "Mysteries made public become cheap and things profaned lose their grace: / Therefore, cast not pearls before swine nor make a bed of roses for an ass").<sup>106</sup> The rose was also the emblem of the *New Atlantis* and of the *De Augmentis* by Bacon (considered by some scholars as a member of the Rosy-Cross brotherhood), whilst we find the rose again in the *Amphiteatrum Sapientiae aeternae solius verae Christiano Kabbalisticum* (1598) by Heinrich Khunrath (1506-1605), who speaks in his work of the great initiation, divided into seven degrees, and includes in the book the image of the rose with a man – placed at the centre of the image – whose arms are open in the shape of a cross. There are a great many examples of the rose used as an emblem in the works of Renaissance scholars, but I shall mention just one – Paracelsus (another fundamental figure in the history of the Rosy-Cross), whose thirty-six writings were marked by a capital "R" and a rose.<sup>107</sup> The rose appears in his *De Pronosticatione*, where we note the emblem XXVI, which represents a crown surmounted by a rose associated with the letter "F" ("F" for Frater), whilst another rose appears at the centre of a crown with the capital "R". These are elements which are linked to a particular phenomenon that emerged in the seventeenth century: Rosicrucianism. It is in the seventeenth century that the rose blossoms on the cross.

### *The Rosicrucian rose*

The seventeenth century reveals a fundamental historical fact concerning the symbolism of the rose. The rose manifests itself not only as a symbol evoked in literary works, but as the emblem of an Order, namely of the Rosy-Cross, from which all future Rosicrucian Orders (or presumed so) would develop. Gabriele Rossetti belonged to one of these Orders, since he was

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<sup>104</sup> See Edward Arthur Waite, *The Real History of the Rosicrucians Founded on Their Own Manifestoes, and on Facts and Documents Collected from the Writings of Initiated Brethren*, London, George Redway, 1887, p. 227; Arthur Edward Waite, *The Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross. Being Records of The House of The Holy Spirit in Its Inward and Outward History*, p. 101; Frances A. Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, p. 92.

<sup>105</sup> Johanne Valentino Andreae, *Chymische Hochzeit Christiani Rosencreutz, anno 1459*, Strassburg, L. Zetzners S. Erben, 1616, p. 1. This passage mentioned in *The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz* corresponds to the Biblical verse from Matthew (7, 6).

<sup>106</sup> *The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz*, translated by Joscelyn Godwin, Introduction and Commentary by Adam McLean, Grand Rapids, MI, USA, Phanes Press, 1991, p. 14.

<sup>107</sup> See Jean-Pierre Bayard, *La Symbolique de la Rose-Croix*, Paris, Payot, 1976, p. 130-131.

initiated into an unknown Rosicrucian Order. His theories derive from the knowledge he acquired in the Rosicrucian Order to which he belonged. Rossetti mentions the Rosy-Cross in his writings and letters, confirming the initiatory continuity between the Middle Ages of the *Fedeli d'Amore* and the Renaissance of the Rosy-Cross. But is there a possible link between the rose of the Rosy-Cross and that of the *Fedeli d'Amore* and of the French troubadours?

In the book *Histoire des Rose-Croix* (History of the Rosy-Cross, 1925) by Frans Wittemans, there is a passage by Roesgen Von Floss, in which this latter links the history of the Rosy-Cross to that of the Albigensians, thus to the entire universe, which is also relevant to medieval French and Italian poetry, namely that of the *Fedeli d'Amore*. According to the legend told by Wittemans, the members of the Von Roesgen Germelshausen family were linked to the Germanic mysteries and the doctrine of the French Albigensians. When Pope Innocent III ordered the massacre of the Albigensians, the castle of Germelshausen was also besieged and sacked. Accused of sharing the ideals of the Albigensians, the whole Von Roesgen Germelshausen family was put to death, except for Christian, the youngest member of the family, who escaped and fled to the East. First, he went to Turkey, then to Arabia, where learned the secrets of the Rosy-Cross Order of the East. When he returned to Europe, Christian renounced his surname and changed his name, becoming Christian Rosenkreutz.<sup>108</sup> This German legend of Christian, the son of the Germelshausen family who took the name Rosenkreutz after his trip to the East, is particularly significant for my studies as it provides a link (though one which cannot yet be proven) between the tradition of the German Rosy-Cross of the Renaissance and the French Albigensian tradition, thus connecting medieval catharism to the Rosicrucianism of the Renaissance.

The filiation between the Rosy-Cross and the *Fedeli d'Amore* is only possible if we take into account the “traditionalist school”. According to the traditionalist René Guénon, for example, the Rosy-Cross derives from the *Fede Santa* (Saint Faith), which, in his view, gave rise to the *Fedeli d'Amore*.<sup>109</sup> The nineteenth century esotericist and poet Paul Sédir (who also belonged to the traditionalist school) highlights the link between the rose of the Rosy-Cross and the rose of *The Romance of the Rose* or of Dante’s *Comedy*, by extending such filiation up to the works of the nineteenth century, such as *Zanoni* by Edward Bulwer Lytton or *Axël* by Villiers de l’Isle d’Adam,<sup>110</sup> which are profoundly imbued with the Rosicrucian doctrine. However, this filiation cannot be demonstrated by following the scientific and objective approach of historical research though some historians, such as Serge Hutin, support it. In fact,

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<sup>108</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 58-59, 122; Frans Wittemans, *Histoire des Rose-Croix*, Paris, Adyar, 1925, p. 15.

<sup>109</sup> René Guénon, *The Esotericism of Dante* [1925], p. 7-11.

<sup>110</sup> Pierre Riffard considers *Axël* by Villiers de l’Isle Adam to be one of the twelve great literary works of Western esotericism. See Pierre A. Riffard, *op. cit.*, p. 943.

Hutin states that the *Fedeli d'Amore* are “a secret society [...] undoubtedly linked to the Rosicrucians”.<sup>111</sup> This subject is rather complex and controversial and merits a study *per se*. But beyond the impossibility of factually demonstrating the historical link between the *Fedeli d'Amore* and the Rosy-Cross, literature undeniably points to the existence of these mysterious initiatory brotherhoods, at least in the literary imaginary and to establish links of filiation, or at least to share the same symbolism and the same literary *topoi*. This is the case of the Rosicrucians and the *Fedeli d'Amore*, since the poetry of the *Fedeli d'Amore* contains a specific symbol, namely the most important symbol of the Rosicrucians: the rose.

Christopher McIntosh points out the link between the Rosicrucian manifestos and the theme of the initiatory secret societies, highlighting an aspect which, though it may appear insignificant, is linked to some extent with the tradition of the *Fedeli d'Amore*. In fact, McIntosh notices that these initiatory societies which arose in medieval and Renaissance times had a certain influence on the Rosicrucian manifestos, especially the German secret societies that claimed their filiation with the Chivalric Orders and the German initiatory brotherhood of the Middle Ages, but also with the Florentine Academies of the Renaissance. In particular, McIntosh mentions the Fruchtbringende Gesellschaft – a German secret society linked to the Florentine societies.<sup>112</sup> Whilst the Rosicrucian manifestos had a relationship, albeit an indirect one, with the Italian Academies of the Renaissance, in particular with the Florentine ones, it follows that they have a tenuous link with the poetic tradition of the *Fedeli d'Amore* based on the *topos* of love and the symbol of the rose. The link between the works of poets such as Cavalcanti, Dante and the Italian Renaissance has been confirmed, as I have shown in chapter II, by scholars of the Renaissance and in the following centuries. Gabriele Rossetti was one of the intellectuals who perpetuated the link between Italian love poetry of the Middle Age and the Italian Renaissance, but more recent scholars such as Frances Yates have also confirmed these associations. Therefore, the doctrine of love and the rose of the *Fedeli d'Amore* and the Troubadours developed via an indirect route to the Rosicrucian manifestos.

Officially, the Rosicrucians appeared in Europe in 1614 with the publication of the *Fama Fraternitatis*, and two other Manifestos, the *Confessio Fraternitatis* and *The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz*, published respectively in 1615 and in 1616. These manifestos (characterized by an anti-catholic and anti-Jesuitical spirit) invited European intellectuals to join the brotherhood and initiate a universal reform of society. The three writings which, as Roland Edighoffer points out, are “based upon earlier esoteric sources and traditions

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<sup>111</sup> “Une société secrète [...] rattachée sans nul doute à la Rose-Croix”. Serge Hutin, *Histoire des Rose-Croix*, Paris, Le Courrier du Livre, 1971, p. 22. See also *ibid.*, p. 23-25, 83.

<sup>112</sup> Cristopher McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians. The History, Mythology, and Rituals of an Esoteric Order*, p. 21-22.

in Western esotericism”<sup>113</sup> – describe the initiatory journey of the legendary protagonist, Christian Rosenkreutz, who left Europe in order to go to the Middle East, where he learned about the occult sciences.<sup>114</sup> The *Fama* tells the story of Christian Rosenkreutz, who sojourned in Egypt and Morocco, in the city of Fez, where he studied the secret doctrine, learning the secrets of magic and the Kabbalah. On returning to Europe (more precisely, Spain), he tried to spread the occult teachings of the doctrine he had learned in the Middle East, but his ideas were derided by the savants of the time. So Christian isolated himself in his house where he pursued his studies. Subsequently, after some time spent studying and meditating, with three “brothers” he founded a brotherhood which, with the passage of time, gathered other members. In 1484, Christian Rosenkreutz founded the Rosy-Cross Order, whose members protected their initiatory doctrine through the bond of secrecy. But what kind of relationship can exist between the story of Christian Rosenkreutz and the doctrine of the *Fedeli d’Amore* of the Middle Ages? One of the elements of continuity between these two different realities lies in the fact that the stages of Christian Rosenkreutz’s journey seem to follow the same path as the love poetry in the search for the rose, from East to West, passing through Spain, as I have shown in chapter II. This theme of the journey from East to West is repeated during the Renaissance and would also be repeated in the nineteenth century. Joachim of Fiore (whose name clearly evokes floral symbolism) founded his brotherhood in Italy, after having been in the East. The troubadours and the trouvères, as we have seen, usually speak of a vague love and of a rose which come from the East; Dante compares his Beatrice to the Bride of Lebanon; Nerval and Rimbaud reference the Eastern source in their works; Pound does the same in his *Cantos* and Yeats in *Sailing to Byzantium*. Between the Middle Ages and the nineteenth century is the Renaissance of the Rosy-Cross, and once again one can see the repetition, in the form of a legend, of the journey of a doctrine from the East in the form of a rose. One of the elements that distinguish the rose in medieval love poetry from the Rosicrucian rose of the Renaissance is that in the former the source of the transmission of the doctrine of love was France, subsequently Italy (passing through Spain), whilst in the case of the Rosy-Cross the source was Germany (again, via Spain), and from Germany it spread throughout Europe, eventually reaching America.<sup>115</sup> It seems, in fact, that the German mystical communities linked to the Rosicrucian movement reached

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<sup>113</sup> Roland Edighoffer, “Rosicrucianism I: First half of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century”, in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, p. 1009. Christopher McIntosh confirms Edighoffer’s assertion, claiming that “the Rosicrucian movement is part of a way of thinking whose roots go far back into antiquity and which can be described as the Western esoteric tradition. [...] A great revival of this tradition began in Italy during the Renaissance and opened up a new phase in the development of esoteric thought”. Cristopher McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians. The History, Mythology, and Rituals of an Esoteric Order*, p. 1.

<sup>114</sup> See Cristopher McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians. The History, Mythology, and Rituals of an Esoteric Order*, p. 25.

<sup>115</sup> On the role of Germany in the Rosicrucian movement, see *ibid.*, p. XVII-XXII, 9-30.



Pennsylvania as early as 1694,<sup>116</sup> and still today, America has the most influential and extensive Rosicrucian organization in the world: the AMORC (whose emblem is a cross with a red rose in the centre).<sup>117</sup>

Germany was not only one of the major players in the Renaissance period, as it was heavily involved in the formation of one of the most important esoteric Orders of the nineteenth century: the Golden Dawn.<sup>118</sup> As Colin Wilson remarks, the initiatory Order of the Golden Dawn has its roots in German magic and the initiatory Order of Rosicrucian origin. In 1885, a clergyman named Woodford apparently found a manuscript written in cipher on a second-hand bookstall in Farringdon Road in London a manuscript written in cipher. William Wynn Westcott was a friend of the clergyman and identified the cipher invented by Trithemius, the fifteenth century alchemist associated with the Rosicrucian movement. This cipher manuscript contained magical rituals for initiating the new adept into a secret society and contained a letter which stated that those who were interested in the rituals of the Order should contact a certain Fräulein Sprengel in Stuttgart. Subsequently, Westcott met Sprengel, who gave him permission to find the Golden Dawn.<sup>119</sup> This explains the importance of Germany (in particular, from the nineteenth century) in the spread of Rosicrucianism across Europe, especially in England.

Germany is not only one of the principal places where the Rosicrucian movement flourished, as the reference to the German country is also symbolic. In this respect, by evoking a passage from chapter III of *Themis aurea* by Michael Maier, Paul Sédir affirms that Germany (beyond being the “headquarters” of the Rosy-Cross) is the land of lilies and roses, “the symbolic land which holds the germs of the roses and of the lilies, where these flowers grow up perpetually in the philosophical gardens in which no intruder holds the entrance”.<sup>120</sup> This concept of a place considered not only from the physical point of view, but also from the spiritual one, is the same concept about the mythical East, seen not as an exotic geographical place but as a spiritual and mystical one – the place that the Christian tradition called “the

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<sup>116</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 119-120; Arthur Edward Waite, *The Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross. Being Records of The House of The Holy Spirit in Its Inward and Outward History*, p. 605-606.

<sup>117</sup> The seat of the AMORC is in California, in the Rosicrucian Park (San José), a majestic structure which has museums, libraries, laboratories and a university. Legend has it that AMORC’s origins are in Europe, since its founder Harvey Spencer Lewis (1883-1939) created the Order of AMORC after being initiated in 1908 in a medieval French castle near Toulouse; after the initiation in France he had permission to form the Rosicrucian Order overseas. Lewis’s initiation took place in two stages: Paris and Toulouse. In Paris, Lewis met people who referred him to Toulouse, the Cathar city *par excellence*, the city of the rose, and it was in this French city that Lewis underwent the initiatory trials that, once overcome, allowed him to become a Rosicrucian and to obtain permission to found the Rosicrucian Order in America. On the AMORC and Harvey Spencer Lewis, see Massimo Introvigne, *Il cappello del mago. I nuovi movimenti magici dallo spiritismo al satanismo* [1990], Milan, SugarCo, 2013, p. 205-210; Jean-Pierre Bayard, *La Symbolique de la Rose-Croix*, p. 215- 221; Cristopher McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians. The History, Mythology, and Rituals of an Esoteric Order*, p. 126-132.

<sup>118</sup> See Colin Wilson. “Foreword”, in Cristopher McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians. The History, Mythology, and Rituals of an Esoteric Order*, p. XI.

<sup>119</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> *Themis aurea*, ch. II, quoted by Paris Paul Sédir, *Histoire et doctrine de la Rose-Croix*, Paris, Bibliothèque des amitiés spirituelles, 1932, p. 64.

Indies”.<sup>121</sup> It is an initiatory path to pursue, the same path that Christian Rosenkreutz followed from Germany to the East, and from East back to the West, passing through Spain, the same places of love poetry and the symbolism of the rose. Like medieval love poetry, the history of Christian Rosenkreutz shares literary motifs that belong to the esoteric tradition. In confirmation of this, Antoine Faivre affirms that “different elements of medieval esotericism can be found in the Manifestos”.<sup>122</sup>

The initiatory journey of Christian Rosenkreutz starts on the evening of Good Friday (*veneris dies*, the day of love) just before Easter, following the tradition of love poetry in the Middle Ages, which had a predilection for the Easter period. Rosenkreutz’s journey lasts seven days which, as Antoine Faivre underlines, refer to the seven phases of the alchemical transmutation, whilst the symbolism of the ladder (echoing Jacob’s ladder in *Genesis*, XXVIII, 12) present in the work seems to represent the alchemical phases of the “humid” path as opposed to the “dry” path.<sup>123</sup> This path, as Faivre points out, describes the process of ascension of the soul towards God;<sup>124</sup> moreover, here we also find the *topoi* of the garden, the castle and the tower with the old guardian inside,<sup>125</sup> which were the typical elements of medieval love texts, such as *The Romance of the Rose*.

The Rosicrucian manifestos contain attacks on ecclesiastical Power which, as we have seen, was one of the major preoccupations of some medieval love poets. In fact, the *Confessio* proposes a social and spiritual utopia which would be installed through the work of the Rosicrucian brothers all over Europe against the tyranny of the Pope. The *Confessio* is pervaded by a prophetic atmosphere which, as Roland Edighoffer remarks, stems from Joachim of Fiore, in particular from his prophecy of three successive ages: the age of nettles, the age of roses, and the age of lilies.<sup>126</sup> Each age corresponds to one of the three elements of the Trinity: the Age of the Father (the Old Testament) is the rule of the Law, the Age of the Son (the New Testament) is the age of Faith, and the third age is the eternal Gospel – the age of the new spiritual religion, the Age of the Holy Spirit, of love and freedom, during which divine knowledge and the truth about God would be revealed to humankind. The *Confessio* (with the other two manifestos) is situated in the Age of the Rose,<sup>127</sup> which corresponds to the Age of the Son and the Age of the Cross, since it is on the Cross that Christ died. It is in the Age prophesied by Joachim of Fiore

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<sup>121</sup> See Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, p. 164.

<sup>122</sup> “Divers éléments de l’ésotérisme médiéval se trouvent incorporés dans les Manifestes”. Antoine Faivre, *Accès de l’ésotérisme occidental*, t. II, p. 264.

<sup>123</sup> See Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, p. 164-169.

<sup>124</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 164-165.

<sup>126</sup> See Roland Edighoffer, “Rosicrucianism I: First half of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century”, in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, p. 1012.

<sup>127</sup> See Cristopher McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians. The History, Mythology, and Rituals of an Esoteric Order*, p. 14-18, 26; Antoine Faivre, *Accès de l’ésotérisme occidental*, t. I, p. 95-96.

that the Rosy-Cross Order appears. In Joachim of Fiore there is also a link between the Renaissance Rosy-Cross and the Middle Ages, with the *Romance of the Rose* and Dante who refers to the teachings of Joachim of Fiore in the *Comedy*. In chapter III, I hinted at the floral symbolism which is implied in the name of the Calabrian abbot, and the floral and vegetal symbolism is also at the basis of his philosophical ternary system of universal history. As Jean-Paul Corsetti has observed, the floral symbolism is associated with seventeenth-century esotericism, not just of the Rosy-Cross but also of other spiritual movements, such as the theosophical movement founded in Germany by Jakob Böhme, who claimed to be a precursor of the “time of lilies” (*Lilienzeit*), namely the moment when the Revelation of Christianity would be transformed into philosophy of the Spirit.<sup>128</sup> This brings us back to Joachim of Fiore. Flowers seem to speak, but they do so by hiding their truth. They seem to invite people to strive to find this hidden truth, to undertake an initiatory journey in search of a flower – the initiatory flower.

In particular, the initiatory rose has a fundamental role in *The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz*, the third and last manifesto of the Rosy-Cross, featuring the theme of spiritual weddings, whose nature is obviously symbolic and initiatory. The work celebrates the wedding of a couple in a castle and, as Frances Yates comments, these weddings are “at the same time an allegory of alchemical processes interpreted symbolically as an experience of the mystic marriage of the soul – an experience which is undergone by Christian Rosenkreutz through the visions conveyed to him in the castle, through theatrical performances, through ceremonies of initiation into orders of chivalry, through the society of the court of the castle”.<sup>129</sup> In fact, the weddings of the king and the queen symbolize the alchemical theme of the primal androgyne, in which the male principal joins the female in order to give birth to the undifferentiated being. On the occasion of these weddings, Christian Rosenkreutz wears a red and white suit with red roses in his hat: “then I set out on my way, put on my white linen coat, and girded myself with a blood-red belt bound crosswise over my shoulders. In my hat I stuck four red roses, so that I could be more easily recognized in the crowd by this sign”.<sup>130</sup> This passage describes the red and white suit that resembles the one worn by Dante when he encounters Beatrice, who sublimate their meeting through the symbol of the rose, the same symbol that characterizes Christian Rosenkreutz and which hides a secret that distinguishes him from other men. This symbol of the rose was hidden in the castle of *The Romance of the Rose*, and we find a castle in the work of Christian Rosenkreutz. Frances Yates noticed this correlation between the Rosicrucian manifestos and in works by Dante, Jean de Meung and Guillaume de

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<sup>128</sup> See Jean-Paul Corsetti, *Histoire de l'ésotérisme et des sciences occultes*, p. 261.

<sup>129</sup> Frances A. Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, p. 85.

<sup>130</sup> *The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz*, p. 21.

Lorris, confirming the alchemical implication of this symbol in her essay on the Rosy-Cross: “the rose is an alchemical symbol; many alchemical treatises have the title *Rosarium*, or rose garden. It is a symbol of the Virgin, and more generally a mystical religious symbol, whether in Dante’s vision or in Jean de Meung’s *Roman de la rose*”.<sup>131</sup>

Whilst Frances Yates identified a thread which linked thematically *The Chemical Wedding* (and, more generally, the Rosicrucian manifestos) with some works of the Middle Ages, such as *The Romance of the Rose* or Dante’s works, Bernard Gorceix found links with the literary works of Renaissance. In fact, he considers *The Chemical Wedding* as a bridge which reflects the theme of some of the most important works of the European Renaissance: the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (The Dream of Poliphilus, 1499) by Francesco Colonna, the *Quinzième Livre* (Fifteenth Book, 1564) by François Rabelais, and *Le Voyage des princes fortunés* (The Journey of the Lucky Princes, 1610) by Béroalde de Verville.<sup>132</sup> Among these works, *The Dream of Poliphilus* is particularly interesting. This work is based on the *topos* of love, and would influence the future generations of writers, for example, Gérard de Nerval. Jean-Paul Corsetti highlights the link between the Rosicrucian Renaissance and the esotericism of the nineteenth century, affirming that “the Rosy-Cross knights, in imitation of their legendary Master, must have been the link in an esoteric chain which connected the Renaissance magi with the theosophists and the *Naturphilosophen* of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, by assuring the perenniality of the royal art”,<sup>133</sup> namely alchemy. Moreover, the alchemical concepts present in *The Chemical Wedding* are accompanied by explicit references to the flower of the rose.

The symbol of the rose also has a fundamental role in the scheme of *The Chemical Wedding*: the Virgin, who appears to announce the union of the bride with the bridegroom, asks Christian Rosenkreutz for the roses placed on his hat. These roses are the distinguishing mark of Christian Rosenkreutz, and they draw the attention of the Virgin who demands those flowers. There is clearly a reference to the initiatory meaning that the rose has in this story, in which the union of the spouses is sanctioned by a love song of the lovers.<sup>134</sup> Once again, we can see the repetition of the *topos* of love associated with the symbolism of the rose, following a literary tradition that had flourished in medieval literature. In particular, as Frances Yates highlights, the marriage of the bride and bridegroom in *The Chemical Wedding* refers to the *topos* of death

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<sup>131</sup> Frances A. Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, p. 92.

<sup>132</sup> See Beranard Gorceix, *La Bible des Rose-Croix*, Paris, P.U.F., 1970, p. IX-X; Antoine Faivre, *Acces to Western Esotericism*, p. 174; Jean-Pierre Bayard, *La Symbolique de la Rose-Croix*, p. 32.

<sup>133</sup> “Les chevaliers Rose-Croix, à l’imitation de leur maître légendaire, devaient être les maillons de la chaîne ésotérique qui, depuis les mages de la Renaissance jusqu’aux théosophes et *Naturphilosophen* des XVIII<sup>e</sup> et XIX<sup>e</sup> siècles, assuraient la pérennité de l’Art royal”. Jean-Paul Corsetti, *Histoire de l’ésotérisme et des sciences occultes*, p. 248.

<sup>134</sup> See Frances A. Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, p. 90.

which, from the alchemical point of view, consists of the process of transmutation of the raw element.<sup>135</sup> Death is an initiatory concept (the initiatory death and the consequent rebirth), and its association with the *topos* of love and the symbolism of the rose in *The Chemical Wedding* reinforces the hypothesis of an initiatory dimension, whilst literature is a vehicle to spread the knowledge of this dimension. In confirmation of the relationship between the Rosicrucian rose and the initiatory dimension, Frances Yates comments: “allusions to the Garter are behind the composite allusions to chivalrous feasts and ceremonies of initiation in Andreae’s work; the Red Cross of the Order of the Garter, the Red Cross of St George of England have been absorbed into the German world, to reappear as ‘Christian Rosencreutz’, with his red roses and his Red Cross ensign”.<sup>136</sup> Frances Yates explains not only the symbolic aspect of the rose, but also alludes to the initiatory Orders of the Renaissance, namely the chivalric origin of the Rosy-Cross which refers to Saint George’s Red Cross of the Order of the Garter and to the roses of England.<sup>137</sup> But beyond the references to the initiatory Orders linked to the Rosicrucian movement, a relevant aspect is the presence in Rosicrucian manifestos of the concept of initiatory filiation, as in the case of the *Fama*, which posits the transmission of the *philosophia perennis*, the doctrine which is always the same – a single and unique doctrine:

Our Philosophy also is not a new invention, but as Adam after his fall hath received it, and as Moses and Solomon used it. Also she ought not much to be doubted of, or contradicted by other opinions, or meanings; but seeing the truth is peaceable, brief, and always like herself in all things.<sup>138</sup>

Moreover, the Rosicrucian manifestos postulate that the *philosophia perennis* had been shared since the origin of humanity by Adam, Enoch, Abraham, Moses, Solomon, Plato, Aristotle and Pythagoras. Platonism was the basis of medieval love poetry which played an important role in the Rosicrucian tradition, as can be inferred from the *Fama*. Traces of this link can also be found in the *Confessio*, more precisely in the treatise written in Latin and published together with the *Confessio*: the *Secretioris Philosophiæ Consideratio Brevis à Philippo à Gabella*. This anonymous text, which precedes the *Confessio* is followed by a brief preface signed “Frater R. C.”, in which the author writes that the *Secretioris Philosophiæ* is founded on the teaching of many philosophers and legendary figures, including Hermes, Seneca and in particular, Plato.<sup>139</sup> Thus, according to the *Secretioris Philosophiæ* of “Frater R. C.”, Platonism is linked to

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<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90-91.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>138</sup> *Fama Fraternitatis*, in Frances A. Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, p. 310.

<sup>139</sup> In reality, the *Secretioris Philosophiæ Consideratio Brevis a Philippo a Gabella* is nothing other than an adaptation of the *Monas Hieroglyphica* (1564) by John Dee (1527-1608). See Frances A. Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, p. XII-XIV, 51-57, 63-70, 86-88, 104-105, 115, 161, 214; Cristopher McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians. The History, Mythology, and Rituals of an Esoteric Order*, p. 29-30.

Rosicrucian thought, but what is interesting for my study is that the *Secretoris Philosophiae* (which was translated at the end of the nineteenth century by the French occultist Papus in his *Traité méthodique de Science Occulte*, 1891) resembles a treatise on alchemy, which proposes to teach followers how to eat the most beautiful flower: the rose. He also shows how to produce honey with the nectar of the rose, and above all how to avoid pricking oneself with the thorns. Thus, the rose is considered as both negative and positive. In fact, the author highlights that the rose is dangerous because of its thorns, but there is a way not to hurt oneself and to eat this flower. In particular, the rose is associated here with honey, nectar and bees, in an image which appears in the frontispiece of the Rosicrucian work *Summum Bonum* (1629) by Joachim Frizius (the pseudonym of Robert Fludd), where the drawing of the rose is associated with the Latin words “Dat rosa mel apibus” (“The rose gives the honey to bees”). Dante also linked the rose to the bees, in canto XXXI of *Paradiso* (v. 7), after affirming that the “milizia santa” (“the holy army”)<sup>140</sup> appears in the form of “candida rosa”, the “shining white rose”.<sup>141</sup> Do bees have to do with the Dantean Blessed in front of the rose? And are the Dantean Blessed possibly linked to the Rosicrucians, who symbolised their own rose together with bees? It is impossible to confirm this, though it is true that the bees and the rose are present both in Dante’s work of the Middle Ages and in the Rosicrucian motto of the Renaissance, in addition to other literary works of the Rosicrucians and medieval love poets. A good example is Thomas Vaughan (a writer who imbued his works with Rosicrucian elements); in his *Anthroposophia Theomagica* (1650) he writes that bees, according to Virgil, are the rays of divine intelligence coming from the Empyrean.<sup>142</sup> But bee honey associated with the rose was also evoked in the Persian love poetry of the Middle Ages, as Rûzbehân Bâqli writes: “when Your Beautiful Face is, in the nights of separation, the Companion of the Faithful of Love on the road to *tawhîd*,<sup>143</sup> your Hair of Rose and Honey that cheers the Sages is the final aim; your Hair of amber – that is the chain which ties fools up – is the beginning”.<sup>144</sup> The Western *Fedeli d’Amore*, the Faithful of Love of the East, and the Rosicrucians of the Renaissance shared the same symbolism: bee honey and the rose. Therefore, this seems to confirm an undercurrent of literary filiation that runs from medieval love poetry to seventeenth-century Rosicrucianism.

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<sup>140</sup> Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, p. 486.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>142</sup> Thomas Vaughan, *Anthroposophia Theomagica, or, A Discourse of the Nature of Man and his State After Death; Grounded on his Creator’s Proto-chemistry and Verifi’d by a Practicall Examination of Principles in the Great World*, London, printed by T.W for H. Blunden at the Castle of Corn-hill, 1650, p. 83.

<sup>143</sup> In the esoteric Islamic tradition, the *tawhîd* is divine unity.

<sup>144</sup> “Lorsque ton beau visage est, dans les nuits de la séparation, le compagnon des Fidèles d’amour sur la voie du *tawhîd*, ta chevelure de rose et de miel qui réjouit les Sages, est le terme limite; ta chevelure d’ambre épandue qui est la chaîne enchaînant les insensés est le début” (translated in French by Henry Corbin). Rûzbehân Bâqli, *Le Jasmin des Fidèles d’Amour (Kitâb-e ‘Abhar al-‘âshiqîn)*, p. 234-235.

In terms of the literary filiation but especially the doctrinary one of esoteric teaching transmitted throughout the centuries in the history of Rosicrucianism, one of the figures who perpetuates this transmission of the Secret Doctrine is Julius Sperber (advisor to Christian of Anhalt, Prince of the Palatinate) who wrote a work defending the Rosy-Cross brotherhood: *Echo of the God-Illuminated Brotherhood of the Venerable Order R. C.* (Danzig, 1615). In this work, Sperber discusses the filiation of initiatory knowledge which would be transmitted from the Chaldeans to the Egyptians, up to Christianity. Thus, the secret doctrine transmitted by Christian Rosenkreutz would date back to the beginning of the Bible. More precisely, according to Sperber, Adam would preserve the divine secret which later, through Noah and the fathers of the church, would be passed on to Zoroaster, to the Chaldeans, the Egyptians, and the Jewish Kabbalists. Thereafter, it was Jesus Christ who showed humanity the path towards eternal bliss, reserving divine knowledge for a restricted group of disciples. This knowledge was preserved and handed down by the Christians Saint John and Saint Bernard, and among the custodians Sperber singles out figures such as Johannes Reuchelin, Cornelius Agrippa, Guillaume Postel, Pico della Mirandola and Marsilio Ficino. The idea of a mystical filiation transmitted throughout the centuries can be found in another scholar of the Rosy-Cross, Michael Maier, who considered the Rosicrucian Order as the repository of an ancient and esoteric tradition with its origins in the traditions of the Egyptians, the Mysteries of Eleusis and of Samothrace, the Persian Magicians, the Pythagorians and the Arabs.<sup>145</sup> This is the same logic applied by Gabriele Rossetti and by the “heterodox” school of medieval love poetry, seen as an undercurrent that flowed through history from Antiquity to the Renaissance, symbolised by a rose sought by lovers. Moreover, this rose symbol represents the supreme emblem of Rosicrucianism, both at artistic and literary level.

Literature records many works impregnated with Rosicrucian principles and symbolized by the rose. For example, the work *Rosa Florescens* (published in Germany in 1617) by Florentinus de Valentia (pseudonym of Daniel Möglin), who defended the Rosy-Cross Order and invited the reader to follow his Rosicrucian teaching.<sup>146</sup> Another example is the treatise *Rosa Jesuitica*, published in 1619 in Brussels (and in 1620 in Prague), which suggested that the Chivalry of the Army of Jesus (the Jesuits) and the Rosicrucians were, in fact, one and the same, with one the continuation of the other. This document (whose authorship is attributed to J. Themistius de Melampage) cannot be considered objective, but it shows how complex and

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<sup>145</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 32-34.

<sup>146</sup> See Frances A. Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, p. 130-133; Arthur Edward Waite, *The Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross. Being Records of The House of The Holy Spirit in Its Inward and Outward History*, p. 245-246.

delicate the language of rose symbolism is, given that in this treatise the rose of the Rosicrucians is linked to the rose of the Jesuits.<sup>147</sup>

The influence of Rosicrucianism on literature has been highlighted by numerous scholars, including Christopher McIntosh, who in his book *The Rosicrucians* dedicates a whole chapter to this subject.<sup>148</sup> We find traces of Rosicrucian thought in various literary works in both the Renaissance and the following centuries. In the Renaissance, Edmund Spenser was one of the authors who drew heavily on the Rosicrucian tradition.<sup>149</sup> Jean-Paul Corsetti suggests that Spenser's *Faerie Queene* is a work which is imbued with Elizabethan Neoplatonism and which foreshadows the Rosicrucian school, given that the Knight of the Rosy-Cross appears in this work. Moreover, there are other themes which have to do with courtly esotericism, the Kabbalah and occult philosophy.<sup>150</sup> Frances Yates is also convinced that the *Faerie Queen* is a Rosicrucian work. In this work by Spenser she sees a *Divine Comedy* of the Renaissance, thus confirming the link between Neoplatonism and the Rosicrucian tradition.<sup>151</sup> In fact, the first book of *The Faerie Queen* revolves around the figure of the Knight of the Rosy-Cross accompanied by the lady called Una (an obvious reference to the concept of "Unity"), while book VI is dedicated to Venus, the star of love, which recalls Plato's *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*. In this manner, Spenser links the ancient and medieval initiatory tradition to the Renaissance and becomes a milestone for later literature. It is no coincidence, according to Yates, that later German Rosicrucian writers associated their movement with Spenser's work.<sup>152</sup> However, he was not the only author to conceal elements of the Rosicrucian tradition in his works. Other writers who did so include Thomas Vaughan (1622-1656, twin brother of the poet Henry Vaughan), who was among the first writers to imbue his works with Rosicrucian elements, highlighting the hermetic and occult aspects of Rosicrucian doctrine.<sup>153</sup> Under the pseudonym of Eugenius Philalethes, he translated the *Fama* and the *Confessio* (*The Chemical Wedding* was translated by Fixcroft) and wrote the *Anthroposophia Theomagica* (dedicating it to a certain brother "R. C.", to the "Renatis Fratibus R. C.", "regenerated Brethren R. C"),<sup>154</sup> in which Vaughan alludes to the fact that he was a member of the Rosy-Cross.<sup>155</sup> In French

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<sup>147</sup> See Arthur Edward Waite, *The Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross. Being Records of The House of The Holy Spirit in Its Inward and Outward History*, p. 235.

<sup>148</sup> See Christopher McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians. The History, Mythology, and Rituals of an Esoteric Order*, p. 107-119.

<sup>149</sup> See Paul Arnold, *Ésotérisme de Shakespeare*, p. 258.

<sup>150</sup> See Jean-Paul Corsetti, *Histoire de l'ésotérisme et des sciences occultes*, p. 227-229.

<sup>151</sup> See Frances A. Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, p. 115-117.

<sup>152</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 198-199.

<sup>153</sup> On the relations between Thomas Vaughan and the Rosicrucian tradition, see Thomas Willard, *Thomas Vaughan and the Rosicrucian Revival in England. 1648-1666*, Leiden, Boston, Brill, 2022.

<sup>154</sup> See Christopher McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians. The History, Mythology, and Rituals of an Esoteric Order*, p. 44-45.

<sup>155</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 46; Arthur Edward Waite, *The Works of Thomas Vaughan: Eugenius Philalethes*, London, Theosophical Publishing House, 1919, p. 261.



literature, a seminal work was written in 1670 by Abbot Montfaucon de Villars, *Le Comte de Gabalis, ou Entretien sur les Sciences Secrètes* (The Count of Gabalis, or Interviews on the Secret Sciences), in which the author profanes the secrets of the Rosy-Cross.<sup>156</sup> In 1673, the Abbot was assassinated near Lyon, and it is likely that his death was due to the publication of his work.<sup>157</sup> According to a legend, he was probably killed because he revealed what had to be kept secret: the mysteries of Rosicrucian science. These suggestions have not been confirmed, though it is evident that the Abbot was killed a few days after publication of his book on the Count de Gabalis who was, in reality, an Italian by the name of Giuseppe Francesco Borri.<sup>158</sup> The work by Abbot Montfaucon de Villars in turn influenced Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, which contains references to Rosicrucian doctrine.<sup>159</sup> Other writers or poets that have mentioned the mysterious brotherhood of the Rosicrucians in their works include Jonathan Swift (1667-1745 – who refers to the “devout brother of the rosy cross”),<sup>160</sup> Goethe, Franz Hartmann, Eduard Breier, Edward Bulwer Lytton, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Gustav Meyrink, John Hargrave, Jorge Luis Borges.<sup>161</sup> Of these writers, I shall focus on Franz Hartmann, whose book *With the Adepts, and adventure among the Rosicrucians* (1887) sets out Rosicrucian doctrine. In this novel there is a passage which is rather interesting for my research. In fact, the author writes:

The name ‘Rosicrucian Order’, or the ‘Order of the Golden and Rosy Cross’ [...] is a comparatively modern invention, and was first used by *Johan Valentin Andreae*, who invented the story of the knight *Christian Rosenkreutz*, for the same purpose as *Cervantes* invented his *Don Quichote de la Mancha*; namely,

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<sup>156</sup> The original title of Abbé Montfaucon de Villars' work is *Le Comte de Gabalis, ou Entretien sur les sciences secrètes* (1670). It was at the time of the first translation into English in 1680 by Philip Ayres and A. Lovell that the word “Rosicrucian” appeared in the title *The Count de Gabalis: Being a Diverting History of the Rosicrucian Doctrine of the Spirits*. The book deals with the existence of an invisible world, studded with elemental spirits such as Gnomes, Nymphs, Sylphs and Salamanders. *The Count of Gabalis* was one of the books that the American poet Ezra Pound recommended to Dorothy Shakespear in a letter dated 14 January 1914, so that she might better understand occultism and, above all, the difference between “real symbolism” and “literary symbolism”: “what do you mean by symbolism? Do you mean real symbolism, Cabala, genesis of symbols, rise of picture language, etc. or the aesthetic < symbology > symbolism of Villiers de l'Isle Adam, & that Arthur Symons wrote a book [*Symbolist Movement in Literature*] about – the literary [*sic*] movement? At any rate begin on the ‘Comte de Gabalis,’ anonymous & should be in catalogue under ‘Comte de Gabalis.’ Then you might try the Grimoire of Pope Honorius (Illrd I think)”. *Ezra Pound and Dorothy Shakespear, Their Letters: 1909-1914*, ed. Omar Pound et A. Walton Litz, New York, New Directions, 1984, p. 302.

<sup>157</sup> On the assassination of Abbé Montfaucon de Villars, Voltaire wrote: “MONTFAUCON DE VILLARS (the abbot), born in 1635, famous for having written the *Comte de Gabalis*. The author was killed by a pistol shot. It is said that the Sylphs murdered him for revealing their mysteries” {“MONTFAUCON DE VILLARS (l'abbé), né en 1635, célèbre par le *Comte de Gabalis*. [...] L'auteur fut tué d'un coup de pistolet. On dit que les Sylphes l'avaient assassiné pour avoir révélé leurs mystères”}. Voltaire, *Œuvres historiques*, ed. René Pomeau, Paris, Gallimard, 1958, p. 1213.

<sup>158</sup> See Jean-Pierre Bayard, *La Symbolique de la Rose-Croix*, p. 145.

<sup>159</sup> See Christopher McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians. The History, Mythology, and Rituals of an Esoteric Order*, p. 108.

<sup>160</sup> Jonathan Swift, *A Tale of a Tub. And Other Satires* [1704], London, New York, Everyman's Library, 1909, p. 118. On the esoteric dimension of Jonathan Swift's work, see Eugène Canselier, *L'Hermétisme dans la vie de Swift et dans ses voyages*, Fontfroide-le-Haut, Fata Morgana, 1983.

<sup>161</sup> On the relations between the Rosicrucian tradition and European literature, see Piero Latino, “La tradition des Rose-Croix dans les littératures européenne et française du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle”, in *Mondes invisibles*, p. 182-186.

for the purpose of ridiculing the would-be Adepts, reformers and gold-makers of his age, when he wrote his celebrated 'Fama Fraternitatis'. Before his pamphlet appeared, the name Rosicrucian did not mean a person belonging to some certain organized society by that name, but it was a generic name, applied to all Occultists, Adepts, Alchemists, or in fact anybody who was or pretended to be in possession of some occult knowledge, and who was therefore supposed to be acquainted with the secret signification of the *Rose* and the *Cross*.<sup>162</sup>

In this passage, Hartmann informs us that before the Rosicrucians of the Renaissance those who used the symbolism of the rose and the cross had the knowledge of the Occult Science. Before this chapter on the Rosicrucians, I analysed the Middle Ages, seen through the eyes of Gabriele Rossetti, Luigi Valli and the representatives of the Dantean "heterodox school". The secret of the rose in the Middle Ages was preserved in the French poems of the troubadours, of the German Minnesänger, and in works by Dante and the *Dolce Stilnovo* poets. According to Hartmann, the medieval rose (together with the cross) was the same rose that in the Renaissance would give rise to the Rosy-Cross Brotherhood.

### *Rosicrucian Shakespeare?*

We have seen that among the English writers of the Renaissance whose works present traces of Rosicrucian philosophy, Edmund Spenser played a pivotal role. Yet according to Paul Arnold, these traces were not only present in Spenser, but also in William Shakespeare.<sup>163</sup> The idea of a "Rosicrucian Shakespeare" was proposed around the end of the nineteenth century by F. W. C. Wigston in his *Bacon, Shakespeare and the Rosicrucians* (1888),<sup>164</sup> in which the author shows the similarities and analogies between the Rosicrucian ideals and the writings of Shakespeare and Bacon.<sup>165</sup> This work by Wigston was not welcomed by the scientific community, owing to his speculative approach, as Frances Yates points out.<sup>166</sup> Though criticizing Wigston's contribution, Yates recognises the possibility of Rosicrucian traces in Shakespeare's writings and asserts that it is only a question of "providing the suggestion of new routes hitherto more or less unsuspected, into Shakespearean problems through which these problems might eventually be given new historical dimension".<sup>167</sup> She goes on to say that Shakespeare's last plays "seem to be anticipating in England, before the departure of Princess

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<sup>162</sup> Franz Hartmann, *An adventure among the Rosicrucians* [1887], Boston, Occult Publishing Company, 1890, p. 39-40.

<sup>163</sup> See Paul Arnold, *Ésotérisme de Shakespeare*, p. 258.

<sup>164</sup> W. F. C. Wigston, *Bacon, Shakespeare and the Rosicrucians*, London, George Redway York Street Covent Garden, 1888.

<sup>165</sup> See Christopher McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians. The History, Mythology, and Rituals of an Esoteric Order*, p. 39-40.

<sup>166</sup> See Frances A. Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, p. 168-169.

<sup>167</sup> Frances A. Yates, *Shakespeare's Last Plays*, p. 6.

Elizabeth to Germany, modes of thought and feeling later to be called Rosicrucian”.<sup>168</sup> She suggests a possible influence of Rosicrucian ideas on Shakespeare: “the Rosicrucian ideas studied in *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* are disengaged from the Last Plays, showing that Shakespeare’s thought in these plays belongs to the evolution of the Renaissance-Hermetic Cabalist tradition into Rosicrucianism”.<sup>169</sup> However, her ideas – even though not studied in depth in subsequent decades – have been followed by scholars such as Ron Heisler, who detected in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* some affinities with Rosicrucian thought, particularly in Acts I, III and IV. He mainly focuses his attention on the scene in which a ceremony takes place in the Temple of Diana, in which the rose plays a crucial role in the plot.<sup>170</sup> According to Heisler, the Rosicrucian rose and Shakespeare’s rose seem to have a tenuous and imperceptible link. There is also a tenuous link as regards Rosenkrantz, a character in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. In the play, Rosenkrantz is murdered by Polonius, together with Guildenstern.<sup>171</sup> Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern are the only keepers of the Prince’s secret. Although Paul Arnold affirms that it is difficult to establish a link between the name Rosenkrantz and the Rosy-Cross, since Rosenkrantz in German means a “garland of roses” and not “Rose-Cross” (precisely “cross of roses”),<sup>172</sup> it is undeniable that between the two names, Rosenkrantz and Rosy-Cross, there is assonance that links them, at least phonetically, undoubtedly referring to the Rosicrucian movement which was to appear some years later in Shakespeare’s work.

Moreover, in *Romeo and Juliet*, there is a dialogue between Romeo and the Nurse which contains an enigmatic allusion to the fact that Rosmarin and Romeo are one and the same, referring in particular to a letter that combined with the letter “C” was the distinctive sign of Rosicrucian works: the “R”. When the Nurse asks, “Doth not rosemary and Romeo begin both with a letter?” (II, V, v. 173),<sup>173</sup> Romeo replies: “Ay, Nurse. What of that? Both with an ‘R’” (II, V, v. 174).<sup>174</sup> Here, there is an allusion to a link between the name Romeo and the concept of Rosemary, as well as the letter “R” – the letter used as a signature by members of the Rosy-Cross Brotherhood. Could it be a reference to the Rosicrucian movement? It is impossible to confirm it, but it would be an interesting idea to explore in greater detail. One cannot, in fact,

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<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>170</sup> See Ron Heisler, “Shakespeare and the Rosicrucians”, *The Hermetic Journal*, 1986, p. 16-19; Ron Heisler, “The World that converged: Shakespeare and the Ethos of the Rosicrucians”, *The Hermetic Journal*, Edinburgh, 1990, p. 149-162

<sup>171</sup> The theme of the two characters Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern would be reworked in the twentieth century by Tom Stoppard in his play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead* (1966).

<sup>172</sup> See Paul Arnold, *Ésotérisme de Shakespeare*, p. 272; Paul Arnold, *Clef pour Shakespeare*, p. 171.

<sup>173</sup> William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, p. 128.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

deduce any kind of link with the Rosicrucians based on these elements, but that very mysterious “R” raises questions which are still unanswered.<sup>175</sup>

Let us return to the hypothesis of a presumed Rosicrucian Shakespeare, based on the knowledge that we have so far, although it is not possible to establish a direct filiation between Shakespeare’s work and the Rosicrucian movement. This filiation is only suggested by the so-called “traditionalist current”, by writers such as Manly Palmer Hall (who devoted a chapter on the “Rosicrucian Shakespeare” in his book *The Secret Teachings of All Ages*),<sup>176</sup> but it is undemonstrable according to the scientific parameters. Notwithstanding, it is undeniable that although Shakespeare died before the publication of the Rosicrucian manifestos, he could not have been in the dark about the intellectual fervour that arose in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, and which preceded the appearance of the Rosicrucian manifestos.<sup>177</sup> It is also undeniable that the rose was the symbol *par excellence* of the Rosicrucians, and that the rose is central to Shakespeare’s work, especially in *Romeo and Juliet*, where he hints that this vague rose hides a mystery that the author does not want to reveal, leaving the reader with the task of discovering it: “what’s in a name? That which we call a rose” (II, I, v. 85-86).<sup>178</sup> At the end of this Shakespearean masterpiece, immediately after the death of Romeo and Juliet, one of the watchmen present at the scene, exclaims: “we see the ground whereon these woes do lie; / but the true ground of all these piteous woes / we cannot without circumstance descry” (V, III v. 179-181).<sup>179</sup> The real reasons for the death of the lovers, according to the watchman, cannot be understood without understanding hidden matters, and the same is true for the rose in *Romeo and Juliet* – its real meaning cannot be understood if one does not know the secret it hides.

### *The Rosy-Cross and the Masonic rose*

The study of the Rosicrucian rose inevitably leads to exploring one of the initiatory milieus *par excellence*: Freemasonry. The Rosicrucian initiatory Orders that formed from the eighteenth century show a link with Freemasonry. The first studies on the possible relationship

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<sup>175</sup> The name “Romeo” also raises questions about possible implications hidden in the etymology of the name. In fact, the name “Romeo” seems to be linked in some way to the word “Rosemary”, which is etymologically linked to the symbol of the rose and the image of the Virgin Mary, as David Lucking has shown, based on the etymological derivation proposed by the *Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* and by the *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, where the association of Rose and Mary implied in the etymon of the word “Rosemary” is confirmed. See David Lucking, *op. cit.*, p. 45; *An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*, ed. Walter Skeat, Oxford, Clarendon, 1956, p. 524; *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, ed. C. T. Onions, Oxford, Clarendon, 1966, p. 773.

<sup>176</sup> Manly P. Hall, *The Secret Teachings of All Ages* [1928], New York, Jeremy P. Tarcher / Penguin, 2003, p. 539-551.

<sup>177</sup> See Paul Arnold, *Ésotérisme de Shakespeare*, p. 257-258; Ron Heisler, “The Worlds that converged: Shakespeare and the Ethos of the Rosicrucians”, *The Hermetic Journal*, Edinburgh, 1990, p. 149-162.

<sup>178</sup> William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, p. 107.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 204.

between Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry appeared in Germany in the eighteenth century, but it is in the nineteenth century that such research finds confirmation. One example is the *Historico-critical Inquiry into the Origin of the Rosicrucians and Free-Masons*<sup>180</sup> (1824) by Thomas De Quincey who, basing himself on the studies of J.-G. Buhle, affirmed that Freemasonry was a Rosicrucian mystification.<sup>181</sup> De Quincey suggested that the Rosicrucianism that spread to England then developed into Freemasonry. Recent studies have confirmed the importance of the role played by England in the complex picture of relations between Rosicrucianism and speculative Freemasonry in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is in England, in fact, that the merger between the Rosicrucian movement and Freemasonry takes place. Frances Yates speaks (without going into detail) about this link between the two initiatory milieus, focusing on the figure of Elias Ashmole (1617-1692), a bridge between the Rosy-Cross and Freemasonry in the seventeenth century.<sup>182</sup> Christopher McIntosh also confirms the link between Freemasonry and Rosicrucianism, highlighting the importance of the Anglophone context.<sup>183</sup> Not only England, but also Scotland played a fundamental role in the development of Freemasonry and the Anglophone Rosicrucian Orders. Edinburgh, like London, had been one of the main centres of Freemasonry since the Renaissance.<sup>184</sup> There is a poem by Henry Adamson, *Muses Threnodie*, published in Edinburgh in 1638, in which the initiatory symbolism of the rose links the Rosicrucian movement to the masonic world:

For what we do presage is not in grosse,  
 For we brethren of the Rosie Crosse:  
 We have the Mason word and the second sight,  
 Things for to come we can foretell aright.<sup>185</sup>

To my knowledge, this is the first reference to the rose associated with the word “Mason”, in the same context as “Rosy-Cross”, which is a literary reference. Thus, by the fifteenth century,

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<sup>180</sup> Thomas De Quincey, “Historico-critical Inquiry Into the Origin of the Rosicrucians and Free-Masons”, *London Magazine*, v. 9, 1824, p. 5-13.

<sup>181</sup> See Jean-Paul Corsetti, *Histoire de l'ésotérisme et des sciences occultes*, p. 266-268.

<sup>182</sup> See Frances A. Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, p. 262-277.

<sup>183</sup> See Cristopher McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians. The History, Mythology, and Rituals of an Esoteric Order*, p. 42-43, 63-67, 137, 141-144.

<sup>184</sup> Marziale Reghellini (one of Gabriele Rossetti's main sources), in the early nineteenth century highlighted the importance of Scotland in the birth of Freemasonry: “one must remember that many English memorials state that the King of Scotland, Bruce, was the founder of the Freemasonic Order in 1314” (“on se bornera à rappeler que beaucoup de mémoires anglais rapportent que le roi d'Écosse, Bruce, fut le fondateur de l'ordre maçonnique en 1314”). Marziale Reghellini de Schio, *Esprit du dogme de la Franche-Maçonnerie*, Bruxelles, H. Tarlier, 1825, p. 185.

<sup>185</sup> In *Early Masonic Pamphlets*, eds. Douglas Knoop, G. P. Jones and Douglas Hamer, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1945, p. 30.

through the art of poetry, the rose indicated a filiation with the initiatory milieu of Freemasonry and of the Rosy-Cross Brotherhood.<sup>186</sup>

Further confirmation of the links between Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry appear in the Eighteenth Degree of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of the “Sovereign Masonic Prince, Knight of the Eagle and the Pelican”, the origin of which is probably to be found in the Rosicrucian movement and the Sovereign Order of St John of Jerusalem.<sup>187</sup> According to the legend, during the Crusades twenty-seven thousand Scottish Freemasons went to Palestine as Crusaders. Their conduct was praised by the Knights of St John who asked the Scottish masons to become members of their Order. In exchange, the Knights of St John conferred the title of knight on the Scottish masons. Hence, the Scottish masons, after establishing a relationship with the Knights, acquired the title of Rosy-Cross and Knights of the Eagle and the Pelican. Following the Crusades, those who had received the title were scattered, but Scotland, and in particular the city of Edinburgh, remained the centre and the most important reference point of the Masonic Order in Europe. As Jean-Pierre Bayard has observed, though the legend could not be considered trustworthy, the symbolism of the degree of Sovereign Prince Rosy-Cross is extremely interesting because of its links with literature, as it contains the symbolism of Dante’s *Paradiso* (canto XXIV and XXV). Two contexts which are different from each other, the historical-masonic context and the literary one, share the same symbols: the triple kiss, the Eagle, the Pelican, the wax rod for sealing, the three theological virtues, the columns of Faith, Hope and Charity, and above all the rose – a mystical rose both in literature and in the initiatory milieu of Freemasonry.<sup>188</sup>

In particular, as far as the symbolism of the rose is concerned, in the closing ritual of the eighteenth degree of the Rosy-Cross Knight of the Scottish Order, there is a passage which refers directly to the mystical rose. In fact, there is a moment during the ritual when reference is made to the importance of the rose: “it is the moment in which the word has to be found and the cubic stone transforms into a Mystical Rose, the flaming star appeared in its entire splendour, our instruments have retaken their ordinary form, the true light has dissipated the darkness and the new law must by then reign on our works”.<sup>189</sup> The mystical rose appears in the masonic ritual as the symbol which enables the hidden truth of darkness to be discovered.

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<sup>186</sup> See Cristopher McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians. The History, Mythology, and Rituals of an Esoteric Order*, p. 137; Jean-Pierre Bayard, *La Symbolique de la Rose-Croix*, p. 242.

<sup>187</sup> See Cristopher McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians. The History, Mythology, and Rituals of an Esoteric Order*, p. 141-143. On the figure of Saint Jean associated to the Masonic context, see Paul Naudon, *Les Loges de Saint-Jean et la Philosophie Ésotérique de la Connaissance*, Paris, Dervy, 1974.

<sup>188</sup> See Jean-Pierre Bayard, *La Symbolique de la Rose-Croix*, p. 244. See also Paul Sédir, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>189</sup> “Il est le moment où la parole est retrouvée, la pierre cubique s’est changée en Rose mystique, l’étoile flamboyante à reparu [sic] dans toute sa splendeur, nos outils ont repris leur forme ordinaire, la Vraie lumière à [sic] dissipée les ténèbres. Et la nouvelle loy [sic] doit regner [sic] desormais [sic] sur nos travaux”. In Jean-Pierre Bayard, *La Symbolique de la Rose-Croix*, p. 250.

Whilst showing this parallel with Dante's work and with the literary works which mention the mystical rose in the previous centuries I cannot, however, categorically state that Dante was a precursor of Freemasonry, but the documents demonstrate that the mystical rose (present in literature) was used by masonic milieus to express initiatory concepts.<sup>190</sup> The initiatory and masonic Orders of the centuries which followed medieval love poetry and Dante's work used the symbol of the rose, thus confirming its great importance not only in literature, but also in the history of ideas. In this respect William Butler Yeats is an example of a combination of literature, esoteric milieus, politics and religion. I will discuss this theme in the second part of my thesis.

Christopher McIntosh confirms that the eighteenth degree of the Scottish and Accepted Masonic Rite, known as the Rose Croix of Heredom, is presented as a form of adaptation of the Rosicrucian motifs. McIntosh quotes *The Textbook of Advanced Freemasonry*, anonymously published in 1873, which stresses the importance of the symbol of the rose in masonic ritual, linking it to Egyptian and Jewish traditions:

This Degree is philosophical, the end of which is to free the mind from those encumbrances which hinder its progress towards perfection and to raise it to the contemplation of inimitable truth, and the knowledge of divine and spiritual object [...]. The emblems of this Degree are the Eagle and the Pelican, the Cross and the Rose. The Eagle is a symbol of Christ in his divine character [...]. The Pelican is an emblem of our Saviour shedding his blood for the salvation of humankind.

The Cross, as with the Egyptians, is a symbol of everlasting life, but since our Saviour's time it has been adopted by all Christians as an emblem of Him who died for the redemption of the human race.

The Rose is figuratively Christ, hence he is called "the Rose of Sharon". Ragon says that the Cross was in Egypt an emblem of immortality, and the rose of secrecy; the rose followed by the cross was the simplest mode of writing "the secret of immortality".<sup>191</sup>

The book also describes the Chamber used for the conferment of the Rosy-Cross degree, whilst the importance of the rose symbol is noteworthy:

This Degree requires Three Chambers, and, if possible, an Outer or Preparation Room for the reception of Candidates [...]. The next is named "the Black Room," this should be hung with black, the floor covered with an oil cloth representing a Mosaic pavement in black and white squares or lozenges, in the East two Black curtains arranged so as to be drawn asunder entirely, and sufficiently open to show the Altar, which should be raised, and on it three steps covered with black with a white border, on which silver or white Swords are worked. Behind and above the upper step a Transparency, on which

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<sup>190</sup> On the symbolism of the rose in Freemasonry, see Alain Pozarnik, *Le Secret de la Rose. De la perfection à l'Amour*, Paris, Dervy, 1997; Claude Guérillot, *La Rose maçonnique*, 2 vols., Paris, Véga, v. 1, 1990, v. 2, 1992 (v. 2); Daniel Beresniak, *La Rose et le compas. Les amours tumultueuses du beau et du vrai*, Paris, Montorgueil, 1993.

<sup>191</sup> *Textbook of Advanced Freemasonry*, London, Reves and Turner, 1873, p. 193. Jean Marie Ragon (quoted in this passage of *The Textbook of Advanced Freemasonry*) was a mason and an expert on Freemasonry.

appears three Crosses, in the Centre or Highest Cross should be the Mystic Rose (Black), placed in the centre of the Cross, and surrounded by a Crown of Thorns, the other two Crosses should have a Skull and Crossbones at the feet. Behind the Curtains and at the foot of the Altar should be a Triangular Table, covered with black cloth, and white fringe around the edge, on which must be placed Three Waxlights, a Bible, Compasses, and Triangle. [...] On the Altar, before the Transparency, at the foot of the Cross, there should be placed a Rose made of Black Crape. In the centre of the room must be the Tracing Board, and on the floor a painting of seven circles in white upon a black ground, and in the centre a Rose. In the North, South, and West there must be Three Pillars, six feet high, in the Capitals of which must be inscribed “Faith, Hope, and Charity,” or rather their initials “F. H. C.” [...]. From the Black Room should open the Chamber of Death [...]. The Chamber of Death must have the emblems of mortality strewed about, and sundry obstacles so placed that the Candidate may have some difficulty in groping his way to the Black Curtain, behind which a Lamp of Spirits of Wine and Salt must be placed, and the Wick of the Lamp also strewed with Salt, and two or three persons in winding sheets grouped around it as Corpses; the Chamber of Death may be lighted by Transparencies, representing Skulls, Crossbones, &c., or by seven flambeaux fixed in Skulls and Crossbones.

The Third or Red Room must be brilliantly illuminated, and all the Brethren in their highest costumes ranged under their Banners, the room hung with red; in the centre the Tracing Board, the representation of the Mysterious Ladder of Seven Steps; on the Altar must be Seven Steps and Thirty-three Lights, behind a Transparency, representing the Blazing star of Seven Points; in the centre the letter G. On the top step of the Altar must be the Cubic Stone, in front of which a Red Rose opened, with the letter G in the centre. The Altar must be profusely decorated with Roses, and perfumed with Atta of Roses.<sup>192</sup>

The rose is continuously evoked in the masonic ritual described in *The Textbook of Advanced Freemasonry*. Serge Hutin also confirms the centrality of the symbolism of the rose in relation to the Rose Croix eighteenth degree, pointing out that it is in this degree that the esoteric meaning of the initials of Christian religion I. N. R. I. is revealed, which would not only mean “Jesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum” (“Jesus Nazarene King of Judeans”) but also “Igne Natura renovatur integra”, or “nature is entirely renewed through fire”.<sup>193</sup> In other words, this is the fulfilment of the Great Alchemical Work. The eighteenth degree also helps to explain the meaning of the mystical androgyny and, quoting P. Rosen, Serge Hutin demonstrates that the rose is the most important symbol of this degree:

An open compass on a quarter of a circle. The head of the compass is surmounted by a crown. Between the two legs of the compass, a cross adorned with rays whose foot leans on the quarter of the circle. In the middle of the cross, a rose, whose stem starts from one of the tips and whose flower leans

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<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201-203.

<sup>193</sup> See Serge Hutin, *op. cit.*, p. 101-102. We find the same explanation of the INRI epigraph in *Le Mystère des Cathédrales* (The Mystery of the Cathedrals, 1926) by the alchemist Fulcanelli, who writes: “the inscription INRI, exoterically translated as *Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudeorum* (Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews), but which gives to the cross its secret meaning: *Igne Natura Renovatur Integra* (By fire nature is renewed whole)”. Fulcanelli, *Le Mystère des Cathédrales. Esoteric interpretation of the Hermetic Symbols of the Great Work*, translated from the French by Mary Sworder, with Prefaces by Eugène Canseliet F. C. H., Introduction by Walter Lang, London, Neville Spearman, 1971, p. 169. See also Eugène Canseliet, *Alchimie. Études diverses de Symbolisme hermétique et de pratique philosophale*, Paris, Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1964, p. 111-112.



on the head of the compass. Below the cross, on one side an eagle with the unfolded wings, on the other one a pelican which feeds its young (by opening its breast). Between the two birds, a branch of acacia. The *sacred word* (INRI) is carved on one side of the jewel in hieroglyphic characters, on the other one there is the *password* (two words: *Emmanuel* and *Pax vobiscum*).<sup>194</sup>

The masonic compass, crown, rose, acacia, eagle, birds, the enigmatic caption I. N. R. I., and the secret masonic codes “Emmanuel” and “pax vobiscum”, which refer directly to the sphere of Christian religion (“pax vobiscum” is used in the Eucharist), all converge in the masonic ritual of the eighteenth degree of the Rose Croix, linking masonic tradition, religion, Rosicrucianism and initiatory symbolism. Thus, there is a link between Rosicrucianism, Freemasonry and literature, although the contours are not clearly defined. It is difficult to establish precise links between these contexts, which are apparently remote from each other, but a tenuous thread seems to link them. Frances Yates had hinted at these invisible (but not necessarily inexistent) links between occult writings, Freemasonry and the Rosicrucian Brotherhood, highlighting the difficulties that research on such topics would entail:

There is a vast literature on Rosicrucianism which assumes the existence of a secret society, founded by Christian Rosencreutz, and having a continuous existence up to modern times. In the vague and inaccurate world of so-called ‘occultist’ writing this assumption has produced a kind of literature which deservedly sinks below the notice of the serious historian. And when, as is often the case, the misty discussion of ‘Rosicrucians’ and their history becomes involved with the masonic myths, the enquirer feels that he is sinking helplessly into a bottomless bog.<sup>195</sup>

These matters raised by Frances Yates are linked to reflections by Gabriele Rossetti, who evidenced the relations between masonic ritual and literature. The difference between the two scholars was that Rossetti emphasized the importance of the link between love poetry and the initiatory Orders from the sectarian perspective. However, Frances Yates was far more cautious and preferred not to commit herself, although she did confirm the link between Rosicrucianism and the initiatory milieus, in particular Freemasonry. At the centre of this complex and sensitive discussion of the links between Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism and literature there is always the same symbol, which acts as a bridge: the rose. With regard to the mystery of the rose associated with the masonic and Rosicrucian traditions, Gabriele Rossetti wrote: “it is in the ritual books, from the most remote ages up to our own of this society [the

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<sup>194</sup> “Un compas ouvert sur un quart de cercle. La tête du compas est surmontée d’une couronne. Entre les deux branches du compas, une croix rayonnée dont le pied s’appuie sur le quart de cercle. Au milieu de la croix, une rose, dont la tige part de l’une des pointes et dont la fleur s’appuie sur la tête du compas. Au bas de la croix d’un côté un aigle aux ailes déployées, de l’autre en pélican nourrissant ses petits (en s’ouvrant la poitrine). Entre les deux oiseaux, une branche d’acacia. Le *mot sacré* (INRI) est gravé d’un côté du bijou en caractère hiéroglyphique, de l’autre est le *mot de passe* (double: *Emmanuel* et *pax vobiscum*)”. Samuel Paul Rosen in Serge Hutin, *op. cit.*, p. 101-102. See also Samuel Paul Rose, *Maçonnerie pratique*, v. 2, Paris, Edouard Baltenweck, 1886, p. 129.

<sup>195</sup> Frances A. Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, p. 262.

ancient initiatory society from which Freemasonry would derive], that the egypt is told that he becomes Rose, and he takes the name, and such Rose is *the emblem of the son of God, who is compared by the evangelist to a Rose*".<sup>196</sup> In order to understand the meaning of the masonic and Rosicrucian rose, Rossetti suggests reading a book from the Middle Ages which has to do with alchemy: the *Rosarium Philosophorum*: "whoever wishes to see which this *Rose* is [that of the Rosicrucians], and from which *Rosary* it derives, must read in the book *Artis Auriferæ quam Chemiam vocant* (Basel, 1610) the treaty by Arnaldus de Villa Nova titled *Rosarium Philosophorum*".<sup>197</sup> Nineteenth century Freemasonry, the Renaissance Rosicrucians and medieval alchemy are linked by Gabriele Rossetti through the symbol of the rose, whose enigma would be preserved by the medieval love poets, by the Rosicrucians and by contemporary Freemasonry:

The ancient sect of Love, which gave rise in Italy to so-called *Platonic Love*, is none other than this secret society [the society of the Rosy-Cross], described by Reghellini, which was hidden under those veils; and the greatest men of the past centuries, who were highly esteemed for both their knowledge and for their power, were all followers of this school of ancient knowledge; which, deriving from ancient Egypt grew, like the fertile Nile, to irrigate the ideal world, and to prepare, during the Renaissance of science and the arts, the current European civilization. [...] The greatest poets emerged from its fertile bosom; we will hear – among its other merits – that it learned the art of poetry; [...] many of its admired poems, that ennobled in Europe the idioms that we speak today, are the precious fruit of its occult doctrines.<sup>198</sup>

These were the thorny questions that Frances Yates raised; Rossetti had preceded Yates in warning that poetry, its roses and its loves, beyond being literary fiction, were sometimes also initiatory symbols, from the ancient school of love to Freemasonry, passing through the Rosicrucians.

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<sup>196</sup> "E ne' libri rituali, che dalle più remote età sino alla nostra di questa medesima società ci pervennero, viene espresso all'epopto il quale divien Rosa, e ne prende il nome, che una tal Rosa è *emblema del figlio di Dio, il quale dall'evangelista è comparato ad una Rosa*". Gabriele Rossetti, *Il mistero dell'Amor platonico del Medio Evo*, v. I, p. 171.

<sup>197</sup> "Chi vuole intanto vedere quale fosse questa *Rosa* [quella dei Rosacroce], e da quale *Rosaio* sorta, legga nel libro intitolato *Artis Auriferæ quam Chemiam vocant* (Basilea, 1610) il trattato di Arnaldo di Villanova intitolato *Rosarium Philosophorum*". *Ibid.*, p. 172.

<sup>198</sup> "L'antica setta d'Amore, onde nacque in Italia il così detto *Amor Platonico*, altro non è che questa stessa società segreta, espressa dal Reghellini, la quale si copriva allora sotto que' veli; e che i più grandi uomini de' secoli passati [...] erano tutti proseliti di questa scuola di sapienza antica; la quale derivando dal vetusto Egitto si allargò, quasi Nilo fecondo, ad irrigare il mondo ideale, ed a preparare, nel Risorgimento delle scienze e delle arti, la presente civiltà europea. [...] I più grandi poeti sono assurti dal suo grembo ubertoso; udremo fra gli altri suoi pregi, ch'ella insegnò l'arte della poesia; [...] molti dei più ammirati poemi, che nobilitarono gli idiomi in Europa or parlati, son preziosi frutti delle sue occulte dottrine". *Ibid.*

In the wake of the Brotherhood of the Renaissance's Rosy-Cross, several Rosicrucian Orders emerged in the following centuries, often influencing literature. In particular, the eighteenth and nineteenth century saw the development of the Rosicrucian type of initiatory society.<sup>199</sup> For example, the Black Rose of Prague, whose adepts were hermeticists and called the Rosicrucians of Gold.<sup>200</sup> The society of the Rosy-Cross of Gold spread all over Europe, especially in the German-speaking areas and in the Netherlands.<sup>201</sup> The latter was particularly fertile terrain for the spread of the Rosicrucian brotherhoods, and by the fifteenth century Samuel Sorbière (1615-1670) wrote about the Netherlands: "there is no country in the world that is more comfortable for the Dutch Rosy-Cross, and where those who possess the secret are freer".<sup>202</sup> Still today, the Netherlands are particularly important in terms of the history of Rosicrucianism. In the twentieth century, a Rosicrucian Society called Lectorium Rosicrucianum was established in Haarlem, which claimed (and still does today) its filiation with the Cathar tradition.<sup>203</sup> The Cathars of the Middle Ages (which are linked, as we have seen, to medieval love poetry) merged with the Rosicrucian tradition of the Renaissance in the Netherlands at a time remote from them and close to us: the twentieth century. Amsterdam housed the most important library in Europe as regards esotericism and the history of the Rosy-Cross, called the Ritman Library, or Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica. This library contained the works of Arthur Edward Waite, one of the most important scholars of Rosacrucianism (as well as occultism), who had a fundamental role in establishing the Golden Dawn and other occult and initiatory Orders in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Waite mentions Gabriele Rossetti (though in a fleeting way), as for example in his *The Legend of the Holy Grail*,<sup>204</sup> and what is noteworthy is the fact that Waite and Rossetti used the same sources for their research, such as the *Memoir of Anti-Jacobinism* by the Abbé Barruel and *La Maçonnerie considérée comme le résultat des Religions Égyptienne, Juive et Chrétienne* by Marziale Reghellini da Schio (1766-1853), who was a mason and a *carbonaro* (like Rossetti), and forced into exile in Brussels. It was in this city that Reghellini wrote his works on Freemasonry and on its connections with religious cults and political Power. He makes reference to Dante, affirming

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<sup>199</sup> See Serge Hutin, *op. cit.*, p. 62; Antoine Faivre, *L'Ésotérisme au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, Seghers, 1973, p. 177-186.

<sup>200</sup> See René Le Forestier, *La Franc-maçonnerie templière et occultiste aux XVIII<sup>e</sup> et XIX<sup>e</sup> siècles*, Paris, Aubier-Montaigne, Louvain, Nauwelaerts, 1970, p. 63-65; Jean-Pierre Bayard, *La Symbolique de la Rose-Croix*, p. 153-154.

<sup>201</sup> See Jean-Pierre Bayard, *La Symbolique de la Rose-Croix*, p. 155.

<sup>202</sup> Quoted in Jean Marquès-Rivière, *op. cit.*, p. 346.

<sup>203</sup> See Jean-Pierre Bayard, *La Symbolique de la Rose-Croix*, p. 223-225.

<sup>204</sup> Arthur Edward Waite, *The Holy Grail: History, Legend and Symbolism* [1933], Mineola, New York, Dover publications, 2006, p. 389, 400.

that the Italian poet was an initiate,<sup>205</sup> and highlights the importance of the symbol of the cross and the rose in initiatory terms: the cross considered as the symbol of union; the rose seen as symbolic of secrecy.<sup>206</sup>

I shall now move on to tracing a generic picture of the initiatory societies based on the symbolism of the rose in the wake of the Rosy-Cross Brotherhood. Among these societies, it is worth mentioning the *Société des Rosati d'Artois* (Society of the Rosati of Artois), in which Artois is, in fact, an anagram of Rosati, and can be considered pleonastic. It was a literary and poetic society founded in France on 12 June 1778 by Louis Marie Ferdinand Charamond, and its members included Lazare Carnot and Maximilien Robespierre.<sup>207</sup> The ceremonial introduction of the *Société des Rosati d'Artois* is based on the importance of the symbol of the rose: “you will pick a rose, you will breathe three times its scent, you will put it in your buttonhole and empty a glass of red wine in one go to the health of all the Rosati, past, present and future: finally, in the name of the Society, you will embrace one of the persons that you love the most. You will then be a real Rosati”.<sup>208</sup> There is an allusion here to the concept of love associated with the rose in speech which is obviously of an initiatory nature. This passage shows that, even in the eighteenth century, the rose, love and initiation go hand in hand, and it was in that century that the history of the Rosy-Cross would merge with hermeticism, which was vigorously revived in the Enlightenment. In the period of the triumph of rationalism the irrational re-emerges, together with the rediscovery of ancient Egypt. This subject would deserve a study *per se*, but I shall just quote the enigmatic words uttered by Cagliostro who, on 10 May 1796, addressed the general assembly of the Freemasons in Paris:

Do not search Sirs, for the symbolic expression of the divine idea: it was created sixty centuries ago by the magus of Egypt. Hermes-Thot established the terms. The first is the Rose, because this flower has a spherical form, the most perfect symbol of unity, and because the scent that it emanates is like a

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<sup>205</sup> See Reghellini de Schio, *La Maçonnerie considérée comme le résultat des religions égyptienne, juive et chrétienne, par le F.M.R., de Schio*, Paris, Ailaud, v. III., 1842, p. 48-50. Reghellini de Schio had this to say about Dante and his presumed initiation: “if we read Dante carefully, we discover that secret societies were widespread, and that they professed the doctrines of the Masons, although we do not know under what name these societies gathered. Dante was an Initiate” (“si on lit avec attention le Dante, on découvre que les sociétés secrètes y étaient répandues, et qu’elles professaient les doctrines des Maçons, quoiqu’on ignore sous quel nom ces sociétés se rassemblaient. Dante était Initié”; *ibid.*, p. 58); “Dante lived at the end of the twelfth century and the beginning of the thirteenth, before the destruction of the Knights Templar, when a number of secret societies existed in Italy, Germany and France. Dante therefore became Rosen-Crux” (“Dante, vivait à la fin du 12<sup>me</sup> siècle, et au commencement du 13<sup>me</sup>, avant l’époque de la destruction des Templiers, et lorsqu’il existait en Italie, en Allemagne et en France, une quantité de Sociétés secrètes. Le Dante a donc devancé Rosen-Crux”). *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>206</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 359. See also Arthur Edward Waite, *The Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross. Being Records of The House of The Holy Spirit in Its Inward and Outward History*, p. 109-110. We have seen Jean Marie Ragon also spoke about the masonic rose associated with the concept of secrecy, as reported in the *Textbook of Advanced Freemasonry*.

<sup>207</sup> See Jean-Pierre Bayard, *La Symbolique de la Rose-Croix*, p. 238.

<sup>208</sup> “Vous cueillerez une rose, vous la respirerez trois fois, puis l’attacherez à votre boutonnière, vous viderez d’un trait un verre de vin rosé à la santé de tous les Rosati, passés, présents et futurs: ensuite, vous embrasserez, au nom de la Société, une des personnes que vous aimerez le mieux. Vous serez alors un vrai Rosati”. Quoted in *ibid.*

revelation of life. This rose was placed at the centre of a Cross, an image that expresses the point at which the peaks of two right angles are joined, whose lines can be extended to infinity by our conception, in the triple sense of *height, breadth* and *depth*. This symbol had gold as its material, which means in the occult science *light* and *pureness*, which the wise Hermes called Rosy-Cross, namely the Sphere of Infinity. Between the arms of the cross he wrote the letters I, N, R, I, each of which expresses a mystery.<sup>209</sup>

Cagliostro was arrested on 27 December 1789 by the Inquisition, charged with heresy and magic, and died in the Fortress of Saint Leo in Rome on 26 August 1795. Beyond this detail, it is worth pointing out the strange reference to the rose, whose mystery hides the meaning of a tradition which, in the enigmatic words of Cagliostro, appears to link magic and Egyptian hermeticism to the Rosicrucian doctrine. On another occasion, during his interrogation by Parliament on 30 May 1786 (according to the *Memorial for the accused*), he stated:

Like the window of the South, like the shining light of Midday which characterizes the full conscience and communication with God, I go towards the North, towards the fog and the cold, abandoning everywhere some particles of myself, going beyond myself, diminishing myself at each stage, but leaving you a bit of clarity, a bit of heat, a bit of strength, until the moment in which my course will be decided and come to an end, in the hours in which the rose will blossom on the cross.<sup>210</sup>

According to Cagliostro, understanding the meaning of the rose also means understanding the cross, which is not only a Rosicrucian symbol, but in particular, a symbol of the Roman Catholic religion.

The example of Cagliostro helps us to understand the esoteric and occult climate that would develop from the eighteenth century, and flourish in the nineteenth century. In fact, it was in the nineteenth century that the Rosicrucian Orders spread and multiplied: the Esoteric Rosy-Cross of Hartmann (founded in Germany in 1888, which then merged with the O. T. O., the Order of the Oriental Templars), the Cabalistic Rosy-Cross of Stanislas de Guaita, which split into to the Order of the Temple of the Rosy-Cross and the Graal or Mystic Order of the the

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<sup>209</sup> “Ne cherchez plus, Messieurs, l’expression symbolique de l’idée divine: elle est créée depuis soixante siècles par les mages d’Égypte. Hermès-Thot en a fixé les deux termes. Le premier, c’est la *Rose*, parce que cette fleur présente une forme sphérique, symbole le plus parfait de l’unité, et parce que le parfum qui s’en exhale est comme une révélation de la vie. Cette rose fut placée au centre d’une *Croix*, figure exprimant le point où s’unissent les sommets de deux angles droits dont les lignes peuvent être prolongées à l’infini par notre conception, dans le triple sens de *hauteur, largeur* et *profondeur*. Ce symbole eut pour matière l’or, qui signifie, dans la science occulte, *lumière* et *pureté*; le sage Hermès l’appelle *Rose-Croix*, c’est-à-dire *Sphère* de l’Infini. Entre les rayons de la croix il écrivit les lettres I, N, R, I, dont chacune exprime un mystère”. In Paul Christian, *Histoire de la magie, du monde surnaturel et de la fatalité à travers les temps et les peuples*, Paris, Furne Juvet, 1870, p. 172-173. On the figure of Cagliostro, see Pier Carpi, *Cagliostro. Il maestro sconosciuto*, Rome, Edizioni Mediterranee, 1997; Aldo A. Mola, *Storia della Massoneria in Italia. Dal 1717 al 2018. Tre secoli di un Ordine iniziatico*, Milan, Bompiani, 2019, p. 58-60. Cagliostro had a certain influence on the literature of the nineteenth century, especially on French literature, for example in authors such as Nerval. Even Goethe was interested in the figure of Cagliostro, and personally went to Sicily to visit his family. See Marino Freschi, *Goethe Massone*, Acireale, Tipheret, 2017, p. 81-85.

<sup>210</sup> Cagliostro in Emmanuel Lalande, *Le Maître inconnu, Cagliostro. Étude historique et critique sur la haute magie*, Paris, Dorbon-aîné, 1912, p. 283.

Rose + Cross of Péladan, the Rosicrucian Society (*Societas Rosicrucian in Anglia*, SRIA) and the Golden Dawn in England. These are only some of the Rosicrucian Orders which, claiming a filiation with the Middle Ages and the Rosy-Cross of the Renaissance, spread from the nineteenth century, and had a fundamental role in influencing literature. I shall discuss these Orders in the second part of my work. Esoteric literature that flourishes from the nineteenth century is based on the love and floral literature of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, which I have discussed in this first part of my thesis. These origins are key to understanding esoteric love and the initiatory rose of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.



## CHAPTER VI

### THE ROSE OF THE ESOTERIC NINETEENTH CENTURY

#### *The esoteric nineteenth century*

In the first part of my work, I showed that the symbol of the rose and the theme of love in literature were closely linked to the esoteric currents of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. But the esoteric currents did not disappear during the Renaissance and continued to exist in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Pierre Riffard points out that “the esotericism of the eighteenth century was above all philosophical and ritualistic”, whilst “the esotericism of the nineteenth century would be above all literary and occultist”.<sup>1</sup> He cites men of letters whose works are steeped in esotericism, such as Zacharias Werner, Gérard de Nerval, Honoré de Balzac and Edward George Bulwer Lytton.<sup>2</sup> German, French and English literature played a fundamental role in the esoteric context that characterised the nineteenth century.

A large part of the intellectual elite, including the literati, were initiated into Masonic lodges or, at least, gravitated towards these initiatory circles. In France, especially towards the end of the century, “the initiatory Orders were populated by men of letters”,<sup>3</sup> as Jean-Pierre Laurant remarks, and Ida Merello confirms this tendency of many intellectuals, namely “carrying out private rites in restricted circles of the elect”.<sup>4</sup> In particular, Ida Merello produced one of the most comprehensive studies on the relationship between literature and esotericism: *Esoterismo e letteratura fin de siècle* (Esotericism and fin-de-siècle literature, 1997). More specifically, Merello focuses on the relationship between esotericism and *fin-de-siècle* French literature, and between esoteric circles and artistic and literary circles of the time.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “L’ésotérisme du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle fut surtout philosophique et ritualiste”; “l’ésotérisme du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle sera surtout littéraire et occultiste”. Pierre A. Riffard, *op. cit.*, p. 805.

<sup>2</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> “Les ordres initiatiques étaient peuplés d’hommes de plume”. Jean-Pierre Laurant, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

<sup>4</sup> “Consumare riti privati in cerchie ristrette di eletti”. Ida Merello, *Esoterismo e letteratura fin de siècle. La sezione letteraria della rivista “L’Initiation”*, Fasano, Schena, 1997, p. 111. On the relationship between esotericism and French literature of the nineteenth century, see also Ida Merello, *Indagini sulle forme dell’ignoto. Esoterismo, fantastico e altre chimere. Enquêtes sur les formes de l’inconnu. Ésotérisme, fantastique et autres chimères*, preface by Patrizia Oppici, eds. Elisa Bricco, Anna Giaufret, Chiara Rolla, Micaela Rossi and Stefano Vicari, Rome, Tab edizioni, 2023.

<sup>5</sup> On the relations between esotericism and art, see Sébastien Clerbois, *L’Ésotérisme et le symbolisme belge*, Wijnegem, Pandora Publishers, 2012. According to Sébastien Clerbois, “esotericism has had a real and concrete influence on various artistic movements such as Surrealism, Romanticism and, in this case, Symbolism” (“l’ésotérisme a joué d’une influence réelle et concrète sur divers mouvements artistiques comme le surréalisme, le romantisme et, en l’occurrence, le symbolisme”). *Ibid.*, p. 13.



In 1947, Guy Michaud had already considered esotericism as “the driver and key component of the symbolist movement”.<sup>6</sup> This idea was confirmed by Victor Emile Michelet,<sup>7</sup> whilst Jules Lermina even asserted that “literature is but one of the branches of occultism”,<sup>8</sup> confirming the fact that nineteenth-century literature was strongly influenced by the esoteric doctrines. During this century, therefore, literature was also a means of transmitting initiatory and occult knowledge. In this regard, a French work from the end of the century, *Sarah Kemmy* (1894) by Georges Montière, highlights the role of literature as a way to preserve and convey esoteric knowledge. Under the guise of a love story between the characters of the novel, the author talks about the esoteric readings in which the main character immerses himself, acquiring increasingly greater wisdom that allows him to see and understand the hidden side of things.<sup>9</sup>

Love continued to be a fundamental theme in French and English literature, especially so in esoteric literature. In his *Éros et littérature*, Michel Brix brilliantly studied the *topos* of love in nineteenth-century literature, particularly French literature, emphasising its mystical significance. Brix speaks of “love mysticism”,<sup>10</sup> recalling that “Platonism after Plato has often taken, in the history of ideas, an esoteric or initiatory form”,<sup>11</sup> touching on numerous contexts linked to the esoteric tradition: Alexandrian Neoplatonism, the Persian and Arabic traditions, Gnosis, medieval mysticism, alchemical thought, Jewish Kabbalah, Christian Kabbalah, Rhenish mysticism, the Neoplatonism of fifteenth-century Florence, the Enlightenment of Jacob Boehme, Swedenborg and Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin, and German and French Romanticism.<sup>12</sup> All these currents, more or less related to Platonic doctrines, created a filiation which, according to some nineteenth century writers such as George Sand, act as *philosophia perennis*. In her work *Spiridion* (1838-1839), George Sand emphasises the doctrinal continuity between Pythagorean, Platonic and Christian beliefs: it is always the same doctrine, the eternal doctrine, the *philosophia perennis*.

This *philosophia perennis* is one of the major themes in nineteenth-century occultist circles. The occultist Papus, for example, believed in the existence of an eternal tradition “which goes, through Pythagoras, Plato and other Greek philosophers, from Moses to the Kabbalah, from the Kabbalah to Christianity, and which is continued today by the alchemists, the

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<sup>6</sup> “Le nerf moteur et clef du mouvement symboliste”. Guy Michaud, *Message du symbolisme. La Révolution poétique*, 4 v., Paris, Nice, v. 2, 1947, p. 371.

<sup>7</sup> See Victor Emile Michelet, *Les Compagnons de la Hiérophanie*, Paris, Dormans Aîné, 1937, p. 31.

<sup>8</sup> “La littérature n’est qu’une des branches de l’occultisme”. Jules Lermina, “Littérature et occultisme”, *L’Initiation*, v. 38, n. 6, March 1898, p. 225.

<sup>9</sup> See Ida Merello, *Esoterismo e letteratura fin de siècle*, p. 113.

<sup>10</sup> “Mysticisme amoureux”. Michel Brix, *Éros et littérature. Le discours amoureux en France au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> “Le platonisme après Platon a souvent pris, dans l’histoire des idées, une forme ésotérique ou initiatique”. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 6-12.

Rosicrucians and the Freemasons”.<sup>13</sup> Another occultist of the late nineteenth century, Louis-Sophron Fugairon (1846-1922), claimed such a filiation through the symbol of the rose, from the lotus of oriental mythology to the Rosicrucian rose, as he wrote in an article published in 1893 in *L’Initiation* (a journal created by Papus) about the symbols of fire: “the gods of India and Tibet rest on the Lotus flower [...]. Later, in the West, the lotus replaced by the rose will give the Rose-Cross”.<sup>14</sup> It is therefore, as Ida Merello says, “a kind of esoteric syncretism”,<sup>15</sup> in which the different esoteric currents over the course of history are put together and create a lineage – a filiation that makes the different eras, and the different Western and the Eastern traditions, communicate. Thus, the nineteenth century followed a trend that had already developed in France (but more generally in Europe) in the eighteenth century, as Michel Brix remarks: “the development of a vast network of sects, lodges and various confraternities, where – as in the Middle Ages – preoccupations with alchemy and magic were mixed with spiritual meditations”.<sup>16</sup> Jean-Paul Corsetti summarises this esoteric context of nineteenth century Europe, where secret societies, Freemasonry, temporal and spiritual Power weave relationships whose echoes can be traced in the literature of the time:

Theosophists, enlightened men and *Naturphilosophen* contributed to the development and expansion of mystical or esoteric Freemasonry throughout Europe. In the space of about fifty years, obediences, rituals and declarations multiplied, sometimes following divergent paths and thus maintaining specific relations with the temporal and spiritual powers. Along with the lodges, there were also countless “secret” societies, of Rosicrucian or chivalric inspiration, often marginal, which continued to proliferate until the nineteenth century, thereby increasing the confusion.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> “Qui irait, par Pythagore, Platon et autres philosophes grecs, de Moïse à la kabbale, de la kabbale au Christianisme, et qui est continuée de nos jours par les alchimistes, les Rose-Croix et les Francs-Maçons”. Gérard Encausse (Papus), *Martinisme et Franc-maçonnerie*, Paris, Chamuel, 1899, p. 67.

<sup>14</sup> “Les dieux de l’Inde et du Thibet reposent sur la fleur de Lotus [...]. Plus tard, en occident, le lotus remplacé par la rose donnera la Rose-Croix”. Louis-Sophron Fugairon, “Le mythe et le symbole du feu”, *L’Initiation*, v. 19, n. 7, avril 1893, p. 247.

<sup>15</sup> “Una sorta di sincretismo esoterico”. Ida Merello, *Esoterismo e letteratura fin de siècle*, p. 37.

<sup>16</sup> “Le développement d’un vaste réseau de sectes, de loges et de confréries diverses, où – comme au Moyen Âge – des préoccupations d’alchimie et de magie se mêlaient aux méditations spirituelles”. Michel Brix, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

<sup>17</sup> “Théosophes, illuminés et *Naturphilosophen* ont contribué, dans toute l’Europe, au développement et à l’expansion de la franc-maçonnerie mystique ou ésotérique. En l’espace d’une cinquantaine d’années, les obédiences, les rituels et les déclarations se multiplient, empruntant parfois des voies divergentes et entretenant, de ce fait, des rapports spécifiques avec les pouvoirs temporel et spirituel. Avec les loges, il faut aussi compter les innombrables sociétés ‘secrètes’, d’inspiration rosicrucienne ou chevaleresque, souvent marginales, qui ne cesseront de proliférer jusqu’au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, augmentant du même coup la confusion”. Jean-Paul Corsetti, *Histoire de l’ésotérisme et des sciences occultes*, Paris, Larousse, 1992, p. 305. This “confusion” of which Corsetti speaks in relation to the esoteric context of the nineteenth century also characterizes the eighteenth century, as confirmed by Antoine Faivre: “from the eighteenth century onwards, these initiatory societies proliferated. When they explicitly place themselves under the sign of the Rosicrucians, they also draw their inspiration from other esoteric currents. They both take on different aspects according to the times, depending on the culture and society of the time. New currents are also born, breaking with those that precede them but from which they originate: Western esotericism is marked by discontinuity, rejection and reinterpretation” (“à partir du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, l’on voit proliférer ces sociétés initiatiques. Quand elles se placent explicitement sous le signe de la Rose-Croix, elles puisent leur inspiration dans d’autres courants ésotériques aussi. Tant elles-mêmes que ceux-ci revêtent des aspects divers selon les époques, en fonction de la culture et de la société du moment. L’on voit aussi naître de nouveaux

This cultural panorama of the nineteenth century, characterised by the strong influence of esoteric currents and by more or less initiatory Orders, was also the subject of Gabriele Rossetti's research, pursued by the so-called Dantean "heterodox" school. Admittedly, Rossetti did not have the scientific rigour that characterises the studies of historians of twentieth- and twenty-first-century esoteric currents, nor of specialists in the field of modern literary criticism who have taken an interest in the links between literature and esotericism. However, the idea of reconstructing the history of esoteric currents through literature was central to Gabriele Rossetti's research into esoteric love, and in this respect he can be considered one of the pioneers of the field of Western esoteric studies. I have already highlighted this aspect in the first chapter, by mentioning Alessandro Grossato's article, "Gabriele Rossetti, autore della prima storia dell'esoterismo occidentale". However, if in the field of Western esoteric studies, Gabriele Rossetti can be considered one of the pioneers, in the field of literary criticism he can be considered the absolute pioneer. His merit lies in highlighting an aspect that is still marginalised in the field of literary studies, namely the relationship between literature and esotericism. To my knowledge, no one before him had studied this aspect in as much depth, and in so doing, he produced one of the first works on the historical reconstruction of esoteric currents from antiquity to the nineteenth century.

Thus, in his *Mistero dell'Amor Platonico*, Rossetti affirms that "many medieval writers used a conventional language in which they discussed among themselves philosophical and political doctrines which they dared not express openly".<sup>18</sup> Such language "was very ancient in several nations of the earth"<sup>19</sup> and in this language "the occult science of the ancient priests was always exposed".<sup>20</sup> In particular, "after having been practised in Europe for centuries, it descended over a long chain of generations to our contemporaries, many of whom still understand and use it".<sup>21</sup> Moreover, Gabriele Rossetti adds that "those who possess the keys by [initiatory] transmission boast of its antiquity and universality",<sup>22</sup> and that "such language is that of the society of Freemasons, which claims that the Templars, so numerous and powerful

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courants, en rupture avec ceux qui les précèdent mais dont ils sont issus: l'ésotérisme occidental est parcouru de discontinuités, de rejets, de réinterprétations"). Antoine Faivre, *Accès de l'ésotérisme occidental*, t. II, p. 18-19.

<sup>18</sup> "Molti scrittori del Medio Evo usavano un linguaggio convenzionale, col quale discorrevano fra loro di dottrine filosofiche e politiche, ch'essi non osavano apertamente esprimere". Gabriele Rossetti, *Il mistero dell'Amor platonico del Medio Evo*, v. II, p. 1249.

<sup>19</sup> "Era antichissimo in parecchie nazioni della terra". *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> "In esso fu sempre esposta la scienza occulta de' sacerdozj vetusti". *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> "Dopo essere stato in Europa da secoli remoti praticato, esso discese per lunga catena di generazioni sino ai nostri contemporanei, molti de' quali l'intendono e l'usano ancora". *Ibid.*, p. 1249-1250.

<sup>22</sup> "Coloro i quali ne hanno per comunicazione le chiavi ne vantano l'antichità e l'universalità". *Ibid.*, p. 1250.

in the Middle Ages, and others who were held to be alchemists and astrologers, as well as others bearing other names, were all their predecessors”.<sup>23</sup>

This language was the language of love which, according to Rossetti, can be found in the literature of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the eighteenth century (notably in Swedenborg) and the nineteenth century. This literary *topos* merely conceals a subterranean history connected with the esoteric currents in history – the “rejected knowledge”<sup>24</sup> theorised by Wouter Hanegraaff. Rossetti speaks of a “a secret society, which had spread throughout various countries of Europe”, adding that “this secret society, which we shall call the Love Sect, was in existence more than a century before Dante lived”,<sup>25</sup> and will be transmitted to the nineteenth century, as he repeatedly affirms. “It was an inauspicious point for me that, in order to decipher Dante, I set out to research the sectarian spirit of his times and trace its subterranean path to our own century”,<sup>26</sup> as Gabriele Rossetti wrote in a letter to John Hookham Frere on 30 July 1833, in order to show that the secret doctrine of love was transmitted from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century, whilst the object of this Sect of Love that spread throughout the centuries is the “changeable mystical woman, because she is the changeable occult science”.<sup>27</sup> In other words, it is the *philosophia perennis* that is passed down through the centuries, the “eternal truth”<sup>28</sup> evoked by George Sand or the “mystical theology”<sup>29</sup> of Balzac.

A little-known French novel by René du Mesnil de Maricourt (1829-1895), *Batracien mélomane* (published in the French esoteric journal *L’Initiation* in March 1891), seems to represent the history of love poetry from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century, particularly

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<sup>23</sup> “Un tal linguaggio è quello della società de’ Liberi Muratori, i quali affermano che que’ Templari sì numerosi e potenti nel medio evo, ed altri ch’erano tenuti per Alchimisti ed Astrologhi, non che altri con altri nomi, eran tutti loro predecessori”. *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> The concept of “rejected knowledge” was evoked by James Webb in his two books: *The Occult Underground* (1974) and *The Occult Establishment* (1976). In the former, he writes that “the occult is rejected knowledge” (James Webb, *The Occult Underground*, La Salle, Illinois, Open Court Publishing Company, 1974, p. 192), while in the latter he specifies the nature of this “rejected knowledge”: “the Establishment culture of the late 19th-century Europe – based on capitalism, individualism, and the pursuit of profit – was confronted with a selection of idealisms whose kingdoms were not of this world, whose categories of thought were apocalyptic, were based on visions of absolute values and drew sustenance from traditions of thinking that have, through historical accident, remained rejected throughout the course of European history. This Underground of rejected knowledge, comprising heretical religious positions, defeated social schemes, abandoned sciences, and neglected modes of speculation, has as its core the varied collection of doctrines that can be combined in a bewildering variety of ways and that is known as the occult”. James Webb, *The Occult Establishment*, La Salle, Illinois, Open Court Publishing, 1976, p. 9-10. The concept of “rejected knowledge” is mentioned several times in Webb’s two books. See, for example, James Webb, *The Occult Underground*, p. 238; James Webb, *The Occult Establishment*, p. 321.

<sup>25</sup> Gabriele Rossetti, *Disquisitiones on the Antipapal Spirit*, v. I, p. 200.

<sup>26</sup> “Infausto punto fu per me quello, per decifrar Dante, mi posi a ricercare lo spirito settario de’ suoi tempi, e tracciarne il cammino sotterraneo, sino al nostro secolo”. Letter from Gabriele Rossetti to John Hookham Frere on 30 July 1833, in *Gabriele Rossetti. Carteggi. Volume terzo (1832-1836)*, p. 283.

<sup>27</sup> “Cangiabile donna mistica, perché essa è appunto la cangiabile scienza occulta”. Gabriele Rossetti, *Il mistero dell’Amor platonico del Medio Evo*, v. I, p. 249.

<sup>28</sup> “Vérité éternelle”. George Sand, *op. cit.*, p. 564.

<sup>29</sup> Honoré de Balzac, *La Comédie Humaine*, ed. Katharine Prescott Wormeley, Boston, Hardy, Pratt and Company, 1899, p. 304.

the love poetry of the Troubadours and the *Fedeli d'Amore*.<sup>30</sup> This novel tells the story of a French troubadour, Jehan de Trinquemar, who is turned into a toad after being killed by the husband of a woman that Jehan had loved. Whilst the novel conveys concepts of an occult nature, such as the transmigration of souls, and thus the occult law of life after death in the form of a Dantean “contrapasso”<sup>31</sup> (“retaliation”),<sup>32</sup> it is also true that the troubadour transformed into a toad who fails to speak modern French can also be seen as the survival of what the toad represents: the medieval doctrine of love. Even if turned into a form that does not allow it to communicate with the modern world (the nineteenth century), the toad represents nostalgia for lost forms, the idea that past forms, although mutilated, continue to survive. The doctrine of love represented by the troubadour Jehan de Trinquemar still survives in the nineteenth century, silent, misunderstood, disfigured, but it is still there. It is the doctrine of love hidden under the veil of a rose.

#### *An unknown thread linking Gabriele Rossetti, Honoré de Balzac and Victor Hugo*

In his *Mistero dell'Amor Platonico* and above all in his correspondences, Gabriele Rossetti shows that the same esoteric doctrine expounded by Dante and the medieval love poets can be found in nineteenth-century French writers and poets. Among these figures of the French literary scene, Rossetti mentions Victor Hugo and Honoré de Balzac.

On Victor Hugo, Rossetti says in his *Mistero*: “this living author [Victor Hugo] wrote some works with esoteric and exoteric meanings, on the same level as Dante, and he comes from the same school”.<sup>33</sup> Gabriele Rossetti states that Victor Hugo and Dante share the same school – one that retains an esoteric doctrine. But it is not only Dante who shares the same school and esoteric teaching with Victor Hugo, since the filiation concerns other works with the subject of love and the rose, namely *The Romance of the Rose* and the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (The Dream of Poliphilus) by Francesco Colonna, as Gabriele Rossetti says to John Hookham Frere in a letter dated 1 June 1834:

While I was away from home, this enigmatic work by the Dominican Francesco Colonna, entitled the *Hypnerotomachia of Poliphilus*, was left in my house [...]. I first learned about this book from an annotator of the *Roman de la Rose*, who states that this work [the *Roman de la Rose*] is of the same

<sup>30</sup> In addition to the Troubadour tradition, René du Mesnil de Maricourt, a writer with a keen interest in the occult, refers to the Rosicrucian tradition, particularly in his novel *Le Prince Narcisse* (1897), in which the protagonist Mitrophane is initiated into the Rosicrucian tradition in order to perfect his qualities as a seer. See Ida Merello, *Esoterismo e letteratura fin de siècle*, p. 97.

<sup>31</sup> *Inferno* (XXVIII, v. 142). Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia*, p. 330.

<sup>32</sup> Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, p. 167.

<sup>33</sup> “Questo autore vivente ha scritto qualche opera con senso esoterico e exoterico, sullo stessissimo sistema di Dante, e dalla medesima scuola proveniente”. Gabriele Rossetti, *Il mistero dell'Amor platonico del Medio Evo*, v. I, p. 417.

nature as this novel of Love [*The Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*]; and since I had already understood the nature of that novel, I had no difficulty in perceiving the character of the book that relates to it; but then I came across many others that are of the same nature, and that say essentially the same thing [..]. Even today such works are produced [...]. In addition to *The Epicurean* by Thomas Moore, that appeared in London in 1826, Victor Hugo's *Notre Dame de Paris* appeared in Paris in 1831, which is one of the most ingenious and interesting novels of its kind I have ever read. Everyone reads it, but only a few people can understand it.<sup>34</sup>

For Gabriele Rossetti *The Dream of Poliphilus*, *The Romance of the Rose*, *The Epicurean* by Thomas Moore<sup>35</sup> and *Notre-Dame de Paris* by Victor Hugo share the same doctrine, that of esoteric love and the initiatory rose. In particular, in the same letter, Gabriele Rossetti writes something very interesting about Victor Hugo, namely that it was the author of *Notre-Dame de Paris* himself who confirmed the initiatory secret hidden in his work:

I knew here in London a friend of Victor Hugo to whom I said that I understood the inner spirit of that novel [*Notre-Dame de Paris*], and I could make it clear to others as well; [...] but that I would take great care in doing so. When he returned to Paris, he told Hugo what I had told him, and gave him my *Disquisitions on the Antipapal Spirit* to read. And the French author told him to congratulate me on it; and he added that he did not wonder that I understood the inner meaning of his novel.<sup>36</sup>

This letter is very interesting since it confirms that both Victor Hugo and Gabriele Rossetti knew about the esoteric nature hidden in literature, and above all that they were in contact, even if indirectly. At the moment we have no other documents proving the relationship between Victor Hugo and Gabriele Rossetti, but this is a research topic that could lead to hitherto unthinkable discoveries, both in the field of literary studies and the history of esoteric currents. What we do know is that there was an indirect link between Hugo and Rossetti, through a friend

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<sup>34</sup> “È stato lasciato in mia casa, mentre io non v’era, quell’enigmatica opera del Dominicano Francesco Colonna la quale s’intitola *La Hypnerotomachia di Polifilo* [...]. Ebbi la prima volta notizia di un tal libro da un annotatore del *Romanzo della Rosa*, il quale asserisce esser della stessa natura di quel romanzo d’*Amore*; e siccome avea già capito di che natura è quel Romanzo, così non mi fu tanto difficile lo scorgere la tempra del libro che gli era relativo; ma poi ne incontrai tanti altri che sono della stessa fatta, e i quali dicono in sostanza la medesima cosa [...] Anche ai dì nostri si producono tali lavori [...] Oltre *The Epicurean* di Tommaso Moore comparso in Londra nel 1826, è uscito in Parigi nel 1831 *Notre Dame de Paris* di Victor Hugo, ch’è uno dei più ingegnosi e de’ più interessanti ch’io mi abbia mai letti dello stesso genere. Tutti si immergono avidissimamente in quella lettura, e son così pochi quei che la capiscono!”. Letter from Gabriele Rossetti to John Hookham Frere on 1 June 1834, in *Gabriele Rossetti. Carteggi. Volume terzo (1832-1836)*, p. 422-423.

<sup>35</sup> As we have seen in the above-mentioned passage, among the English works of the nineteenth century that would hide the secret doctrine of love, Gabriele Rossetti mentions a little known work, *The Epicurean* (1827), written by Thomas Moore (1779-1852). It is set in 257 CE and is the story of the Epicurean philosopher Alciphron who is converted to Catholicism by the Egyptian priestess Alete. Thomas Moore devotes another work to the theme of love: *The Lovers of the Angels* (1823). Moreover, one of his most important poetic compositions deals with the symbolism of the rose: *The Last Rose of Summer* (1805).

<sup>36</sup> “Ho conosciuto qui in Londra un amico di Victor Hugo a cui ho detto ch’io capiva lo spirito interno di quel Romanzo, e poteva anche farlo capir altrui; [...] ma che mi sarei ben guardato dal farlo. Quand’ei tornò a Parigi, narrò all’*Hugo* quel che io gli avea detto, e gli dié a leggere il mio Spirito Antipapale. È l’autore francese nel renderglielo gli disse di farmene le sue congratulazioni; e che non si maravigliava ch’io capissi il senso intimo del suo romanzo”. Letter from Gabriele Rossetti to John Hookham Frere on 1 June 1834, in *ibid.*, p. 423.

of the French writer who was in Paris, but it is not known who this person was. Even William Michael Rossetti was not able to say who the intermediary was between the French writer and his father: “I do not know who his ‘friend’ many have been”.<sup>37</sup> Beyond the mystery of who might have acted as a bridge between Hugo and Rossetti, what matters is the recognition of esoteric knowledge on the part of Victor Hugo, whose *Notre-Dame de Paris* would be one of the works that spread the doctrine of love of the Middle Ages and of the Renaissance to the nineteenth century.<sup>38</sup>

In a letter to Charles Lyell on 24 January 1837, Gabriele Rossetti speaks of Hugo’s novel *Notre-Dame de Paris*, linking it to other little-known works on esoteric Renaissance love, such as the *Dialoghi d’amore* (Love Dialogues) by the Giambattista Manso (1570-1645), the *Cecaria* and *La Luminaria* by Marcantonio Epicuro (1472-1555), and the *Tempio d’Amore* (The Temple of Love) by Galeotto Del Carretto (1455-1530):

I have never read, nor have I ever seen the *Dialoghi d’amore* by the Marquis Giambattista Manso, man of letters and patron of men of letters of the sixteenth century. But I know that this was a time of great activity of the sect, and that innumerable compositions of this kind came out of many of these Italian academies, which appeared to be literary and were secret. I have collected and read some very valuable compositions, and among them a little poem entitled *La Ciociaria e L’Illuminaria* by a famous Neapolitan man of letters called Antonio Epicuro: it is a little poem which is shamelessly sectarian, and which I have explained. Another poem, very long, is that of the *Tempio d’Amore* by the Marquis del Carretto of the same age, where many figures are explained: in that temple are buried in couples, in separate arches, Dante and Beatrice, Petrarch and Laura, Boccaccio and Fiammetta, Cino and Selvaggia, and many others. These and many other works (some of which are based on drawings by Boethius) have been analysed by me and arranged century by century, from Dante to the present day. The last one I am analysing is the novel by Victor Hugo, a living Frenchman, entitled *Notre-Dame de Paris*; it is a real sectarian work, and confessed by the author himself as such. What a world of illusions we have lived in and continue to live in!<sup>39</sup>

In this letter, Gabriele Rossetti confirms the esotericism hidden in Victor Hugo's work, stressing once again the filiation with works of the Italian Renaissance.

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 425.

<sup>38</sup> *Notre-Dame de Paris* by Victor Hugo is set in the Middle Ages.

<sup>39</sup> “Non ho mai letto, né mai veduto *Dialoghi d’amore* del Marchese Giambattista Manso, letterato e mecenate di letterati del ’500. So però che quello fu un tempo di grande attività nella setta, e che innumerevoli componimenti di quel genere uscirono da quelle tante accademie Italiane, che parevano letterarie ed erano segrete. Preziosissimi ne ho raccolti e letti, e fra gli altri un poemetto intitolato *La Cecaria e l’Illuminaria* di un famoso letterato Napoletano chiamato Antonio Epicuro: poemetto ch’è sfacciatamente settario, che ho tutto spiegato per quanto prudenza il concessi. Un altro ben lungo è quello del *Tempio d’Amore* del Marchese del Carretto della stessa età, dove sono spiegate molte figure: in quel tempio sono sepolti a coppia a coppia, in arche separate, Dante e Beatrice, Petrarca e Laura, Boccaccio e Fiammetta, Cino e Selvaggia, e così altri. Questi ed altri molti lavori (alcuni de’ quali procedono sul disegno di Boezio) sono stati da me analizzati e posti per ordine secolo per secolo, dal tempo di Dante fino al nostro. L’ultimo che analizzo è il romanzo di Victor Hugo, francese vivente, intitolato *Notre Dame de Paris*: lavoro settario quanto altro mai, e dallo stesso autore confessato per tale. In che mondo d’illusioni siamo vissuti e viviamo!”. Letter from Gabriele Rossetti to Charles Lyell on 24 January 1837, in *Gabriele Rossetti. Carteggi. Volume quarto (1837-1840)*, p. 22-23.

But Victor Hugo is not the only French writer mentioned by Gabriele Rossetti. Another figure of nineteenth-century French literature who, according to Gabriele Rossetti, is linked to the doctrine of the *Fedeli d'Amore* of the Middle Ages is Honoré de Balzac.<sup>40</sup> Of all Balzac's works, Gabriele Rossetti underlines the importance of *Le Livre mystique* (The Mystical Book, 1835), based on the theory of esoteric love, in the wake of Dante and Swedenborg, as he writes in a letter to Charles Lyell of 1 February 1843:

Have you ever read *Le Livre mystique* by Balzac, a living French author, published in 1836? Read it, because it is really curious. It is divided into three parts, and it expounds mysticism in mystical language, at least as obscure as the ancient books of this kind. In the first part he introduces a certain Louis Lambert who expounds Mysticism; in the second part he introduces Dante to the school of Sigieri in Paris [...]; in the third he introduces a nephew, Swedenborg's wife and a man, a strange and changeable being, *Seraphita-Seraphitus*, and both of them express themselves in a way that makes even the firmest head turn, and says among other things:

The union of a *spirit of Love* and a *spirit of Wisdom* puts the creature in the divine state, while its soul is woman and its body is man; the last human expression where the spirit prevails over the form, and the form still struggles against the divine spirit... Thus the *natural* (the state in which unregenerate beings are), the *spiritual* (the state in which angelic spirits are) and the *divine* (the state in which the angel remains before breaking his shell) are *the three degrees* of existence by which man reaches heaven [...].

For the most part, it is as he says. What seems more notable to me is the fact that Dante and Swedenborg are put on the same footing.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> It is interesting to note that Léon Cellier, in his book *Parcours initiatiques*, associates two authors in particular with Dante, namely Balzac and Hugo. These are the same two authors that Gabriele Rossetti indicated as writers who concealed the Dantean doctrine of esoteric love in their works. Cellier states that “the dream of Balzac was to compete with Dante by placing *The Divine Comedy* in front of *The Human Comedy*. Even better than Balzac [...], Hugo wanted to give his century a *Divine Comedy*” (“faire concurrence à Dante, en dressant en face de *La Divine Comédie* *La Comédie Humaine*, tel fut le rêve de Balzac. Mieux encore que Balzac [...], Hugo voulut donner à son siècle une *Divine Comédie*”). Léon Cellier, *Parcours initiatiques*, Neuchâtel, À la Baconnière, Grenoble, Presses universitaires de Grenoble, 1977, p. 165.

<sup>41</sup> “Avete mai letto ‘Le livre mystique’ di De Balzac, autore francese tuttora vivente, libro pubblicato nel 1836? Leggetelo, perché è veramente curioso. È diviso in tre parti, ed espone il misticismo con lingua mistica, alquanto meno oscura che ne’ libri antichi di tal genere. Nella prima parte introduce un tal Luigi Lamberti come espositore del Misticismo; nella seconda introduce Dante alla scuola di Sigieri in Parigi [...]; nella terza introduce un nipote, *femina e maschio* di Swedenborg, essere bizzarro e cangevole, *Seraphita-Seraphitus*, la quale e ’l quale si esprime in modo da far volgere la testa più ferma, e dice fra l’altre cose:

L’Union qui se fait d’un *esprit d’Amour* et d’un *esprit de Sagesse* met la créature à l’état *divin*, pendant que son âme est *femme* et son corps est *homme*; dernière expression humaine où l’esprit l’emporte sur la forme, et la forme se débat encore contre l’esprit divin... Ainsi *le naturel* (état dans lequel sont les êtres non régénérés), *le spirituel* (état dans lequel sont les esprits angéliques) et *le divin* (état dans lequel demeure l’ange avant de briser son enveloppe) sont *les trois degrés* de l’exister par lesquels l’homme parvient au ciel [...].

È in gran parte così. Ciò che mi sembra più notevole è il vedere Dante e Swedenborg messi alla stessa riga”. Letter from Gabriele Rossetti to Charles Lyell on 1 February 1843, in *Gabriele Rossetti. Carteggi. Volume quinto (1841-1847)*, p. 188. There is a translation of this letter by William Michael Rossetti, published in the book *Gabriele Rossetti. A Versified Autobiography* (London, Sands & Co., 1901, p. 133-144), but I decided to translate the letter because the translation by W. M. Rossetti does not appropriately convey in English some Italian and French expressions in the original letter.



But this aspect, the Dante-Swedenborg connection, was one of the most important themes in Rossettian thinking, and Balzac transposes into a literary work what Gabriele Rossetti had written as a work of literary criticism. In the following paragraphs, I will focus on the works of Honoré de Balzac and Victor Hugo, emphasising the esoteric dimension of the *topos* of love and floral mysticism, in particular, the mysticism of the rose.

*Balzac: his mystical flowers and his friendship with the Duke of Sermoneta*

In nineteenth-century French literature, one of the first writers to introduce the esoteric dimension of Dante was Honoré de Balzac, and floral symbolism (as well as the *topos* of love) played a central role in this respect. Dante is therefore a fundamental model for Balzac, one of his inspirations,<sup>42</sup> and, as Anne-Marie Baron points out, Balzac presents Dante's *Comedy* as a mystical work, rich in esoteric perspectives.<sup>43</sup> As I have already mentioned in Chapter II, Balzac speaks of an esoteric Dante in his work *Les Proscrits* (*The Exiles*, 1831, contained in the *Livre mystique*), where Dante is portrayed as auditing Sigieri Brabante's course at the University of Paris on mystical theology, on the so-called *philosophia perennis*, the eternal doctrine at the basis of the esoteric and initiatory tradition. In two other novels of the *Livre Mystique*, namely *Louis Lambert* (1832) and *Séraphîta* (1834), Balzac presents Dante as a clairvoyant and as a precursor of Swedenborg: "Dante Alighieri's poem seems a mere speck to the reader who will dive into the innumerable passages in which Swedenborg has given actuality to the heavenly spheres".<sup>44</sup> Balzac associates the figure of Dante with Swedenborg, and this aspect is, as already mentioned, one of the main arguments put forward by Gabriele Rossetti in his *Mistero dell'Amor Platonico*. To my knowledge, Gabriele Rossetti was one of the first scholars to speak of the relationship between Dante and Swedenborg; this association will be of interest to other writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as in the case of Ezra Pound, which I will discuss in a later chapter. It could be said that in Balzac's work, what Gabriele Rossetti had theorised in his Dantean studies, namely the encounter between Dante's doctrine and that of the

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<sup>42</sup> On the influence of Dante on Balzac, see Maxime Prévost, "Écrire la voyance: Présence de Dante Alighieri dans *Les proscrits* de Balzac", *Études littéraires*, v. 37, n. 2, 2006, p. 87-98. On the relations between Balzac and Dante, see Vittorio Lugli, "Dante et Balzac", in Vittorio Lugli, *Dante e Balzac con altri italiani e francesi*, Naples, Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1952, p. 11-37; René Guise, "Balzac et Dante", *L'Année balzacienne*, 1963, p. 297-319; Pierre Brunel, "Balzac et Dante: de la *Divine Comédie* à *La Comédie humaine*", in *Il Signor di Balzac, Balzac vu par l'Italie*, Paris, Paris-musées, 2000, p. 25-34 ; Anne-Marie Baron, *Balzac, spiritualiste d'aujourd'hui. Au-delà du Bien et du Mal*, Paris, Honoré Champion, 2022, p. 225-228.

<sup>43</sup> See Anne-Marie Baron, *Balzac et la Bible. Une herméneutique du romanesque*, Paris, Honoré Champion, 2007, p. 265-266.

<sup>44</sup> Honoré de Balzac, *Séraphîta* [1834], translated by Clara Bell and with an introduction by David Blow, Sawtry, Dedalus, New York, Hippocrene, 1989, p. 67.

Swedish mystic Swedenborg, takes place on a literary level.<sup>45</sup> In the “Preface to *The Mystical Book*”, Balzac considers Swedenborg’s doctrine “as a new *Divine Comedy*”.<sup>46</sup>

The author of *The Human Comedy* acquired much of his knowledge about the esoteric dimension of Dante from a proponent of the esoteric interpretation of Dante’s work: Michelangelo Caetani (1804-1882), Duke of Sermoneta. Balzac frequented the salons organised by Michelangelo Caetani, where the international intellectual elite of the time gathered. Chateaubriand, Stendhal, Walter Scott, Franz Listz, Hyppolite Taine, Ernest Renan, Frédéric Ozanam, Andrè-Marie Ampère, Ferdinand Gregorovius and Theodor Mommsen, are just some of the intellectuals who frequented the salons organised by Duke Michelangelo Caetani.<sup>47</sup> It was on these occasions that Balzac acquired most of his knowledge of the esoteric dimension of Dante’s work, and he expresses his indebtedness to Caetani in *The Human Comedy*. In fact, Balzac dedicated an episode of his *Human Comedy*, namely *La Cousine Bette*, to Michelangelo Caetani: “To Don Michel Angelo Cajetani, Prince of Téano. It is not to the Roman prince, nor to the heir of the illustrious house of Cajetani, which has given popes to Christendom that I dedicate this small fragment of a long story; it is to the learned commentator of Dante”.<sup>48</sup> This passage shows Balzac’s esteem for the Italian duke, who exerted a remarkable influence on the French writer. This esteem is shared by other figures of the French intellectual scene, such as Hyppolite Taine who, in his travel diary, describes Rome as a nefarious place, with its unhealthy medieval debris, with the exception of only a few enlightened spirits, including Michelangelo Caetani.<sup>49</sup> He is extremely important for my research because, like Rossetti, he proposed an esoteric interpretation of Dante’s literary work, highlighting the secret symbolism of the cross and the eagle in the *Comedy*.<sup>50</sup> The profile of Michelangelo Caetani is particularly interesting because, unlike Gabriele Rossetti, he belonged to a milieu that could not be considered “heterodox”: the Roman pontifical aristocracy. In fact, he was a descendant of

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<sup>45</sup> On the influence of Swedenborg on Balzac, see Saori Osuga, “Balzac and Swedenborg”, in *Philosophy. Literature. Mysticism. An anthology of essays on the thought and influence of Emmanuel Swedenborg*, ed. Stephen McNeilly, London, The Swedenborg Society, 2013, p. 151-174.

<sup>46</sup> “Comme une nouvelle Divine Comédie”. Honoré de Balzac, “Préface du ‘Livre mystique’”, in Honoré de Balzac, *La Comédie Humaine. XI. Études philosophiques. Études analytiques*, ed. Pierre-Georges Castex, Paris, Gallimard, t. XI, 1980, p. 506.

<sup>47</sup> See Stefano Salzani, *op. cit.*, p. 108-110; Pier Luigi Vercesi, *op. cit.*, p. 93-98; Gian Mario Cazzaniga, “Dante profeta dell’unità d’Italia”, in *Storia d’Italia. Annali 25. Esoterismo*, p. 472.

<sup>48</sup> Honoré de Balzac, *Cousin Bette*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 3. On the relations between Balzac and Michelangelo Caetani, see Anne-Marie Baron, *Balzac et la Bible. Une herméneutique du romanesque*, p. 273-280; Anne-Marie Baron, *Balzac occulte. Alchimie, magnétisme, sociétés secrètes*, Lausanne, L’Âge d’homme, 2012, p. 191; Piero Latino, “Balzac, Caetani et l’ésotérisme dantesque”, in *Mondes invisibles*, p. 201-203.

<sup>49</sup> See Hippolyte Taine, *Voyage en Italie*, ed. Michel Brix, Paris, Bartillat, 2018, p. 112, 266, 323; Pier Luigi Vercesi, *op. cit.*, p. 95; François Léger, *Monsieur Taine*, Paris, Criterion, 1993, p. 193.

<sup>50</sup> Michelangelo Caetani set out his theories on Dantean esotericism in three books published between 1852 and 1857: *Della Dottrina che si asconde nell’ottavo e nono canto dell’Inferno della Divina Commedia di Dante Allighieri* (Rome, Tipografia Menicanti, 1852); *Di una più precisa dichiarazione intorno ad un passo della Divina Commedia nel XVIII canto del Paradiso* (Rome, Menicanti, 1852); *Matelda nella divina foresta della Commedia di Dante Allighieri: disputazione tuscolana* (Rome, Salviucci, 1857).

two popes, Gelasius II (ca. 1160-1119) and Benedetto Caetani (1230-1303), the latter being Boniface VIII, the pope mentioned by Dante in his *Divine Comedy*;<sup>51</sup> therefore, the esoteric perspective proposed by Michelangelo Caetani came from one of the representatives of the most conservative Italian cultural milieu of the nineteenth century, closely linked to the Vatican. There are no studies on this particular aspect of Balzac's literary production and investigations in this regard would open up new and unexplored research opportunities. The only scholar who has dealt with the relationship between Balzac and the question of the esotericism of Dante and the *Fedeli d'Amore* is, to my knowledge, Anne-Marie Baron, who focuses on this theme in her books *Balzac et la Bible* (2007), *Balzac Occulte* (2012) and *Balzac, spiritualiste d'aujourd'hui* (2022). Moreover, Anne-Marie Baron's work is the only one that deals with the relationship between esotericism and Balzac's work. In fact, we find Balzac extensively mentioned in the studies of esoteric currents in the history of ideas, but there are still no in-depth literary studies on this fundamental dimension of Balzac's work.<sup>52</sup>

Honoré de Balzac was not merely a chronicler of French society – he was also an author whose work abounds in esoteric elements.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, Balzac's work is undeniably full of elements that refer to the esoteric tradition, and especially to an initiatory dimension. As Anne-Marie Baron remarks, “Balzac makes initiation in every sense of the word the major antenna of his work”,<sup>54</sup> one of the most obvious examples of which is *The Human Comedy*, “a work as initiatory as the *Divine Comedy*”.<sup>55</sup> She points out that “the Balzacian novel is in essence a novel of initiation”,<sup>56</sup> since it presents what Laurent Déom has defined as “the modification of one or more major semiological traits of the protagonist's existence, by means of one or more ordeals symbolically referring to death”.<sup>57</sup> In fact, Balzac's heroes follow the three fundamental stages of any initiation, namely the first preliminary stage of preparation of the candidate, that of inner purification (which takes place in a secret place), the intermediate phase of the initiatory death, followed by the fundamental stage: the rebirth, the new life of the adept.<sup>58</sup> This is the

<sup>51</sup> See Pier Luigi Vercesi, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

<sup>52</sup> Balzac is frequently mentioned by specialists in the history of esotericism in the Western tradition. I will limit myself to citing a few of these studies, in which the esoteric dimension of Balzac's work is discussed in varying degrees of detail: *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, p. 265, 334, 778, 1004, 1026, 1031; Christopher McIntosh, *Eliphas Lévi and the French Occult Revival* [1972], New York, State University of New York Press, 2011, p. 195-197; Colin Wilson, *The Occult. A History*, New York, Random House, 1971, p. 324-325.

<sup>53</sup> Some of Balzac's works, such as *Louis Lambert*, *The Exiles* and *Séraphîta*, were placed on the Index in 1841. See Loïc Artiaga, “Balzac et l'Index (1841-1864)”, *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome. Italie et Méditerranée*, t. 121, n. 2, 2009, p. 413-426.

<sup>54</sup> “Balzac fait de l'initiation à tous les sens du terme antennes majeures de son œuvre”. Anne-Marie Baron, *Balzac occulte. Alchimie, magnétisme, sociétés secrètes*, p. 175.

<sup>55</sup> “Œuvre aussi initiatique que la *Divine Comédie*”. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>56</sup> “Le roman balzacien est par essence un roman initiatique”. *Ibid.*, p. 177.

<sup>57</sup> “La modification d'un ou plusieurs traits sémiologiques majeurs de l'être du protagoniste, par le biais d'une ou plusieurs épreuves renvoyant symboliquement à la mort”. Laurent Déom, “Le roman initiatique: éléments d'analyse sémiologique et symbolique”, in *Cahiers électroniques de l'imagination*, n. 3, 2005, p. 80.

<sup>58</sup> See Anne-Marie Baron, *Balzac occulte. Alchimie, magnétisme, sociétés secrètes*, p. 175.

case, for example, of the protagonist Prosper Magnan in *L'Auberge rouge* (The Red Inn, 1831), where we find the three stages mentioned earlier: the isolation and purification of the impulses, the death of the old man, and his rebirth to new life.

But the descent into hell of Balzac's characters is not only about a change in the ontological status of being that involves a new birth – it is also about the world of secret societies, so widespread in the nineteenth century of Balzac. This is the same subject that was at the centre of Gabriele Rossetti's research into love poetry, and in Balzac the secret societies of the nineteenth century are also one of the recurrent themes. For example, the societies mentioned in *The Human Comedy*, such as the initiatory society of the "Treize" (the Thirteen) or the "Frères de la Consolation", the "Brothers of Consolation", whose admission of the aspiring initiate (as in the case of Godefroid) is possible after he has overcome severe trials. The theme of initiation is always linked, in Balzac, to the *topos* of love.

In the *History of the Thirteen* – composed of three novels: *Ferragus* (whose name is taken from the brave Saracen in *Orlando Furioso* by Ariosto),<sup>59</sup> *The Duchesse de Langeais*, and *The Girl With the Golden Eyes*), Balzac introduced the secret society of the "Treize"<sup>60</sup> through the description of the mystical love between the characters of his work – a mystical love that recalls that of the *Fedeli d'Amore* of the Middle Ages, as pointed out by Anne-Marie Baron, who highlights this connection between the "Thirteen" and the *Fedeli d'Amore* by stating that the three texts of the cycle *History of the Thirteen* can be considered "as mystical love stories in which Wisdom takes on the features of three exceptional women, in the same way that some exegetes of Dante encourage us to see her incarnation in Beatrice".<sup>61</sup> The reference to the Dantean exegetes she mentions concerns the "heterodox" school of Dantean studies, in particular the contribution of Luigi Valli, whilst Balzac's mystical love seems to have to do with the esoteric love of the *Fedeli d'Amore*.<sup>62</sup> It is therefore a love associated with divine Wisdom, the gnostic Sophia, the rose of Sharon: a love that in Balzac combines the tradition of esoteric love of the Middle Ages and the mystic love of the Jewish tradition. In fact,

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<sup>59</sup> The name Ferragus appears in the *Orlando furioso* in Canto I, during the fight between the Saracen Ferragus and Renaud for the love of Angelica. See *ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>60</sup> In *Ferragus*, Balzac describes the society of the Thirteen as follows: "in Paris there were thirteen brethren who were entirely at one another's disposal but did not recognize one another in public, although they met together in the evening like conspirators, concealing no thoughts from one another, each in turn drawing on riches similar to those of the Old Man of the Mountain, having a foot in every salon, their hands in every coffer, elbowing their way through every street, a head on every pillow, unscrupulous in their furtherance of every whim. They had no leader, for not one of them could claim supremacy, quite simply, priority was given to the liveliest passion for the most urgent need. They were thirteen kings – anonymous but really kings; more than kings judges and executioners too, that had equipped themselves with wings in order to soar over society in its heights and depths, and disdained to occupy any place in it because they have unlimited power over it". Honoré de Balzac, *History of the Thirteen*, translated and introduced by Herbert J. Hunt, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1974, p. 26-27.

<sup>61</sup> "Comme des histoires d'amour mystique dans lesquelles la Sagesse prend les traits de trois femmes exceptionnelles, de la même façon que certains exégètes de Dante incitent à en voir l'incarnation en Béatrice". Anne-Marie Baron, *Balzac occulte. Alchimie, magnétisme, sociétés secrètes*, p. 190.

<sup>62</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 190-192.

in weaving love stories, such as between Antoinette de Langeais and Armand de Montriveau or Daniel d'Arthez and Diane de Maufrigneuse, Balzac introduces the concept of divine Wisdom concealed by its multiple veils, similar to the process of unveiling and concealing that characterises the Kabbalah of Abraham Aboulafia, who described mystical truths through the metaphor of clothing. Balzac, too, imbues the clothing of the characters in his novels with mystical meaning. In doing so, as Anne-Marie Baron says, “he [Balzac] reveals what he hides and he hides what he reveals”,<sup>63</sup> and this logic of the tension between occultation and unveiling of divine truth so dear to the tradition of Jewish mysticism is linked in Balzac to courtly love, to the *fin' amor* of the troubadours, whose love for a woman is basically the union with the soul, imprisoned in the impure body. Armand de Montriveau and Daniel d'Arthez are the two Balzac characters who represent this spiritualised love of the courtly tradition, this Platonic Eros whose ultimate end is mourning – death.<sup>64</sup>

Clémence, Antoinette and Paquita – Balzac's women who suffer martyrdom and die tragically, leaving their lovers who remain faithful to the memory of their beloved. Thus, Félix or Montriveau exalt the parts of their beloved's body which are like divinities, and which recall the mystical eroticism of the *Song of Songs*.<sup>65</sup> For example, the words of Henry de Marsay who, in *The Girl With the Golden Eyes*, exalts the erotic sensuality of the woman imbued with a sacred significance: “ever since I have taken an interest in women, my unknown *she* is the only one whose virginal bosom, whose ardent and voluptuous curves have realized for me the unique woman of my dreams”.<sup>66</sup> Here, as in the case of Dante and the love poetry of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the beloved woman is not a physical woman, but the image of a sacred space where man tries to find God, as confirmed by Anne-Marie Baron, who affirms:

One can consider these heroines as functions or hypostases, as in Dante or Cavalcanti. The bloody murder of Paquita, the martyrdom of Clémence Jules and the death of Antoinette de Langeais, placed under the patronage of Teresa of Avila, who vowed her to the “*Adoremus in aeternum*”, illustrate this almost alchemical transmutation of human love into divine love, of sensuality into spirituality.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> “Il révèle ce qu'il cache et il cache ce qu'il révèle”. *Ibid.*, p. 192.

<sup>64</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 192-193.

<sup>65</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 193-195.

<sup>66</sup> Honoré de Balzac, *History of the Thirteen*, p. 339.

<sup>67</sup> “On peut considérer ces héroïnes comme des fonctions ou des hypostases, comme chez Dante ou Cavalcanti. Le meurtre sanglant de Paquita, le martyre de Clémence Jules et la mort d'Antoinette de Langeais, placée sous le patronage de Thérèse d'Avila, qui la voue à l'’*Adoremus in aeternum*’, illustrent cette transmutation quasi alchimique de l'amour humaine à l'amour divin, de la sensualité en spiritualité”. Anne-Marie Baron, *Balzac occulte. Alchimie, magnétisme, sociétés secrètes*, p. 194-195.

As Arlette Michel remarks, this dual nature of love (“earthly love - ideal love”) was already present in Balzac’s early novels.<sup>68</sup> This is the case of the unfinished story *Sténie, ou les Erreurs philosophiques* (Sténie, or the Philosophical Errors, 1819-1822), or the novels *Wann-Chlore* (1825) and *La Dernière Fée* (The Last Fairy, 1823). In his book *Éros et littérature*, Michel Brix gives a brilliant study of the dual nature of love in Balzac’s work, and he emphasises the importance of what he defines as “the great love novel of *The Human Comedy*”,<sup>69</sup> namely *Le Lys dans la vallée* (The Lily in the Valley, 1835), which deals with Platonising love in the wake of Dante and Petrarch.<sup>70</sup>

In *The Lily of the Valley*, in the guise of a love story between Félix de Vandenesse and Henriette de Mortsau, Balzac introduces all the elements of the esoteric tradition associated with medieval love poetry by the Dantean “heterodox school”: the coded language used by the Manicheans, the Cathar heresy, the association of love and heresy, the mystical meaning of the figure of the woman or the symbolic flower of the rose and the lily, in the wake of the floral symbolism of the *Song of Songs*.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, Balzac blends these elements with the mystical ideas of Jacob Boehme. The undeniable esoteric dimension of these ideas has been widely studied by scholars of Western esotericism, such as Antoine Faivre.<sup>72</sup> The mixture of German esotericism and the Italian medieval tradition, as well as the French context of the nineteenth century, is one of the features characterising Balzac’s literary production. This aspect will also be central to other figures in nineteenth-century French literature, such as Gérard de Nerval. Balzac not only introduces Boehme in his novels, but also refers to other figures of the German esoteric milieu, such as Franz von Baader, whose undeniable esoteric dimension has been widely studied by specialists in Western esotericism, such as Antoine Faivre in his *Accès de l’ésotérisme occidental* (Access to Western Esotericism).<sup>73</sup> Thus, in *Massimilla Doni* (1837), Balzac speaks of Baader through the *topos* of love: “Baader, who in his lectures eliminated things divine by erotic imagery, had no doubt observed, like some Catholic writers, the intimate resemblance between human and heavenly love”.<sup>74</sup> Once again, love is a way of expressing concepts relating to the world of the invisible. In the Middle Ages, as we have seen, this higher knowledge was embodied by a woman personifying Eternal Wisdom, often in the form of a

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<sup>68</sup> See Arlette Michel, *Le Mariage et l’amour dans l’œuvre romanesque d’Honoré de Balzac*, Paris, Honoré Champion, 4 v., 1976. See also Michel Brix, *Eros et littérature. Le discours amoureux en France au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, p. 194.

<sup>69</sup> Michel Brix, *Eros et littérature. Le discours amoureux en France au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, p. 203.

<sup>70</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 204.

<sup>71</sup> See Anne-Marie Baron, *Balzac occulte. Alchimie, magnétisme, sociétés secrètes*, p. 191-192.

<sup>72</sup> On the esoteric dimension of Jacob Boehme’s work, see Antoine Faivre, *Accès de l’ésotérisme occidental*, t. I, p. 248-253; t. II, p. 51-55, 184-185, 221-230, 280.

<sup>73</sup> On the esoteric dimension of Franz von Baader’s work, see *ibid.*, t. I, p. 157-163, 244-337.

<sup>74</sup> Honoré de Balzac, *Comédie Humaine. A Father’s Curse and Other Stories*, ed. George Saintsbury, translated by James Waring, London, J. M. Dent and Company, New York, Macmillan Company, 1898, p. 278.

flower, as in *The Romance of the Rose* or in the poetry of the *Fedeli d'Amore*. In this respect, Anne-Marie Baron points out that “Balzac follows this long tradition in *The Lily of the Valley* which also owes to Jacob Boehme, translated by Saint-Martin, the idea of an invisible church where the rose, the lily and the vine are the symbols of the ‘summer of Christ’ (*The Day-Spring*)”.<sup>75</sup> *The Lily in the Valley*, she continues, “establishes a cult of love, whose object is both the immaculate lily, the symbol of the bride of the *Song of Songs* of the invisible church, and the bride of the Lamb of God in Revelation, a cult that finds its fulfilment in the death and mourning of the beloved. Death allows the intuitive revelation of divine truth, the necessary process of abstraction that leads to contemplation”.<sup>76</sup>

This mystique of love expounded by Balzac initiates the reader in the concept of mysticism, which Balzac explains by tracing its history from antiquity to the nineteenth century. He highlights the heretical character of what is called “Mysticism” and speaks in terms of an initiatory filiation linking the Eleusian Mysteries to the Middle Ages of Sigieri Brabante and to the eighteenth century of Swedenborg, including figures such as Pythagoras, Fenelon, Jacob Boehme and Saint Martin. It is therefore the same theory expounded by Gabriele Rossetti in his studies on Platonic love in the Middle Ages and, like Rossetti, Balzac places the figure of Dante at the centre of this initiatory chain. He defines the concept of “Mysticism” in the “Preface to the *Mystical Book*” as follows:

Mysticism is precisely Christianity in its pure principle. [...] Doctrine of the first Christians, the religion of the anchorites of the desert, mysticism comports with no government, no priesthood. For this reason it has always been the object of the greatest persecutions of the Church. There lies the secret of the condemnation of Fenelon; there the key-note of his quarrel with Bossuet. As religion, mysticism comes in a direct line from Christ through Saint John, author of the Apocalypse; for the Apocalypse is an arch thrown across between Christian mysticism and Indian mysticism; Egyptian and Greek in turn, coming from Asia, preserved in Memphis, formulated to the profit of his Pentateuch by Moses, guarded at Eleusis, at Delphos, understood by Pythagoras, revived by the Eagle of the Apostles, and transmitted nebulously to the University of Paris. In the twelfth century the learned Sigier (see “The Exiles”) taught the mystical theology as the science of sciences in that University, the queen of the intellectual world, to which the four Catholic nations were paying court. You will there see Dante coming to enlighten his *Divina Commedia* from the illustrious doctor who would now be forgotten were it not for the lines in which the great Florentine has recorded his gratitude to his master. The mysticism which you will find there, pervading society without alarming the court of Rome because at that time the sublime and beautiful Rome of the middle ages was omnipotent, was transmitted to

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<sup>75</sup> “Balzac suit cette longue tradition dans *Le Lys dans la vallée*, qui doit aussi à Jacob Boehme traduit par Saint-Martin l’idée d’une église invisible où la rose, le lys et la vigne sont les symboles de ‘l’été du Christ’ (*L’Aurore naissante*)”. Anne-Marie Baron, *Balzac occulte. Alchimie, magnétisme, sociétés secrètes*, p. 192.

<sup>76</sup> “Ce roman [*Le Lys dans la vallée*] instaure un culte amoureux dont l’objet est à la fois le lys immaculé, symbole de la fiancée du *Cantique des Cantiques* de l’église invisible, et la fiancée de l’agneau de Dieu dans l’Apocalypse, culte qui trouve son accomplissement dans la mort et le deuil de l’aimée. La mort permet en effet la révélation intuitive de la vérité divine, le processus d’abstraction nécessaire qui mène à la contemplation”. *Ibid.*

Madame Guyon, to Fenelon, to Mademoiselle de Bourignon by German authors, among whom the most illustrious is Jacob Boehm. In the eighteenth century came Swedenborg, an evangelist and a prophet, whose figure rises as colossal perhaps as those of Saint John, Pythagoras, and Moses. M. Saint-Martin, who died recently, is the last great mystical writer.<sup>77</sup>

This passage summarises, in literary form, many of the most important events in the history of esoteric currents in the West, as well as in the East. The amount of information presented invites the reader to go beyond the strictly literary meaning, to discover the hidden meaning of the texts. They focus on topics in the history of religion that are often ignored by the non-specialist reader. Thus, Balzac establishes with the reader a kind of dialectical approach that requires an effort, that of drilling down to the roots, to the origin of the facts, “by exhorting moving from the oblique meaning, constituted by the narrative, to its esoteric meaning”,<sup>78</sup> to put it in the words of Anne-Marie Baron, who has highlighted this characteristic aspect of Balzac’s work. To achieve this end, Balzac uses an enigma, so that he can reveal and preserve at the same time a knowledge, a doctrine. The word “enigma”, as well as the word “enigmatic”, are often repeated in Balzac,<sup>79</sup> and in *Séraphîta* the concept of enigma is associated with floral symbolism, when the author speaks of the “enigmatical flower of humanity”.<sup>80</sup>

Balzac’s work abounds with references to floral symbolism, the significance of which is mystical. The favourite flower of the author of *The Lost Illusions* is the lily, as his novel *The Lily of the Valley* also attests, but the rose is also extremely important. The rose is found in various novels of *The Human Comedy*. This is the case of “the Queen of the Roses”<sup>81</sup> in César Birotteau, a novel in which references to the rose are numerous, or in *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* (The Splendours and Miseries of Courtesans, 1838), where the symbolism of the rose abounds. In *Séraphîta*, Balzac describes the “divine sphere”<sup>82</sup> through the symbolism of the rose, always associated with the *topos* of love, as in the case of medieval and Renaissance love poetry. The rose appears in relation to the magical or mystical initiation that takes place in the sphere of Specialism,<sup>83</sup> namely the sphere of the genies and of the saints. It is thanks to this initiation that *Séraphîta*’s human form is transformed into a seraph and the two young people, Minna and Wilfried, become potential angels, they become initiates:

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<sup>77</sup> Honoré de Balzac, *La Comédie Humaine*, ed. Katharine Prescott Wormeley, p. 303-304.

<sup>78</sup> See Anne-Marie Baron, *Balzac occulte. Alchimie, magnétisme, sociétés secrètes*, p. 25.

<sup>79</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>80</sup> Honoré de Balzac, *Séraphita*, p. 43.

<sup>81</sup> “La Reine des Roses”. Honoré de Balzac, *La Comédie humaine. VI. Études de mœurs: scènes de la vie parisienne*, ed. Pierre-Georges Castex, Paris, Gallimard, t. VI, 1977, p. 42, 43, 47, 55, 57-60, 62, 64, 66-68, 77, 174, 189, 203, 269, 283, 285. 289, 302.

<sup>82</sup> Honoré de Balzac, *Séraphita*, p. 152.

<sup>83</sup> In *Louis Lambert*, Balzac specifies that there are three spheres in the world of Ideas: the sphere of Instinct, of Abstractions, and of Specialism. The latter is the sphere “which is the formula of God”. *Ibid.*, p. 274.



The spectacle that was then suddenly unveiled to the eyes of the two seers overpowered them by its vastness, for they felt like atoms whose smallness was comparable only to the minutest fraction which infinite divisibility allows man to conceive of, brought face to face with the infinitely numerous which God alone can contemplate as He contemplates Himself.

[...]

They understood the invisible bonds by which material worlds are attached to the spiritual worlds.

[...]

Strung by the excessive exaltation of their faculties to a pitch for which there is no word in any language, for a moment they were suffered to glance into the divine sphere. There all was gladness. Myriads of angels winged their way with one consent and without confusion, all alike but all different, as simple as the wild rose, as vast as worlds.<sup>84</sup>

Balzac's rose in *Séraphîta* expresses a mystical dimension that leads the two seer protagonists towards the "deathless legions":

The two seers could discern the seraph as a darker object amid deathless legions, whose wings were as the mighty plumage of a forest swept by the breeze.

[...]

Up and up, receiving a fresh gift at each circle, while the sign of his election was transmitted to the highest heaven, whither he mounted purer and purer.

None of the voices ceased; the hymn spread in all its modes –

"Hail to him who rises to life! Come, flower of the worlds, diamond passed through the fire of affliction, pearl without spot, desire without flesh, new link between earth and heaven, be thou Light! Conquering spirit, queen of the world, fly to take thy crown; victorious over the earth, receive thy diadem! Be one of us!"

The angel's virtues reappeared in all their beauty. His first longing for heaven was seen in the grace of tender infancy. His deeds adorned him with brightness like constellations; his acts of faith blazed like the hyacinth of the skies, the hue of the stars. Charity decked him with oriental pearls, treasured tears. Divine love bowered him in roses, and his pious resignation by its whiteness divested him of every trace of earthliness.<sup>85</sup>

Divine love, roses, floral symbolism and mystical initiation into eternal life are the elements that run through *Séraphîta* and, more generally, through Balzac's work, in which all the currents and heterodox spiritualities of the history of ideas converge, such as Chivalry, the Knights Templar, the amorous symbolism of the troubadours, Jewish mysticism, German mysticism, Freemasonry, the Carboneria, alchemy and Rosicrucianism.<sup>86</sup> All these currents also converge in Gabriele Rossetti's studies of love literature from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, whilst Balzac was, according to Rossetti, one of the French representatives of an

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<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

<sup>86</sup> There are traces of Rosicrucianism in Balzac (in addition to the Crusades and the Holy Land in the Middle Ages) in *Clotilde de Lusignan ou le beau juif* (1822), where the Rosicrucian tradition is present in the form of the love story between Lusignan and Clotilde – the two lovers who experience divine love: once again, carnal love symbolises divine love. On the Rosicrucian echoes in Balzac's work, see Anne-Marie Baron, *Balzac occulte. Alchimie, magnétisme, sociétés secrètes*, p. 94-97, 168-168.

initiatory chain which, through literature, would survive from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century. In the work of this author, we find the same characteristics of medieval esoteric love detected by Gabriele Rossetti, although adapted to a context closer to everyday reality, rather than to metaphysical abstractions understandable only by an intellectual elite, as in the case of the *Fedeli d'Amore* or the Rosicrucians. It is no coincidence that Balzac's *Comedy* is called "Human comedy" and not "Divine", as in the case of Dante. Balzac is closer to everyday life, and in this everyday life he inserts concepts whose aim is to transgress the human condition in order to reach the contemplation of divine things. To achieve this goal, he imbues his novels with references to medieval love mysticism, alchemy, the Rosicrucian tradition and, in so doing, he introduces the reader to what he calls in *Séraphîta* "the frontier of the visible and the invisible",<sup>87</sup> through an inner experience aimed at spiritual and moral perfection: a true transmutation of the self. This is therefore what Michel Brix has called "spiritual initiation"<sup>88</sup> by linking it to the foundations of Platonic thought, namely "the upward orientation of intellectual research towards spiritual initiation; the need to seek the good and the will to reform society in order to establish harmony; the conception of the Absolute as the One", and "the thesis that poetic inspiration and amorous passion enable one to rise from the sentient world to the intelligible universe".<sup>89</sup> All these elements are present in Balzac. The initiation of the spirit that the author of *The Human Comedy* proposes is of interest to every reader, to the common person who wishes to and succeeds in rising, in waking up. But Balzac's work confronts the reader with another type of initiation, one that is linked to the secret and initiatory Orders that have always existed throughout history. This concept was the one that Gabriele Rossetti expounded in his works on Dantean esotericism and on medieval love literature – a world unknown to the majority of people, a subterranean world made up of initiatory Orders that would shape the history of Europe – a secret history whose traces can be found in literary works, especially those that speak of love and roses. It has already been said that Rossetti considered Balzac (as well as Victor Hugo) as the French author who expounded in his works the secret doctrine of Dante, which leads to a secret history. It is no coincidence that Balzac wrote a novel whose title needs no comment: *L'envers de l'histoire contemporaine* (The Seamy Side of History, 1848).<sup>90</sup> As Anne-Marie Baron rightly writes, "to title a novel *The Seamy Side of*

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<sup>87</sup> Honoré de Balzac, *Séraphîta*, p. 147.

<sup>88</sup> "Initiation spirituelle". Michel Brix, *Eros et littérature. Le discours amoureux en France au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, p. 9.

<sup>89</sup> "L'orientation ascendante de la recherche intellectuelle vers l'initiation spirituelle; la nécessité de chercher le bien et la volonté de réformer la société pour y établir l'harmonie; la conception de l'Absolu comme l'Un"; "la thèse que l'inspiration poétique et la passion amoureuse permettent de se hausser du monde sensible vers l'univers intelligible". *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> It is worth noting that the second episode of *The Seamy Side of History* is entitled "L'Initié" (The Initiated), in which Balzac presents two forms of initiation: the personal one, concerning the ontological transformation of the being, and the one relating to the Initiatory Orders, meaning membership of these secret associations. See Honoré

*History* implies the idea of a hidden history, accessible only to the initiated, that is to say, both of occult events and characters and of a symbolic or figurative reading of official history”.<sup>91</sup> And in the *Lost Illusions* (1837), Balzac categorically confirms the same truth that is continually repeated by Gabriele Rossetti in his *Mistero dell’Amor Platonico*, through the study of an esoteric love and an initiatory rose. The *Lost Illusions* in fact contain something that could upset (or awaken) the reader: “there are two kinds of history: official history, all lies, the history which is taught in schools, history *ad usum delphini*. Then there’s secret history, which explains how things really happened: a scandalous kind of history”.<sup>92</sup>

### *The esoteric rose of Victor Hugo*

A friend of Victor Hugo appears to have met Gabriele Rossetti in London. William Michael Rossetti’s letter does not say who this anonymous friend was. We only know that Victor Hugo confessed to this common friend to Gabriele Rossetti that *Notre-Dame de Paris* was a work concealing an “intimate”, esoteric meaning, like the esoteric doctrine typical of the work of Dante and the medieval love poets. The only evidence we have to confirm this unknown aspect of Victor Hugo’s work is the letter from Gabriele Rossetti, confirmed by his son William Michael, as I have already indicated. Research into this completely untouched field of the literary production of the author of *Les Misérables* would open up unexplored avenues of investigation leading to hitherto unthinkable discoveries. Gabriele Rossetti’s reflection on Victor Hugo opens up different research opportunities, such as the esoteric dimension of Hugo’s work, the relationship between Dantean esotericism, Victor Hugo’s literary production, and Hugo’s conception of an esoteric love, both mystical and initiatory. There is, finally, another significant aspect of Victor Hugo: his association with the initiatory circles of the nineteenth century, which I will discuss at the end of my section on Victor Hugo’s rose.

First of all, should we speak of esotericism in Victor Hugo’s case? Studies in this regard are scarce, but they do exist and have been carried out by reliable specialists. Among the first specialists who highlighted the esoteric dimension of Hugo’s work are Denis Saurat, Auguste Viatte, Léon Cellier and Georges Cattau, and it is mainly due to their works that Victor Hugo’s esotericism has been recognised. There have been no other important contributions in this sense,

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de Balzac, *The Seamy Side of History. The Comedy of Human Life, Volume XXXII*, Stroud, Nonsuch, 2005, p. 106-183.

<sup>91</sup> “Intituler un roman *L’envers de l’histoire contemporaine* suppose l’idée d’une histoire cachée, accessible aux seuls initiés, c’est-à-dire à la fois d’événements et de personnages occultes et d’une lecture symbolique ou figurale de l’histoire officielle”. Anne-Marie Baron, *Balzac occulte. Alchimie, magnétisme, sociétés secrètes*, p. 31.

<sup>92</sup> Honoré de Balzac, *Lost Illusions*, translated and introduced by Herbert J. Hunt, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1971, p. 643.

but the depth of the research carried out by these specialists is sufficient to show and confirm the presence of traces of esotericism (particularly Christian or Jewish) in Victor Hugo's work.<sup>93</sup>

He was no stranger to the occult, and his interest in the occult sciences can be seen in his mature novels. As shown by Paul Berret,<sup>94</sup> Hugo's library contained a vast amount of books on the occult, but his knowledge was not only of a bookish nature. He personally frequented figures of the nineteenth-century esoteric and occultist milieu, such as Eugène Nus, and even took part in spiritualist séances.<sup>95</sup> However, this aspect is not the focus of this study. It is important to note the relationship between Hugo and the world of esoteric currents, in particular the link with the esoteric doctrine of love which, according to Gabriele Rossetti, can be found in *Notre-Dame de Paris*, where Hugo's debt to Dante is evident.<sup>96</sup>

The titles of two chapters of *Notre-Dame de Paris* are, in fact, two sentences taken directly from Dante: “*LASCIATE OGNI SPERANZA [ALL HOPE ABANDON...]*”<sup>97</sup> (Dante, *Inferno*, III, 9) is the title of the fourth chapter of the eighth book, and “*LA CREATURA BELLA BIANCO VESTITA (DANTE) (THE LOVELY CREATURE ROBED IN WHITE)*”<sup>98</sup> (Dante, *Purgatorio*, XII, 88-89) is the title of the second chapter of the eleventh book. In a poem from *The Contemplations*, namely *Écrit sur un exemplaire de la Divina Commedia* (Written on a copy of the ‘Divina Commedia’), Hugo identifies with Dante: “now I am a man, and my name is Dante”.<sup>99</sup> This identification with Dante is obvious, but what does it entail? Is it exclusively literary or of an initiatory-esoteric nature, as Gabriele Rossetti put it? At the beginning of *Notre-Dame de Paris*, in the “Note added to the definitive edition (1832)”, Victor Hugo writes a passage that should make us think:

Here now is his [the author of *Notre-Dame de Paris*] work in its entirety, as he imagined it, as he wrote it, good or bad, lasting or flimsy, but as he wants it to be.

No doubt these rediscovered chapters will be deemed of little worth in the eyes of those people, otherwise most judicious, who looked in *Notre-Dame de Paris* only for the drama, for the novel. But there may be other readers who

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<sup>93</sup> On the relations between Victor Hugo and Kabbalah, see Denis Saurat, *La Religion ésotérique de Victor Hugo*, Paris, Hachette, 1929, p. 16-35; Michel Arouimi, *Écrire selon la rose. Melville, Bosco, Kafka, Hugo*, Paris, Hermann, 2016, p. 355-356.

<sup>94</sup> Paul Berret, *La philosophie de Victor Hugo en 1854-1859, et deux mythes de la “Légende des siècles”*: “*le Satyre*” – “*Pleine Mer*” – “*Plein Ciel*”, Paris, Paulin, 1910, p. 57.

<sup>95</sup> On the relations between Victor Hugo and spiritism, see Jean De Mutigny, *Victor Hugo et le spiritisme*, Paris, Fernand Nathan, 1981; Denis Saurat, *op. cit.*, p. 32-35.

<sup>96</sup> On the influence of Dante in Hugo's work, see Luigi Foscolo Benedetto, “Victor Hugo e Dante”, *Lettere italiane*, 20.1, 1968, p. 40-55; Michael Pitwood, *Dante and the French Romantics*, Geneva, Droz, 1985, p. 174-208, 287-296. The book by Pitwood, *Dante and the French Romantics*, is extremely interesting because it explores the relations between Dante and French authors of the nineteenth century, such as Nerval, Gautier, Nodier and Balzac.

<sup>97</sup> Victor Hugo, *Notre-Dame de Paris*, translated with an Introduction and Notes by Alban Krailsheimer, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 342.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 528.

<sup>99</sup> “Maintenant, je suis un homme, et je m'appelle Dante”. Victor Hugo, *Écrit sur un exemplaire de la Divina commedia*, in *Les Contemplations. Livre troisième. Les luttes et les rêves. I*, in Victor Hugo, *Œuvres poétiques. II. Les Châtiments. Les Contemplations*, ed. Pierre Albouy, Paris, Gallimard, 1967, p. 568.

have not found it a waste of time to study the aesthetic and philosophical ideas hidden within the book, and who, while reading *Notre-Dame de Paris*, have taken willing pleasure in sorting out beneath the novel something other than the novel and following, if we may be allowed the somewhat ambitious expressions, the historian's system and the artist's aim through the poet's creation, such as it is.<sup>100</sup>

Here Hugo tells the reader that *Notre-Dame de Paris* contains, for those who understand it, a hidden philosophy. He says that his book goes beyond literature, and this recalls the similarity with Dante's words that warn the reader about a hidden doctrine in his *Divine Comedy*:

O you whose interest are sane and well,  
Look at the teaching which is here concealed  
Under the unfamiliar veil of verses.<sup>101</sup>

The relationship between Dante and Victor Hugo has been highlighted by Léon Cellier, who affirms that "Hugo wanted to give his century a *Divine Comedy*",<sup>102</sup> creating a point of contact between Dante and Shakespeare in his work: "the memory of the *Inferno* hangs over *Les Misérables*, but the intention to rival Dante is more apparent in *L'Homme qui rit* (The Laughing Man, 1869), though with the astonishing variation that the hero descends into the underworld under the guidance not of Virgil, but of Shakespeare".<sup>103</sup> The Middle Ages of Dante and the Renaissance of Shakespeare meet in the nineteenth century in Victor Hugo, who evokes both authors to describe the descent into hell of his characters – an initiatory journey whose ultimate destiny is death. For example, in *The Laughing Man*, the lovers Ursus and Gwynplaine symbolise – as Léon Cellier notes – the couple inherent in any initiation, that is to say the Master and the Disciple, the initiator and the neophyte, Zarastro and Tamino.<sup>104</sup> The structure of the novel is an initiation in itself: a "little initiation" and a "great initiation". In fact, there is one piece that appears to be turning point: *Chaos vaincu* (Chaos Conquered). Léon Cellier stressed this pivotal moment in the novel, since what precedes it corresponds to the "little initiation", to Gwynplaine's childhood, whereas with *Chaos vaincu* the mature age begins, the "great initiation".<sup>105</sup>

In *The Laughing Man*, all the stages that characterise an initiation are present: the mystical quest in the form of a journey, the obstacles that oppose the heroes along the way, the descent into hell mentioned earlier, and the progress through a labyrinth. Thus, the child

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<sup>100</sup> Victor Hugo, *Notre-Dame de Paris*, p. 9.

<sup>101</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, p. 82.

<sup>102</sup> "Hugo voulut donner à son siècle une *Divine Comédie*". Léon Cellier, *Parcours initiatique*, p. 165.

<sup>103</sup> "Le souvenir de l'*Inferno* plane sur *Les Misérables*, mais l'intention de rivaliser avec Dante s'accuse davantage dans *L'Homme qui rit*, avec cette étonnante variante toutefois que le héros descend aux enfers sous la conduite, non de Virgile, mais de Shakespeare". *Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>104</sup> See *ibid.* Zarastro and Tamino are also found in Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, which I will discuss in the next chapter.

<sup>105</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 169.

Gwynplaine has to go through a triple labyrinth, that is to say the Portland labyrinth, the Weymouth labyrinth and the Melcomb-Regis labyrinth, and it is during this tortuous itinerary that he encounters the monsters and fights the Dragon: “he was the Saint George fighting this dragon”.<sup>106</sup> It is here that the protagonist lives through a night of hell, experiencing death, which comes in the form of a hanged man or a woman, more precisely a woman buried under the snow. It is at the exit of the labyrinth that the child Gwynplaine (welcomed by the philosopher Ursus and the wolf Homo) is reborn. This is the protagonist’s second birth, where his soul is awakened and has emerged from childish unconsciousness. Gwynplaine dies in order to be reborn, thus confirming the initiatory law: in order to be reborn one must suffer, reach the bottom of the underworld, and die. But, as Léon Cellier reminds us about Gwynplaine’s initiatory journey, “the neophyte (Gwynplaine) deserved to be reborn because in hell he saved love”:<sup>107</sup> love and death. Once again, we have the motif of death associated with love. And in *The Laughing Man*, love and roses go hand in hand. The symbolism of the rose accompanies the stages of the protagonist’s initiatory journey in order to ascend, and as Victor Hugo himself reminds us: “what is called rising in the world means leaving a calm course in life and embarking on one that is full of alarms”.<sup>108</sup> Initiation involves an encounter with this course in life “full of alarms”: it is frightening, but it is the only way to be reborn, to put the old man to death. It is the death of Jesus on the cross. He dies but is reborn, that is the immortality of Christ.

We find Hugo’s theme of the importance of suffering in two poems, *Dolor* and *Pati*, that summarise this initiatory conception of pain in order to evolve:

To climb is to immolate oneself. Every summit is severe.  
Olympus is slowly transformed into a calvary;  
Martyrdom is written everywhere;  
A huge cross lies in our deep night;  
And we see bleeding in the four corners of the world  
The four nails of Jesus Christ.<sup>109</sup>

Man is dark: let him suffer, he will shine, good God  
Makes the diamond out of the vile coal.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Victor Hugo, *The Laughing Man* [1869], translated by James Hogarth, Glasgow, Kennedy & Boyd, 2008, p. 219.

<sup>107</sup> “Le néophyte (“Gwynplaine”) a mérité de renaître parce que dans l’enfer il a sauvé l’amour”. Léon Cellier, *Parcours initiatiques*, p. 170.

<sup>108</sup> Victor Hugo, *The Laughing Man*, p. 431.

<sup>109</sup> “Monter, c’est s’immoler. Toute cime est sévère. / L’Olympe lentement se transforme en Calvarie; / partout le martyre est écrit ; / une immense croix gît dans notre nuit profonde ; / et nous voyons saigner aux quatre coins du monde / les quatre clous de Jésus-Christ”. Victor Hugo, *Dolor*, in Victor Hugo, *Œuvres poétiques. II. Les Châtiments. Les Contemplations*, p. 774.

<sup>110</sup> “L’homme est sombre: qu’il souffre, il brillera, Dieu bon / Refait le diamant avec le vil charbon”. Victor Hugo, *Pati*, in *Le livre lyrique – La destinée*, in Victor Hugo, *Œuvres complètes. Poésie III*, Paris, Robert Laffont, 1985, p. 401.

This passage perfectly sums up the concept of suffering which acts as an initiation and allows man to “ascend”, to touch a higher existential dimension, because as Denis Saurat reminds us for Hugo, “suffering, expiation, is the condition for ascent”.<sup>111</sup>

This initiatory dimension can be found in Hugo’s symbol of the rose. Michel Arouimi has devoted a study to Hugo’s rose in his work *Écrire selon la rose* (Writing according to the Rose),<sup>112</sup> in which he highlights the mystical and esoteric dimension of the rose in Victor Hugo, for example, the rose in *The Laughing Man* – a novel defined by Léon Céliier as “a novel of regeneration”,<sup>113</sup> an “initiatory novel”<sup>114</sup> which has to do with the struggle of the soul, as Hugo himself confirms in the draft preface of 17 July 1868: “this book is a drama, the drama of the soul”.<sup>115</sup> In this work, as Michel Arouimi points out, the roses “manifest Victor Hugo’s metaphysical aspirations”.<sup>116</sup> Here, Hugo reveals the dual nature of the mystical rose, beneficial and evil, a source of bliss and a sinister danger of perdition. Thus, in Victor Hugo we find the rose associated with the woman *par excellence*, namely Isis, the hidden woman, “the veiled one”, and as Agnès Spiquel defined her: “a hidden knowledge”.<sup>117</sup> But in Victor Hugo’s *The Laughing Man* there is also a rose associated with Lilith, in whom – as Michel Arouimi remarks “is hidden the darkened *Shekhinah*”,<sup>118</sup> that is to say the destructive *Shekhinah*, symbolised by the rose. This is a metaphor for what Gershom Scholem calls “the forces of the demonic”: “she [the *Shekhinah*] becomes like the rose who is surrounded by thorns and thistles, namely, the forces of the demonic that hold it captive”.<sup>119</sup> In other words, the rose is a path that leads to divine wisdom, but it can also lead to dark, destructive and hellish forces.

The bouquet of roses is also found in *Le dernier jour d’un condamné* (The Last Day of a Condemned Man, 1829). The rose evoked in this last novel is particularly interesting since it is associated with the concept of death, through the story of the decapitation of a condemned

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<sup>111</sup> “La souffrance, l’expiation, est la condition de l’ascension”. Denis Saurat, *La Religion ésotérique de Victor Hugo*, p. 132.

<sup>112</sup> In his book *Écrire selon la rose*, Michel Arouimi focuses not only on Hugo’s rose, but also on the symbolism of the rose in Herman Melville, Henry Bosco and Franz Kafka.

<sup>113</sup> “Roman de la régénération”. Léon Cellier, *Parcours initiatiques*, p. 165.

<sup>114</sup> “Roman initiatique”. *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> “Dans l’intention de l’auteur, ce livre [*L’Homme qui rit*] est un drame. Le drame de l’Âme”. Victor Hugo, *L’Homme qui rit*, ed. Roger Borderie, Paris, Gallimard, 2002, p. 400.

<sup>116</sup> “Les ‘roses’ qui [...] manifestent les aspirations métaphysiques de Victor Hugo”. Michel Arouimi, *op. cit.*, p. 358.

<sup>117</sup> “La voilée”, “une connaissance dérobée”. Agnès Spiquel, *La Déesse cachée. Isis dans l’œuvre de Victor Hugo*, Paris, Honoré de Champion, 1997, p. 10. In Jewish tradition, the feminine manifestation of divinity is the *Shekhinah*, the last Kabbalistic sephirah (also called Malkut), and in the Zohar (summa of Jewish tradition) the symbol of the *Shekhinah* is the rose. More specifically, in the Zohar, the *Shekhinah* is defined first as a lily, when she is still considered a lover, then as a rose when she becomes a wife (*Zohar*, I, 221, a). See *Il libro dello splendore*, Cuneo, Edizioni Studio Tesi, 1988, p. 29-30. On the *Shekhinah*, see *Dictionnaire critique de l’ésotérisme*, p. 1188.

<sup>118</sup> “[Lilith, où] se dissimule la shekhina assombrie”. Michel Arouimi, *op. cit.*, p. 450. On the rose as a symbol of the destructive *Shekhinah* in *The Laughing Man*, see *ibid.*, p. 450-451.

<sup>119</sup> Gershom Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead. Basic Concepts in the Kabbalah* [1976], translated from the German by Joachim Neugroschel, Foreword by Joseph Dan, New York, Schocken Books, 1991, p. 190.

man. In addition to the social implications of the subject of capital punishment, there are the mystical meanings contained in the symbol of the rose, as shown by Michel Aroumi.<sup>120</sup> The rose is at the centre of another novel by Victor Hugo, *Han d'Islande* (Han of Iceland, 1821), which tells the story (set in the seventeenth century) of the son of the viceroy of Norway, Ordener, who faces many difficult experiences in order to save the compromised honour of the father of his beloved Ethel. The rose provides the backdrop for this love story and is tinged with mysticism, with reference to the Jewish mystical tradition.<sup>121</sup> Michel Aroumi has highlighted the links between *Han of Iceland* and the allusions to the concept of *Shekhinah*, as well as the relationship with the *Song of the Songs* that can be seen, for example, in a passage where Hugo evokes “the song of the Sulamite, the wife waiting for the husband, and the return of the beloved one”.<sup>122</sup> The Rose of *Han of Iceland* is the Rose of Supreme Wisdom.<sup>123</sup> It is not only a poetics of the rose, but also a mystique of the rose, as Michel Aroumi suggests.<sup>124</sup> This mystique of the rose can also be found in Victor Hugo’s *Les Travailleurs de la mer* (The Toilers of the Sea, 1866),<sup>125</sup> where the metaphysical issues are also veiled by numerical symbolism, notably the number “thirty-two”, which refers to the thirty-two paths of wisdom according to the cabalistic tradition.<sup>126</sup> Just as Dante confers pivotal importance on numerical symbolism (notably the numbers “nine” and “three”), Hugo confers the same importance on certain numbers or, to put it in Michel Aroumi’s words, on “numerical coincidences”,<sup>127</sup> which seem to convey a deeper esoteric knowledge.

The metaphysical significance given to the symbol of the rose can also be found in the poem *Ce que dit la bouche d'ombre* (What the Shadow Mouth Says), where Hugo expresses the reason for the existential quest through the symbolism of the rose:

Man must ignore.  
 He must be blinded by all the dust.  
 Otherwise, like the child guided by edges,  
 Man would live, walking straight to the vision.  
 To doubt is his power and his punishment.  
 He sees the rose, and denies; he sees the dawn, and doubts;  
 Where would be the merit in finding his way back,  
 If man, seeing clearly, king of his will  
 Had certainty, having freedom?  
 No. He must hesitate in the vast nature,  
 Let him go through the frightening adventure of choice.<sup>128</sup>

<sup>120</sup> See Michel Aroumi, *op. cit.*, p. 370.

<sup>121</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 403, 424-425.

<sup>122</sup> Victor Hugo, *Han of Iceland* [1821], Boston, Little, Brown and Company, 1894, p. 33.

<sup>123</sup> See Michel Aroumi, *op. cit.*, p. 424.

<sup>124</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 429.

<sup>125</sup> On the symbolism of the rose in *Les Travailleurs de la mer*, see *ibid.*, p. 430-451.

<sup>126</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 447.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> “L’homme doit ignorer. / Il doit être aveuglé par toutes les poussières. / Sans quoi, comme l’enfant guidé par des lisières, / l’homme vivrait, marchant droit à la vision. / Douter est sa puissance et sa punition. / Il voit la rose,



The “why” of man’s quest on this earth is explained through the metaphor of the rose, which man sees, but denies. The work of individuals is to seek themselves, and the upheavals caused by this search are fundamental so that they can find themselves and find God, going through the “frightening adventure” that is life. The life of every human being, according to Hugo, is part of the divine project. God made man ignorant and unhappy, and as soon as man emerges from his ignorance, he meets God and forgets the suffering that has characterised the course of his existence.<sup>129</sup> Hugo’s poetry is both a mirror of society and history and a mystical quest. In a letter to George Sand on 18 May 1862, Victor Hugo wrote:

don’t be afraid of seeing me as too Christian. I believe in Christ as in Socrates, and in God more than in myself. If you continue this reading, read the thing called *Parenthèse* (Parenthesis). I explain this word very quickly: in God more than in myself; in other words I am more sure of God’s existence than of my own”.<sup>130</sup>

This sentence is very important because it highlights a fundamental point – the certainty of God’s existence in Victor Hugo’s view, as in all the poets who are the subject of my study, including Gabriele Rossetti. As I showed in Chapter I, Rossetti rejected religious Power, the Power of religion – or rather the Power of religions – but he firmly believed in God, that mysterious principle that manages the universe and of which man knows nothing, as Hugo says in his poem *Ce que dit la bouche d’ombre*. This explains the anticlericalism of Victor Hugo, Rossetti or an author like Gérard de Nerval. It is not a question of reaction to the established Power for a simple and juvenile insubordination to authority – rather, of a feeling tending towards divinity without any intermediation of an institutionalised and hierarchical religion. It is no coincidence that Bruno Pinchard, as we have seen in Chapter I, has defined Gabriele Rossetti as a figure with features in common with Victor Hugo and Gérard de Nerval: “Rossetti is a kind of initiatory and sectarian Hugo, whose hermeticism, like that of George Sand, Pierre Leroux or Gérard de Nerval, is a hermeticism of emancipation”.<sup>131</sup>

But with Gérard de Nerval and Gabriele Rossetti, the author of *Notre-Dame de Paris* shared not only a literary hermeticism concealing esoteric knowledge, he also shared the

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et nie; il voit l’aurore, et doute; / où serait le mérite à retrouver sa route, / si l’homme, voyant clair, roi de sa volonté / avait la certitude, ayant la liberté? / Non. Il faut qu’il hésite en la vaste nature, / qu’il traverse du choix l’effrayante aventure”. Victor Hugo, *Ce que dit la bouche d’ombre*, in *Les Contemplations. Livre sixième. Au bord de l’infini*, in Victor Hugo, *Œuvres poétiques. II. Les Châtiments. Les Contemplations*, p. 815.

<sup>129</sup> See Denis Saurat, *La Religion ésotérique de Victor Hugo*, p. 47-48.

<sup>130</sup> “N’ayez pas peur de me voir trop chrétien. Je crois au Christ comme à Socrate, et en Dieu plus qu’à moi-même. Lisez, si vous continuez cette lecture, la chose intitulée *Parenthèse*. J’explique bien vite ce mot: *en Dieu plus qu’en moi-même*; c’est-à-dire que je suis plus sûr de l’existence de Dieu que de la mienne propre”. Letter from Victor Hugo to George Sand on 18 May 1862, in Victor Hugo, *Œuvre complètes*, ed. Massin, Paris, Le Club français du livre, t. 12, 1969, p. 1171.

<sup>131</sup> Bruno Pinchard, art. cit., p. 251.

membership of the initiatory Orders. In particular, it seems that Victor Hugo belonged to a particular secret society: the Angelical Society.

*The “Société Angélique” (Angelical Society), Jules Verne and the other Europe*

In 1984, Michel Lamy published a book titled *Jules Verne initié et initiateur* (Jules Vernes, initiator and initiate),<sup>132</sup> which was awarded the prestigious Prix Botta by the *Académie Française* in 1985 and which attracted the attention of the historian Giorgio Galli, in his research on “the relationship between esoteric culture and political culture”.<sup>133</sup> According to Michel Lamy, writers and poets such as Victor Hugo, George Sand, Gérard de Nerval, Jules Verne, Anatole France and Maurice Barrès belonged to a secret society of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the *Société Angélique*,<sup>134</sup> whose members would have been bound by a common secret and coordinated by the publisher Pierre-Jules Hetzel.<sup>135</sup> According to Lamy, Hetzel had a leading role in this sinister secret society, and it was he who directed and coordinated the members of this organisation, including poets and writers such as Hugo, Verne and Nerval,<sup>136</sup> thus influencing their literary productions and, to some extent, their lives.

In particular, Jules Verne is said to have hidden in his novels, in an obscure and coded way, a veiled message (through anagrams, science-fiction hyperbole, indirect references,

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<sup>132</sup> Michel Lamy, *Jules Verne initié et initiateur. La clé du secret de Rennes-le-Château et le trésor des rois de France*, Paris, Payot, 1984. Lamy’s book has been translated into English: Michel Lamy, *The Secret Message of Jules Verne. Decoding his Masonic, Rosicrucian, and Occult Writings*, translated by Jon E. Graham, Rochester, Vermont, Destiny Books, 2007.

<sup>133</sup> “Rapporto tra cultura esoterica e cultura politica”. Giorgio Galli, *Esoterismo e politica*, p. 100.

<sup>134</sup> The *Société Angélique* was founded in the sixteenth century by the printer Gryphe, pseudonym of Sébastien Greif, who came from Reitingen in Württemberg and settled in Lyon in 1522. See Michel Lamy, *Jules Verne initié et initiateur*, p. 219. Grasset d’Orcet states that the *Société Angélique* was a secret and initiatory group placed under the ultra-masonic patronage of Saint-Gilles. See *ibid.* On the *Société Angélique*, see Patrick Berlier, *La Société angélique*, Marseille, Arqa, 2004; MaryAnge Tibot-Douze, *La Société angélique et ses sœurs jumelles à Lyon à travers les siècles*, Serrières, A. Douzet, 2013; Mariano Bizzarri, *Rennes le Château dal vangelo perduto dei Cainiti alle sette segrete*, Rome, Edizioni Mediterranee, 2005, p. 104-110.

<sup>135</sup> See Mariano Bizzarri, “Introduzione – Solo fantascienza? L’esoterismo nascosto di Jules Verne”, in Michel Lamy, *Jules Verne e l’esoterismo. I viaggi straordinari. I Rosa-Croce. Rennes le Château*, ed. Gianfranco de Turris, Rome, Edizioni Mediterranee, 2005, p. 9. Pierre-Jules Hetzel was a minister under Cavignac (more precisely, Head of Cabinet under Cavaignac, Head of Cabinet at the Ministry of the Navy and then at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), a secret agent in Germany, a friend of Lamartine, and it was he who allowed the clandestine publication of the *Châtiments* by Victor Hugo. See Michel Lamy, *Jules Verne initié et initiateur*, p. 114. On the relations between Jules Verne and Pierre-Jules Hetzel, see *ibid.*, p. 267-270. On the correspondence between Jules Verne and Pierre-Jules Hetzel, see *Correspondance inédite de Jules Verne et de Pierre-Jules Hetzel: 1863-1886. Tome I, 1863-1874*, eds. Olivier Dumas, Piero Gondolo della Riva and Volker Dehs, Geneva, Slatkine, Paris, Honoré Champion, t. I, 1999; *Correspondance inédite de Jules Verne et de Pierre-Jules Hetzel: 1863-1886. Tome II, 1875-1878*, eds. Olivier Dumas, Piero Gondolo della Riva and Volker Dehs, Geneva, Slatkine, Paris, Honoré Champion, t. II, 2001; *Correspondance inédite de Jules Verne et de Pierre-Jules Hetzel: 1863-1886. 1879-1886. Tome III*, eds. Olivier Dumas, Piero Gondolo della Riva and Volker Dehs, Geneva, Slatkine, Paris, Honoré Champion, t. III, 2002; *Correspondance inédite de Jules et Michel Verne avec l’éditeur Louis-Jules Hetzel: 1886-1914. Tome I, 1886-1896*, eds. Olivier Dumas, Volker Dehs and Piero Gondolo della Riva, Geneva, Slatkine, Paris, Société Jules Verne, t. I, 2004; *Correspondance inédite de Jules et Michel Verne avec l’éditeur Louis-Jules Hetzel: 1886-1914. Tome II, 1897-1914*, eds. Olivier Dumas, Volker Dehs and Piero Gondolo Della Riva, Geneva, Slatkine, Paris, Société Jules Verne, t. II, 2006.

<sup>136</sup> *Angélique* is one of the works by Gérard de Nerval.

symbols) concerning secret truths about the *Société Angélique*, as well as other initiatory organisations of the nineteenth century, such as Freemasonry, the Bavarian Illuminati, the Carboneria, the Golden Dawn, the Rosicrucian Societies and other lesser-known societies. Allusions to this initiatory and secret world can be found in novels such as *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870), *Around the World in 80 Days* (1872), *Black Indies* (1877), *The Jangada* (1881), *Mathias Sandorf* (1885), *The Carpathian Castle* (1892) and *The Clovis Dardentor* (1896).<sup>137</sup>

As Michel Lamy has shown, the *topos* of love and the symbol of the rose give the reader the key (one of the keys) to understanding the mysteries linked to Jules Verne's coded message.<sup>138</sup> Love and the rose in Jules Verne's work open up a double discourse, concerning the mystical dimension relating to the spiritual perfection of the being and to the secret history of political events. On the former aspect, Michel Lamy speaks of Jules Verne's literary production (specifically *Les Indes Noires*) in terms of an "initiatory and mystical work".<sup>139</sup> Simone Vierne had already underlined and studied in depth the initiatory dimension of Verne's work, showing that his novels present the three phases of initiatory ceremonies: the preparation, the journey into the afterlife, the rebirth.<sup>140</sup> Marcel Brion pointed out that the initiatory dimension of Verne's journeys is revealed through love, as in the case of *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, where we find "the perilous adventures that lead to the conquest of the Lady", and "love thus becomes one of the mainsprings of the 'adventure', if not the main one, as in *Perceval* and *Lancelot*".<sup>141</sup> Thus, Axel's search for a lover is merely a metaphor for the initiation process: "Axel, Jules Verne's 'knight', will marry the pretty Grauben, who was not the cause but the reward for courage and daring spent in the underworld. For it is important that the woman is associated, outwardly and incidentally, with adventure, stimulation, solicitation, crowning,

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<sup>137</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> Due to its vastness, it is impossible to analyse Verne's works in which love and the rose are present. In order to undertake further research, I limit myself to mentioning the novels in which the symbolism of the rose (almost always associated with the theme of love) is found: *De la terre à la lune* (1865), *Autour de la lune* (1870), *Le pays des fourrures* (1873), *Le tour du monde en quatre-vingts jours* (1873), *Docteur Ox* (1874), *Un drame au Mexique et autres nouvelles* (1876), *Hector Servadac* (1877), *Les Indes noires* (1877), *Un capitaine de quinze ans* (1878), *Les tribulations d'un Chinois en Chine* (1879), *La maison à vapeur* (1880), *L'école de Robinsons* (1882), *Le rayon vert* (1882), *Kéraban le Têtu* (1883), *L'archipel en feu* (1884), *L'épave du Cynthia* (1884), *Mathias Sandorf* (1885), *Nord contre Sud* (1887), *Mistress Branican* (1891), *Mirifiques aventures de maître Antifer* (1894), *L'île à hélice* (1895), *Le superbe Orénoque* (1898), *Bourse de voyage* (1903), *L'agence Thompson and Co.* (1907), *Les naufragés du Jonathan* (1909), *Le secret de Wilhelm Storitz* (1910), *L'étonnante aventure de la mission Barsac* (1919). The rose is also present in the poetic production of Jules Verne. It can be found in the following poems: *La fille de l'air*, *L'attente*, *L'orphelin au couvent*, *Douleur*, *Romance*.

<sup>139</sup> Michel Lamy, *The Secret Message of Jules Verne*, p. 51.

<sup>140</sup> On the initiatory dimension of Jules Verne's work, see Simone Vierne, *Jules Verne et le roman initiatique: contribution à l'étude de l'imaginaire*, Paris, Éditions du Sirac, 1973; Simone Vierne, *Rite, roman, initiation*, Grenoble, Presses universitaires de Grenoble, 1973, p. 111-132.

<sup>141</sup> "Les aventures périlleuses qui conduisent à la conquête de la 'Dame'"; "l'amour devenant ainsi un des ressorts de l' 'aventure', sinon le ressort majeur, comme dans *Perceval* et dans *Lancelot*". Marcel Brion, *L'Allemagne Romantique: le voyage initiatique*, Albin Michel, Paris, t. I, 1977, p. 33.

achievement”.<sup>142</sup> Verne’s woman thus enables the ontological transformation of the being, and the man who seeks her is transformed by seeking her.

Whilst Marcel Brion highlights the initiatory love in *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, Michel Lamy detects the same initiatory dimension in the form of love in *The Black Indies*, which he considers to contain “one of the most beautiful passages ever written concerning a descent into hell”.<sup>143</sup> This novel is, as he remarks, “the story of a man in search of his soul, that divine element that each of us must find within our deepest heart by means of successfully overcoming ordeals. It is necessary to free from its material straitjacket the hidden pearl, the *anima*, the Lady of the troubadours”.<sup>144</sup> This relationship between Verne’s work and the esoteric language of the poetry of the troubadours is repeatedly emphasised by Michel Lamy, who states that Verne uses an “initiatory language – a language of the birds worthy of the thirteenth-century troubadours”.<sup>145</sup> He adds that “it is in the numerical combinations and the associations of sounds that the key to the Verne strongbox is held. By intentionally veiling a secret teaching beneath the folding screens of language”.<sup>146</sup> The hermetic language of Jules Verne, which Michel Lamy links to the language of the birds used by Rabelais or to the cryptic language of the troubadours and trouvères,<sup>147</sup> is characterised by the presence of the rose. He cites an enigmatic phrase in *Travel Scholarships*, “*Rosam angelum letorum*”,<sup>148</sup> whose French phonetic reading corresponds to the sentence “*Rose a mangé l’omelette au rhum*”<sup>149</sup> (in English, “Rose ate the rum-flavoured omelette”).<sup>150</sup> For Michel Lamy, this sentence refers to the language of the birds that Jules Verne uses and that he shares with other nineteenth century writers, such as Honoré de Balzac, George Sand and Victor Hugo.

Like Victor Hugo and George Sand, Verne’s rose is linked, according to Lamy, to the language of the birds. The crypticity of Verne’s language of the birds belongs to the family of the “methods of the gay (jay) knowledge dear to the troubadours of the Languedoc, the great adepts of the language of the birds (magpie-jay)”.<sup>151</sup> For example, in the novel *Clovis Dardentor*, the character Jean Taconnat seems to allude to the Troubadour concept of “gaiety”,

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<sup>142</sup> “Axel, le ‘chevalier’ de Jules Verne, épousera la jolie Grauben, qui ne fut pas la cause mais qui est la récompense du courage et de l’audace dépensés dans le monde souterrain. Car il importe que la femme soit associée, extérieurement et accessoirement, à l’aventure, stimulation, sollicitation, couronnement, aboutissement”. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>143</sup> Michel Lamy, *The Secret Message of Jules Verne*, p. 48.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

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

<sup>147</sup> See Michel Lamy, *Jules Verne initié et initiateur*, p. 19-20.

<sup>148</sup> Jules Verne, *Travel Scholarships*, translated by Teri J. Hernández, edited by Arthur B. Evans, Introduction by Walker Dehs, Middletown, Connecticut, Wesleyan University Press, 2013, p. 243, 265, 321.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 321.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 361. The phonetic pun that the sentence produces in French, creating a sentence with another meaning, cannot be reproduced in English.

<sup>151</sup> Michel Lamy, *The Secret Message of Jules Verne*, p. 88.

when he says that he is “gay as a son-in-law who inherits from his mother-in-law in the first year of his marriage”,<sup>152</sup> and Clovis Dardentor’s addresses to Taconnat by pronouncing a play on words alluding to “gaiety”:<sup>153</sup> “Ah! Ah! Monsieur Jean, so you have regained your natural gaiety”.<sup>154</sup> And again, what about the enigmatic reference in *Clovis Dardentor* to the “stationmaster’s nightingale”?<sup>155</sup> In this regard, Michel Lamy comments that “the nightingale was a bird dear to the troubadours and often served as a ‘key’ to introduce a hidden passage. This is why a skeleton key is called a ‘nightingale’ in argot, for it opens doors that have been closed to the profane”.<sup>156</sup> In the previous chapters, I alluded to the esoteric dimension of the nightingale in love poetry, associating it with the symbolism of the rose, and Jules Verne seems to follow this tradition.

The rose plays an important role in Jules Verne’s work, and Michel Lamy devotes a chapter to Verne’s rose: “La Rose, la Croix et le Grand Architecte de Rennes-le-Château” (The Rose, the Cross and the Great Architect of Rennes-le-Château). In fact, Verne’s rose is linked to various esoteric traditions, for example, the mysterious history of Rennes-le-Château and its abbot Bérenger Saunière,<sup>157</sup> as Lamy has shown in his book. Without dwelling on this subject, which is not the focus of my thesis, I would like to point out that the rose evoked by Verne in connection with the mystery of Rennes-le-Château is closely linked to the Roseline (the red line), which was dear to Bérenger Saunière. It was also the term used to designate the Meridian Zero, that began in the Church of Saint-Sulpice in Paris and crossed the region of Rennes-le-Château.<sup>158</sup> Patrick Ferté has spoken in terms of “the esotericism of the meridian”,<sup>159</sup> a kind of esoteric geography hidden in the mysterious Meridian Zero and which we find in *Clovis Dardentor* by Jules Verne. But the rose of Verne also refers to the Rosicrucian tradition. In Jules Verne there are numerous allusions to the Rosy-Cross, as Michel Lamy has shown.<sup>160</sup> There are Rosicrucian echoes in *Travel Scholarships*, where the word “Rose-Croix” is

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<sup>152</sup> Jules Verne, *Clovis Dardentor*, London, Sampson Low, Marston & Company, 1897, p. 162.

<sup>153</sup> The translation into English of the two following passages (corresponding to footnotes 154 and 155) of the English version of Verne’s *Clovis Dardentor*, which I have used, does not render the original text by Verne appropriately. So I have translated it to render the original meaning of the text, in particular the concept of “gaiety”, which is lost in the English translation.

<sup>154</sup> “Ah! Ah! monsieur Jean, vous avez donc repigé votre gaieté naturelle”. Jules Verne, *Clovis Dardentor*, Paris, Hetzel et Cie, 1896, p. 163.

<sup>155</sup> “Rossignolade du chef de gare”. *Ibid.*, p. 193.

<sup>156</sup> Michel Lamy, *The Secret Message of Jules Verne*, p. 88.

<sup>157</sup> On the esoteric teaching of Bérenger Saunière, see *Moi, Bérenger Saunière. Curé de Rennes-le-Château, tome II, révélations et message*, Paris, Association des Auteurs Auto-édités, 1989. This book contains the writings of Bérenger Saunière, whose doctrine is based on the *topos* of Love. See, in particular, chapter VI, “Votre conscience. Aimer, c’est vivre” (“Your conscience. To love is to live”), p. 77-98. It should be noted that the rose appears in the centre of the book cover, in the image summarising the doctrine of Bérenger Saunière, and it is called “Rose of Consciousness” (“Rose de la conscience”).

<sup>158</sup> See Michel Lamy, *Jules Verne initié et initiateur*, p. 96-97; Mariano Bizzarri, *op. cit.*, p. 89-95.

<sup>159</sup> “L’ésotérisme du méridien”. Patrick Ferté, *Arsène Lupin supérieur inconnu. La clé de l’œuvre codée de Maurice Leblanc* [1992], Paris, Guy Trédaniel, 2004, p. 125.

<sup>160</sup> See Michel Lamy, *Jules Verne initié et initiateur*, p. 135-136.

mentioned on several occasions, for example: “the plantation of Rose-Croix”,<sup>161</sup> “the trees in Rose-Croix”,<sup>162</sup> “the domain of Rose-Croix”,<sup>163</sup> “I would have had the good fortune to keep you at Rose-Croix for a few weeks”,<sup>164</sup> “the grower of Rose-Croix’s hospitable offer”.<sup>165</sup> Rosicrucian echoes can even be found in *Mathias Sandorf*, where Jules Verne speaks of “florins” and “kreutzers”. These two coins refer to the flower (the rose) and the cross (“kreutzers”), as Lamy has noted, who sees in the association “florin” and “kreutzers” a veiled evocation of the expression “Rose-Croix” – the flower of the rose and the cross.<sup>166</sup> The same evocation is found in Gérard de Nerval, precisely in *Lorely*, where florins and kreutzers are mentioned several times.<sup>167</sup> Another clue to the Rosicrucian tradition can be found in the work *Robur le Conquérant* (Robur the Conqueror, 1886), whose eponymous protagonist’s name, Robur, according to Michel Lamy, conceals the signature of the Rosicrucians: R. C. (the letter R associated with the name “Romur” and the letter C associated with the word “Conqueror”, written in capital letters).<sup>168</sup> Moreover, he underlines that these Rosicrucian traces in Jules Verne are also present in George Sand’s work, in which we can also detect echoes of the Cathar tradition. The title of George Sand’s work *Consuelo*, Lamy says, seems to recall the Cathar *consolamentum*: “Consuelo means ‘consolation’, recalling the Cathar *consolamentum*”.<sup>169</sup> The rose is the symbol that allows us to understand Sand’s Catharism, whose allusions can be found, for example, in the novel *Jeanne*, where floral symbolism, the symbol of the rose and the *topos* of love are evoked.<sup>170</sup> We find the tradition of the Cathars even in Jules Verne. Michel Lamy devotes a paragraph to the possible links between Verne and the Cathar tradition. The title is significant, “Et si les Cathares...” (And if the Cathars...),<sup>171</sup> and is followed by another paragraph which is simply a continuation of the previous one: “...avaient caché le Graal au Bugarach” (...had concealed the Grail on Bugarach).<sup>172</sup> But it is not only Rosicrucianism and Catharism that are at the centre of Jules Verne’s hermetic language, since in his work we

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<sup>161</sup> Jules Verne, *Travel Scholarships*, p. 186.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>166</sup> See Michel Lamy, *Jules Verne initié et initiateur*, 136.

<sup>167</sup> See Gérard de Nerval, *Lorely*, in Gérard de Nerval, *Œuvre complète. III*, eds. Jean Guillaume and Claude Pichois, Paris, Gallimard, v. III, 1993, p. 15, 24, 25, 27, 85, 87, 88, 89, 105, 107, 144, 210, 211, 215, 216.

<sup>168</sup> See Michel Lamy, *Jules Verne initié et initiateur*, p. 139-142.

<sup>169</sup> Michel Lamy, *The Secret Message of Jules Verne*, p. 162.

<sup>170</sup> See Michel Lamy, *Jules Verne initié et initiateur*, p. 155-156.

<sup>171</sup> Michel Lamy, *Jules Verne initié et initiateur*, p. 103; Michel Lamy, *The Secret Message of Jules Verne*, p. 107.

<sup>172</sup> Michel Lamy, *Jules Verne initié et initiateur*, p. 107; Michel Lamy, *The Secret Message of Jules Verne*, p. 111.

frequently find references to Freemasonry,<sup>173</sup> to the Bavarian Illuminati,<sup>174</sup> to the Golden Dawn,<sup>175</sup> and to the Carboneria,<sup>176</sup> the secret society to which Gabriele Rossetti belonged.

Jules Verne would have gravitated towards this secret and initiatory world of the nineteenth century, and as Michel Lamy points out, “his work, entirely devoted to the transmission of a message, should, from all evidence, be the reflection not of the single philosophy of a man but that of a whole community”.<sup>177</sup> Writers such as Victor Hugo, George Sand, Alexandre Dumas, Maurice Leblanc and Gaston Leroux would have belonged to this community. Thus, Michel Lamy’s book, *Jules Verne initié et initiateur*, opens up a new interpretative horizon not only for the novels of Jules Verne, but also for other seminal figures of French literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This horizon has to do with the world of secret societies, an initiatory world unknown to the profane and for which literature sometimes acts as a spokesperson. Thus, based on Lamy’s study, it is evident that Gaston Leroux’s work shows striking analogies with Verne’s *Robur*, as can be seen in his novel *Le Roi Mystère* (The King Mystery, 1908), in which the author speaks of the Rose-Croix as an “occult Power”.<sup>178</sup> A passage from *Le Roi mystère* is extremely significant because it also relates to Dantean esotericism:

I have already told some of you how I came to know R. C. and what such an event cost me. In truth, I cannot regret the adventure since it allowed me to approach one of those men whose existence seems possible only in novels and who commands one of the most formidable occult Powers that have long been constituted on the fringe of society. Everything that has been said about R. C. is still less than the truth. I have seen him at work and his work has interested me – I who am interested in so little here on earth. I will not tell you in detail the superb effort he made during the last ten years to become the most

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<sup>173</sup> Jules Verne’s novels are littered with references to Freemasonry, as in *In Search of the Castaways*, where there are allusions to Masonic lodges, or in *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, where the author specifically mentions the Great Architect of the Universe, as well as clear Masonic symbols such as the compass or the square. See *ibid.*, p. 59. On the relationship between Jules Verne and Freemasonry, see *ibid.*, p. 38-62.

<sup>174</sup> On the relations between Jules Verne and the Illuminati of Bavaria, see *ibid.*, p. 207-217.

<sup>175</sup> On the relations between Jules Verne and the Golden Dawn, see *ibid.*, p. 168-186.

<sup>176</sup> On the relations between Jules Verne and the Carboneria, see *ibid.*, p. 152-156. On the subject of the links between Jules Verne and the Carboneria, Michel Lamy emphasises the importance of the symbolism of the oak tree, which is linked to the tradition of the *Carbonari* (the members of the Carboneria) and which is also found in Verne’s work. See *ibid.*, p. 152. The remark made by Michel Lamy is very interesting, as reminds us of the relationship existing between the troubadour love tradition and the symbolism of the oak tree, thus communicating, in an indirect way, the tradition of the troubadours with that of the *Carboneria*: “legend tells us that the first troubadour found the ‘leys d’amor’ (the laws of love) in the branches of a sacred oak”. Michel Lamy, *The Secret Message of Jules Verne*, p. 153.

<sup>177</sup> Michel Lamy, *The Secret Message of Jules Verne*, p. 230.

<sup>178</sup> See Michel Lamy, *Jules Verne initié et initiateur*, p. 142-145. Michel Lamy affirms that Verne’s writings “found strange echoes in Gaston Leroux and Maurice Leblanc” (Michel Lamy, *The Secret Message of Jules Verne*, p. 164), thus with the story of Arsène Lupin. On the relationship between Jules Verne’s literary production and Maurice Leblanc’s Arsène Lupin, see *ibid.*, p. 157-167. On the esoteric dimension of Arsène Lupin, see Patrick Ferté, *op. cit.* This work by Patrick Ferté is interesting because it links the esotericism of Arsène Lupin, not only to the work of Jules Verne, but also to the majority of the themes and authors that are the subject of my study: Gérard de Nerval, Joséphin Péladan, Dante, Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism, Troubadourism, Catharism, the *Fedeli d’Amore*, and above all, the initiatory symbolism of the rose. Patrick Ferté’s work frequently refers to the esotericism of the rose.

formidable bandit – in the sense of a gang leader – of modern times and perhaps of history. You must have penetrated, as I have, into those mysterious and terrible underworlds like the circles of Dante’s *Inferno*, where he has established the main cogs of the marvellous mechanism which he directs and which makes him one of the masters of the world.<sup>179</sup>

In this passage, Leroux mentions Dante, who is evoked several times in *Le Roi Mystère*, and likewise the rose is mentioned several times in the text, whose links with Verne’s work are of an esoteric nature, and which relate to esoteric knowledge and the world of secret and initiatory societies. On this last point, as Mariano Bizzarri writes in the introduction to the Italian edition of Michel Lamy’s book on Jules Verne *Initié et Initiateur* (translated into Italian with the title: *Jules Verne e l’esoterismo*), the author of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* is said to have alluded in his novels to the “manoeuvres, both hidden and obvious, of a secret organisation which, since time immemorial, has been preparing the advent of a Great Monarch, called upon to govern the fate of humanity towards the end of time”.<sup>180</sup> In this regard, Lamy writes:

the time is not ripe for a complete revelation, but the message must continue to be passed down in order to increase the fraternity of people who are preparing for this advent. Tomorrow, perhaps, the banner of the Great Monarch will rise up the mob, but will this truly be the Great Monarch? What force will he bring with him? Will he not be opening the doors of the underground world and unleashing the powers of shadow for a gigantic Walpurgis Night? Will he possess white powers or dark powers? Will the promised return to the Golden Age be the prerogative of Saturn-Satan? Will we see the rebirth of blood cults in the form of holocausts?<sup>181</sup>

Michel Lamy talks about white forces opposed to black forces, of a struggle between good and evil, of “powers of darkness” which, if they have the upper hand, will cause “camouflaged blood cults”, to real holocausts.<sup>182</sup> Thus, the author of *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, according to Lamy, wanted to warn the reader of something dangerous and terrible that some secret societies were preparing. We could therefore speak of a prophetic Jules Verne, who

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<sup>179</sup> “J’ai déjà raconté à quelques-uns d’entre vous comment j’ai été amené à faire la connaissance de R. C. et ce qu’un tel événement me coûta. Je ne saurais regretter en vérité l’aventure puisqu’elle m’a permis d’approcher un de ces hommes dont l’existence ne semble possible que dans les romans et qui commande à l’une des plus formidables puissances occultes qui se soient constituées depuis longtemps en marge de la société. Tout ce qu’on a raconté de R. C. et encore au-dessous de la vérité. Je l’ai vu à l’œuvre et son œuvre m’a intéressé, moi que si peu de chose intéresse ici-bas. Je ne vous narrerai point par le détail l’effort superbe qu’il accomplit pendant ces dix dernières années, pour devenir le plus redoutable bandit – dans le sens de chef de bande – des temps moderne et peut-être de l’histoire. Il faut avoir comme moi pénétré dans ces souterrains mystérieux et terribles comme les cercles de l’*Enfer* du Dante où il a établi les principaux rouages du mécanisme merveilleux qu’il dirige et qui en fait l’un des maîtres du monde”. Gaston Leroux, *Le Roi Mystère* [1908], Paris, Éditions Baudinière, 1977, p. 281.

<sup>180</sup> “Manovre, nascoste e palesi, di un’organizzazione segreta che da tempo immemorabile prepara l’avvento di un Gran Monarca, chiamato a reggere le sorti dell’Umanità in prossimità della fine dei tempi”. Mariano Bizzarri, “Introduzione – Solo fantascienza? L’esoterismo nascosto di Jules Verne”, in Michel Lamy, *Jules Verne e l’esoterismo*, p. 10.

<sup>181</sup> Michel Lamy, *The Secret Message of Jules Verne*, p. 288.

<sup>182</sup> The two world wars followed Jules Verne’s works several decades later.



foresaw the catastrophes that would lead to the destruction of Europe.<sup>183</sup> In this respect, Mariano Bizzarri states that “behind the banal ‘story’ of the facts, as told us in the newspapers, there is something else. Something unmentionable and mysterious, about which someone, like Verne, is trying to instruct us”.<sup>184</sup> Therefore, Mariano Bizzarri continues, “the anticipations of science fiction for which Verne has rightly carved out a place in the history of science fiction should perhaps be read differently, as harbingers of a programme animated and pursued – for some time – by a kind of organisation such as Francis Bacon announced in his *New Atlantis*”.<sup>185</sup>

This scenario concerning a struggle between good and evil, between the forces of Light and those of the Shadow, has to do with the concept of counter-initiation, which presupposes two other fundamental concepts: initiation and Tradition. Giorgio Galli neatly and effectively summarises the relationship between Tradition, initiation and counter-initiation:

A fundamental concept for esotericism: that of Tradition. There would be a primordial, planetary tradition, a particular relationship with the transcendent (ideas, symbols, liturgies), from which all subsequent historical religions would flow.

Tradition is linked to initiation, that is to the access to it, by virtue of specific gifts, through a process that passes through its custodians (the “initiates”) over the millennia. Initiation, positive, has its negative pole in counter-initiation, manipulation and counterfeiting through the work of “counter-initiated” characters, an obvious opposition between Light and Darkness, between Good and Evil, between Ormuz and Ahriman, the god and the devil, which has ancient roots in the dualistic conception of the world, subsequently developed in many historical religions.<sup>186</sup>

Thus, to use Giorgio Galli’s words, counter-initiation corresponds to “conceptions maliciously committed to distorting the original Tradition, for negative rather than positive ends, in order to increase the Evil rather than the Good”.<sup>187</sup> Counter-initiation was central to René Guénon’s writings, and among his heirs is Jean Robin, who read the history of France from this Guénonian

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<sup>183</sup> Mariano Bizzarri, “Introduzione – Solo fantascienza? L’esoterismo nascosto di Jules Verne”, in Michel Lamy, *Jules Verne e l’esoterismo*, p. 10.

<sup>184</sup> “Dietro la ‘storia’ banale dei fatti, così come ci vengono narrati dai quotidiani, c’è dell’altro. Qualcosa di inconfessabile e misterioso, su cui qualcuno, come Verne, tenta di istruirci”. *Ibid.*

<sup>185</sup> “Le anticipazioni fantascientifiche per le quali Verne si è a giusta ragione ritagliato un posto nella storia della *science-fiction*, andrebbero forse lette in modo diverso, come preannunci di un programma animato e perseguito – da tempo – da una qualche organizzazione quale quella preconizzata da Francesco Bacone nella sua *La nuova Atlantide*”. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>186</sup> “Un concetto fondamentale per l’esoterismo: quello di Tradizione. Ne esisterebbe una primordiale, planetaria, un rapporto particolare col trascendente (idee, simboli, liturgie), dal quale deriverebbero tutte le successive religioni storiche.

Alla tradizione è legata l’iniziazione, cioè l’accedervi, in virtù di doti specifiche, attraverso un processo che passa per i suoi depositari (gli ‘iniziati’) lungo i millenni. L’iniziazione, positiva, ha il suo polo negativo nella controiniziazione, la manipolazione e contraffazione attraverso l’opera di personaggi ‘controiniziati’ un’evidente contrapposizione tra la Luce e le Tenebre, tra il Bene e il Male, tra Ormuz e Arimane, il dio e il diavolo, che ha antiche radici nella concezione dualistica del mondo, sviluppatasi poi in molte religioni storiche”. Giorgio Galli, “De Gaulle e l’esoterismo”, in Paolo Rumor, Loris Bagnara, Giorgio Galli, *L’altra Europa. Miti, congiure ed enigmi all’ombra dell’unificazione europea* [2010], Castelfranco Veneto, Panda edizioni, 2017, p. 57.

<sup>187</sup> “Concezioni impegnate maleficamente a stravolgere la Tradizione originaria, per fini negativi anziché positivi, in vista del potenziamento del Male anziché del Bene”. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

perspective,<sup>188</sup> also focusing on the concept of counter-initiation associated with Lovecraft's work<sup>189</sup> (whose name refers to love, "forging or building love",<sup>190</sup> as Giorgio Galli reminds), in his work *Lovecraft et le secret des adorateurs du serpent* (Lovecraft and the secret of the serpent worshippers).<sup>191</sup> In a way, this is similar to Michel Lamy's reading of Jules Verne, in which the "powers of the Shadow" are opposed to the good of humanity.

This sinister scenario would become one of the Jules Verne's major preoccupations. As Michel Lamy has pointed out, Verne was plagued by anxieties and fears, and it is perhaps no coincidence that Verne suffered a mysterious attack (fortunately without the writer's death), and destroyed his archive, some time before his death.<sup>192</sup> In this regard, Michel Lamy wonders what the position of the publisher Pierre-Jules Hetzel was, who frequented the world of Jewish para-masonic societies and the secret services. It was Hetzel who paved the way for Jules Verne's publishing success, but the latter would at some point break away and not even attend the funeral of his publisher.<sup>193</sup> It seems that Jules Verne, as well as George Sand,<sup>194</sup> admired Hetzel at first, regarding him as a master, but over the years his approach changed, and he turned away from him so much that he did not contribute to the special issue of the *Magasin d'Éducation de la Récréation* on 15 June 1886, published in memory of Pierre-Jules Hetzel.<sup>195</sup> Michel Lamy has brilliantly dealt with this subject, and wonders "if, upon realizing the kind of society under whose influence he had fallen – a society whose purposes or means he did not

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<sup>188</sup> Jean Robin, *Le Royaume du Graal: introduction au mystère de la France*, Paris, G. Trédaniel, 1993.

<sup>189</sup> Jean Robin, *Lovecraft et le secret des adorateurs du serpent*, Paris, G. Trédaniel, 2017. Jean Robin's book deals with the symbolism of the rose linked to the mystery of Rosalie (*Rose-ligne*, the Rose line), as in Jules Verne's work; Rosaline associated with Shakespeare, in *Love's Labour Lost* (Rosaline as a Saturnian figure linked to lunar magic); the Catharism-Hitlerism link and Dantean esotericism. On the subject of Dantean esotericism, Jean Robin mentions the *Fedeli d'Amore* (*ibid.*, p. 340) and refers to Guénon's book *L'Ésotérisme de Dante* (*ibid.*, p. 367). It should be noted that Lovecraft had corresponded with Guénon (*ibid.*, p. 187). On Lovecraft's esoteric dimension, see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "Fiction in the Desert of the Real: Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos", *Aries*, 7, 2007, p. 85-109.

<sup>190</sup> "Forgiare o costruire l'amore". Giorgio Galli, *Le coincidenze significative. Da Lovecraft a Jung, da Mussolini a Moro, la sincronicità e la politica*, Turin, Lindau, 2010, p. 131.

<sup>191</sup> On the subject of the "snake-worshippers" referred to in the title of Robin's book, it is worth recalling the lines of Thomas Stearns Eliot in his "Choruses from 'The Rock'", where the American poet presents the reader with the struggle between good and evil in "a world confused and dark and disturbed by portents of fear" (*The poems of T. S. Eliot. Volume I. Collected and uncollected poems*, ed. Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue, London, Faber & Faber, 2015, p. 175), advising readers to stay away from the "Mystery of Iniquity") and concentrate on day-to-day life: "the great snake lies ever half awake, at the bottom of the pit of the world, curled / in folds of himself until he awakens in hunger and moving his head to right and to left prepares for his hour to devour. / But the Mystery of Iniquity is a pit too deep for mortal eyes to plumb. Come / Ye out from among those who prize the serpent's golden eyes, / the worshippers, self-given sacrifice of the snake. Take / Your way and be ye separate. / Be not too curious of Good and Evil; / seek not to count the future waves of Time; / but be ye satisfied that you have light / enough to take your step and find your foothold"). *Ibid.*

<sup>192</sup> See Mariano Bizzarri, "Introduzione – Solo fantascienza? L'esoterismo nascosto di Jules Verne", in Michel Lamy, *Jules Verne e l'esoterismo*, p. 11; Michel Lamy, *Jules Verne initié et initiateur*, p. 15.

<sup>193</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>194</sup> George Sand had a profound influence on Jules Verne. On the relations between George Sand and Jules Verne, see Kiera Vaclavik, "George Sand & Jules Verne", *French Studies Bulletin*, v. 25/90, 2004, p. 8–10; Michel Lamy, *Jules Verne e l'esoterismo*, p. 115-116.

<sup>195</sup> See Michel Lamy, *Jules Verne initié et initiateur*, p. 267.

approve, Jules Verne had not tried to escape. And by the same token, we might ask would someone have tried to prevent him?”<sup>196</sup> There is undoubtedly an evolution in Jules Verne’s life that is also evident in his work, at least from 1865, as Marie-Hélène Huet has noted.<sup>197</sup> In particular, after he suffered the mysterious shooting (by his nephew Gaston), something changed permanently in Jules Verne’s life. Michel Lamy went further in this regard, speaking of a “Jules Verne, who could never walk normally again and was forced to use a cane to the end of his days, he never revealed anything either”.<sup>198</sup> Moreover, “he always held his silence and imposed it on his entourage, letting his interlocutors quickly know that it was a subject of which he did not like to speak”.<sup>199</sup> In a letter to his brother Paul (Gaston’s father) dated 1 August 1894, the Jules Verne wrote: “I have too much and too serious a cause for sadness to mix with the joys of the Nantes family. All gaiety has become unbearable for me, my character is deeply altered and I have received blows from which I will never recover”.<sup>200</sup>

On the subject of Jules Verne’s anxieties, Michel Lamy wonders whether the French writer may have pursued a Luciferian quest by contributing to causing the scenarios described by Howard Philips Lovecraft, those “which permitted the gods of the anti-world to manifest among us”,<sup>201</sup> among human beings, on the earth. Elsewhere, Michel Lamy is even more precise, stating that:

Perhaps his [Jules Verne’s] despair before dying might be better understood in the context of his participation in a work whose ultimate purpose was the

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<sup>196</sup> Michel Lamy, *The Secret Message of Jules Verne*, p. 284.

<sup>197</sup> See Marie-Hélène Huet, *L’Histoire des Voyages extraordinaires: essai sur l’œuvre de Jules Verne*, Paris, Lettres modernes, 1974, p. 19.

<sup>198</sup> Michel Lamy, *The Secret Message of Jules Verne*, p. 286.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>200</sup> “J’ai trop et de trop graves sujets de tristesse pour me mêler aux joies de la famille nantaise. Toute gaieté m’est devenue insupportable, mon caractère est profondément altéré et j’ai reçu des coups dont je ne me remettrai jamais”. This letter from Jules Verne to his brother Paul, dated 1 August 1894, was quoted for the first time by Jules Verne’s niece Allotte de La Fuÿe in her biographical work *Jules Verne. Sa vie, son œuvre* (Paris, Simon Kra, 1928, p. 246). The letter is quoted in several works, including the following: Jean Chesneaux, *Jules Verne, une lecture politique* [1971], Paris, F. Maspero, 1982, p. 20; Jean Chesneaux, *Jules Verne. Un regard sur le monde. Nouvelles lectures politiques*, Paris, Bayard, 2001, p. 31; Olivier Poivre d’Arvor, Patrick Poivre d’Arvor, *Le monde selon Jules Verne*, Paris, Mengès, 2004, p. 49; Michel Lamy, *Jules Verne initié et initiateur*, p. 272. This letter is also quoted in the biographical dossier of the English version of *Bourse de Voyage*, edited by Arthur B. Evans. See Jules Verne, *Travel Scholarships*, transl. Teri J. Hernández, ed. Arthur B. Evans, Introduction by Walker Dehs, Middletown, Connecticut, Wesleyan University Press, 2013, p. 399-400. However, according to Olivier Dumas, the 1 August 1894 letter quoted by Allotte de La Fuÿe is a falsified and falsely dated letter. See Olivier Dumas, *Jules Verne. Avec la publication de la correspondance inédite de Jules Verne à sa famille*, Lyon, La Manufacture, 1988, p. 466. Be that as it may, both in the letter quoted by Jules Verne’s niece Allotte de La Fuÿe and in the one quoted by Olivier Dumas (dated 20 June 1894) we note a feeling of anguish in Verne’s *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. It is this feeling of anguish, remorse and repentance that Michel Lamy attributes to Verne’s return to Catholicism. See Michel Lamy, *Jules Verne initié et initiateur*, p. 272. Verne’s Catholic spirituality is also confirmed by Mario Turiello, one of the first critics to study the French writer’s work: *Around the World in 80 Days*, from 1894 to 1904 (letters published in the *Bulletin de la Société Jules-Verne, Trente-trois lettres de Jules Verne commentées par leur destinataire*, M. Mario Turiello, *Bulletin de la société Jules Verne*, n. 4, August 1936 p. 162-202). In fact, other French and foreign authors have found comfort in returning to Catholicism after having touched on or fully experienced the world of the occult. This is true of both Nerval and Eliot.

<sup>201</sup> Michel Lamy, *The Secret Message of Jules Verne*, p. 288.

rehabilitation of these final gods [the fallen gods]. We should not scoff at such a theory and should refrain from cloaking ourselves too comfortably in the mantle of reason and positivism, for people with a reputation for good sense and rationalism, such as Anatole France, have believed in the possibility of such theories.<sup>202</sup> [...] In ancient civilisations, human sacrifices offered the gods (phantomlike forces that were considered as such and resembled what we call larva) the blood and vital forces they need to manifest. In our day, sects – even in France and other countries of the West – practice vampirism in the purest tradition of these ancient religions. We could also see in the Holocaust perpetuated by the Thule Society of Nazism a reactualization of these sacrifices to what are customarily known as the dark powers.<sup>203</sup>

Here, in this passage, the scenario becomes even more complex as we are talking about Nazism and the Holocaust. Miche Lamy, in fact, formulates the hypothesis according to which “it is legitimate to ask to what extent the Holocaust of World War II was the fruit of a vampiric cult”.<sup>204</sup> Lamy’s research leads the figure of Jules Verne being situated in a filiation that leads to the Thule Society – a secret society which had a remarkable influence on the political scene of the twentieth century, as it prepared the advent of National Socialism and deeply influenced Adolf Hitler.<sup>205</sup> One of the theoreticians of Nazism, Alfred Rosenborg, stated that “the men who founded this association were true magicians”,<sup>206</sup> and “their names were Karl Haushofer, Rudolf Von Sebottendorf, and especially Dietrich Eckart”.<sup>207</sup> It was the latter who wrote in 1923: “Follow Hitler! He will dance, but it is I who wrote the music! I have initiated him into the secret doctrine. I have opened his centres to the vision and have given him the means to communicate with the power. Do not weep for me; I will have influenced history more than any other German”.<sup>208</sup> There are therefore close links between esotericism and Hitler’s Nazism; these relations have been studied by Giorgio Galli, who has also highlighted the implications and links with literature, referring to authors such as Péladan or Jules Verne.<sup>209</sup>

Now, although the association may seem inappropriate, Hitlerism has been linked by some scholars to Catharism, and consequently to the history of the *Fedeli d’Amore*.<sup>210</sup> Denis de Rougemont had already underlined the importance of the Cathar tradition within the Germanic tradition of the twentieth century, especially thanks to the publication of Otto Rahn<sup>211</sup> who died

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<sup>202</sup> The same idea is shared by Gérard de Nerval, who speaks of the fallen gods on numerous occasions in his works. For example, the sonnet “Antéros”.

<sup>203</sup> Michel Lamy, *The Secret Message of Jules Verne*, p. 294.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 263.

<sup>205</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 244-245.

<sup>206</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 261.

<sup>207</sup> Michel Lamy, *The Secret Message of Jules Verne*, p. 261.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 260-261.

<sup>209</sup> See Giorgio Galli, *Hitler e il nazismo magico. Le componenti esoteriche del Reich millenario* [1989], Milan, BUR Rizzoli, 2016.

<sup>210</sup> As Jean-Michel Angebert recalls, Hitler was an admirer of Dante and Petrarch. See Jean-Michel Angebert, *Hitler et la tradition cathare* [1971], Rosières-en-Haye, Camion blanc, 2008, p. 345.

<sup>211</sup> On Catharism according to Otto Rahn, see Francesco Zambon, “Il catarismo e i miti del Graal”, in *Tradizione letteraria, iniziazione, genealogia*, eds. Carlo Donà and Mario Mancini, Milan, Luni Editrice, 1998, p. 99-109. Rahn had written his doctoral thesis on Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival*, and in 1930 he went to Paris to

mysteriously in an alpine desert), *La Croisade contre le Graal* (The Crusade against the Grail, 1934), where the author takes up the ideas of Eugène Aroux and Péladan (thus, another case of indirect influence of Gabriele Rossetti), namely the fact that “all the troubadours were Cathars, all the Cathars were troubadours”<sup>212</sup> and that courtly rhetoric was the secret language of heresy. But, if the starting point for tracing the secret origins of Hitler’s cosmogony linked to Catharism is Otto Rahn with his book *La Croisade contre le Graal*, it is Jean-Marie Angebort who, in his book *Hitler et la Tradition Cathare* (Hitler and the Cathar Tradition), proposes the equation “Hitlerism = Catharism”, or rather, “Hitlerism = Gnosis = Manicheism + Catharism”.<sup>213</sup> Jean-Marie Angebort traces a filiation linking the Germany of the Third Reich to the tradition of the Cathars: “it was [...] in Germany, and especially in Bavaria, that the legend of the Grail was transported, transmitted from century to century to the Illuminati of Bavaria. The solar cult transmitted to the Cathars by the Manicheans was taken up by the Rosicrucians and the Illuminati to arrive in the form of the Third Reich”.<sup>214</sup>

In his comparison between Catharism and Hitlerism, Angebort traces an initiatory filiation linking figures from different eras: Manes, Goethe, Dante, Faust, Nietzsche, Wagner.<sup>215</sup> Nerval is the French author through whom Angebort presents the history of an esoteric tradition transmitted over the centuries from East to West.<sup>216</sup> He quotes Eugène Aroux and Péladan<sup>217</sup> (not Gabriele Rossetti: again, a case of indirect influence) referring to Dante as “the great pontiff of [the] Cathar sect”.<sup>218</sup> He speaks of all the themes that are the subject of my thesis: courtly love, the troubadour ideal, the *Fedeli d’Amore*<sup>219</sup> and the symbolism of the rose. We find the mystical rose again when the author of *Hitler et la tradition cathare* speaks of the Rosicrucians, considered as “the guardians of the mystical Rose, who spread throughout

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continue his doctoral research. It was in Paris that he met Maurice Magre, a writer from Languedoc and specialist in the theme of the Grail, author of the *Trésor des Albigeois* (1938). See Jean-Michel Angebort, *op. cit.*, p. 52-53. As Otto Rahn recalls, Maurice Magre’s hypothesis was that “the Cathars would have been, in the Middle Ages, the Buddhists of the West” (“les cathares auraient été, au Moyen-Âge, les bouddhistes de l’Occident”). Otto Rahn, *La Croisade contre le Graal. Grandeur et chute des Albigeois* [1934], Rosières-en-Haye, Camion blanc, 2015, p. 33. In *Le Trésor des Albigeois*, Maurice Magre stresses the importance of the symbolism of the rose, as it is the key to finding the Grail. The author also points out that “the true Grail exists” (“le vrai Graal existe”) and that “there are false Grails and bad guardians” (“il y a de faux Graal et de mauvais gardiens”), because “evil is too powerful” (“le mal est trop puissant”), but “thanks to the rose” (“grâce à la rose”), human beings can find “the true Grail” (“le vrai Graal”). Maurice Magre, *Le Trésor des Albigeois. Roman du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle à Toulouse*, Paris, Fasquelle, 1938, p. 96.

<sup>212</sup> “Tous les troubadours étaient cathares, tous les cathares étaient troubadours”. Otto Rahn, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

<sup>213</sup> “Hitlérisme = gnose = manichéisme + catharisme”. Jean-Michel Angebort, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>214</sup> “C’était [...] en Allemagne, et qui plus est en Bavière, que la légende du Graal s’était transportée, transmise de siècle en siècle jusqu’aux Illuminés de Bavière. Le culte solaire transmis aux cathares par les manichéens a été repris par les Rose-Croix et les Illuminés pour parvenir sous forme du III<sup>e</sup> Reich”. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>215</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 7. Jean-Michel Angebort devotes a chapter to Wagner with a significant title: “Wagner troubadour” (chapter V). See *ibid.*, p. 197-231.

<sup>216</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 135-138, 151.

<sup>217</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 20, 63.

<sup>218</sup> “Grand pontife de [la] secte cathare”. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>219</sup> In particular, on the *Fedeli d’Amore* mentioned by Jean-Michel Angebort, see *ibid.*, p. 169.

Germany, which now holds the title of sacred land”.<sup>220</sup> But, Jean-Michel Angebert adds , “the mystical rose was not unknown to the Templars and its meaning is known (as a symbol of all the virtues of knowledge) throughout the esoteric tradition”.<sup>221</sup> He speaks of the rose in terms of a “symbol of knowledge” linked to magic, recalling that the White Rose is the rose of white magic, since there are both white magic and black magic. More precisely, Jean-Michel Angebert evokes this white rose in relation to “the war between Steinerian white magic and Hitlerian black magic” which “took place well before the Nazi takeover”.<sup>222</sup> The author of *Hitler et la tradition cathare* also refers to “the heraldic rose charged with the swastika”,<sup>223</sup> when he speaks of the Albigensian brother Guyot (the knight Kyot of the Grail legend), author of the Cathar Bible. In dealing with the figure of Brother Guyot, Angebert shows not only the combination of the rose and the swastika,<sup>224</sup> but also the same nature shared by *Parsifal* and *The Divine Comedy* which, according to him, sanctioned the union of Catharism and Templarism, and later of the Rosicrucians.<sup>225</sup> This filiation does not end with Catharism and the Rosicrucians but, according to Jean-Michel Angebert, extends to the Thule secret society. The analysis of the national-socialist thought that he proposes through the maze of esoteric traditions is that of “Gnosis with its most significant projection represented by the prophet Manes, developed naturally around Catharism, a neo-gnostic apparition characteristic of the Middle Ages, and continued with the study of the Templars. Then, Gnosis hides itself by degenerating, with the Rosicrucians and the Illuminati of Bavaria, to end up, after many detours, with the mysterious Thule group”.<sup>226</sup> This recalls Michel Lamy’s research, which has shown the links between Verne’s literary work and the world of secret societies, such as the Thule.

As regards the links between Nazism and literature, it should be noted that some authors, after their death (and therefore without their knowledge), were associated with the Nazi ideology, although in reality this is an unfounded association. This is the case of Péladan, whose ideas and theories were taken up by representatives of Nazism.<sup>227</sup> Dante himself was associated

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<sup>220</sup> “Les gardiens de la Rose mystique, qui se répandirent dans toute l’Allemagne, laquelle se para désormais du titre de terre sacrée”. *Ibid.*, p. 367.

<sup>221</sup> “La rose mystique n’était pas ignorée des Templiers et son sens est connu (symbole de toutes les vertus de la connaissance) par toute la tradition ésotérique”. *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>222</sup> “La guerre entre magie blanche steinerienne et magie noire hitlérienne se déroula bien avant la prise du pouvoir nazis”. *Ibid.*, p. 249.

<sup>223</sup> “La rose héraldique chargé du svastika”. *Ibid.*, p. 215.

<sup>224</sup> On the relationship between the rose and the swastika, see *ibid.*, p. 214.

<sup>225</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>226</sup> “Gnose avec sa projection la plus significative représentée par le prophète Manès, le développement s’ordonne naturellement autour du catharisme, apparition néo-gnostique caractéristiques du Moyen-Âge, et se poursuit avec l’étude des templiers. Ensuite, la gnose se cache en dégénéralant, avec la Rose-Croix et les Illuminés de Bavière, pour aboutir, après bien des détours, au mystérieux groupe Thulé”. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>227</sup> In this respect, see Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism. Secret Aryan Cult and their Influence on Nazy Ideology* [1985], London, New York, Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 2005, p. 213; James Webb, *The Occult Establishment*, p. 52-53.

with fascist ideals by some political representatives of the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>228</sup> Moreover, many scholars who have dealt with esoteric subjects, such as the one in my thesis, the *Fedeli d'Amore*, have often been associated with Italian fascism, and more generally, with the extreme right. This is the case of Luigi Valli or Julius Evola. However, this is not a question of the political right or left, since the implications of esotericism are of interest not only to the extreme right, but also to the left, as Giorgio Galli has clearly shown, stressing that “the relationship between esoteric culture and political culture concerns the entire political spectrum, from the left to the right”.<sup>229</sup> Serge Hutin already pointed out that, for example, “behind the Russian revolution, we could probably detect the activity of a very mysterious secret society, the Green Dragon”.<sup>230</sup> However, beyond the fact that there are obvious relations between political culture and esoteric culture, esotericism is independent of any social phenomenon, as René Guénon states in *The Esotericism of Dante*, where he writes that “true esotericism must lie beyond oppositions expressed in outer movements that disturb the profane world; and if such movements are occasionally created, or invisibly directed, by powerful initiatic organisations, one can say that the latter dominate these movements without being part of them, in such a way as to exercise their influence equally upon which of the opposing terms”.<sup>231</sup> This demonstrates the complexity of the discourse concerning the relationship between esotericism and the course of historical events, including the role of secret societies, to which literature sometimes refers. Jules Verne is one of the most important writers who enables us to understand the secret history of Europe, as shown by Michel Lamy, whose book *Jules Verne initié et initiateur* was highlighted by the historian Giorgio Galli. In fact, Jules Verne is one of the focal points of Giorgio Galli’s research into the relationship between esoteric culture and political culture.

Galli discusses esoteric circles in nineteenth and early twentieth century Paris, showing the relationship between literature, esotericism and politics. He quotes the alchemist Fulcanelli (whom I will discuss in more detail in chapter XII) about an “esoteric and political centre”<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> See Alessandra Giuli, “Esoterismo neopagano nel Regime Fascista. Colloqui con Giorgio Galli”, in *Esoterismo e fascismo. Storia, interpretazioni, documenti*, ed. Gianfranco de Turrís, Rome, Edizioni Mediterranee, 2006, p. 50-51; Marco Rossi, “La Teosofia di fronte al fascismo”, in *ibid.*, p. 56; Mariano Bizzarri, “L’Aquila e il Fascio Littorio, simboli cosmici”, in *ibid.*, p. 115-119; Julius Evola, “Mussolini temeva l’influsso della magia?”, in *ibid.*, p. 153. In his work *La magia e il potere. L’esoterismo nella politica occidentale*, Giorgio Galli devotes a chapter to the relationship between Dantean esotericism and fascist esotericism, “Dante e l’esoterismo fascista” (“Dante and fascist esotericism”, p. 215-245), in which the author discusses the use of the figure of Dante through the ideological propaganda of the Fascist ideology. Galli also speaks of the *Fedeli d’Amore* (as well as of Gabriele Rossetti) and he expresses his favourable opinion about their existence. He believes, in fact, in the validity of this thesis, and mentions, in particular, a work (completely forgotten by literary critics) to which I alluded in chapter II, *Il grande viaggio nei mondi danteschi – Iniziazione ai misteri maggiori*, by the theosophist Emma Cusani.

<sup>229</sup> “Il rapporto tra cultura esoterica e cultura politica concerne tutto lo spettro politico, dalla sinistra alla destra”. Giorgio Galli, *Esoterismo e politica*, p. 99.

<sup>230</sup> “Derrière la révolution russe, on pourrait sans doute déceler l’activité d’une très mystérieuse société secrète, celle du Dragon Vert”. Serge Hutin, *Gouvernants invisibles et sociétés secrètes*, Paris, J’ai lu, 1971, p. 19.

<sup>231</sup> René Guénon, *The Esotericism of Dante*, p. 20.

<sup>232</sup> “Centro esoterico e politico”. Giorgio Galli, *Esoterismo e politica*, p. 101.

located in Paris, at least until the beginning of the twentieth century. This Parisian centre corresponds to the *Chat Noir*, a cabaret located in Montmartre, and the passage from Fulcanelli quoted by Giorgio Galli is the following:

many among us remember the famous Chat-Noir (Black Cat), which was so popular under Rodolphe Salis' management; but how many knew what sort of esoteric and political centre was concealed there, what international masonry was hidden behind the ensign of the artistic cabaret? On the one hand the talent of a fervent, idealistic youth made up of aesthetes seeking glory, carefree, blind, and incapable of suspicion; on the other, the confidences of a mysterious science mixed up with obscure diplomacy, a two-faced tableau deliberately exhibited in a medieval framework.<sup>233</sup>

Thus, under the appearance of a place consecrated to art, song and literature, the *Chat Noir* would have concealed an esoteric and political centre, and the figures who would have frequented this esoteric milieu would have included Raymond Roussel, Maurice Leblanc, Gaston Laroux and Emma Calvé.<sup>234</sup> These are the same people that Michel Lamy links to Jules Verne, and Giorgio Galli confirms the involvement of the author of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* in the esoteric and initiatory circles at the turn of the century.

The confirmation of Jules Verne's involvement in the so-called "secret history" can also be found in a book, *L'altra Europa* (The Other Europe, 2010), which is the result of a memoir written by Paolo Rumor, son of Giacomo Rumor, one of the most important figures in Italian politics during post-war reconstruction. Giacomo Rumor was a leading representative of the post-war political party "Democrazia Cristiana" (Christian Democrats), and during his political career he wrote a memoir based on information gleaned from Maurice Schumann,<sup>235</sup> the French statesman who played a key role in the creation of the European Union, and one of its founders. Schumann and Rumor were closely linked, and Rumor was also closely connected to important figures in the Vatican. In fact, he was the trustee of Monsignor Montini, the future Pope Paul VI. The stature of Giacomo Rumor is therefore undeniable in terms of international politics. He was not a conspiracy theorist, but one of the most important European personalities of the twentieth century.

From Paolo Rumor's memoir, disturbing aspects of the real history of Europe emerge. Behind the history of the European Union, of a united Europe, there were occult organisations linking politics not only to the secret services and the Vatican, but also to ancient esoteric circles. Paolo Rumor's memorial was drafted from documents given to Giacomo Rumor by Maurice Schumann, and from Paolo Rumor's knowledge of the secret history of Europe,

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<sup>233</sup> Fulcanelli, *The Dwellings of the Philosophers*, translated by Brigitte Donvez, Lionel Perrin, Boulder, Archive Press, 1999, p. 91.

<sup>234</sup> See Giorgio Galli, *Esoterismo e politica*, p. 101.

<sup>235</sup> The memoir of Paolo Rumor is the result of the information that Maurice Schumann had given and exchanged with Giacomo Rumor, as well as the documents that Schumann provided to his Italian friend and colleague.



knowledge shared by his father with Schumann. The title of the book in which this information was published is significant: *L'altra Europa*, namely “The Other Europe”.<sup>236</sup> This book by Paolo Rumor describes a very old secret organisation that has been operating over the centuries and that would have been present, under different names, from antiquity to the twentieth century – not only in Europe, but also in Egypt, Palestine and Persia. It is, as Paolo Rumor writes, a “sort of transversal structure that acts as a catalyst for certain contingent decisions of an economic, social and political nature, coinciding with certain important historical moments, and which has been operating [...] at least since the middle of the nineteenth century, but which, according to what I have read, has existed practically since the dawn of civilisation”.<sup>237</sup> I am not able here to go into this extremely interesting subject, which is fundamental to the history of humanity, but I would like to point out that Rumor’s list includes figures from the decision-making, cultural and intellectual elite, and among these figures are men of letters: “this organisation exists (it would be preferable to say ‘hides’ itself) within the social, political, religious, scientific, humanist and literary environment of its time, and is therefore indistinguishable from the local and historical context”.<sup>238</sup> Among the men of letters and writers cited by Paolo Rumor, we should mention Sir Philip Sidney, Jean Cocteau, Maurice Barrès, Alexandre Lenoir and Victor Hugo.<sup>239</sup> The last three, in particular, are discussed in my thesis: Sidney, for the initiatory symbolism of the rose in his works (chapter V); Alexandre Lenoir was one of Gabriele Rossetti’s main sources for his work on esoteric love in the Middle Ages, and Victor Hugo is the starting point for this chapter on the esoteric rose in the nineteenth century. All three are found in Giacomo Rumor’s list of the elite “Structure” whose purpose is to guide the cultural-political evolution of Europe and America, and consequently the whole world.

As Paolo Rumor points out, almost all the people on Schumann’s list are linked, more or less indirectly, to esoteric traditions. They are “interested in subjects gravitating in the ‘intermediate world’ between the known and the unknown, but with a predilection for the mysterious, the hermetic, the occult, astrology, [...] alternative brotherhoods, freemasonry, [...]

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<sup>236</sup> The memoir was deposited in the “Biblioteca Civica Bertoliana” of Vicenza, in the Political Archives Section, on 29 March 2004, by the lawyer Paolo Rumor of Vicenza. It was given by Paolo Rumor to Giorgio Galli, and both of them, with the collaboration also of Loris Baganara, started the project that led to the publication of the book *L'altra Europa*. See Paolo Rumor, Loris Baganara, Giorgio Galli, *op. cit.*, p. 7-8.

<sup>237</sup> “Sorta di Struttura trasversale che funge da catalizzatrice a determinate decisioni contingenti di natura economica, sociale e politica, in concomitanza con certi momenti storici importanti, e che essa è operativa [...] almeno fin dalla metà del diciannovesimo secolo, ma che per quel che ho letto, esiste praticamente dall’alba della civiltà”. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>238</sup> “Quest’organizzazione si fonde (sarebbe meglio dire: ‘si nasconde’) nell’ambiente sociale, politico, religioso, scientifico, umanistico, letterario della propria epoca di appartenenza e quindi è indistinguibile dal contesto locale e storico”. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>239</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 126. Other figures who were part of Paolo Rumor’s list, and who could be relevant for future research, are: Alphonse Louis Constant, the Radcliffe family of Northumberland in England, and John Dee.

niche literary and artistic circles, [...] the irrational”.<sup>240</sup> Rumor adds, “if Schumann’s list is true, we can deduce that the existence of an occult network of operators in the ganglia of the institutions may be true”.<sup>241</sup> It must be stressed that these words are not spoken by a person who is interested in the occult, but as Giorgio Galli remarks, by “an extremely respectable person with an established and impeccable public life”.<sup>242</sup> It is Paolo Rumor himself who affirms this, showing his practical spirit, free of any link with the occult: “I do not want to be conditioned by the seduction of ‘mystery’ [...]. Life is a very concrete reality and full of trials for every man: it is better to deal with the contingent because life is too dense with afflictions”.<sup>243</sup>

However, even if Paolo Rumor is a figure completely detached from the world of the occult, as he clearly states, he does not deny the existence of a reality unknown to the profane world, which has to do with the history of humanity. He repeats this several times. Thus, for example, he states in a passage of his memoir:

Behind the official apparatuses there are people who think in terms of objectives that transcend those of the State. In fact, the general sense of what I have been able to understand from reading my father’s documents, as well as from his oral explanations, is that there was (and perhaps still is), at a very high level and different from those known, a Group or Entity (of which some people belonging to former noble families were or are members) that was and is working on a project important for Europe, but also beyond this scope. This was at least the case until the early 1980s, because after that date I cannot know if things changed (I have reason to doubt it).

These people do not hesitate to use techniques of suggestion or concealment in order to direct the public’s emotions, expectations and mental aspirations and, consequently, to gain acceptance for structural changes affecting national communities. (This observation is free of positive or negative judgements on such a strategy). The activities of the various governments do not seem to have the capacity to interfere with the above-mentioned planning, at least in the short term (since they are not aware of the public and transparent aspects); the same applies to the political parties, which are in fact kept completely out of the loop of what is known in jargon as “The Great Work”.<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> “Interessate a materie che gravitano nel ‘mondo di mezzo’ fra il conosciuto e lo sconosciuto, ma con una predilezione per il misterioso, l’ermetico, l’occulto, l’astrologia, [...] le confraternite alternative, la massoneria, [...] gli ambienti letterari e artistici di nicchia, [...] l’irrazionale”. *Ibid.*, p. 16-17.

<sup>241</sup> “Se la lista Schumann corrisponde a realtà, possiamo dedurre che possa essere vera l’esistenza di una rete occulta di operatori nei gangli delle Istituzioni”. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>242</sup> “Una persona estremamente rispettabile, dalla vita pubblica accertata e impeccabile”. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>243</sup> “Non voglio lasciarmi condizionare dalla seduzione del ‘mistero’ [...]. La vita è una realtà molto concreta e piena di prove per ogni uomo: conviene occuparsi del contingente perché è fin troppo denso di affanni”. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>244</sup> “Dietro agli apparati ufficiali operano persone che ragionano secondo scopi che trascendono quelli strettamente statuali. In realtà, il senso generale di ciò che ho potuto capire dalla lettura dei documenti di mio padre, come pure dalle sue spiegazioni orali, è che esisteva (e forse esiste ancora), a un livello molto alto e diverso da quelli conosciuti, un Gruppo o un’Entità (di cui facevano o fanno parte anche alcune persone appartenenti a vecchie casate nobiliari) che lavorava e lavora a un progetto importante per l’Europa, ma anche *oltre* simile finalità. Questo almeno valeva fino ai primi anni Ottanta, perché dopo tale data non posso sapere se le cose sono cambiate (peraltro ho ragione di dubitarne).

Tali persone non esitano a ricorrere a tecniche di suggestione o dissimulazione per pilotare l’emotività dell’opinione pubblica, le sue aspettative, le sue aspirazioni mentali, e conseguentemente far accettare cambiamenti strutturali che coinvolgono le comunità nazionali. (Quest’osservazione è scevra da giudizi positivi o negativi su siffatta strategia). L’attività dei singoli governi non sembra avere la capacità di interferire con la citata

In another passage, Paolo Rumor is even more precise and summarizes his idea about documents of his father Giacomo Rumor, expressing with complete detachment. I quote him in full, given the importance of the content exposed:

The general sense that I got from reading my father's writings and references is that there is (or at least existed until a few years ago, which confirms in practice its actuality) a kind of *transversal Structure* that acts as a catalyst for certain contingent decisions of an economic, social and political nature, coinciding with certain important historical moments, and that it has been "operative" – in the sense of not being dormant – since at least the middle of the nineteenth century. But, from what I have read and what has been reported to me, it has existed (and perhaps still exists) practically since the dawn of civilisations, although the very statement of such a fact is almost embarrassing, as it contrasts both with the evolution of psychic products over time and with the obvious inconstancy and inconsistency of human beings across historical epochs.

At this point, even without giving full credence to the extreme antiquity of the associative structure described in my father's documents (of whose veracity and relevance I have tried several times, always unsuccessfully, to find some defects in the light of the historical studies that have emerged from time to time to deal with such a complex and multifaceted subject), I can only express my astonishment – and perhaps even awe – at the assertion that a more or less significant part of the history of the West has been, and still is, skilfully and profoundly influenced by a few superior minds. The fact in itself would be extremely relevant even without the extraordinary ascendancy of the Structure, which takes on almost mythological aspects. Other members of this organisation included Monsignor Roncalli, when he was Patriarch of Venice, Israel Monti; Éliphas Lévi; Franklin Delano Roosevelt and more whom I do not recall (it is not clear at this point in what capacity they had participated: whether in an operational or merely advisory capacity; whether at the top or on the margins).

I had to omit the names of people too well known and still living, or who had recently died, because I believe my father would not have approved of mentioning them. I have also decided to exclude certain other topics and historical facts, considering that public opinion is not yet prepared to take note of them.

[...]

Personally, I have always been very reluctant to give full credence to the assumption emerging from the above writings, that is to say a prominent role played by an elitist structure operating transversely to the occasional historical event (and of course my father was of the same opinion). I must therefore make it clear that I have only reported what I have read or heard, without providing any critical assessment. However, it seems indisputable to me – given the quantity, concordance and credibility of the sources I have examined and from which this data is drawn – that the operation of the European Union was designed and planned much earlier than any contemporary historiographer would be willing to accept. It seems equally plausible to me that the *real* authors of this Union came from an unsuspected and unidentifiable group. Probably they merely gave the impulse at the right

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programmazione, quantomeno a breve termine (poiché essi ne sono al corrente solo per quel che riguarda gli aspetti pubblici e trasparenti); e neppure i partiti politici, che in realtà vengono tenuti totalmente esclusi da quella che in gergo viene chiamata 'La Grande Opera'". *Ibid.*, p. 104-105.

moment and then left the operation to the specialists and the ordinary elective mechanisms.<sup>245</sup>

In this passage, Paolo Rumor mentions Éliphas Lévi (whom we have met in previous chapters), one of the cardinal figures of esoteric circles in nineteenth-century France, who had a remarkable influence on French literature of that time. The aim of Rumor is not to propose a theory or put forward a hypothesis, rather, he limits himself to telling what he knows so that these truths are not lost:

In itself, the first aspect of my father's memoirs, namely the existence of the Secret Structure, with its multifaceted functions and its wide dissemination in the West, already appears sensational.

In the absence of documentary evidence, I cannot claim that this exposition has much hope of public credibility. I limit myself to stating it so that the memory of these things, as passed on to me by my father, is not lost, while waiting for some objective verification from another source – confirming or denying what is recounted in these pages – which I have lacked.

As far as the person of Schumann is concerned, to whom practically almost all the reported knowledge dates back, there is nothing I know about him that would allow me to pass judgement on the man, except for the few pieces of information I had about him in my family. In fact, I have no confirmation that he belonged to elite groups, but I wonder if his acquaintances were aware of the arguments he passed on to my father.

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<sup>245</sup> “Il significato complessivo che ho tratto dalla lettura degli scritti di mio padre e dai suoi riferimenti è che esiste (o quantomeno è esistita fino a pochi anni fa, il che ne conferma in pratica l'attualità) una sorta di *Struttura trasversale* che funge da catalizzatrice a determinate decisioni contingenti di natura economica, sociale e politica, in concomitanza con certi momenti storici importanti, e che essa è ‘operativa’ – nel senso di non quiescente – almeno fin dalla metà del XIX secolo. Ma per quel che ho letto e che mi è stato riferito, essa esisteva (e forse esiste ancora) praticamente dall'alba delle civiltà, nonostante sia quasi imbarazzante la stessa enunciazione di un tale fatto, che contrasta sia con l'evoluzione dei prodotti psichici nel tempo, sia con l'evidente volubilità e incostanza dell'essere umano durante le epoche storiche.

A questo punto, anche senza prestare completa fede all'estrema antichità della compagine associativa descritta nei documenti di mio padre (sulla cui verità e attualità più volte ho cercato, sempre inutilmente, di trovare un qualche difetto alla luce degli studi storici che venivano di volta in volta ad affrontare una materia così complessa e poliedrica), non posso che esprimere il mio stupore – e forse anche timore – dinanzi all'asserzione che una parte più o meno rilevante della storia dell'Occidente sia stata e sia tutt'ora abilmente e profondamente influenzata da poche menti sovrastanti. Il fatto di per sé sarebbe di estrema rilevanza anche senza la straordinaria ascendenza della Struttura, la quale assume aspetti quasi mitologici. Ne avevano fatto parte anche monsignor Roncalli, quando era patriarca di Venezia, Israele Monti; Éliphas Lévi; Franklin Delano Roosevelt e altri che non ricordo (non è chiaro a questo punto in quale veste vi avessero partecipato: se in forma operativa o soltanto consultiva; se al vertice o ai margini).

Ho dovuto omettere i nomi di persone troppo conosciute e ancora viventi, o morte da poco, perché ritengo che mio padre non ne avrebbe approvata la menzione. Ho tralasciato anche l'esposizione di qualche altro argomento e fatto storico, valutando che l'opinione pubblica non sia ancora preparata per prenderne cognizione.

[...]

Personalmente ho sempre avuto molta riluttanza nel dare completo credito all'ipotesi emergente degli scritti sopra riportati, cioè a un ruolo guida svolto da una struttura elitaria che opera in modo trasversale rispetto agli occasionali avvenimenti storici (e ovviamente mio padre era dello stesso parere). Perciò preciso che mi sono limitato a riferire quanto da me letto o ascoltato, senza fornire alcuna valutazione critica. Comunque mi sembra incontestabile – considerata la quantità, concordanza e credibilità delle fonti da me esaminate, dalle quali proviene questo dato – che l'operazione dell'Unione Europea è stata progettata e programmata *molto tempo prima* di quello che ogni storiografo contemporaneo sarebbe disposto ad accettare. Mi pare altrettanto plausibile che i *veri* autori di quest'Unione provengano da una compagine insospettabile e non individuabile. Probabilmente essi si sono limitati a dare l'impulso nel momento giusto, cedendo poi l'operatività agli specialisti e ai meccanismi elettivi ordinari”. *Ibid.*, p. 159-160.

I conclude this narrative by quoting by heart a significant phrase that struck me, reported by Schumann and which, albeit somewhat emphatically, might explain some of the picture I have tried to sketch: “In the West, politics is a matter of interests, while history is a family affair”.<sup>246</sup>

This passage from Rumor’s memoir shows, in some respects, striking analogies with the secret history presented by Michel Lamy in his book on the esotericism of Jules Verne,<sup>247</sup> and, if pursued further, could be complemented by literary studies (or literary works) devoted to the telling of a secret history of humanity.<sup>248</sup>

I began this chapter on the esoteric rose in the nineteenth century by speaking about the esoteric context of the nineteenth century, about Rossetti and the French authors he mentions as holders of Dante’s esoteric doctrine, such as Honoré de Balzac and Victor Hugo. The study of esoteric love and the symbol of the rose in Balzac and Hugo led us to the *Société Angélique* and the worlds of secret societies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In this respect, the figure of Jules Verne (in whom love and the rose play a major role) has been extremely important for understanding the secret history of Europe. Jules Verne’s fantastic stories, mixed

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<sup>246</sup> “Di per sé appare sensazionale già il primo aspetto delle memorie di mio padre, cioè l’esistenza della Struttura segreta, con le sue poliedriche funzioni e la sua vasta diffusione nell’Occidente.

In assenza di riscontri probatori di natura documentale, non posso pretendere che questa esposizione abbia forti speranze di pubblica credibilità. Mi limito a enunciarla più che altro perché non vada disperso il ricordo di queste cose, come mi è stato trasmesso da mio padre, nell’attesa che da qualche altra fonte possono giungere quelle verifiche oggettive – a conferma o smentita di quanto raccontato in queste pagine – che a me sono mancate.

Per quanto riguarda la persona di Schumann, al quale risalgono praticamente quasi tutti i dati conoscitivi riportati, nulla so della sua figura che mi consenta di esprimere un giudizio sull’uomo, tranne per quelle poche informazioni che ho avute su di lui in famiglia. In realtà non possiedo alcuna conferma che egli appartenesse a gruppi elitari. Mi chiedo tuttavia se i suoi conoscenti fossero al corrente degli argomenti che egli ha trasmesso a mio padre.

Chiudo questa narrazione citando a memoria una frase significativa che mi ha colpito, riferita da Schumann e che, seppure in modo piuttosto enfaticizzato, potrebbe spiegare alcune cose del quadro che mi sono sforzato di abbozzare: “In Occidente la politica è una questione di interessi, la storia invece è una questione di famiglia”. *Ibid.*, p. 161-162.

<sup>247</sup> The question of family lineage in the history of the French monarchies is one of the major themes of Michel Lamy, who builds his demonstration by starting with the Merovingian dynasty.

<sup>248</sup> One of the most comprehensive and well-documented works on the secret history of Europe (and humanity in general) is *Massoneria e sette segrete. La faccia occulta della storia* (Freemasonry and secret sects. The occult face of history, 1990) by Epiphanius, who published this work under a pseudonym. Although rarely cited in academic research, this little-known work has attracted the attention of authoritative academic specialists such as the Italian anthropologist Ida Magli, who drew on *Massoneria e sette segrete* for her book *La dittatura europea* (The European Dictatorship, 2010). See, in particular, Ida Magli, *La dittatura europea* [2010], Milan, BUR Rizzoli, 2012, p. 126-129-136. One aspect worthy of note is that in *Massoneria e sette segrete* particular importance is given to the relationship between literature and the world of secret societies and initiatory Orders. Many writers and poets are mentioned for their direct or indirect links with initiatory circles. These include Dante Alighieri, William Blake, Honoré de Balzac, Victor Hugo, Edward Stanislas de Guaita, Joséphin Péladan, Edward George Bulwer Lytton, William Butler Yeats, Gabriele D’Annunzio, T. S. Eliot, Bernard Shaw, Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, Rainer Maria Rilke, Edouard Schuré, Bram Stoker, H. G. Wells, Arthur Machen, Edward Arthur Waite and John Ruskin. Among the Initiatory Orders to which many literary figures belonged, the author highlights the importance of the Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia, the Golden Dawn, the Kabbalistic Order of the Rose-Cross, and the Pilgrim’s Society. See Epiphanius, *Massoneria e sette segrete. La faccia occulta della storia* [1990], Naples, Controcorrente, 2008, p. 205-222. On the secret history of Europe (or rather the world), a good source is Theodore Ziolkowski’s book *The Literature of Cult and Conspiracy* which, among other merits, highlights the role of literature in understanding the occult history of humanity. Theodore Ziolkowski, *The Literature of Cult and Conspiracy*, Baltimore, Maryland, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013.

with the love affairs of his characters and the evocation of a mysterious rose, conceal a secret history, characterised by apparently inconceivable things. These are confirmed in the writings of leading figures in international politics such as Giacomo Rumor and Robert Schumann, as well as in the studies of credible historians, such as the political scientist Giorgio Galli. In *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, Jules Verne warns the reader that what he is recounting is not the fruit of his imagination, but the description of stories that are inconceivable to the common man, but nevertheless real, even if unknown to the profane world: “I am the chronicler of things which seem to be impossible but are true and incontestably real”.<sup>249</sup> There would be a secret history of humanity that literature tries to bring to light, albeit in a veiled way. Gabriele Rossetti said so many times, and Balzac also spoke of a secret history, which he called a “scandalous kind of history”. George Sand confirms this truth by saying, in a letter to Pierre Leroux on 15 June 1843, that “there would be a great work to do on the occult history of humanity”.<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> Jules Verne, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, translated with an Introduction and Notes by David Coward, London, Penguin Classics, 2017, p. 329.

<sup>250</sup> “Il y aurait à faire un grand travail sur l’histoire occulte de l’humanité”. Letter from George Sand to Pierre Leroux on 15 June 1843, in *Histoire d’une amitié (d’après une correspondance inédite, 1836-1866)*. Pierre Leroux et George Sand, ed. Jean-Pierre Lacassagne, Paris, Klincksieck, 1973, p. 167.



## CHAPITRE VII

### FROM THE ROSE OF THE *FEDELE D'AMORE* GÉRARD DE Nerval TO THE ESOTERIC ROSE OF SUFISM, GOETHE AND MOZART

#### *The “troubadourisme exagéré” of Nerval*

In nineteenth-century French literature, the symbol of the rose is central to the work of a writer and poet for whom love is a major theme, which is characterised by its esoteric nature: Gérard de Nerval. One could define Gérard de Nerval as a *Fedele d'Amore* or a troubadour transposed to the nineteenth century, as he defines himself in *Les Nuits d'octobre* (October Nights, 1852), where he speaks of himself in terms of “troubadourisme exagéré”,<sup>1</sup> “out-and-out minstrelsy”.<sup>2</sup>

Michel Brix has pointed out that “Nerval’s entire work [...] is largely open to the theme of amorous mysticism”,<sup>3</sup> and Martine Broda has rightly spoken of “a love syncretism of Nerval”,<sup>4</sup> who “belongs to the cohort of Platonic lovers”.<sup>5</sup> Nerval defined himself as “the mysterious lover”,<sup>6</sup> and it is especially with Dante that he shares his fidelity to love.<sup>7</sup> Jean Richer had already pointed out that in Nerval we find a theory of Platonic love similar to that of Dante and Petrarch, one which is also found in Renaissance Neoplatonism, notably in Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, Francesco Giorgi and Leo the Hebrew<sup>8</sup> – the Renaissance authors who were crucial in Gabriele Rossetti’s reflections on esoteric love in his *Mistero dell’Amor Platonico*.

As I have already shown in the previous chapters, in one of the few French articles devoted to Gabriele Rossetti, “Soleil dans les gémeaux: l’ésotérisme de Dante selon Gabriele Rossetti”, Bruno Pinchard defines the author of the *Mistero* by comparing him to Gérard de Nerval. Pinchard considers Gabriele Rossetti as a kind of Hugo, George Sand, Pierre Laroux and Gérard de Nerval; in fact, as he rightly observed, there are points of contact between the

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<sup>1</sup> Gérard de Nerval, *Les Nuits d'octobre*, in Gérard de Nerval, *Œuvres complètes. III*, eds. Jean Guillaume and Claude Pichois, Paris, Gallimard, t. III, 1993, p. 349.

<sup>2</sup> Gérard de Nerval, *October Nights* in Gérard de Nerval, *Selected Writings*, translated and with an Introduction and Notes by Richard Sieburth, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, Penguin Classics, 1999, p. 241.

<sup>3</sup> “L’œuvre de Nerval tout entière [...] s’ouvre largement à la thématique du mysticisme amoureux”. Michel Brix, *Eros et littérature. Le discours amoureux en France au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, p. 245.

<sup>4</sup> “Syncretisme amoureux de Nerval”. Martine Broda, *L’Amour du nom. Essai sur le lyrisme et la lyrique amoureuse*, Paris, José Corti, 1997, p. 107-108.

<sup>5</sup> “Appartient à la cohorte des amants platoniques”. *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>6</sup> “L’amant mystérieux”. Gérard de Nerval, “À Alexandre Dumas” (letter-preface to the *Filles du feu*), in Gérard de Nerval, *Œuvres complètes. III*, t. III, p. 452.

<sup>7</sup> On the theme of love in Nerval, see Bruno Tritsmans, “Lettres d’amour, récits d’amour. Figures de l’énonciation amoureuse chez Nerval”, *Romantisme*, n. 63, 1989, p. 51-65.

<sup>8</sup> See Jean Richer, *Expérience et création* [1963], Paris, Hachette, 1970, p. 531.



author of *Aurélia* and the author of the *Mistero*. Like Rossetti, Nerval was anti-Catholic, but his anti-Catholicism did not lead to materialism or atheism. Like Rossetti, Nerval believed in divinity, in the invisible world, but he did not accept institutionalised religion. However, Nerval recognised the usefulness of religion, especially for common people who are in the dark about the hidden truths of religion. In fact, for Nerval, religion is seen as the remedy for the threat of perdition and protects the mind from dispersion, as he reminds us: “when the soul hovers uncertainly between life and dream, between mental disarray and the reappearance of cold reflection, it is in religious belief that one must seek solace”.<sup>9</sup>

There are no documents proving an acquaintance or link between Gérard de Nerval and Gabriele Rossetti; however, in Nerval’s work we find, in literary form, the same themes propounded by Rossetti in his *Mistero dell’Amor Platonico*. We thus find in Nerval what Gabriele Rossetti theorised in his interpretation of medieval love literature, in particular the esoteric doctrine of love passed down through the centuries, without forgetting the Nerval’s interest (as well as Rossetti’s) in the secret societies of the East and the West. This is the same esotericism claimed by Gabriele Rossetti, who studied the presence of esoteric currents in literature, whilst Nerval made esotericism the subject of his literary creations. Rossetti’s literary criticism and Nerval’s literary work spoke the same language, but in different forms.

What is interesting to note is that Gérard de Nerval and Gabriele Rossetti shared a common source: *Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire du jacobinisme* (Memoirs for use in the history of Jacobinism, 1797-1798) by the abbot Augustin Barruel.<sup>10</sup> This work outlined the history of the initiatory and Masonic currents that developed from the eighteenth century onwards, and was used as a reference by both Rossetti and Nerval, who took up the story of an occult conspiracy hatched by Masonic and Jacobin lodges to the detriment of Christianity at the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>11</sup> While Gabriele Rossetti used Barruel’s contribution to forge his work on Dantean esotericism and love poetry in the Middle Ages, Nerval used it above all in writing his work *Les Illuminés* (The Illuminated, 1852).

Thus, we find in Nerval what we find in Gabriele Rossetti: the claim of a filiation, a subterranean and hidden historical continuity of philosophical or religious ideas, which would have been transmitted from antiquity to the Middle Ages, and from there to the nineteenth century, passing through the Renaissance, which was a crucial period, as a bridge between antiquity and modernity.<sup>12</sup> In so doing, as Camille Aubaude points out, “Nerval establishes a

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<sup>9</sup> Gérard de Nerval, *Aurélia* in Gérard de Nerval, *Selected Writings*, p. 290.

<sup>10</sup> On the influence of the abbot Augustin Barruel in Nerval’s work, see Camille Aubaude, *Nerval et Le Mythe d’Isis*, Paris, Éditions Kimé, 1987, p. 138.

<sup>11</sup> See Stefano Salzani, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

<sup>12</sup> On the relationship between Nerval’s work and the poetic and philosophical tradition of the Renaissance, see Jean-Nicolas Illouz, “Nerval, poète renaissant”, *Littérature*, n. 158, 2010, p. 5-19. The article is also present in Gérard de Nerval, *Œuvres complètes, Choix des poésies de Ronsard, Du Bellay, Baïf, Belleau, Du Bartas*,

filiation between the great currents of Western esotericism”.<sup>13</sup> This idea of a subterranean history can be seen in *Les Illuminés*, where Nerval traces the chronology of the Neoplatonic tradition that has been passed down through the centuries, including the asylum in Florence given to the Neoplatonic philosophers after they were driven out following the capture of Constantinople.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the author of *Les Illuminés* points out that at the time of the Crusades, the Christian world absorbed doctrines from the East, and then claimed a continuity between Freemasonry, the Druses, the Rosicrucians, the Neo-Platonists of Florence, and the ideas of the Alexandrians after the capture of Constantinople.<sup>15</sup> Thus, Nerval is one of the authors of the nineteenth century who links the Platonism of antiquity with the mysticism of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Italy is one of the bridges of this filiation, and a fundamental role is played by Florence, the city of the Medici, namely the family that welcomes what Nerval calls “the Neo-Platonists of Florence”.<sup>16</sup> By evoking these Florentine Neoplatonists, Nerval traces a filiation linking the various esoteric currents: Freemasonry, the Rosicrucians, the Italian Neoplatonists of the Renaissance, the occult sciences and the esoteric movements of the eighteenth century. We find this filiation expressed in literary form, for example, in *Les Illuminés*.<sup>17</sup> And the *Fedeli d'Amore*? Is there any possibility of linking Nerval to the medieval *Fedeli d'Amore*?

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Chassignet, Desportes, Régnier, eds. Emmanuel Buron and Jean Nicolas Illouz, Paris, Classiques Garnier, t. I, 2011, p. 7-24. The names of Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, Nicolas de Cusa, Giordano Bruno and Tommaso appear in *Aurélia* as well as in *Les Illuminés*, and for Nerval they represent fundamental figures of the Renaissance in terms of the transmission of esoteric knowledge.

<sup>13</sup> “Nerval établit une filiation entre les grands courants de l’ésotérisme occidental”. Camille Aubade, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

<sup>14</sup> See Bertrand Marchal, “Notices, notes et variantes”, in Gérard de Nerval, *Les Chimères. La Bohême galante. Petits châteaux de Bohême*, ed. Bertrand Marchal, Paris, Gallimard, 2005, p. 305.

<sup>15</sup> See Camille Aubade, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

<sup>16</sup> “Les néoplatoniciens de Florence”. Gérard de Nerval, *Les Illuminés*, in Gérard de Nerval, *Œuvres complètes. II*, eds. Jean Guillaume and Claude Pichois, Paris, Gallimard, t. II, 1984, p. 1124. On the “Neo-Platonists of Florence” evoked by Nerval and linked to the Medici family, see Bertrand Marchal, “Nerval et le retour des dieux”, in *Gérard de Nerval. Les filles du feu. Aurélia. “Soleil noir”. Actes du colloque d’agrégation des 28 et 29 novembre 1997*, Paris, SEDES, 1997, p. 226-228.

<sup>17</sup> On the affiliation of different esoteric currents that Nerval refers to in *Les Illuminés* see, for example, the following passage: “Masonry established its highest institutions in Scotland, and it was as a result of France’s relations with that country, from Mary Stuart to Louis XIV, that the mystical institutions that gave rise to the *Rosicrucians* were firmly established here.

In the meantime, from the sixteenth century onwards, Italy had seen the emergence of a long series of bold thinkers, including Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, Meursius, Nicolaus of Cusa, Giordano Bruno and other great minds, favoured by the tolerance of the Medici, and sometimes referred to as the *Neoplatonists of Florence*.

The capture of Constantinople, which exiled so many illustrious scholars to Italy, also had a great influence on this philosophical movement, which brought back the ideas of the Alexandrians and reintroduced the study of Plotinus, Proclus, Porphyry and Ptolemy, the first opponents of nascent Catholicism.

It should be noted here that most of the learned physicians and naturalists of the Middle Ages, such as Paracelsus, Albert the Great, Jerome Cardan, Roger Bacon and others, were more or less attached to these doctrines, which gave a new formula to what were then known as the occult sciences, that is to say astrology, the cabala, palmistry, alchemy, physiognomy, etc., as well as the science of the human body.

It was from these various elements, and also in part from Hebrew science, which spread more freely from the Renaissance onwards, that the various schools of mysticism developed at the end of the seventeenth century. First came the Rosicrucians, whose indiscreet disciple the Abbé de Villars was, and later, it is claimed, his victim.

Nerval seems to be the French author who comes closest to Dante in terms of conveying a message of an initiatory nature. Léon Cellier considers Dante to be the “spiritual double”<sup>18</sup> of Nerval. He is one of Nerval’s main models, the other two sources being Apuleius and Swedenborg. It is thanks to these three poetic and above all spiritual models that Nerval undertakes what he calls a “stud[y] of the human soul”,<sup>19</sup> thus linking, as Jean-Nicolas Illouz has pointed out, the initiation tale of Apuleius, the spiritual autobiography of Dante and the visionary literature of Swedenborg.<sup>20</sup>

The influence of Dante on Nerval is indisputable, since it is the author himself who affirms it, as for example at the beginning of *Aurélia*, when he evokes Swedenborg, Apuleius and Dante to explain his altered state of consciousness: “Swedenborg called these visions his *Memorabilia*; they came to him more often in reverie than in sleep; Apuleius’ *Golden Ass* and Dante’s *Divine Comedy* are the poetic models of such studies of the human soul”.<sup>21</sup>

Now, if it is true, as the critical current inaugurated by Gabriele Rossetti maintains, that Dante shared an esoteric doctrine with the Order of the *Fedeli d'Amore*, we might wonder whether the Dantean influence on Nerval is purely literary or esoteric in nature. In the latter case, it means that this esoteric doctrine could have reached Nerval, whose frequenting of

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Then came the *Convulsionnaires* and certain sects of Jansenism; around 1770, the *Martinists*, the *Swedenborgians*, and finally the Illuminati, whose doctrine, first founded in Germany by Weisshaupt, soon spread to France, where it merged with the Masonic institution” (“La maçonnerie établit ses institutions les plus élevées en Écosse, et ce fut par suite des relations de la France avec ce pays, depuis Marie Stuart jusqu’à Louis XIV, que l’on vit s’implanter chez nous fortement les institutions mystiques qui procédèrent les *Rosecroix*.”)

Pendant ce temps, l’Italie avait vu s’établir, à dater du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle, une longue série de penseurs hardis, parmi lesquels il faut ranger Marsile Ficin, Pic de la Mirandole, Meursius, Nicolas de Cusa, Jordano Bruno et autres grands esprits, favorisés par la tolérance des Médicis, et que l’on appelle quelquefois les *néoplatoniciens de Florence*.

La prise de Constantinople, en exilant tant de savants illustres qu’accueillit l’Italie, exerça aussi une grande influence sur ce mouvement philosophique qui ramena les idées des Alexandrins, et fit étudier de nouveau les Plotin, les Proclus, les Porphyre, les Ptolémée, premiers adversaires du catholicisme naissant.

Il faut observer ici que la plupart des savants médecins et naturalistes du moyen âge, tels que Paracelse, Albert le Grand, Jérôme Cardan, Roger Bacon et autres, s’étaient rattachés plus ou moins à ces doctrines, qui donnaient une formule nouvelle à ce qu’on appelait alors les sciences occultes, c’est-à-dire l’astrologie, la cabale, la chiromancie, l’alchimie, la physiognomonie, etc.

C’est de ces éléments divers et en partie aussi de la science hébraïque, qui se répandit plus librement à dater de la renaissance, que se formèrent les diverses écoles mystiques qu’on vit se développer à la fin du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle. Les *Rosecroix* d’abord, dont l’abbé de Villars fut le disciple indiscret, et plus tard, à ce qu’on prétend, la victime.

Ensuite les *convulsionnaires* et certaines sectes du jansénisme; vers 1770, les *martinistes*, les *swedenborgiens*, et enfin les illuminés, dont la doctrine, fondée d’abord en Allemagne par Weisshaupt, se répandit bientôt en France, où elle se fonda dans l’institution maçonnique”). Gérard de Nerval, *Les Illuminés*, in Gérard de Nerval, *Œuvres complètes. II*, t. II, p. 1123-1124.

<sup>18</sup> “Sosies spirituels”. Léon Cellier, *Gérard de Nerval. L’homme et l’œuvre*, Paris, Hatier-Boivin, 1956, p. 185.

<sup>19</sup> Gérard de Nerval, *Aurélia*, in Gérard de Nerval, *Selected Writings*, p. 265.

<sup>20</sup> See Jean-Nicolas Illouz, “‘Un mille-pattes romantiques’: *Aurélia* de Gérard de Nerval”, *Romantisme*, n. 161, 2013, p. 75-76.

<sup>21</sup> Gérard de Nerval, *Aurélia*, in Gérard de Nerval, *Selected Writings*, p. 265.

esoteric circles is undeniable.<sup>22</sup> In fact, Nerval is not only a reader of occult books – he frequented the esoteric circles of the nineteenth century and belonged to the initiatory milieu of the time.<sup>23</sup> Thus, if Dante’s descent into hell is merely an initiatory journey, and the figure of the woman as well as the symbol of the rose represent metaphors of a mystical-initiatory nature, then it is possible that these symbols and *topoi*, which are also present in Nerval’s work, are related to the allegedly esoteric doctrine professed by Dante and the *Fedeli d’Amore* in the Middle Ages. The love of Nerval resembles Dantean love – a love that has nothing to do with passionate or carnal love, but one that is akin to religion, as Nerval points out in *Pandora*: “let’s not make a mock of love or religion, for they are in truth the same thing”.<sup>24</sup> In *Sylvie*, for example, Nerval speaks of a “vague, hopeless love I had conceived for an actress”,<sup>25</sup> while in the *Voyage en Orient* (Journey to the Orient, 1851) he describes a “love that one conceives for actresses, for queens, for women poets”.<sup>26</sup> In *Aurélia*, Nerval describes “a kind of love in me that transcended preference or desire”.<sup>27</sup> His love is therefore only a chimera,<sup>28</sup> of love for an

<sup>22</sup> It is particularly in *Léo Burckart* that Nerval shows his interest in secret societies. On the relations between Gérard de Nerval and the initiatory world, see Jean Richer, *Expérience et Création*, p. 383-417. On Nerval’s membership of Freemasonry, see Louis Levionnois, “Gérard de Nerval était-il franc-maçon?”, *Cahiers Gérard de Nerval*, n. 4, 1981, p. 59-63.

<sup>23</sup> Son of a Freemason, Gérard de Nerval repeatedly emphasised his descent from and membership of the Masonic and other initiatory orders: “you know that I myself am one of the *widow’s children*, a *louveteau*, that is a wolf cub (son of a master), that I was nurtured in the horror of Adoniram’s murder and in the admiration of the holy Temple, whose pillars were cedars from Mount Lebanon” [“tu sais que je suis moi-même l’un des *enfants de la veuve*, un *louveteau* (fils de maître), que j’ai été nourri dans l’horreur du meurtre d’Adoniram et dans l’admiration du saint Temple, dont les colonnes ont été des cèdres du mont Liban”]. Gérard de Nerval, *Voyage en Orient*, in Gérard de Nerval, *Œuvres complètes. II*, t. II, p. 596. Here Nerval explicitly states that he is a widow’s son, and elsewhere he emphasises his lineage when he wants to be initiated, in Lebanon, into the Druze religion: “I produced my titles, fortunately having in my papers one of those beautiful Masonic diplomas full of cabalistic signs familiar to Orientals” (“j’ai produit mes titres, ayant heureusement dans mes papiers un de ces beaux diplômes maçonniques pleins de signes cabalistiques familiers aux Orientaux”). *Ibid.*, p. 597. And in a letter of 1853, addressed to his father he wrote: “as the son of a mason and a simple louvetan, I amused myself by covering the walls with cabalistic figures and pronouncing or singing things forbidden to the profane; but it is not known here that I am an Egyptian companion (*refik*)” [“fils de maçon et simple louvetan, je m’amusais à couvrir les murs de figures cabalistiques et à prononcer ou à chanter des choses interdites aux profanes; mais on ignore ici que je suis compagnon-égyptien (*refik*)”]. In Gérard de Nerval, *Œuvres complètes. III*, t. III, p. 818. In this passage, Nerval speaks of “things forbidden to the profane”, which can only be known if one is initiated, and the author of *Les Chimères* seems to be an initiate, as he repeats, for example, when he emphasises his membership of the Order of Moses in a letter on 17 October 1854 to Dr Blanche: “as a secret member of the German Order of Mopses, my rank allows me to put my cards on the table” (“appartenant en secret de l’ordre des Mopses qui est d’Allemagne, mon rang me permet de jouer carte sur table”). *Ibid.*, p. 898. On Nerval’s affiliation to initiatory Orders, see Jean Richer, *Gérard de Nerval et les doctrines ésotériques, avec des textes et des documents inédits*, Paris, Éditions du Griffon d’or, 1947, p. 162.

<sup>24</sup> Gérard de Nerval, *Pandora*, in Gérard de Nerval, *Selected Writings*, p. 247. On Nervalian mysticism, see Auguste Viatte, “Mysticisme et poésie chez Gérard de Nerval”, *Cahiers de l’Association internationale des études françaises*, n. 15, 1963, p. 79-85; Riccardo Raimondo, “Mysticisme de Gérard de Nerval: une analyse mystico-symbolique”, *Annali di Ca’ Foscari. Serie occidentale*, v. 56, 2022, p. 117-140.

<sup>25</sup> Gérard de Nerval, *Sylvie* in Gérard de Nerval, *Selected Writings*, p. 150.

<sup>26</sup> “Amour que l’on conçoit pour des actrices, pour des reines, pour des femmes poètes”. Gérard de Nerval, *Voyage en Orient*, in Gérard de Nerval, *Œuvres complètes. II*, t. II, p. 514.

<sup>27</sup> Gérard de Nerval, *Aurélia*, in Gérard de Nerval, *Selected Writings*, p. 276.

<sup>28</sup> Vito Carofiglio has noted that the concept of unrealisable love is also present in Théophile Gautier’s novel *Arria Marcella* (1852). See Vito Carofiglio, “Nerval entre histoire et illusion: magie napolitaine et séduction amoureuse”, in *Le Le Rêve et la vie. Aurélia, Sylvie, Les Chimères de Gérard de Nerval. Actes du colloque du 19 janvier 1986 de la Société des études romantiques*, Paris, SEDES, 1986, p. 96. In this article, Vito Carofiglio

unattainable woman, as confirmed by Michel Brix, who points out that “Nerval’s work revolves around an ideal and unattainable female figure”,<sup>29</sup> namely the eternal feminine of a celestial nature: “the feminine principle, and, as Goethe says, the heavenly feminine”,<sup>30</sup> writes Nerval in *Journey to the Orient*. For the author of *Aurélia*, therefore, as Maria Luisa Belleli remarked, “the beloved woman is elevated to the rank of intermediary between man and the divinity”,<sup>31</sup> and the quest for this impossible love makes Nerval what he calls a “lover of an eternal kind”,<sup>32</sup> an eternal love, which is also an “impersonal love”,<sup>33</sup> as Pierre Jourde has defined it. Impersonality is linked to initiation, since initiation involves a death that leads to a second life and then to initiatory immortality, obtained through the erasure of the personality, the false personality of the old man substituted by that of the new man, spiritually renewed after his death and his mystical rebirth.

Nerval’s entire work is characterised by its initiatory nature,<sup>34</sup> for example in *Aurélia*, where one finds numerous references to the concept of initiation. Michel Jeanneret has spoken of an “initiatory programme that commands the whole of *Aurélia*’s research”,<sup>35</sup> and Léon Cellier saw in *Aurélia*’s structure a “small initiation” followed by a “great initiation”.<sup>36</sup> Nerval’s initiatory programme is confirmed by himself, in passages such as these: “the ordeal to which you have been submitted is now at its end”; “Courage, brother, this is the final stage!”.<sup>37</sup> This stage is pronounced by the figure of a woman who speaks to Nerval, for whom love, an initiatory ordeal and a descent into hell are inseparable: “I compare this series of ordeals I have undergone to what, in the eyes of the ancients, was represented by the idea of a descent into Hell”.<sup>38</sup>

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studies the esoteric dimension of Nerval’s work and, in particular, of his amorous initiation. See *ibid.*, p. 83-96. Carofiglio underlines the importance played by esotericism in Nerval’s work and asserts that it is not a mere intellectual abstraction, but rather central to his literary production. See *ibid.*, p. 83-84. Carofiglio focuses on Nerval’s esoteric love and alludes to the symbolism of the rose, focusing his attention on the figure of Saint Rosalie. See *ibid.*, p. 89-90.

<sup>29</sup> “L’œuvre de Nerval gravite autour d’une figure féminine idéale et inaccessible”. Michel Brix, *Eros et littérature. Le discours amoureux en France au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, p. 246.

<sup>30</sup> “Le principe féminin, et, comme dit Goethe, le *féminin céleste*”. Gérard de Nerval, *Voyage en Orient*, v. II, p. 248.

<sup>31</sup> “La femme aimée est élevée au rang d’intermédiaire entre l’homme et la divinité”. Maria Luisa Belleli, “L’Italie de Nerval”, *Revue de littérature comparée*, n. 34, 1960, p. 389.

<sup>32</sup> “Amoureux d’un type éternel”. Gérard de Nerval, *Dossier du Voyage en Orient. Le Carnet du Caire*, in Gérard de Nerval, *Œuvres complètes. II*, t. II, p. 844.

<sup>33</sup> Pierre Jourde, “*Les Chimères: la voix du neutre*”, in Nerval. *Actes du colloque de la Sorbonne du 15 novembre 1997*, ed. André Guyaux, Paris, Presses de l’Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1997, p. 109.

<sup>34</sup> On the initiatory dimension of Nerval, see Antonia Fonyi, “Histoire d’un amour erratique”, in Gérard de Nerval. *Les filles du feu. Aurélia. “Soleil noir”*. *Actes du colloque d’agrégation des 28 et 29 novembre 1997*, p. 165-166.

<sup>35</sup> Michel Jeanneret, “Dieu en morceaux: avatars de la figure divine *Aurélia*”, in Nerval. *Actes du colloque de la Sorbonne du 15 novembre 1997*, p. 179.

<sup>36</sup> See Léon Cellier, *Parcours initiatique*, p. 269-277, 288-300. See also Camille Aubaude, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 311.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 316.

Thus, as Monique Streiff Moretti points out, “*Aurélia* is an initiatory journey, very classically structured in two parts, on the model of Dante’s *Vita Nuova*”.<sup>39</sup> Like Dante in his *Vita Nova*, Nerval lived a second life, as described in *Aurélia*: “this *Vita nuova* was divided into two phases in my case”.<sup>40</sup> So Nerval seems to embody the figure of a poet-initiate who presents the reader with his mystical experience through which the spirit transcends the sensory world: “From the moment I became persuaded of the fact that I was undergoing the ordeals of a sacred initiation, a sense of invincibility took hold of my mind. I considered myself a hero living under the gaze of gods”.<sup>41</sup> Here, Nerval describes an experience in which he crosses the boundaries of reality, experiencing a fusion with the absolute that is ecstatic, like Dante, who in turn described a similar experience, a state of ecstasy at the edge of life: “I have set my feet in that point in life beyond which one cannot go with the intention of returning”.<sup>42</sup>

The initiatory dimension can be found not only in *Aurélia*, but in the entire work of Nerval. A good example is *Les Illuminés*, which evokes the Isis lodge, a place of initiation during the Revolution; or *Léo Burckart*, which describes a scene of initiation linked to the context of German secret societies; or again, the *Journey to the Orient*, based on initiatory tales, such as the *L’Histoire de la reine du matin et de Soliman prince des génies* (The Tale of the Queen of the Morning and Soliman the Prince of the Genii), whose initiatory nature has been highlighted by Alizée Alexandre, who emphasises that initiation constitutes a fundamental key to the reading of the text.<sup>43</sup> In all these cases, it is always a descent into hell, preceded by trials.

In Nerval’s case, it is therefore a real journey of the “soul”, having as its model Dante and his *Divine Comedy*, where the poet-pilgrim takes his mystical journey by degrees, from the infernal darkness of the dark forest, through the intermediate state of Purgatory, to the paradisiacal contemplation of the “*candida rosa*”, “the white rose”. In this initiatory journey, the woman loved by Dante, Beatrice, symbolises the Holy Wisdom leading to the encounter with the Divine, and Nerval’s Beatrice is called Aurélia, as Monique Streiff Moretti points out: “the character of Aurelia explicitly renews the allegorical role of Dante’s Beatrice”.<sup>44</sup> Beatrice has a mystical value, as can be seen in *The Banquet* (III, XI), where Dante says that his wife is

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<sup>39</sup> “*Aurélia* est un itinéraire initiatique, très classiquement structuré en deux parties, sur le modèle de la *Vita Nuova* de Dante”. Monique Streiff Moretti, “Allégorie et apocalypse dans *Aurélia*”, in Gérard de Nerval, *Les filles du feu. Aurélia. “Soleil noir”*. Actes du colloque d’agrégation des 28 et 29 novembre 1997, p. 196.

<sup>40</sup> Gérard de Nerval, *Aurélia*, in Gérard de Nerval, *Selected Writings*, p. 265. On the relationship between the Dantean *Vita Nova* and Nerval’s work, see Daniel Couty, “De *La Vita Nova* à la ‘vie nouvelle’”, in Gérard de Nerval, *Les filles du feu. Aurélia. “Soleil noir”*. Actes du colloque d’agrégation des 28 et 29 novembre 1997, p. 234-236.

<sup>41</sup> Gérard de Nerval, *Aurélia*, in Gérard de Nerval, *Selected Writings*, p. 306.

<sup>42</sup> Dante, *Vita Nova*, p. 17.

<sup>43</sup> See Alizée Alexandre, “Gérard de Nerval en pays de Saba. Bible, mystères et fiction dans *l’Histoire de la reine du matin et de Soliman, prince des génies*”, *Revue Nerval*, n. 1, 2017, p. 182-183.

<sup>44</sup> “Le personnage d’Aurélia renouvelle explicitement le rôle allégorique de la Béatrice de Dante”. Monique Streiff Moretti, “Allégorie et apocalypse dans *Aurélia*”, in Gérard de Nerval, *Les filles du feu. Aurélia. “Soleil noir”*. Actes du colloque d’agrégation des 28 et 29 novembre 1997, p. 197.

not a real woman, she is Philosophy: “I say that this woman is the lady of the intellect whom we call Philosophy”.<sup>45</sup> Through the allegory of love and the theme of the death of the beloved Beatrice, Dante would hide, as we have already seen, the vision of the inexpressible, the *excessus mentis*, of ecstasy due to the encounter with eternity, a state in which the intellectual faculties surrender to the vision of the absolute and the intellect is able to enjoy the contemplation of the divinity: “and I have seen things which cannot be told / possibly, by anyone who comes down from up there”<sup>46</sup> says Dante in *Paradiso* (I, v. 5-6) to describe this mystical experience that allows the vision of God. Beatrice would thus be the cosmic Sophia, the individual soul that connects to the cosmic soul, she is Wisdom, and she is also called by Dante “Sponsa de Libano”, “Bride of Lebanon” (*Purgatorio*, XXX, v. 10-13): “and one of them, / as if sent from heaven, / shouted in a singing voice, three times, *Veni / Sponsa de Libano*, and the rest after him”.<sup>47</sup> But Nerval, too, in his *Journey to the Orient* promises to marry Saléma, a Druze girl, during his stay in Lebanon, and for the love of this girl he will wish to be initiated into the religion of the Druze.<sup>48</sup> Thus, Dante and Nerval share the *topos* of the mystical marriage linked to the land of Lebanon, in the East. This mystical marriage with the Angel Woman is one of the major themes of Sufism and of all esoteric traditions imbued with Platonism and Gnosis. As for the troubadours, the Italian medieval love poets, the mystical poets of the Sufi gnosis, and for Gérard de Nerval, love is the active force that allows man’s union with God. It is the energy to find the hidden occult Sophia, namely God, the image of God that sleeps in every human being, who must find it. And it is through reason that the individual must find the divinity: what reason cannot understand must paradoxically be found by reason.

Through this difficult and tortuous spiritual journey, man abandons himself to the senses and reaches the mystical heights, and this hidden image of God, this divine substance present in man unconscious of having it, is symbolised in Sufi mysticism by a woman, as in Dante, in the mystical poets of Love, as well as in Gérard de Nerval. Ecstasy corresponds to the encounter with this power, called Love, which links man to God, and in this highly spiritual event the false “I” dies, meeting the true “I”: the eternal “I”. The death of the old “I” involves the death of the senses, and consequently the union with its divine *alter ego*, the hidden divinity. And as in Dante, where love for a woman leads to a spiritual rebirth ending in a rose (*Paradiso*, XXXI, v. 1-3), in Nerval the woman is also in spiritual form, not in the form of a love story of passion, desire and voluptuous pleasure.

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<sup>45</sup> Dante, *Convivio. A Dual-Language Critical Edition*, p. 179.

<sup>46</sup> Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, p. 351.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 329.

<sup>48</sup> On the figure of Saléma in Nerval, see Gérard Cogez, *Voyage en Orient de Gérard de Nerval*, Paris, Gallimard, 2008, p. 108-110.

Like Dante, Nerval's woman carries a mystical message, as does the flower of the rose, which also carries a message of an esoteric nature. The rose in Nerval's work is similar to the Dantean "candida rosa". It is the initiatory agreement between the poet and his beloved, namely the Divine Wisdom, the Gnostic Sophia allowing the understanding of the mystery of the divinity. The woman and the rose are thus only a veil for Nerval, as for Dante: behind the vision of the rose lies the knowledge of the divine reality. Love for a woman, the quest for a rose, these are the metaphors and the means to reach God.

The different women of Nerval are simply the same woman: "I am none other than Mary, none other than your mother, none other than the one you have always loved in every shape and manner. At each of your ordeals I have cast off one of the masks that veil my features; soon you shall see me as I truly am".<sup>49</sup> The same identification is found in *Sylvie*, where the author postulates the identification between Adrienne-Sophie (the nun) and Jenny Colon (the actress): "to be in love with a nun in the guise of an actress! ... and what if they were one and the same!!".<sup>50</sup> For the medieval *Fedeli d'Amore*, the different women exalted in the love poems were the same woman, and in Nerval's work too, the woman is always the same: different faces of women veiling the same woman, who is theophany because she is the path to divine illumination: "the adored woman is herself only the abstract ghost, only the incomplete image of a divine woman, betrothed to the believer from all eternity".<sup>51</sup> The search for the beloved woman is none other than the search for oneself: to find the woman and to identify with her means to find the *Sophia Aeterna*, the eternal Sophia; Nerval says this several times in his works, for example, in one of the *Journey to the Orient's* stories, *Histoire de la reine du Matin et de Soliman, prince des génies* (The Tale of the Queen of the Morning and Soliman the Prince of the Genii), where Tubal-Cain discovers the mystery of love in the person of Balqis: "Balqis, spirit of light, my sister, my wife, at last I have found you".<sup>52</sup>

But is it possible to deduce the existence of a filiation between Nerval, Dante and the medieval *Fedeli d'Amore* on the basis of the similarities expressed in their works, in particular the love for an ideal woman and the constant reference to the mystical rose? To my knowledge, the only article that addresses the question of possible links between Nerval and the *Fedeli d'Amore* is one by Jean de Moncelon, "Nerval et l'ordre des Fedeli d'Amore. L'initiation

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<sup>49</sup> Gérard de Nerval, *Aurélia*, in Gérard de Nerval, *Selected Writings*, p. 303.

<sup>50</sup> Gérard de Nerval, *Sylvie*, in *ibid.*, p. 151.

<sup>51</sup> "La femme adorée n'est elle-même que le fantôme abstrait, que l'image incomplète d'une femme divine, fiancée au croyant de toute éternité". Gérard de Nerval, *Voyage en Orient*, in Gérard de Nerval, *Œuvres complètes. II*, t. II, p. 279. On the figure of the woman loved and elevated to the rank of intermediary between man and the divinity in *Aurélia* by Nerval, see Maria Luisa-Belelli, "L'Italie de Nerval", *Revue de Littérature Comparée*, 34, 1960, p. 389; Michel Jeanneret, "Dieu en morceaux: avatars de la figure divine dans *Aurélia*", in *Nerval. Actes du colloque de la Sorbonne du 15 novembre 1997*, p. 187.

<sup>52</sup> "Balqis, esprit de lumière, ma sœur, mon épouse, enfin, je vous ai trouvée". Gérard de Nerval, *Voyage en Orient*, in Gérard de Nerval, *Œuvres complètes. II*, t. II, p. 741.



manqué de Gérard de Nerval” (Nerval and the Order of the *Fedeli d’Amore*. The failed initiation of Gérard de Nerval),<sup>53</sup> where the author postulates that Nerval is a “half-initiate”,<sup>54</sup> or a man who, like Dante, experiences the initiation, but unlike the Italian poet, does not accomplish it definitively and completely. Although the article is based on the relationship between Nerval and the doctrine of the *Fedeli d’Amore*, Jean de Moncelon does not mention the cardinal representatives of Dantean heterodox current, notably Gabriele Rossetti or Luigi Valli. The author refers to other studies, such as those of Henry Corbin, to whom I have already alluded in previous chapters in relation to his work on the relationship between the *Fedeli d’Amore* in the Islamic tradition (especially the Persian mystical tradition)<sup>55</sup> and medieval Italian and French love poets, also identifying links with eighteenth and nineteenth century figures such as Swedenborg and Balzac.<sup>56</sup> On the other hand, one article that uses exegetical criteria based on the current inaugurated by Gabriele Rossetti in order to analyse Nerval’s work is by Roger Mazelier, “Gérard de Nerval et les cathares en Périgord”<sup>57</sup> (“Gérard de Nerval and the Cathars in Périgord”, defined by Peter Dayan as a “sparkling and eclectic article”),<sup>58</sup> where reference is made to Luigi Valli’s research. Mazelier also refers to alchemical literature, namely the work of the enigmatic twentieth-century alchemist Fulcanelli, *Le Mystère des Cathédrales* (The Mystery of the Cathedrals, 1926), which presents alchemy as the key to reading the secrets guarded by the symbols characterising the French cathedrals of the Middle Ages and hermetic literature. But I will come back to Fulcanelli and alchemy later, when I focus on the alchemical rose at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. What is interesting to note is that

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<sup>53</sup> Jean Moncelon, “Nerval et l’ordre des *Fedeli d’Amore*. L’initiation manquée de Gérard de Nerval”, *Cahiers Gérard de Nerval*, n. 17, 1994, p. 52-64. On the relations between the *Fedeli d’Amore* and Gérard de Nerval, see Piero Latino, “La rose initiatique. De la rose de Dante et des *Fidèles d’Amour* à la rose de Nerval”, *Revue Nerval*, n. 4, 2020, p. 277-292.

<sup>54</sup> Jean Moncelon, “Nerval et l’ordre des *Fedeli d’Amore*. L’initiation manquée de Gérard de Nerval”, *Cahiers Gérard de Nerval*, p. 53.

<sup>55</sup> Henry Corbin’s work highlights the importance attached by Sufi poets to floral symbolism, particularly the rose, and to the expression “Fidèle d’Amour”, “Faithful of Love”, as demonstrated by the *Livre de la fleur* (Book of the Flower), *Les Intuitions des fidèles d’amour* (The Intuitions of the Faithful of Love), *Le Jasmin des fidèles d’amour* (The Jasmine of the Faithful of Love). In particular, this latter work has been translated by Henry Corbin himself from Persian into French: Rûzbehân Baqli Shirâzi, *Le Jasmin des fidèles d’amour* (*Kitâb-e ‘Abhar al-‘âshiqîn*). For Corbin, “Sufism” is “the religion of the Faithful of Love” (“la religion des fidèles d’amour”). Henry Corbin, *En Islam iranien. Aspects spirituels et philosophiques. Les Fidèles d’amour. Shî’isme et soufisme*, Paris, Gallimard, t. III, 1972, p. 114. On Eastern *Fedeli d’Amore*, see also Hasan ebn Mohammad Sharaf Râmî, *Il manuale dei Fedeli d’Amore*, eds. Iman Mansub Basiri and Stefano Salzani, with the collaboration of Demetra Salzani, Lavis (TN,) La Finestra Editrice, 2016.

<sup>56</sup> On Henry Corbin’s contribution to Persian mystical poetry, see Charles-Henri de Fouchécour, “Henry Corbin et la poésie mystique persane”, in *Henry Corbin. Philosophies et sagesse des religions du livre*, eds. Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, Christian Jambet and Pierre Lory, Turnhout, Brepols, 2005, p. 135-141. On the importance attached to Swedenborg by Henry Corbin on the subject of visionary exegesis, see Jean-François Marquet, “Swedenborg et l’exégèse visionnaire”, in *Henry Corbin et le comparatisme spirituel. Colloque tenu à Paris les 5 et 6 juin 1999*, Paris, Arché Edidit, 2000, p. 65-87.

<sup>57</sup> Roger Mazelier, “Gérard de Nerval et les cathares en Périgord. Commentaires sur les deux premiers vers de ‘El Desdichado’”, *Europe*, n. 516, 1972, p. 53-104.

<sup>58</sup> “Étincelant et éclectique article”. Peter Dayan, *Nerval et ses pères: portrait en trois volets et un cadenas*, Geneva, Droz, 1992, p. 53.

Roger Mazelier's contribution highlights fascinating aspects regarding the symbolism of the rose, since this flower is associated with the hidden meanings of the name "Catherine", which is a name referring to Cathar: "the assimilation of Catherine to Cathar is an occult and secret tradition in Rose Croix circles".<sup>59</sup> Roger Mazelier adds another interesting peculiarity about the hidden meaning of the name Catherine, and alludes to a relationship between Nerval, the rose, the *Fedeli d'Amore* and art by Hans Memling, characterised by its mystical dimension:

Hans Memling depicted St. Catherine in a painting from the former Gatteaux collection, now in the Louvre, entitled "The Mystical Wedding of St. Catherine".

[...]

St Catherine is dressed in purple and ermine, that is to say she wears the red and white colours of the Faithful of Love (*Fedeli d'Amore*), on a rich brocade skirt dotted with thistles, a plant dedicated to the "evil of the world" and to the number five, the same skirt as the Lady of the Unicorn. In the background, a bed of red and white roses shines. This purple and this ermine are no accidental colours, they are found on Catherine in Memling's masterpiece, another mystical wedding which is in St John's Hospital in Bruges, and they should be found [...] on another Catherine who appears in the central panel of Sir John Donne of Kidwelly's triptych in the National Gallery.

Nerval makes Catherine appear in the *Pandora*: "I saw her still dancing with two chiselled silver horns, [...] the haughty Catherine".<sup>60</sup>

In addition to the hidden meaning of the name Catharine associated with the symbol of the rose, Roger Mazelier underlines the esoteric value of floral symbolism in Nerval, in particular the distance that separates the initiate from the profane, when, for example, the author of *Les Chimères* evokes the hidden meaning of the anxoka, a flower "that the profane call flower

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<sup>59</sup> "L'assimilation de Catherine à Cathare est une tradition occulte et secrète dans les cercles Rose Croix". Roger Mazelier, "Gérard de Nerval et les cathares en Périgord. Commentaires sur les deux premiers vers de 'El Desdichado'", p. 80.

<sup>60</sup> "Hans Memling a figuré Ste Catherine dans un tableau provenant de l'ancienne collection Gatteaux, qui se trouve actuellement au Louvre et qui est intitulé: 'Mariage mystique de Ste Catherine.'

[...]

Ste Catherine est vêtue de pourpre et d'hermine c'est-à-dire qu'elle porte les couleurs rouge et blanche des Fidèles d'Amour, sur une riche jupe de brocart parsemée de chardons, plante vouée au 'mal du monde' et au nombre cinq, la même jupe que la Dame à la Licorne. Au second plan brille un parterre de roses rouges et blanches. Cette pourpre et cette hermine ne sont pas des couleurs de hasard, on les retrouve habillant Catherine dans le chef-d'œuvre de Memling, un autre mariage mystique qui se trouve à l'hôpital St Jean de Bruges et on devrait les retrouver [...] sur une autre Catherine qui apparaît dans le panneau central du triptyque de Sir John Donne of Kidwelly à la National Gallery.

Nerval fait surgir Catherine dans la Pandora [...]:

'Je la voyais dansant toujours avec deux cornes d'argent ciselé [...]. Je la domptai en m'attachant désespérément à ses cornes et je crus reconnaître en elle l'altière Catherine'". *Ibid.*, p. 80-81. The idea of a Nerval linked to the Cathar tradition was presented by Jean Richer who interpreted the sonnet *El Desdichado* as a Cathar poem. See Jean Richer, *Gérard de Nerval et les doctrines ésotériques*, p. 18, 108. In fact, in a letter to Jenny Colon, Nerval alludes to his descent from the Périgord, associated, in turn, with the Albigensians or Cathars: "I, a poor and obscure descendant of a lord of the Périgord" ("moi, pauvre et obscur descendant d'un châtelain du Périgord"). Gérard de Nerval, "Un roman à faire", in Gérard de Nerval, *Œuvres complètes. I*, eds. Jean Guillaume and Claude Pichois, Paris, Gallimard, t. I, 1989, p. 698.

of fire”.<sup>61</sup> This sentence implies the existence of a language for the profane and another for the initiated. In other words, an exoteric language and an esoteric language. In this respect, Christine Alan has written an interesting article on the esotericism of Nerval’s flowers, “Quelques fleurs ésotériques chez Nerval” (Some esoteric flowers in Nerval),<sup>62</sup> in which the author emphasises that all Nerval’s flowers, from forget-me-nots (myosotis) to anxoka or mandrake, have a strictly esoteric value. Among all the flowers, Christine Alan points out, the most profound esoteric meaning is retained by the columbine and, above all, by the rose.<sup>63</sup>

Nerval’s rose is characterized by the multiplicity of its meanings, which is confirmed by Michel Brix, who emphasizes that in Nerval’s work the rose is the flower “whose semiotic versatility is the richest”.<sup>64</sup> Among its multiple and nuanced meanings, the rose in Nerval is associated with death, as Christine Alan has shown.<sup>65</sup> In *Octavia*, for example, pale roses crown death: “Death! [...] She appears to me, wearing a crown of pale roses as the banquet draws to its close”.<sup>66</sup> Whilst in ancient times the festival of the dead was called Rosalia or Rosaria,<sup>67</sup> in the initiation rites, death is also often associated with the rose. It is a metaphorical death, a mystical death that is a rebirth. Texts on initiation often speak of a death associated with the rose, a death crowned with roses, and in Nerval we find traces of this initiatory rose, for example, in the *Journey to the Orient*, a work in which the description of the journey of the mystical lovers is present.<sup>68</sup> In fact, in “La Messe de Vénus” (The Mass of Venus) and “Le Songe de Polyphile” (The Dream of Poliphilus”),<sup>69</sup> whose titles clearly refer to Platonic love,

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<sup>61</sup> “Que les profanes appellent [sic] *fleur du feu*”. Gérard de Nerval, *Aurélia. Manuscrits antérieurs ou postérieurs au texte remis à la “Revue de Paris”*, in Gérard de Nerval, *Œuvres complètes. III*, t. III, p. 755. According to Roger Mazelier, the anxoka symbolises the “rota, solar cross of Lorraine, [...] the Gnostic rose, the Cathar cross of light” (“rota, croix de Lorraine solaire, [...] la rose gnostique, la croix de lumière cathare”). Roger Mazelier, “Gérard de Nerval et les cathares en Périgord. Commentaires sur les deux premiers vers de ‘El Desdichado’”, p. 99.

<sup>62</sup> Christine Alan, “Quelques fleurs ésotériques chez Nerval”, in *Gérard de Nerval*, ed. Jean Richer, Paris, Éditions de l’Herne, 1980, p. 171-181.

<sup>63</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 175. For a symbolic reading of flowers in Nerval’s work (notably the hollyhock, anxoka and columbine), see Alice Planche, “Regards sur le monde végétal dans l’œuvre de Nerval. De la surface au secret”, *Cahiers Gérard de Nerval*, n. 2, 1979, p. 7-16.

<sup>64</sup> “Dont la polyvalence sémiotique est la plus riche”. Michel Brix, “Gérard de Nerval et la symbolique des fleurs”, in *Baudelaire et Nerval. Poétiques comparées*, eds. Patrick Labarthe and Dagmar Wieser, with the collaboration of Jean-Paul Avice, Paris, Champion, 2015, p. 55.

<sup>65</sup> See Christine Alan, “Quelques fleurs ésotériques chez Nerval”, in *Gérard de Nerval*, p. 177.

<sup>66</sup> Gérard de Nerval, *Octavia*, in Gérard de Nerval, *Selected Writings*, p. 199.

<sup>67</sup> On the “Rosales” of the Ancients, see Jean Richer, “Sainte napolitaine et sainte de l’abîme”, *Studi francesi*, n. 14, 1970, p. 96-100; Jean Richer, *Nerval, Expérience et création* [1963], Paris, Hachette, 1971, p. 677-680.

<sup>68</sup> In the *Journey to the Orient*, Nerval celebrates the roses of Shubrah. In this respect, see Gabriel Bounoure, “La rose de Choubrah”, *Les Lettres Nouvelles*, n. 62, 1958, p. 27-44; Daniel Lançon, “La Rose de Choubrah. L’expérience nervalienne selon Gabriel Bounoure, Le Caire (1956-1959)”, *Revue Nerval*, n. 4, 2020, p. 143-156.

<sup>69</sup> Here Nerval’s reference is undeniable to Francesco Colonna’s *The Dream of Poliphilus*, a love story in which love acts as an initiation. On the importance of *The Dream of Poliphilus* in Nerval, see Camille Aubaude, *op. cit.*, p. 213. It is the love story between Polyphilo and Polia, separated in life, but reunited after death. Once again, the association of “love-death”. And in this work, Nerval evokes the continuity of pagan symbols in the Christian cult, as he points out: “it was under the forms of the Christian faith that they [Poliphilo and Polia] fulfilled this pagan vow” (“ce fut sous les formes de la foi chrétienne qu’ils accomplirent ce vœu païen”). Gérard de Nerval, *Voyage en Orient*, in Gérard de Nerval, *Œuvres complètes. II*, t. II, p. 238. In another story of *Journey to the Orient*,

Nerval evokes the accessories and emblems of a ritual ceremony consisting of roses and myrtle, and “a basket filled with shells and roses”.<sup>70</sup> In “Le Grand Champ des morts” (The Great Field of the Dead), the author describes a funeral procession and speaks of the “dead woman, still young, as pale as wax, but with blush on her cheeks, and lying on flowers crowned with roses”.<sup>71</sup>

For Gérard de Nerval, material man can aspire to regenerate himself thanks to the bouquet of roses and the mediation of the goddess Isis (a divinity also associated with the rose): “material man longed for the bouquet of roses which would regenerate him at the hands of the lovely Isis”.<sup>72</sup> In this passage from *Sylvie*, Nerval links the rose to the woman, to Isis, to the quest for the mystical spouse who can elevate man spiritually, and as Christine Alan says, this spiritual quest “can be explained if the Nervalian rose, like the rose of the Rosicrucians, symbolises Knowledge, which is victory over time and death”.<sup>73</sup> Now, this sense of the Nervalian rose associated with the beloved seems to correspond to the Dantean rose linked to Beatrice. Like Dante and the Medieval *Fedeli d’Amore* from the West and the East, for the author of *Aurélia* the rose and the woman are symbols of an unceasing quest to reach ultimate spiritual revelation. Rose and the quest for a wife go hand in hand, as well as with a journey towards knowledge in Nerval’s work.

The rose of Nerval acquires a mystical meaning not only as a flower, but also as a colour, a mixture of white and red, as Anne-Marie Jaton has shown.<sup>74</sup> One could speak of the pink (which corresponds to the French word “rose”) colour of Nervalian mystical love, because, once again, the colour pink is associated with the *topos* of love and with the image of the woman, a metaphysical love whose hue is pink: “having been guided to these heights by our masters, we at last breathed the pure air of solitude, drinking ourselves into oblivion from the golden cup of fable, drunk with poetry and love – love, alas, of vague shapes, of blue and rosy hues, of metaphysical phantoms. Seen close, any real woman seemed too gross to our starry-eyed sensibilities. She had to appear a queen or goddess: above all, she had to lie beyond reach”.<sup>75</sup> How can we not think here of the “love from afar” of the French troubadours, such as

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“Voyage à Cythère” (“Journey to Cythera”, published in *L’Artiste*, in 1844), Nerval tells the story of love, of “celestial love” (“l’amour celeste”, *ibid.*, p. 237) between Francesco Colonna (the author of *The Dream of Poliphilus*) and Polia. The inspiration for this work is Charles Nodier’s *Franciscus Columna* (1843), a work imbued with alchemical values linked to the image of perfect love.

<sup>70</sup> “Une corbeille garnie de coquilles et de roses”. *Ibid.*, p. 236.

<sup>71</sup> “Morte, jeune encore, d’une pâleur de cire, mais avec du fard sur les joues, et étendue sur des fleurs couronnées de roses”. *Ibid.*, p. 613.

<sup>72</sup> Gérard de Nerval, *Sylvie*, in Gérard de Nerval, *Selected Writings*, p. 146.

<sup>73</sup> “[L’idéal de Nerval, ainsi défini au début de *Sylvie* pourrait être la quête de cette épouse mystique ‘Mère de la Nature’ c’est-à-dire origine et principe de toute vie matérielle ou spirituelle. Ceci] s’explique si la rose nervalienne, de même que celle des rosi-cruciens, symbolise la Connaissance, qui est victoire sur le temps et la mort”. Christine Alan, “Quelques fleurs ésotériques chez Nerval”, in *Gérard de Nerval*, p. 181.

<sup>74</sup> See Anne-Marie Jaton, “Sylvie: la Rose et le vert”, in *Le Rêve et la vie. Aurélia, Sylvie, Les Chimères de Gérard de Nerval. Actes du colloque du 19 janvier 1986 de la Société des études romantiques*, p. 157-168.

<sup>75</sup> Gérard de Nerval, *Sylvie* in Gérard de Nerval, *Selected Writings*, p. 146.

that of Jufre Rudel?<sup>76</sup> Commenting on the passage mentioned earlier, Anne Marie Jaton defines this distant, rose-tinted love as a “new little Roman de la Rose”, whose spiritual dimension is expressed “through a series of figures of speech centred around the rose and the Dantean allegory of the flower”.<sup>77</sup> *The Roman de la Rose*, Dante, the flower of the rose, all these elements converge in Nerval. Like Dante, the Nervalian “Adrienne-Béatrice” appears in *Sylvie* through the image of a pink and golden flower: “a night-flower blooming in the pale effulgence of the moon, a phantom fair and rosy gliding over the green grass half-bathed in white mist”.<sup>78</sup> Once again, the angel-woman of Nerval is tinged with pink, combined with the golden hue.<sup>79</sup> And the mystical value of the rose as a colour (pink) is mentioned several times by Nerval in *Sylvie*, where he associates this flower with the saints, with Boccaccio and with the mysticism of Francesco Colonna: “the rosy figures of saints and angels are profiled against the pale blue of the vaults, their allegorical pagan demeanour evoking the sensibility of a Petrarch or the mythical mysticism of a Francesco Colonna”.<sup>80</sup>

With regard to Colonna’s mysticism, as Michel Brix remarks, *The Dream of Poliphilus* (1499) is a landmark, as well as a model for *Aurélia*.<sup>81</sup> It is a work that, for Nerval, is a bridge between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, but it is also a fundamental text in the field of esotericism.<sup>82</sup> This work represents, as Alberto Cesare Ambesi states, “the centre that connects all the medieval esoteric literature prior to the future official texts of the Auguste Brotherhood”,<sup>83</sup> namely the Rosicrucian Brotherhood. But *The Dream of Poliphilus*, describing the protagonist’s initiatory journey in search of his beloved (a metaphor for inner spiritual transformation), is the work that Gabriele Rossetti considers as the most important for understanding the esoteric love hidden in literature, even more than the work of Dante. He makes this clear in a letter to Charles Lyell on 30 May 1834:

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<sup>76</sup> On the theme of the “love from afar” in Nerval, see Vito Carofiglio, “Nerval entre histoire et illusion: magie napolitaine et séduction amoureuse”, in *Le Rêve et la vie. Aurélia, Sylvie, Les Chimères de Gérard de Nerval. Actes du colloque du 19 janvier 1986 de la Société des études romantiques*, p. 94.

<sup>77</sup> “Nouveau petit Roman de la Rose”; “par une série de figures de style centrée autour de la rose et par l’allégorie dantesque de la fleur”. Anne Marie Jaton, “Sylvie: la Rose et le vert”, in *Le Rêve et la vie. Aurélia, Sylvie, Les Chimères de Gérard de Nerval. Actes du colloque du 19 janvier 1986 de la Société des études romantiques*, p. 160.

<sup>78</sup> Gérard de Nerval, *Sylvie* in Gérard de Nerval, *Selected Writings*, p. 150-151.

<sup>79</sup> See Anne “Sylvie: la Rose et le vert”, in *Le Rêve et la vie. Aurélia, Sylvie, Les Chimères de Gérard de Nerval. Actes du colloque du 19 janvier 1986 de la Société des études romantiques*, p. 161.

<sup>80</sup> Gérard de Nerval, *Sylvie* in Gérard de Nerval, *Selected Writings*, p. 161.

<sup>81</sup> See Michel Brix, *Nouveaux documents sur Gérard de Nerval*, Namur, Presses universitaires de Namur, 2020, p. 41.

<sup>82</sup> In her book *Les Jardins du songe* (The Gardens of the Dream, 1976), Emanuela Kretzulesco-Quaranta pointed out that *The Dream of Poliphilo* aimed to convey an esoteric message from a group of Platonic scholars who were persecuted around 1468. See Emanuela Kretzulesco-Quaranta, *Les Jardins du songe. “Poliphile” et la mystique de la Renaissance*, Paris/Rome, Les Belles Lettres/Éditrice Magma, 1976. In this work, the author evokes the tradition of the *Fedeli d’Amore*.

<sup>83</sup> “Il centro che raccorda tutta l’antérieure letteratura esoterica medievale con i futuri testi ufficiali dell’Augusta Confraternita”. Alberto Cesare Ambesi, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

The most sectarian book ever written in the world [is] Francesco Colonna's *The Dream of Poliphilus* (multiple lover), which deals with love and architecture (and links the sect of Love with those of the Masons or Architects). This work was written by this Dominican shortly after the death of Boccaccio, that is to say at the beginning of the fifteenth century; and it has driven many interpreters mad.<sup>84</sup>

*The Dream of Poliphilus* begins with the Dantean echo of the “selva oscura” (from which the protagonist manages to exit) and tells the story of Poliphilo who is in love with Polia.<sup>85</sup> The symbolism of the rose plays a fundamental role in this work. The lovers, Poliphilo and Polia, feed on “uno rosario cum fructi e fiori”,<sup>86</sup> “a rosary with fruits and flowers”. Nerval takes up this story, based on a love and a rose that act as an initiation, and evokes the initiatory journey of the two lovers initiated into the cult of Venus, emphasising that it is a pagan initiation taking place in a Christian universe, and which ensures the eternity of love in death: “henceforth, imitating the chaste loves of the believers in Venus-Urania, they promised to live apart during life in order to be united after death, and strangely enough, it was in the form of the Christian faith that they fulfilled this pagan vow”.<sup>87</sup> Here, the Nervalian syncretism reconciles the Christian creed with the pagan tradition, in the wake of a common esoteric doctrine symbolised by a love and a rose linked to the initiatory rites evoked in *The Dream of Poliphilus*. This esoteric doctrine in the form of love and roses was the basis of Gabriele Rossetti's theories on the *Fedeli d'Amore* and was also the basis of Nerval's work.

#### “La rose-trémière”: the hollyhock rose

Bertrand Marchal has spoken of the “Rosalian apotheosis of Aurelia-Artemis”<sup>88</sup> in relation to the sonnet *Artemis* and to the work *Aurélia*, where the role of the rose is of capital importance, and appears in the form of the “hollyhock” – the “rose trémière”, whose etymology is “rose d'outre-mer”, that is to say the rose from the East.<sup>89</sup> It goes without saying that the

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<sup>84</sup> “Il libro più settario che siasi mai nel mondo, cioè quello di Francesco Colonna, intitolato *Il sogno di Polifilo* (molteplice amante), che tratta di amore ed architettura (il quale vale a mettere in relazione la setta d'Amore con quella de' Muratori o Architetti). Quest'opera fu scritta da quel domenicano poco dopo la morte di Boccaccio, cioè al principio del 400; ed ha fatto impazzire molti interpreti”. Letter from Gabriele Rossetti to Charles Lyell on 30 May 1834, in *Gabriele Rossetti. Carteggi. Volume terzo (1832-1836)*, p. 416.

<sup>85</sup> Based on the writings of Grasset D'Orcet, Michel Lamy points out that “polia, or Dame Cognoissance [Lady Knowledge], is nothing other than gnosis of the troubadours which the Greeks regarded as divine wisdom and worshipped under the name of Athena Polias”. Michel Lamy, *The Secret Message of Jules Verne*, p. 243.

<sup>86</sup> Francesco Colonna, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, eds. Marco Ariani and Mino Gabriele, Milan, Adelphi, 1998, p. 224.

<sup>87</sup> “Dès lors, imitant les chastes amours des croyants de Vénus-Uranie, ils se promirent de vivre séparés pendant la vie pour être unis après la mort, et chose bizarre, ce fut sous la forme de la foi chrétienne qu'ils accomplirent ce vœu païen”. Gérard de Nerval, *Voyage en Orient*, in Gérard de Nerval, *Œuvres complètes. II*, t. II, p. 238.

<sup>88</sup> “Apothéose rosaliennne d'Aurélia-Artémis”. Bertrand Marchal, “Notices, notes et variantes”, in Gérard de Nerval, *Les Chimères. La Bohême galante. Petits châteaux de Bohême*, p. 330.

<sup>89</sup> See Jean Richer, *Gérard de Nerval et les doctrines ésotériques*, p. 120. On the “rose d'outre-mer”, “rose from the East”, see Lucien Guyot, Pierre Gibassier, *Les Noms des fleurs* [1960], Paris, Presses Universitaires de France,

Nervalian hollyhock must be considered from a symbolic point of view because, in reality, the hollyhock does not belong to the rose family, but to the marshmallow family. This hollyhock rose originating from the East is associated with the *topos* of love, with the image of the woman and with death.<sup>90</sup> Yet, in *Aurélia*, Nerval presents a woman symbolising the lost lover who “twined her bare arm around a long stalk of hollyhock”.<sup>91</sup> This appearance is preceded by an apocalyptic vision, and the disappearance of this woman leads to death. Similarly, in the sonnet *Artemis*, the rose, love and woman go hand in hand: “Love who loved you from the cradle in her grave; she who was my sole love still loves me tenderly: she is death – or dead ... O delight, O torment! The rose she holds is the Hollyhock Rose”.<sup>92</sup> The association of death with love and the rose is also found in *El Desdichado*, a sonnet in which Nerval, like Orpheus, sings of the triumph of death by crossing the forbidden thresholds. Here the triumph over death is linked to floral symbolism and to one of the themes dear to the *Fedeli d’Amore*: the kiss. The passage that reads “my brow still burns from the kiss of the queen”<sup>93</sup> recalls the Platonic meditation on the kiss also evoked by the poets of the *Dolce Stil Novo* and by Dante in the *Inferno* (V, v. 133-136): “when we read how that smile, so much desired, / was kissed by such a lover, in the book, / he, who will never be divided from me, / kissed my mouth, he was trembling as he did so”.<sup>94</sup> It is the kiss that Diana gives to the sleeping Endymion; it is the kiss of the tradition of the *mors osculi* of the Kabbalists, of the *Song of Songs*: “osculetur me osculo oris sui” (“let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth”).<sup>95</sup> In other words, it is the kiss of the mystical death, of the union with God through love. Nerval thus revives in his work the *topos* of mystical love, linking it to the theme of death: death by a kiss. The kiss is also evoked by Nerval in a sonnet, *El Desdichado*, characterised by what Pierre Riffard calls “esoteric writing”.<sup>96</sup> In fact, this sonnet reveals a strong presence of elements and symbols that refer to esoteric knowledge.<sup>97</sup> It is in

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1968, p. 9, 101. On the hollyhock in Nerval, see Christine Alan, “Quelques fleurs ésotériques chez Nerval”, in *Gérard de Nerval*, p. 179-180.

<sup>90</sup> The association “woman-rose-death” is also present in *The Tentation de Saint Antoine* by Flaubert, where the girl (or rather the Young Girl who dialogues with the Old Girl until she merges) is associated with Death and the rose crown: “a death’s head, with a crown of roses”. Gustave Flaubert, *The Temptation of Saint Antony*, translated with an Introduction and Notes by Kitty Mrosovsky, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1983, p. 220. See Jeanne Bem, “Gérard de Nerval et la jeune fille”, in *Gérard de Nerval. Les filles du feu. Aurélia. “Soleil noir”*. *Actes du Colloque d’Agrégation des 28 et 29 novembre 1997*, p. 172.

<sup>91</sup> Gérard de Nerval, *Aurélia*, in Gérard de Nerval, *Selected Writings*, p. 278.

<sup>92</sup> Gérard de Nerval, “Artémis”, in *ibid.*, p. 368.

<sup>93</sup> Gérard de Nerval, “El Desdichado”, in *ibid.*, p. 363.

<sup>94</sup> Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, p. 68.

<sup>95</sup> *The Song of the Songs. Interpreted by Early Christian and Medieval Commentators*, p. 22. With regard to the *Song of Songs*, in the *Histoire de la reine du Matin et de Soliman, prince des génies*, Nerval mentions “the burning rose of Sharon” (“la rose ardente de Saron”, Gérard de Nerval, *Voyage en Orient*, in Gérard de Nerval, *Œuvres complètes. II*, t. II, p. 736), thus referring to the biblical flower of the *Song of Songs*. Nervalian syncretism includes Hebrew mysticism. On the concept of death associated with the kiss, see Jean Richer, *Expérience et création*. p. 568-569.

<sup>96</sup> “Écriture ésotérique”. Pierre A. Riffard, *op. cit.*, p. 832.

<sup>97</sup> For an alchemical reading of “El Desdichado” and the esoteric significance of the rose in this sonnet, see *ibid.*, p. 833.

this sonnet that “the vine and the rose are entwined”, where the poet says he has “twice victorious crossed the Acheron”<sup>98</sup> – a passage that recalls Dante in his *Divine Comedy*, accompanied by Virgil who, in turn, warned the reader in the *Aeneid* (VI, v. 133-136) about the dangers of crossing the river: “Yet, if there’s love so strong in your mind, so mighty a passion / twice to float over the Stygian lakes, twice gaze upon deep black / Tartarus, if it’s your pleasure to wanton in labours of madness / grasp what you must do first”.<sup>99</sup> For his part, Dante writes “he (Virgil) answered: ‘These are things you will be told / when our steps come to a halt, as they will do, / on that sad strip of land beside Acheron’”.<sup>100</sup> It is therefore a journey of no return, just like the one in the initiations that foresee a death. Inspired by Dante and Virgil, Gérard de Nerval is also inspired by a journey of no return.

On the subject of the rose in the sonnet *El Desdichado*, Christine Alan has noted that the lines “le pampre à la rose s’allie” (“the vine and the rose are entwined”) are to be read and understood phonetically as “la rose s’allie”, where the phonetical elision of “rose” and “s’allie” generates in the French language<sup>101</sup> the name “Rosalie”.<sup>102</sup> In addition, Rosalie can be seen as a double of Aurélia, whose anagram is “Orélias”, namely the homonym of Aurelia.<sup>103</sup> Rosalie” thus links three Nervalian literary productions, that is to say *Aurélia*, *Artemis* and *El Desdichado*, and this echo extends from one work to the other through the symbol of the rose: the “rose trémière”, “the hollyhock”. This “hollyhock” is linked to Saint Rosalie, the patron saint of Sicily, Palermo, and of the Belgian capital, Brussels. She is the saint “with a crown of violet roses”,<sup>104</sup> the one that protects “the cradle of a sleeping infant”,<sup>105</sup> and she is the “violet-hearted rose, flower of Saint Gudula”,<sup>106</sup> she is “the saint of the abyss”.<sup>107</sup> The abyss in which Rosalie resides refers to a subterranean world, to the infernal abyss, namely to the descent into hell: “Rosalie” could therefore evoke an initiation.<sup>108</sup>

<sup>98</sup> Gérard de Nerval, “El Desdichado”, in Gérard de Nerval, *Selected Writings*, p. 363.

<sup>99</sup> Virgil, *Aeneid*, translated with Notes by Frederick Ahl with an Introduction by Elaine Fantham, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 132.

<sup>100</sup> Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, p. 58.

<sup>101</sup> The same phonetic effect cannot be reproduced in the English language.

<sup>102</sup> See Christine Alan, “Quelques fleurs ésotériques chez Nerval”, in *Gérard de Nerval*, p. 178.

<sup>103</sup> See Olivier Encrenaz, “Sur un passage d’*Aurélia* et une glose d’*Artémis*”, in *Gérard de Nerval*, p. 331. The diphthong “au” in French is read “o”.

<sup>104</sup> Gérard de Nerval, *Octavia*, in Gérard de Nerval, *Selected Writings*, p. 200.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> Gérard de Nerval, “*Artémis*”, in Gérard de Nerval, *Selected Writings*, p. 368.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> With regard to Rosalie, Michel Brix has highlighted a text by Jacques Arago (a writer, draughtsman and explorer, brother of the astronomer and physicist François Arago and of the playwright and politician Étienne Arago) that Nervalian critics have not considered in relation to Gérard de Nerval. It is an account [attached to volume IV of *Paris, ou le Livre des Cent-et-Un* (Paris, Ladvocat, 1832, p. 197-225)] devoted to a two-month stay in 1830 in the clinic of Dr Blanche in Montmartre, the same clinic where Nerval was interned in 1841. In this account, Arago mentions Rosalie and refers enigmatically to the theme of love and madness. See Michel Brix, *Nouveaux documents sur Gérard de Nerval*, p. 279. The following two passages could be the subject of further research on the relationship between the symbol of the rose, the theme of love and the concept of madness: “Rosalie (her name was not actually Rosalie) was brought here, some time ago, by a man of about thirty years of age and



Initiation means death and rebirth, the dissolution of opposites that merge into unity, in a harmony reminiscent of Shakespeare's lines from *Romeo and Juliet*: "and all things change them to their contrary".<sup>109</sup> Initiation could be seen as an alchemical process, characterised by an initial state of imperfection and a subsequent state of final perfection, a path of perfection from the infernal night to the light of Dante's paradisiacal rose, a dissolution resulting in the unity of the Great Alchemical Work, which is like a rebirth. As Pierre Riffard noted in *El Desdichado*, the "vine", that "[is] entwined" with the rose symbolises the harmony of opposites that die in order to merge and be reborn, therefore, in unity.<sup>110</sup> Alchemy is thus also related to the concept of mystical rebirth characterising the stages of initiation, and the rose is the symbol of this mystical rebirth. It represents the regeneration obtained through initiation into the mysteries, a purification that allows the soul to be reborn, as Jean-Louis Bory recalls about the rose of Apuleius in his *Golden Ass*: "red, the rose symbolises more particularly the mystical rebirth, the first degree of regeneration through initiation into the mysteries. Lucius the donkey grazes on the red roses. And here he is promised supernatural bliss in the service of a saving – providential – deity".<sup>111</sup> Nerval considers Apuleius to be the "head of this family of writers",<sup>112</sup> that is to set up a school formed of writers who promoted an initiatory literature and who shared sapiential ideas and doctrines originating in Apuleius, for whom the metamorphosis of the "being", the true change, is possible thanks to the rose, to this initiatory flower.

Thus, the Nervalian rose, like the Dantean rose, seems to represent the mystical way for the poet-initiate to break through spatial and temporal barriers, to detach himself from the body and encounter the true soul, on a purely spiritual plane, where the confines of space and time

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entrusted to the special care of M. Blanche. There was no delirium in her head, and the frequency of her pulse was not great enough to make the doctor suppose that the indisposition announced by the beating of the arteries was the primary cause of the young woman's arrival... The next day Rosalie's reason had disappeared [...] Three months had passed, and Rosalie was still insane"; "Rosalie always remembers that she was madly in love: she speaks to her friends, she tells them about her emotions, her minutes of hope, her days of anguish, and I heard her repeat that such a life was not without some sweetness... Don't believe her; she is lying to spare her husband any remorse" ["Rosalie (elle ne s'appelait point Rosalie) fut conduite ici, il y a quelque temps, par un homme d'une trentaine d'années et confiée aux soins spéciaux de M. Blanche. Il n'y avait point de délire dans sa tête, et la fréquence de son pouls n'était pas assez grande pour faire supposer au docteur que l'indisposition annoncée par le battement des artères, fût la cause première de l'arrivée de la jeune femme... Le lendemain la raison de Rosalie disparut [...]. Trois mois s'étaient écoulés, et Rosalie était toujours folle" (in *ibid.*, p. 288); "Rosalie se souvient toujours qu'elle a été folle d'amour: elle dit à ses amis, elle leur raconte ses émotions, ses minutes d'espérance, ses journées d'angoisse, et je lui entendu répéter qu'une pareille vie n'était pas sans quelque douceur... Ne la croyez pas; elle ment pour épargner des remords à son mari" (in *ibid.*, p. 288); "Rosalie se souvient toujours qu'elle a été folle d'amour: elle dit à ses amis, elle leur raconte ses émotions, ses minutes d'espérance, ses journées d'angoisse, et je lui ai entendu répéter qu'une pareille vie n'était pas sans quelque douceur... Ne la croyez pas; elle ment pour épargner des remords à son mari" (in *ibid.*, p. 290)].

<sup>109</sup> William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, p. 102.

<sup>110</sup> See Pierre A. Riffard, *op. cit.*, p. 833.

<sup>111</sup> "Rouge, la rose symbolise plus particulièrement la renaissance mystique, le premier degré de la régénération par initiation aux mystères. L'âne Lucius broute les roses vermeilles. Et le voilà promis à une félicité surnaturelle au service d'une divinité salvatrice – providentielle". Jean-Louis Bory, "Preface", in Apulée, *L'Âne d'or ou les métamorphoses*, ed. Pierre Grimal, Paris, Gallimard, 1975, p. 15. See also Camille Aubaude, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

<sup>112</sup> "Chef de cette famille d'écrivains". Gérard de Nerval, *Les Illuminés*, in Gérard de Nerval, *Œuvres complètes*, II, t. II, p. 1083.

fade away, and the self knows its eternal origin. Dante's "candida rosa" and Nerval's mystical "hollyhock rose", the "rose trémière", seem to symbolise a moment of supreme conciliation as a vision, where oppositions are cancelled out, giving life to an alchemical harmony described in mystical terms. In particular, with regard to the Nervalian hollyhock, Olivier Encrenaz confirms its mystical meaning, stating that "for the Gnostics, the 'hollyhock rose' is the other name for the 'Cinquefoil', a flower with five petals, as this name indicates, a number and a symbol of man spiritually perfectible through progressive initiation into the Mysteries, on the way to supreme enlightenment".<sup>113</sup> In Dante and Nerval, the rose is associated with a love that has nothing to do with carnality, a spiritual love, a force of attraction of an "other" nature, an initiatory nature, because for both poets it is always a question of overcoming increasingly tortuous obstacles, dangerous thresholds, forbidden doors. In other words, it is a spiritual pilgrimage characterised by a descent into the infernal abyss and an ascent in the form of a theophanic vision, of illumination. Thus, the rose would be the symbol of the supreme initiation, which can only be obtained by overcoming very difficult trials, as in the motto of the Rosicrucians of the Renaissance: *Per crucem ad Rosam*. This idea of a rose accessible only through effort, sacrifice, suffering and pain is also found in Saint Catherine of Siena: "my soul is jubilantly happy in this grief – because among the thorns I smell the fragrance of the rose about to open".<sup>114</sup> Thus the transformation of the being, spiritually renewed, resurrected after death, is possible through an initiatory journey that leads to new life through death, from the cross to the rose.

Inspired by Dante, Gérard de Nerval was also influenced by his doctrine which – according to the esoteric interpretation proposed by the current of Dantean studies inaugurated by Gabriele Rossetti – is a secret doctrine linked to the teaching of the *Fedeli d'Amore*, namely the discovery of a spiritual dimension characterised by the erasure of time and space in order to immerse oneself in a reality that goes beyond the human senses: timelessness. This is possible through a death that takes place in life, through initiation, and which allows the encounter with the true "I", the soul hidden in every human being. It is the knowledge of the "absolute", a space without place and time, and the Nervalian rose, like the Dantean one, is the culmination of this spiritual quest, expressed metaphorically by the love for an ideal woman. The symbolism of the rose is thus the bearer of an initiatory doctrine concealing what George Sand calls in *La*

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<sup>113</sup> "Pour les Gnostiques, la 'Rose trémière' est l'autre dénomination de la 'Quintefeuille', fleur à cinq pétales comme l'indique cette appellation, nombre et symbole de l'homme spirituellement perfectible par l'initiation progressive aux Mystères, en marche vers l'illumination suprême". Olivier Encrenaz, "Sur un passage d'*Aurélia* et une glose d'Artémis", in *Gérard de Nerval*, p. 331.

<sup>114</sup> Letter from Catherine of Siena to Matteo di Fazzio de' Cenni written in late 1375, in *The letters of Catherine of Siena*, translated with introduction and notes by Suzanne Noffke, O. P., Arizona, Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies Tempe, v. I, 2000, p. 182-183.

*Comtesse de Rudolstadt* (1843, *The Countess of Rudolstadt*) the “eternal truth”,<sup>115</sup> namely the *philosophia perennis*, the foundation of initiatory teaching.<sup>116</sup>

*The thorns of the rose and the dangers of initiation*

Gérard de Nerval is one of the authors of nineteenth-century French literature who went further on the subject of initiation. In fact, he spoke not only of initiation as a spiritual path leading to the “eternal truth”, but also warned the reader of the perils of initiation, as a rite with its trials – an initiation which cannot be experienced without the mental and physical preparation to withstand the effects of such an overwhelming journey.<sup>117</sup> In *Les Illuminés*, Nerval evokes the dangers of the initiations practised in certain secret Orders of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: “the danger of these initiations is to deliver man to violent spirits; and I cannot confirm that the forms which were communicated to me were not borrowed forms”.<sup>118</sup> Nerval thus deals with a fundamental aspect of initiations: the danger of the encounter with invisible forces that can destroy man psychologically and physically, leading him to madness or even death. In the twentieth century, it was Carl Gustav Jung who scientifically explained the hidden part of the human psyche, influenced by invisible forces that affect the human mind on encountering the shadow or dark side. During initiation, or rather, during certain initiations practised in Secret Orders which Nerval describes in *Les Illuminés*, the individual comes into contact with this dark and hidden part of the self.

The study of initiatory rites leads us to the initiations of the ancient Mysteries, of which Nerval speaks abundantly in his works, as does Gabriele Rossetti who, in his *Mistero*, devotes a chapter to the Mysteries and to the law of silence imposed by these rites [chapter I: “Antica istituzione de’ misteri segreti e loro oggetto” (Ancient institution of the secret mysteries and

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<sup>115</sup> “Vérité éternelle”. George Sand, *Consuelo. La Comtesse de Rudolstadt*, p. 564.

<sup>116</sup> On the initiatory dimension of the work by George Sand, see Henry Bonnet, “Triompher de la mort dans *La Comtesse de Rudolstadt*”, in *Lecture de Consuelo. La comtesse de Rudolstadt de George Sand*, eds. Michèle Hecquet and Christine Planté, Lyon, Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 2004, p. 335-348.

<sup>117</sup> Jean Richer has pointed out that Nerval’s so-called madness, or “theomania”, is nothing other than “the consequence of magical or theurgic practices, such as those practised by the *Élus Coëns* or those recorded in the *Philosophia Occult* by Cornelius Agrippa, practices whose purpose [for Nerval] is to raise the soul of his mother or that of Jenny Colon” (“la conséquence de pratiques magiques ou théurgiques, celles que pratiquaient les *Élus Coëns* ou celles qui sont consignées dans la *Philosophia occulte* de Cornelius Agrippa, pratiques ayant pour objet d’évoquer l’âme de sa mère ou celle de Jenny Colon”). Jean Richer, “Romantiques français devant les Sciences occultes”, in *Literature and Science. Proceedings of the 6<sup>th</sup> triennial congress, Oxford, 1954*, Oxford, B. Blackwell, 1955, p. 247. For his part, Georges Cattau wonders: “did Nerval want – seized by the vertigo of the abyss – to fathom this dark well where Lucifer is chained?” (“Nerval a-t-il voulu – saisi par le vertige de l’abîme – sonder ce puits sombre où Lucifer est enchaîné?”). Georges Cattau, *op. cit.*, p. 75. The answer is given by Nerval: “I was accursed for having attempted to penetrate into a terrible mystery in violation of divine law” (“j’étais maudit pour avoir voulu percer un mystère redoutable en offensant la loi divine”). Gérard de Nerval, *Aurélia*, in Gérard de Nerval, *Œuvres complètes. III*, t. III, p. 721.

<sup>118</sup> “Le danger de ces initiations est de livrer l’homme à des esprits violents; et je ne puis répondre que les formes qui se communiquaient à moi ne fussent pas des formes d’emprunt”. Gérard de Nerval, *Les Illuminés*, in Gérard de Nerval, *Œuvres complètes. II*, t. II, p. 1087.

their object)].<sup>119</sup> The study of the ancient Mysteries inevitably led to an awareness that during these rites something secret and unspeakable was taking place. The Mysteries demanded silence, because the secret could not be revealed to the uninitiated, to those who had not taken sides. What was done during these ceremonies could not be disclosed. In addition to the unspeakable, participation in the Mysteries required mental and physical preparation to withstand the harshness of the trials. Suetonius points out, for example, that Nero did not have the courage to participate in the initiatory rites of passage of the Eleusian Mysteries (*Ner.* 34): “[Nero] did not have the courage to participate in the sacred rites of Eleusis: the voice of the herald kept the impious and the wicked away from the initiation”.<sup>120</sup>

Yet even in the case of the ancient Eleusian Mysteries, the rose is evoked and imbued with an initiatory meaning. It is found in the *Hymn to Demeter*, where Homer describes the mysteries held at Eleusis.<sup>121</sup> It is Demeter, the “august Demeter”,<sup>122</sup> that teaches men the secrets of the initiation rites of Eleusis,<sup>123</sup> which must be done to plate the soul of the deity. Demeter, as well as the other deities, must be calmed and placated through rites. Thus, it follows that these deities need the submission of human beings, who must offer secret and unspeakable rites (including human and animal sacrifices)<sup>124</sup> to these higher entities, called “deities”. Homer speaks of the “terrible plan”<sup>125</sup> of certain deities, who are characterised by their indifference: Demeter is indifferent towards humanity.<sup>126</sup>

The rites of Eleusis are also described by Aristophanes in his *Frogs* (440-53), where he evokes the “divine festival”<sup>127</sup> in honour of the goddess, and here again the rose is present.<sup>128</sup>

<sup>119</sup> See Gabriele Rossetti, *Il mistero dell'Amor platonico del Medio Evo*, t. I, p. 19-34.

<sup>120</sup> “[Nero] *Eleusinis sacris, quorum initiatione impii et scelerati uoce praeconis sumouentur, interesse non ausus est*”. In *Le religioni dei misteri. Volume I. Eleusi, Dionisismo, Orfismo*, p. XVII.

<sup>121</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 12-13, 18-19, 40-41.

<sup>122</sup> “Δημήτηρ τιμάοχος”. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>123</sup> The *Hymn to Demeter* by Homer contains a passage which states that only a few men have the chance to participate in the sacred rites, while the others will never have this privilege: “happy among men who live on earth is he who has been / admitted to the rite! / But he who is not initiated into the mysteries, he who is excluded from them, will never have / such a fate, not even after death, down there in the bleak darkness” (“ὄλβιος ὃς τὰδ’ ὀπωπεν ἐπιχθονίων ἀνθρώπων ὃς δ’ ἀτεῆς ἱερῶν”). *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>124</sup> In his *Hymn to Demeter*, Homer speaks of the sacrifices offered to the deities during the Mysteries of Eleusis: “the overseers of the sacred Eleusinian rites perform these / preliminary sacrifices” (“προτε]λεια θ[ύε]ν τὸς ἱεροποιὸς Ἐλευσινίων καὶ [---ε]ν”). *Ibid.*, p. 104. On the subject of animal sacrifices, see also *ibid.*, p. 118-119. For example, Homer refers to the sacrifices of the pigs: “in the mysteries of Demeter, a piglet was sacrificed. The animal is in fact consecrated to the goddess. Each of the initiates would sacrifice in their own favour. These animals are called mystery animals” (“Ἐν τοῖς μυστηρίοις τῆς Δήμητρο χοῖρος θύεται. ἀνάκειται γὰρ τὸ ξῶον ἕκαστος δὲ τῶν μυστηρίων ἑαυτοῦ ἔθνε. ταῦτα τὲ καλεῖται μυστηρικά”). *Ibid.*, p. 117. Human and animal sacrifices are also found in the rites of Dionysus, in Euripides’ *The Bacchae* (I 114-5, I 38-9, see *ibid.*, p. 251, 285), in *The Cretans* (79-12, see *ibid.*, p. 285), in Plutarch’s *Isis and Osiris* [35 (365 a), see *ibid.*, p. 325]. On the subject of sacrifices in the rites dedicated to Dionysus, see also *ibid.*, p. 327. We find the description of Dionysian rites in Titus Livius (see *ibid.*, p. 338-345) and in Clement of Alexandria in the *Protrepticus* (I 2, 2, see *ibid.*, p. 285). In particular, the latter stresses the fact that the Mysteries of Dionysus are inhuman because the cruelty of the sacrifices is indescribable. See *ibid.*, p. 379.

<sup>125</sup> “δεινὴν μητίσσοτο βουλήν”. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>126</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 34-35.

<sup>127</sup> “θεοφιλοῦς ἑορτῆς”. *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>128</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 138-139.

Referring to the initiation of Eleusis, Hippolytus in his *Confutation of All Heresies* (V 8, 39-40) speaks of the “great and unspeakable mysteries”,<sup>129</sup> which cannot be spoken about because insiders must respect the rule of silence on this subject.<sup>130</sup> Again, whilst Euripides wrote “I am ashamed of the god celebrated”<sup>131</sup> (*Ione* 1074-7) in the Eleusis Mysteries, Tertullian (*Against the Valentinians* I, 1-3) confirmed this shame which would explain the recourse to initiatory silence: “even in the famous rites of Eleusis... silence is in force on what one is ashamed of. [...] From this follows the law of silence”.<sup>132</sup> And, as Scolî reminds Plato (*Gorgia* 497c), it was during these ceremonies (where “shameful actions” took place),<sup>133</sup> that the participants uttered the following words: “I ate the drum, I drank from the cymbal, I brought the sacred vessel. I went down below the Temple cell”.<sup>134</sup> This is the same sentence that Nerval utters in *Sylvie* in chapter XIII, where he speaks of his love for Aurélia, associating it with *The Dream of Poliphilus* and the sentence on the initiates of Eleusis: “‘I have eaten of the drum and drunk of the cymbal,’ as the apparently meaningless phrase of the initiates of Eleusis runs”.<sup>135</sup> The Nervalian love and rose thus also lead to the Mysteries of Eleusis, namely the unspeakable rites covered by the law of secrecy, as attested by the ancient texts.

John Tzetzes (twelfth century) even speaks of “the unspeakable objects of the mysteries, which cannot be revealed to those who are not initiated”.<sup>136</sup> There are, therefore, not only unspeakable actions, but also unspeakable objects used during the initiatory ceremonies of the ancient Mysteries. Pausanias confirms the impossibility of knowing what happens during the Mysteries for those who are not initiated: “the uninitiated cannot know even indirectly those

<sup>129</sup> “μεγάλα καὶ ἄρρητα μυστήρια”. *Ibid.*, p. 152. Euripides speaks in *The Bacchae* of “unspeakable rites” (“ἄρρητα”, *ibid.*, p. 318) about the rites dedicated to Dionysus, and about those dedicated to Orpheus he speaks of “unspeakable mysteries” (“Μυστηρίων τετῶν ἀρρητή”, *ibid.*, p. 396). On the sacrifices in the initiation rites of the Mysteries of Eleusis, see *ibid.*, p. 495-506.

<sup>130</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 151.

<sup>131</sup> “Αἰσχύνομαι τὸν πολύμυτον θεόν”. *Ibid.*, p. 190.

<sup>132</sup> “Et illa Eleusinia ... quod tacent, pudor est ... sequitur iam silentii officium.... sequitur iam silentii officium”. *Ibid.*, p. 191.

<sup>133</sup> “αἰσχροῦ”. *Ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>134</sup> “Jeinai atque ebibi cyceonem: ex cista sumpsi et in calathum misi : accepi rursus in cistulam transtuli”. *Ibid.*

<sup>135</sup> Gérard de Nerval, *Aurélia*, in Gérard de Nerval, *Selected Writings*, p. 174. On the Eleusis rites expression, “I ate the drum and drank the cymbal”, linked to Gérard de Nerval, see Hisashi Mizuno, “J’ai mangé du tambour et bu de la cymbale”. Nerval et les mystères de l’amour”, *Revue d’Histoire littéraire de la France*. A reading of *Sylvie* (and more generally of Nerval’s work) from the perspective of the mysteries of Eleusis was provided by Henri Bonnet in his article “Gérard de Nerval au rendez-vous de la civilisation grecque et romaine”. In *Le Rêve et la vie. Aurélia, Sylvie, Les Chimères de Gérard de Nerval. Actes du colloque du 19 janvier 1986 de la Société des études romantiques*, p. 33-51. The idea of the relationship between Nerval’s work and the initiatory dimension of the Eleusian mysteries has also been explored by Albert Thibaudet, who states: “a whole section of Gérard’s work, *Aurélia, le Voyage en Orient, les Illuminés*, resembles a representation, an unfolding of the Eleusis mysteries, namely the adventures of the soul on earth” (“toute une partie de l’œuvre de Gérard, *Aurélia, le Voyage en Orient, les Illuminés*, ressemble à une représentation, à un déroulement de mystères d’Eleusis, soit les aventures de l’âme sur la terre”). Albert Thibaudet, *Histoire de la littérature française. II. De 1789 à nos jours*, Paris, Stock, Delamain et Boutelleau, 1936, p. 185-186. Moreover, Anita Grossvogel (*Le Pouvoir du nom: essai sur Gérard de Nerval*, Paris, José Corti, 1972) and Daniel Vouga (*Nerval et ses Chimères*, Paris, José Corti, 1981) have proposed connections between Nerval’s work and the *Hymn to Demeter* concerning the initiatory rites of the Ancient Mysteries.

<sup>136</sup> “τὰ μυστικά καὶ ἀπόρρητα καὶ μὲν ἀμνήτους ἀνέκφορα”. *Ibid.*, p. 172.

things which they cannot see because they are excluded from them”.<sup>137</sup> Now a question arises: when Nerval or other writers refer to these Mysteries, do they do so for purely literary purposes or, on the contrary, do they refer to these rites because they had direct experiences with circles where these initiatory rituals were practised (as in the case of Nerval, who claimed to belong to the esoteric and initiatory Orders of his time)? In the first case, it would only be a question of literary filiation. In the second case, it would be a historical fact about which nothing is known, despite the constant references in ancient texts. The initiatory silence imposed on the initiates does not allow us to know what precisely took place during the initiations, but we can recognise what the protagonists of these rites wrote, in literary form, confirming that it was something concrete, not a pure invention. Pausanias writes: “whoever has attended the initiatory rites of Eleusis or read the so-called Orphic texts knows what I am saying”.<sup>138</sup> Can the same be said for Nerval, for the love poets according to Gabriele Rossetti, for William Butler Yeats or other poets and writers who wrote their works with reference to these mysterious rites, where “unspeakable things” also took place? Was the rose associated with these mysteries also an unspeakable flower?<sup>139</sup>

However, notwithstanding the fact that the initiation rites of the ancient Mysteries are characterised by unspeakable facts, the texts of antiquity emphasise that it was through these rituals that the initiates obtained knowledge and, therefore, happiness. Homer is very clear on this point: “blessed is he of men on earth who has seen these things, / but whoever is uninitiated in the mysteries, whoever has no part in them, never / has a share of the same joys when he is dead below the dank gloom”.<sup>140</sup> Thus, participation in the rites of the mysteries would ensure knowledge from which the common man is excluded. This esoteric knowledge leads to happiness because the initiate encounters divine things. It is an encounter that, as Paolo Scarpi points out, “invests the plane of human existence”<sup>141</sup> and which “allows one to ‘live’ free of the ‘evils’ that plague the uninitiated”.<sup>142</sup> In fact, “the intervention of the God”, Scarpi continues, “translates into a refuge from the ‘mal de vivre’, which men can gain through the participation in sacred rites”.<sup>143</sup> In other words, according to the texts we have just analysed, it is due to the

<sup>137</sup> “καὶ τοῖς οὐ τελεσθεῖσιν, ὁπόσων θέας εἴργονται, δῆλα δῆπου μηδὲ πῦθέσθαι μετεῖναι σφισιν”. *Ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>138</sup> “ὄσδις δὲ ἤδη τελετῆν Ἐευσῖνι εἶδεν ἢ τακαλούμενα Ὀρφικὰ ἐπελέξατο, οἶδεν ὀλέγω”. *Ibid.*, p. 186.

<sup>139</sup> In *Les Illuminés*, Nerval speaks of a rose “enchanted by the devil” (“enchantée par le diable”, Gérard de Nerval, *Œuvres complètes*, II, t. II, p. 1078) and quotes a poetic composition by Jacques Cazotte that evokes this sinister rose, since “the devil is under the flower” (“le diable est sous la fleur”, *ibid.*).

<sup>140</sup> Homer, *The Homeric Hymns*, ed. Susan C. Shelmerdine, Indianapolis, Indiana, Focus Publishing/R. Pullins Company, 1995, p. 57.

<sup>141</sup> “[La felicità nell’Aldilà [...] discende da una conoscenza, ottenuta attraverso la visione dei riti, che] investe il piano dell’esistenza umana”. Paolo Scarpi in *Le religioni dei misteri. Volume I. Eleusi, Dionisismo, Orfismo*, p. 557.

<sup>142</sup> “[La felicità *post mortem* è garantita dalla visione dei riti che] consente di ‘vivere’ immuni dai ‘mali’ che investono i non iniziati”. *Ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> “L’intervento del dio si traduce in un rifugio dal ‘male di vivere’, che gli uomini possono guadagnare attraverso la partecipazione ai sacri riti”. *Ibid.*, p. 558.

knowledge acquired during these initiatory ceremonies that one can forget the suffering and pain of the human condition and touch the divine truths, meaning the truths of the invisible reality that exists, but which human beings are not able to perceive. Nerval's rose also leads to this unknown and occult reality.

*Beyond Nerval: the rose of the Persian mystical tradition*

Gérard de Nerval is a writer who enables the discussion of the esoteric dimension of the rose symbol to be extended to other contexts beyond French literature, and beyond literature itself, thus touching religion, more precisely esoteric currents as noted by Jean Richer, who states that the author of *Aurélia* “aspires to the conquest of heaven and, beyond that, to the liberation of the human condition and rebirths, joining a common background to the esotericism of several great religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, but above all rediscovering the essence of eternal Platonism”.<sup>144</sup> Nerval's literary and mystical models do not stop at Apuleius, Dante and Swedenborg, but also include European Renaissance figures such as Shakespeare<sup>145</sup> and above all, as we have seen, Francesco Colonna. His literary production also makes it possible to approach German mysticism linked to figures such as Goethe, to whom he refers in order to evoke the “celestial” dimension of the female principle,<sup>146</sup> Novalis – whose heroine in the work

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<sup>144</sup> “[Nerval] [...] aspire à la conquête du ciel et, au-delà même, à la libération de la condition humaine et des renaissances, rejoignant un fond commun à l'ésotérisme de plusieurs grandes religions: hindouisme, bouddhisme, Islam, mais surtout retrouvant l'essentiel de l'éternel platonisme”. Jean Richer, *Expérience et Création*, p. 14.

<sup>145</sup> On the relations between Nerval and Shakespeare, see Monique Streiff Moretti, “Réflexion sur un faux titre ‘Les Filles du feu’”, in *Nerval. Actes du colloque de la Sorbonne du 15 novembre 1997*, p. 23-39.

<sup>146</sup> Goethe's influence on Nerval is very significant and suffice it to say, it was Nerval who translated the German writer's *Faust* into French. There are many references to Goethe in Nerval's works, for example *Pandora* (1854), which contains a passage from Goethe's *Faust* as an exergue: “two souls, alas, dwell within my breast, each wishing to be free from the other”. Gérard de Nerval, *Selected Writings*, p. 245. And it is in *Pandora* that Nerval evokes “the indecipherable riddle carved on the stone of Bologna”, which refers to the hermetic androgynous: “AELIA LAELIA. *Nec vir, nec mulier, nec androgyna*, etc. ‘Neither male, nor female, nor androgyne, nor maiden, nor young, nor old, nor *chaste*, nor *mad*, nor modest, but all this together...’ In a word, *Pandora* says it all – at least all I would want to say”. *Ibid.* The enigma of Bologna was also the subject of a chapter, “The Bologna Enigma”, which Carl Gustav Jung expanded on in his *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, where he linked it to alchemy. See Carl Gustav Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis. An Inquiry into the Separation and Synthesis of Psychic Opposites in Alchemy. The Collected Works of C. G. Jung. Volume 14*, translated by R. F. C. Hull, eds. Sir Herbert Read, Michael Fordham, Gerhard Adler, William McGuire, second edition, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1970, p. 56-88. In this chapter, Jung quotes the entire text of the Bologna enigma: “*Aelia Laelia Crispis*, neither man nor woman, nor mongrel, nor maid, nor boy, nor crone, nor chaste, nor whore, nor virtuous, but all. / Carried away neither by hunger, nor by sword, nor by poison, but by all. – Neither in heaven, nor in earth, nor in water, but everywhere is her resting place. / *Lucius Agatho Priscius*, neither husband, nor lover, nor kinsman, neither mourning, nor rejoicing, nor weeping, (raised up) neither mound, nor pyramid, nor tomb, but all. / He knows and knows not (what) he raised up to whom. / (This is a tomb that has no body in it. / This is a body that has no tomb round it. / But body and tomb are the same)” [*Aelia Laelia Crispis, nec vir nec mulier, nec andogyna, nec puella, nec juvenis, nec anus, ne casta, nec meretrix, nec pudica, sed omnia. / Sublata nec fame, nec ferro, nec veneno, sed omnibus. Nec coelo, nec aquis, nec terris, sed ubique jacet. / Lucius Agatho Priscius, nec maritus, nec amator, nec necessarius, neque moerens, neque gaudens, neque flens, hanc neque molem, nec pyramidem, nec sepulchrum, sed omnia. / Scit et nescit (quid) cui posuerit. / (Hoc est sepulchrum, intus cadaver non abens. / Hoc est cadaver, sepulchrum extra non habens. / Sed cadaver ide, est et sepulchrum sibi.)*]. *Ibid.*, p. 56-57.

*Disciples in Sais* is only a veiled Isis and called “Rosenblütchen” (again, the rose),<sup>147</sup> or Hoffman, in whom the character of Aurelia, as in Nerval, appears in *The Devil’s Elixirs* (1815). In particular, in *The Devil’s Elixirs*, a cardinal role is played by Saint Rosalia, as in Nerval’s work. Saint Rosalia and the theme of courtly love go hand in hand in this work by Hoffmann, whose literary production is permeated by the *topos* of love. Hoffmann’s discourse on the rose and love would merit a separate study, but I cannot pursue this subject here.<sup>148</sup>

The German literary and mystical tradition is only one of the domains that Nerval opens up to the reader with regard to the esoteric dimension of the *topos* of love and the symbol of the rose. In fact, Gérard de Nerval plunges the reader into a universe whose boundaries embrace the West and the East, from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century, passing through the Renaissance. It is above all the East that represents a crucial point in Nerval’s literary production: “everything that the Persian poets have told of Hudhad, the marvellous bird, Gérard knew”,<sup>149</sup> said Théophile Gautier, confirming Nerval’s extensive knowledge of the Persian tradition. Nerval thus brings together the Eastern and Western traditions, showing the relationship between Arab and Persian love poetry and European love poetry, and consequently the symbolism of the rose linked to this love poetry.<sup>150</sup>

In an early manuscript of *Aurélia*, Nerval associates the rose (Rosalie) with the oriental esoteric tradition, more precisely with Yemen, linking it to the Virgin of the Apocalypse and the Queen of Sheba:

I had represented the Queen of the South such as I had seen her in my dreams, such as she has been depicted in the Apocalypse of the apostle John [...] One of her hands is placed on the highest rock in the mountains of Yemen; with the other, pointed towards the sky, she swings the anxoka flower, known to the uninitiated as the flower of fire. [...] The sign of the Ram appears twice on the heavenly orb, where the figure of the Queen is reflected as in a mirror, and takes on the features of Saint Rosalie. Crowned with stars, she appears prepared to save the world.<sup>151</sup>

In this passage where Nerval mentions Rosalia there is a reference to Yemen which represents the “orient in the metaphysical sense of the term”, or the Orient “which the Gnostics identified with Yemen”<sup>152</sup> as Jean Moncelon states. For Nerval, the East is not therefore exclusively a

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<sup>147</sup> See Camille Aubaude, *op. cit.*, p. 161. On the relations between Novalis and Nerval, see Pierre-André Touttain, “Pèlerins de Saïs. Novalis et Nerval”, *Cahiers Gérard de Nerval*, n. 7, 1985, p. 28-30.

<sup>148</sup> I would like to thank Fabio Camilletti for suggesting that I investigate the presence of courtly love in Hoffman’s work, and its relationship with Nerval.

<sup>149</sup> “Tout ce que les poètes persans ont raconté de Hudhad, l’oiseau merveilleux, Gérard le savait”. In Gérard de Nerval, *Œuvres*, eds. Albert Béguin and Jean Richer, Paris, Gallimard, t. II, 1956, p. 64- 65.

<sup>150</sup> On the relationship between Nerval’s work and the Eastern tradition, see Jacques Huré, “Nerval et le récit oriental”, *Cahiers Gérard de Nerval*, n. 6, 1983, p. 11-18.

<sup>151</sup> Gérard de Nerval, *Aurélia*, in Gérard de Nerval, *Selected Writings*, p. 321-322.

<sup>152</sup> “Orient au sens métaphysique du terme”; “que les gnostiques identifiaient au Yémen”. Jean Moncelon, “Nerval et l’ordre des *Fedeli d’Amore*. L’initiation manquée de Gérard de Nerval”, *Cahiers Gérard de Nerval*, p. 52.



geographical place, but also and above all a symbolic place,<sup>153</sup> in particular, the country of Yemen; this is confirmed by Henry Corbin, who explains the esoteric significance of this place in the East called Yemen:

Why is he called the “Yemenite”? It is because South Arabia, Yemen and the land of Saba play a great role in the mystical symbolism of the visionary geography of our authors [the Persian love poets]. *Yemen* is the “right side” of the valley from which the divine voice called to Moses from the depths of the Burning Bush (Koran 28:30). [...] Mîr Dâmâd, the theology instructor of the Isfahan school, likes to quote this one among others: “Faith comes from Yemen; theosophy is Yemeni”. Yemen is thus equivalent to “the East” in the *ishrâqi* sense of the word; hence, “Yemeni philosophy” forms the same contrast to Peripatetic philosophy as “Eastern philosophy” does to the latter. The visionary experience here is consistent with the geographical data, since in relation to Qayrawân Yemen is indeed in the East. It is interesting to note that the biographer of Christian Rosenkreutz, the eponymous founder of the Rosicrucians, led his hero on a “quest for knowledge” to the sages of Yemen.<sup>154</sup>

This passage by Corbin is extremely important as the esoteric tradition of the Rosicrucians is linked to the metaphysical East represented by Yemen, thus claiming a filiation of an esoteric nature between the East and the West, as Gabriele Rossetti also theorises in his studies on the *Fedeli d'Amore*. Corbin also speaks of this esoteric love of the Eastern tradition, especially a love associated with Yemen:

There existed (or, at least, the poetic tradition makes it exist) in South Arabia, in the Yemen, an ideal tribe, famous for the practice of a platonic and chaste love which is designated as *'odhrite* love. Poets have glorified the couples of famous lovers; Rûzbehân names some of them at the beginning of his work *Jasmin*. The Majnûn-Layla couple would be the version in North Arabia of these ideal figures celebrated by the poets of South Arabia. The same version also exists, if not pre-existing, in the Persian mystical period where it is perpetuated to the modern era.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> On the initiatory dimension of the *Journey to the Orient*, see Gérard Coge, *op. cit.*, p. 83-87.

<sup>154</sup> “Pourquoi est-il dit le ‘Yéménite’? C’est que l’Arabie du Sud, le Yémen et le pays de Saba jouent un grand rôle dans le symbolisme mystique de la géographie visionnaire de nos auteurs. *Yemen*, c’est le ‘côté droit’ de la vallée d’où la voix divine interpella Moïse du fond du Buisson ardent (Qorân 28: 30). [...] Mîr Dâmâd, le maître de théologie de l’école d’Ispahan, se plaît entre autres à citer celui-ci: ‘La foi vient du Yémen; la théosophie est yéménite.’ Yémen équivaut donc à ‘Orient’ au sens *ishrâqi* du mot; d’où, la ‘philosophie yéménite’ forme le même contraste à l’égard de la philosophie péripatéticienne que la ‘philosophie orientale’ à l’égard de celle-ci. L’expérience visionnaire s’accorde ici avec les données géographiques, puisque par rapport à Qayrawân le Yémen est bien à l’Orient. Il n’est pas sans intérêt de relever que le biographe de Christian Rosenkreutz, éponyme des ‘Rose-Croix’, a conduit son héros à la ‘quête de la Connaissance’ jusque chez les sages du Yémen”. Henry Corbin, *En Islam iranien. Aspects spirituels et philosophiques. Les Fidèles d’amour. Shî’isme et soufisme*, t. III, p. 273. In his studies on Persian mysticism, Henry Corbin also discusses Goethe’s intertwined rose crosses, thus linking his poetry with the esotericism of Eastern and Western medieval love poetry. Henry Corbin, *En Islam iranien. Aspects spirituels et philosophiques. L’école d’Ispahan. L’école shaykie. Le Douzième Imâm*, Paris, Gallimard, t. IV, 1972, p. 314, 404-410, 416-425.

<sup>155</sup> Henry Corbin, *En Islam iranien. Aspects spirituels et philosophiques. Les Fidèles d’amour. Shî’isme et soufisme*, t. III, p. 138. On the relationship between Platonism and Islam according to Henry Corbin, see Radu Marasescu, “La question de la permanence du ‘Platonisme’ en Islam iranien selon Henry Corbin”, in *L’Ésotérisme shi’ite. Ses racines et ses prolongements. Shi’i esotericism: its roots and developments*, ed. Ali Amir-Moezzi, with Maria De Cillis, Daniel De Smet and Orkhan Mir-Kasimov, Turnhout, Brepols, 2016, p. 163-175.

According to Henry Corbin, there is a mysticism of love described in Persian literature which does not stop in the Middle Ages; on the contrary, it is handed down to the modern era. Corbin proposes interesting avenues of research on this aspect, showing the analogies with European literature. He refers to “the community of the Faithful of Love [*Fedeli d’Amore*]: Dante, Cavalcanti, Rûzbehân, ‘Iraqî, Hâfez”,<sup>156</sup> and evokes the “*Fedeli d’Amore* around Dante or before him”,<sup>157</sup> thus tracing a filiation that precedes Dante and continues after him, for example, in Swedenborg or Balzac in his work *Séraphîta*.<sup>158</sup> Nerval’s work, particularly *Aurélia*, which is strongly influenced by Swedenborg’s ideas, is also part of this current. Jean Moncelon confirms that the Nervalian visions “certainly belong to the tradition of the visionary dream illustrated by the works of a Swedenborg, a Novalis or, in Persia, a Rûzbehân Baqlî Shîràzî”.<sup>159</sup> The East and the West thus come together Nerval’s work.

The relationship between Eastern and Western traditions was studied as early as the eighteenth century by the comparative mythologist William Jones (1746-1794), who argued that Eastern love poetry is based on the concept of Divine Love and Beauty, built on a mystical allegory.<sup>160</sup> Jones revealed the existence of a codified love jargon used by the Indian Vedic, Sufi and Pythagorean schools. He also saw analogies between Persian love poetry and Petrarch’s sonnets.<sup>161</sup> This last aspect was later studied by Gabriele Rossetti and above all by Luigi Valli, who investigated the links between medieval Italian love poetry and Persian poetry, remarking “the erotic forms have clothed mystical thoughts”.<sup>162</sup> If we take the work of Dante as an example, as Carlo Formichi says, “in *The Divine Comedy* we hear only an echo of the Persian eschatological doctrine, but such an echo exists, and he who does not hear it is deaf”.<sup>163</sup>

<sup>156</sup> “La communauté des Fidèles d’amour: Dante, Cavalcanti, Rûzbehân, ‘Iraqî, Hâfez”. Henry Corbin in Rûzbehân Baqlî Shirâzi, *Le Jasmin des fidèles d’amour (Kitâb-e ‘Abhar al-‘âshiqîn)*, p. 73.

<sup>157</sup> “Fidèles d’amour”, autour de Dante ou antérieurement à lui”. Henry Corbin, *En Islam iranien. Aspects spirituels et philosophiques. Le Shî’isme duodécimain*, Paris, Gallimard, t. I, 1971, p. XXIII.

<sup>158</sup> Henry Corbin, *En Islam iranien. Aspects spirituels et philosophiques. Sohrawardî et les Platoniciens de Perse*, Paris, Gallimard, t. II, 1971, p. 323-325. Henry Corbin has also shown how the esoteric tradition of Sufism influenced the poetry of the Western Middle Ages, as in the case of the French troubadours, for example, with Ibn Hazm’s love verses, which would have influenced the literary production of seminal figures of the French Middle Ages such as William IX of Aquitaine. See Henry Corbin, *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, Paris, Gallimard, 1986, p. 316.

<sup>159</sup> “[Les rêves visionnaires de Nerval] appartiennent assurément à la tradition du songe visionnaire illustré par les œuvres d’un Swedenborg, d’un Novalis ou encore, en Perse, d’un Rûzbehân Baqlî Shîràzî”. Jean Moncelon, “Nerval et l’ordre des *Fedeli d’Amore*. L’initiation manquée de Gérard de Nerval”, *Cahiers Gérard de Nerval*, p. 59.

<sup>160</sup> See William Jones, *On the Mystical Poetry of the Persians and Hindus. The Works of Sir William Jones in the Thirteen Volumes*, London, Stockdale & Walker, v. VI, 1807, p. 211-235.

<sup>161</sup> See *Ibid.*, p. 227; William Jones, *Poems, Consisting Chiefly of Translations from the Asiatick Tongues*, London, Clarendon Press, 1772, p. IV. See also Stefano Salzani, *op. cit.*, p. 377-380.

<sup>162</sup> “Le forme erotiche hanno vestito i pensieri mistici”. Luigi Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d’Amore*, p. 505. On the relationship between Persian poetry and Italian and French poetry in the Middle Ages, see *ibid.*, p. 118-137; Gabriele Rossetti, *Il mistero dell’Amor platonico del Medio Evo*, t. I, p. 139-160.

<sup>163</sup> “Nella Divina Commedia si sente soltanto un’eco lontana delle dottrine escatologiche persiane, ma tale eco c’è, e chi non la ode è sordo”. Carlo Formichi, “Dante e la Persia”, *Nuova Antologia. Rivista di lettere, scienze ed arti*, VII, v. CCLXXVIII of the collection CCCLVI, July-August 1931.

Dante would therefore also have been influenced by the Persian tradition, and we know that Dante was one of Nerval's main sources, also inspired by the Eastern poetic and the mystical tradition.

It is not only Dante and the Italian love poetry of the Middle Ages that was inspired by Oriental literature: the whole of medieval European literature is indebted to the Oriental tradition, in particular Persian poetry, and this influence also continued in later centuries.<sup>164</sup> A good example is Goethe's *West-östlicher Divan*, which owes much to the poetic work of Hāfiz, defined by Carlo Saccone as a "Stilnovist" poet,<sup>165</sup> by virtue of the striking analogies between Goethe's work and the literary production of the Italian *Dolce Stil Novo* poets. But the myth of the Orient is also found in nineteenth-century French and English literature in authors such as Lamartine, Chateaubriand or Yeats.<sup>166</sup>

I have previously mentioned the role played by Henry Corbin in the study of the Persian Sufi tradition and, more generally, of the Arab world. He studied the Eastern *Fedeli d'Amore* whom he defined as "companions of Dante",<sup>167</sup> alluding to the close links between Dante's poetry and the Sufi tradition, between the Persian love poets and "their Western counterparts, the *Fedeli d'Amore*, the companions of Dante".<sup>168</sup> Corbin refers to the love of Persian poetry in terms of the "metaphysic of love":<sup>169</sup> "look for me in the mystical abode of love",<sup>170</sup> writes Rûzbehân Baqlî of Shîrâzi (1128-1209) and defines this love as a "secret religion"<sup>171</sup> where the woman loved is simply "*Sophia Aeterna*".<sup>172</sup> She is *Sophia Aeterna* in what he calls "*mundus imaginalis*" – a place "where spirits take on bodies and bodies become spirits".<sup>173</sup> It is this

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<sup>164</sup> An example of the influence of the Arabic tradition on the European one is the word "troubadour" which, according to Maria Rosa Menocal, derives from the Arabic "taraba", meaning "to sing", and from tarab, "song": the troubadours were indeed singers of love. See Maria Rosa Menocal, *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History: A Forgotten Heritage*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987, p. XI. On the relationship between Arabic poetry and the poetry of the troubadours, see Joumana Chahal Timery, "Points de rencontre du 'muwassah' arabo-andalou et de la poésie lyrique des troubadours: le sentiment de l'amour et son expression poétique", in *Echi letterari della cultura araba nella lirica provenzale e nella Commedia di Dante*, ed. Claudio Gabrio Antoni, Pasian di Prato, Campanotto, 2006, p. 76-95. See also Stefano Salzani, *op. cit.*, p. 380.

<sup>165</sup> See Carlo Saccone, "Luoghi e protagonisti di uno 'stilnovista' persiano: il 'teatrino d'Amore' di Hāfiz", in *Medioevo romanzo e orientale: macrotesti fra oriente e occidente*, eds. Eliana Creazzo, Giovanna Carbonaro and Natalia L. Tornesello, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2003, p. 171-204. See also Stefano Salzani, *op. cit.*, p. 380.

<sup>166</sup> On the influence of the myth of the Orient on European poets and writers, see Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* [1978], London, Penguin Books, 2003.

<sup>167</sup> Henry Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital* [1954], translated from the French by Willard R. Trask, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1990, p. 267. Corbin uses the same expression, "compagnons de Dante" ("Dante's companions"), in *Creative imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabî* [1958], translated from the French by Ralph Manheim, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1981, p. 52, 100, 154, 306.

<sup>168</sup> "Leurs homologues d'Occident, les *Fedeli d'amore*, les compagnons de Dante". Henry Corbin in Rûzbehân Baqlî Shirâzi, *Le Jasmin des fidèles d'amour (Kitâb-e 'Abhar al-'âshiqîn)*, p. 37.

<sup>169</sup> Henry Corbin, *Creative imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabî*, p. 127.

<sup>170</sup> "Cherche-moi dans la demeure mystique de l'amour". Rûzbehân Baqlî Shirâzi, *Le Jasmin des fidèles d'amour (Kitâb-e 'Abhar al-'âshiqîn)*, p. 31. For an in-depth discussion of the phrase "Seek me in the mystical abode of love" in *Le Jasmin d'Amour* de Rûzbehân, see Henry Corbin, *L'Imâm caché*, Paris, L'Herne, 2003, p. 110-115.

<sup>171</sup> Henry Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, p. 267.

<sup>172</sup> Henry Corbin, *Creative imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabî*, p. 52, 69, 98, 100, 139, 141.

<sup>173</sup> "*Mundus imaginalis*"; "où les esprits prennent corps et où les corps deviennent esprits". Henry Corbin, *L'Alchimie comme art hiératique*, Paris, L'Herne, 1986, p. 137.

“mystical religion of human beauty” belonging to the “esoteric Islam”<sup>174</sup> that incorporates “the minstrels of this religion of love”.<sup>175</sup> Henry Corbin lists some pivotal figures of these ‘minstrels’, such as Ahmad Ghazalli, Awhadoddîn Kermânî, Fakhroddîn ’Erâqî, Rûzbehân Baqlî de Shîrâz, Ibn ’Arabi, Hallâj, Suhrawardî, Shiblî, Dhu al-Nûn al Misrî Ibn al-Fârid, Rûmî.

In the Sufi tradition of Persian mystical poetry, it is human love that allows access to divine unity, to esoteric *tawhîd*,<sup>176</sup> which is realised through “the experience of human love for a being of beauty”,<sup>177</sup> through “the mystical death of love”.<sup>178</sup> The esoteric *tawhîd* implies the absorption of the lover into the beloved, thus allowing the realisation of the unity of love since, as Henry Corbin points out, “the Divine Being is itself at once the love, the lover and the beloved”.<sup>179</sup> This is why, when Majnûn is asked what his name is, he answers: “Layla”.<sup>180</sup> “I am Layla”, Majnûn will say. Majnûn is Layla, “it is God who loves Himself in Majnûn’s love for Layla”,<sup>181</sup> since, as Corbin clarifies, “if Majnun feels that he is Layla, it is because he himself has become the ‘mirror of God’ or the ‘eye of God’ revealing himself in Layla’s beauty”.<sup>182</sup> “I am Layla”: this identification of Majnûn with Layla, of the lover with the beloved, is the same one evoked by Rûzbehân: “I am who I love, and who I love is me; we are two spirits immanent in a single body”.<sup>183</sup> Likewise Hallâj, who said: “I am the one I love; the one I love is me; we are two spirits immanent in one body”.<sup>184</sup> But how can we not think of the Italian Cecco

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<sup>174</sup> “Religion mystique de la beauté humaine”; “Islam ésotérique”. Henry Corbin, *En Islam iranien. Aspects spirituels et philosophiques. Les Fidèles d’amour. Shî’isme et soufisme*, t. III, p. 18.

<sup>175</sup> “Les ménestrels de cette religion d’amour”. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>176</sup> On the concept of *tawhîd*, see *ibid.*, p. 15-18, 21, 24-25, 127-136.

<sup>177</sup> “L’expérience de l’amour humain pour un être de beauté”. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>178</sup> “La mort mystique d’amour”. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>179</sup> “L’Être Divin est soi-même à la fois l’amour, l’amant et l’aimé”. *Ibid.*, p. 66-67.

<sup>180</sup> The legend of Majnûn and Layla dates back to the seventh century. The two lovers Majnûn and Layla could be seen as the reincarnation of Tristan and Isolde or Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet in Arabic and Persian poetry. There are several versions of the love story between Majnûn and Layla, notably in Turkish-Ottoman and Persian literature, and one of the most famous is by the Persian poet Nezâmi (c. 1141-1209). The origin of this tale is the story of Qays, who falls madly in love with Layla. However, the original name of Layla’s lover is not Majnûn, but Qais (more precisely Qais ibn al-Mulawwah), which etymologically refers to norm and measure in Arabic. Qais becomes Majnûn, which literally means “possessed by the djinns”, meaning the invisible supernatural entities also known as “genies”. On the story of the mad love between Majnûn and Layla, see André Miquel, Percy Kemp, *Majnûn et Layla: l’amour fou*, Paris, Sindbad, 1984; Jad Hatem, “Majnun et sa folie d’amour: je suis Layla”, in *Les Fous d’amour au Moyen Âge. Actes du colloque tenu en Sorbonne les 29, 30 et 31 mars 2001*, eds. Claire Kappler and Suzanne Thiolier-Méjean, Paris, L’Harmattan, 2007, p. 281-289; Leili Anvar-Chenderoff, “L’amour de Majnûn pour Leyli: Folie ou sagesse?”, in *Les Fous d’amour au Moyen Âge. Actes du colloque tenu en Sorbonne les 29, 30 et 31 mars 2001*, p. 125-139; Henry Corbin, *L’Imâm caché*, p. 115-124; Stefano Salzani, *op. cit.*, p. 388; *Lessico Universale Italiano*, Rome, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana fondata da Giovanni Treccani, t. XI, 1973, p. 669. On the relationship between Nerval’s work and the story of the mad love between Majnûn and Layla, see Piero Latino, “Nerval et l’amour fou dans la poésie persane”, *Studi Francesi*, n. 197, LXVI/2, 2022, p. 333-345.

<sup>181</sup> “C’est Dieu qui s’aime soi-même dans l’amour de Majnûn pour Layla”. Henry Corbin, *En Islam iranien. Aspects spirituels et philosophiques. Les Fidèles d’amour. Shî’isme et soufisme*, t. III, p. 111.

<sup>182</sup> “Si Majnun éprouve qu’il est Layla, c’est parce qu’il est lui-même devenu le ‘miroir de Dieu’ ou ‘l’œil de Dieu’ se révélant à soi-même dans la beauté de Layla”. *Ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>183</sup> “Je suis qui j’aime, et qui j’aime est moi; nous sommes deux esprits immanents à un seul corps”. Rûzbehân quoted by Henry Corbin, “Quiétude et inquiétude de l’âme dans le soufisme de Rûzbehân Baqlî de Shîrîz”, *Eranos-Jahrbuch*, n. XXVII, 1958, p. 159.

<sup>184</sup> “Je suis celle (ou celui) que j’aime; celle (ou celui) que j’aime est moi; nous sommes deux esprits immanents à un seul corps”, in Rûzbehân Baqlî Shirâzi, *Le Jasmin des fidèles d’amour (Kitâb-e ‘Abhar al-‘âshiqîn)*, p. 38.

d'Ascoli, who exclaims in *L'Acerba* (III, 1, 139): “dunque io son ella”, “whence I am she”? Thus, both in the Eastern tradition and in the Western tradition of the Middle Ages, the same truth of a mystical nature is repeated, that is, the identification of the lover with the beloved, and at the same time with God. This refers to the Trinitarian structure of the divinity postulated by Saint Augustine. Therefore, it is in love that one finds the perfect image of the Trinity, a love that is a long and tortuous path of initiation requiring an effort of introspection. The mystery of the divine is thus summarised in the triad composed of the Lover, the Beloved and Love. Majnûn loves Layla, he sees himself through Layla's eyes, and Layla, in turn, sees herself through Majnûn's eyes: he identifies with her, and she identifies with him. Here is the mystery of esoteric love according to the Persian Sufi tradition, as Pierre Gallais reminds us, “this gaze through which they see each other, through which each one sees himself, that is Love”.<sup>185</sup>

This mystical love implies a change of perspective when reading love poetry written by a poet belonging to the Sufi tradition, as the physical characteristics of the lovers should not be considered as features referring to sensual and carnal love, but always as metaphors describing the search for God. Thus, the eye of the lover becomes the mirror in which the rays of divinity are reflected, as Henry Corbin confirms with regard to the ecstatic love of Majnûn: “the mystical lover, Majnun, is the eye through which God contemplates himself, and for this reason he is the love through which God loves himself in the object of this love”.<sup>186</sup> And more precisely, to put it in the terms of Arab-Persian mysticism, following Henry Corbin:

When the mystic has become the *eye* through which God sees himself, then the human *shâhid*, the face of human beauty, is *seen* by this divine eye. But what God sees is precisely his own face, since this is his *shâhid*; it is God who loves himself in *Majnûn*'s love for Layla. The human *shâhid* becomes the *mashhûd*, the Contemplated, of the eternal *shâhid*.<sup>187</sup>

Majnûn becomes the “theophanic mirror (*mir 'ât-e tajallî*)”,<sup>188</sup> the “Mirror of God”,<sup>189</sup> he is therefore “the eye (*dîdeh-hastî!*) through which God looks at himself”<sup>190</sup> and, in so doing, reveals himself in Layla's beauty, invested with a sacred meaning. She is a spiritual initiation,

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<sup>185</sup> “Ce regard par lequel ils se voient l'un l'autre, par lequel chacun se voit donc soi-même, c'est cela l'Amour”. Pierre Gallais, *Perceval et l'initiation. Essais sur le dernier roman de Chrétien de Troyes, ses correspondances orientales et sa signification anthropologique*, Paris, Les Éditions du Sirac, 1972, p. 256.

<sup>186</sup> “L'amant mystique, Majnun, est l'œil par lequel Dieu se contemple, et pour cela il est l'amour par lequel Dieu s'aime soi-même dans l'objet de cet amour”. Henry Corbin in Rûzbehân Baqli Shirâzi, *Le Jasmin des fidèles d'amour (Kitâb-e 'Abhar al-'âshiqîn)*, p. 38.

<sup>187</sup> “Lorsque le mystique est devenu l'œil par lequel Dieu se voit soi-même, alors le *shâhid* humain, le visage de beauté humaine, est vu par cet œil divin. Mais ce que Dieu voit, c'est précisément son propre visage, puisque tel est son *shâhid*; c'est Dieu qui s'aime soi-même dans l'amour de *Majnûn* pour Layla. Le *shâhid* humain devient le *mashhûd*, le Contemplé, du *shâhid* éternel”. Henry Corbin, *En Islam iranien. Aspects spirituels et philosophiques. Les Fidèles d'amour. Shî'isme et soufisme*, t. III, p. 111.

<sup>188</sup> “Miroir théophanique (*mir 'ât-e tajallî*)”. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>189</sup> “Miroir de Dieu”. *Ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>190</sup> “L'œil (*dîdeh-hastî!*) par lequel Dieu se regarde”. *Ibid.*, p. 140.

a divine manifestation: Layla's beauty is theophany, "sacred sign (*âyat*), *sacramentum*".<sup>191</sup> Thus, the knowledge of oneself is possible thanks to the knowledge of the beloved woman, of the other: the quest for the other is none other than the quest for oneself. It is this knowledge of oneself that leads the lover to the knowledge of the mysteries of the divinity, as Pierre Gallais states, "the lover finds himself and finds God in loving".<sup>192</sup> Carnal love is therefore only a veil hiding what the French troubadours called "celestial love", which corresponds to the spiritual love evoked by Ibn 'Arabî, namely a love that awakens in man the nostalgia for a reality beyond the senses, beyond sensible appearance.<sup>193</sup> In order to access divine love, the lover must lift this veil, and thus gain access to the Gnostic knowledge of God. This is, in the words of Henry Corbin, "the blossoming of human love into divine love".<sup>194</sup> The love between Majnûn and Layla is thus an esoteric love, an initiatory love which "is worth in the true sense as an initiatory death"<sup>195</sup> and which leads, therefore, to the destruction of the self, the death of all sensuality, of all possessive ideas: a love which, as Henry Corbin explains, "shakes [...] every element of the person" and destroys "the vapours of sensual nature".<sup>196</sup> Whilst it is true that this love in which everything is cancelled out is suffering, it is also true that it is this painful love that gives access to the "eternal world"<sup>197</sup> evoked by Rûzbehân. Suffering is the only way to reach this privileged and eternal world, as the Sufi poet Jami (1414-1492) reminds us in his version of Layla and Majnûn, where he says: "know that in love, the essential is suffering and that happiness can only be fake".<sup>198</sup> This love is an initiatory journey and has nothing to do with carnality but with a purely spiritual dimension, requiring not the possession of the beloved but, on the contrary, the dispossession, the absence of desire, the renunciation of desire. This implies the annihilation of the ego, the obliteration of the ego and an inner maturation that makes the lover an initiate, who crosses the desert, a metaphor for the soul that struggles against its demons, like the crossing of the desert by Majnûn. The desert brings the lover-initiate face to face with the beasts that he must confront and defeat in order to embrace the silence of nothingness. It is a struggle that transforms the individual, who frees himself/herself from passions, emotions and animal instincts in order to find the divine origin, the true goal of man in this life: to seek and find God in order to merge with him. The path to the secret of love leading to God is madness: the

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<sup>191</sup> "Signe sacré (*âyat*), *sacramentum*". *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>192</sup> "L'amant trouve soi-même et trouve Dieu en aimant". Pierre Gallais, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

<sup>193</sup> See Henry Corbin, *Creative imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabî*, p. 160-166.

<sup>194</sup> "L'éclosion de l'amour humain en amour divin". Henry Corbin, *En Islam iranien. Aspects spirituels et philosophiques. Les Fidèles d'amour. Shî'isme et soufisme*, p. 140.

<sup>195</sup> "Vaut au sens vrai comme une mort initiatique". *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>196</sup> "Ébranle [...] chaque élément de la personne"; "les vapeurs de la nature sensuelle". Rûzbehân Baqli Shirâzi, *Le Jasmin des Fidèles d'Amour (Kitâb-e 'Abhar al-'âshiqîn)*, p. 74.

<sup>197</sup> "Monde éternel". *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>198</sup> French translation. "Sache que dans l'amour, l'essentiel, c'est la souffrance et le bonheur ne peut être que factice". Jâmi, *Leyli o Majnûn*, in *Les Fous d'amour au Moyen Âge. Actes du colloque tenu en Sorbonne les 29, 30 et 31 mars 2001*, p. 132.

madness of love. Praising madness, the Persian poet Rûmi (1207-1273) said: “abandon wiles, O lover, become mad, become mad”.<sup>199</sup> Similarly, ‘Attâr – another Persian poet, comments as follows on losing reason to embrace madness: “if you fall in love, it becomes necessary / to leave reason and become Majnûn”.<sup>200</sup> To become Majnûn means to become mad with love, but this madness of love is not the madness of a person who loves another: it is to approach God after having experienced the underworld.

And the rose? Is it linked to the madness of love in Persian poetry leading to God? Henry Corbin repeatedly stresses the mystical dimension of the rose in Persian poetry and, more generally, in the Islamic tradition. I have chosen two poems attributed to Farid-ud-Din-‘Attâr, *The Nightingale Song* and *The Pleasure of Lovers*, where the rose (and the nightingale motif) is central to the message of a mystical nature conveyed by the texts. These two poems have been translated and studied by Carlo Saccone and, to my knowledge, it is the only translation in Europe of these Persian verses.<sup>201</sup> Saccone emphasises that these poems cannot be read from the perspective of the “merely aesthetic-literary dimension”, for this undermines the true meaning of ‘Attâr’s work by making it “a simple and elegant re-elaborator of mystical doctrines in poetic key”, whereas ‘Attâr’s verses aspire to illuminate a truth covertly – a “pathway to the mystery of mysteries”.<sup>202</sup> Saccone thus speaks of ‘Attâr’s poems in terms of a “perspective of spiritual hermeneutic” because they reveal the “most arcane things of the spirit”,<sup>203</sup> and this act of unveiling mystical truths makes use of myths which, in the case of ‘Attâr, correspond to the journey of the birds in search of their king Simurgh and the love story between the nightingale and the rose.<sup>204</sup>

The metaphor of the birds and the rose symbolise the journey of the mystics in search of God. The birds are guided by the hoopoe who is the spiritual guide, the Dantean Virgil, the

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<sup>199</sup> French translation. “Abandonne les ruses Ô amant, deviens fou, deviens fou”. Rûmi (Ode 2131), in *ibid.*, p. 133. See also Gialâl ad-Dîn Rûmî, *Poesie mistiche*, ed. Alessandro Bausani, Milan, BUR Rizzoli, 2012, p. 123-125. On the relations between Rumi and esotericism, more precisely the esoteric dimension of the eroticism present in Rumi’s work, see Mahdi Tourage, *Rûmî and the Hermeneutics of Eroticism*, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2007, p. 36-41, 149-182.

<sup>200</sup> French translation. “Si tu deviens amoureux, il devient nécessaire / de quitter la raison et devenir Majnûn”. ‘Attâr quoted in *Les Fous d’amour au Moyen Âge. Actes du colloque tenu en Sorbonne les 29, 30 et 31 mars 2001*, p. 133.

<sup>201</sup> Farîd al-dîn ‘Attâr, *La rosa e l’usignolo*, ed. Carlo Saccone, Rome, Carocci, 2003. Carlo Saccone translates into Italian the title of the two poems as follows: “Il diletto degli amanti” (The Pleasure of the Lovers) and “La Canzone dell’Usignolo” (The Song of the Nightingale).

<sup>202</sup> “Dimensione meramente estetico-letteraria”; “semplice elegante rielaboratore in chiave poetica di mistiche dottrine”; “via di accesso al mistero dei misteri”. Carlo Saccone, “Introduzione”, in *ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>203</sup> “Prospettiva di ermeneutica spirituale”; “cose più arcane dello spirito”. *Ibid.*

<sup>204</sup> See *ibid.* The myth of the mystical journey of the birds in search of their king (a metaphor for the soul in search of God) is also found in the works of the three Persian poets Avicenna, Ghazâlî and Sohravardi. See *ibid.* For example, *Risâlat al-Tayr* (Epistle of the birds), is a work whose tone is esoteric, written both by Avicenna and Ghazâlî, and which influenced the *Mantiq al-Tayr* (The Word of the Birds) by ‘Attâr. See Carlo Saccone, “La canzone di Rosa e Usignuolo: paradigmi dell’amore nella poesia persiana medievale”, in *ibid.*, p. 157. As for the nightingale – Saccone remarks – this bird symbolises “‘the spiritual being’ hidden in every man” (“l’essere spirituale’ nascosto in ogni uomo”). Carlo Saccone, “Note”, in *ibid.*, p. 85-86.

*shaykh* of the Sufi brotherhoods, about whom Corbin writes: “the *shaykh* wants to teach the ‘mystical birds’ in all fairness the final reality of *eros*, that of the *tawhîd* of the initiates”.<sup>205</sup> And in *The Song of the Nightingale*, ‘Attâr evokes one that has been initiated into the mysteries of love: Hallâj. In fact, by making the nightingale speak, he describes the death of Hallâj, the Persian love poet who was crucified for claiming to be God: “a sip of wine was given to Hallâj / he said: *I am God*, and he turned the world upside down / when he had the cup of divine Unity in his hands / his judges immediately issued the death warrant”.<sup>206</sup> The death penalty was also inflicted on Cecco d’Ascoli, who said in his love writings, as we have seen, “I am she”. This is the identification of the divinity with the self, the “know thyself” of the Greek oracles. Here, ‘Attâr clearly speaks of the death penalty inflicted on Hallâj, and he does so by inserting this historical fact into the love story of the nightingale singing of the rose, the “symbol of the supernatural”,<sup>207</sup> the flower that summarises in this passage the doctrine of esoteric love – a love that, as Carlo Saccone remarks, in Sufism is “the initiator to the divine arcane and to a kind of esoteric wisdom”.<sup>208</sup> The nightingale says that this doctrine of unity, the divine unity, cannot be understood by everyone,<sup>209</sup> thus repeating a fundamental concept of the *Fedeli d’Amore*: the elitist character of the esoteric knowledge of the mystery of love summarised in the flower of the rose. This knowledge requires solitude, as Luigi Valli had already pointed out in his *Linguaggio segreto*.<sup>210</sup> ‘Attâr’s lover is a solitary pilgrim, a hermit misunderstood by the crowd, “far from the crowd”,<sup>211</sup> but who has found the truth: he has found God and so can never be alone. The only person the pilgrim needs is a guide, the master who helps him to walk the perilous path, like Virgil for Dante: “whoever does not have a master / will have the demons as companions on the way”.<sup>212</sup> ‘Attâr’s poem emphasises the importance and absolute necessity of the master in order to travel the initiatory path, since without the master’s guidance the neophyte is destined to fail.<sup>213</sup> If, on the contrary, the pilgrim in search of the rose follows his

<sup>205</sup> “Le *shaykh* veut enseigner en toute équité aux ‘Oiseaux mystiques’ la réalité finale de l’*eros*, celle du *tawhîd* des initiés”. Henry Corbin in Rûzbehân Baqlî Shirâzi, *Le Jasmin des fidèles d’amour (Kitâb-e ‘Abhar al-‘âshiqîn)*, p. 89.

<sup>206</sup> Italian translation. “Un sorso di vino fu dato ad Hallâj / disse: *Io sono Dio*, e il mondo sconvolse / Quand’ebbe tra le mani la coppa della divina Unità / i suoi giudici subito emisero sentenza di morte”. Farîd al-dîn ‘Attâr, *op. cit.*, p. 41-42. On the crucifixion of the Persian mystic Hallâj in Baghdad in 922, Carlo Saccone highlights one of the causes of Hallâj’s martyrdom: the fact that he had divulged esoteric doctrines, thereby violating the law of the arcane protected by secrecy. See Carlo Saccone, “La canzone di Rosa e Usignolo: paradigmi dell’amore nella poesia persiana medievale”, in Farîd al-dîn ‘Attâr, *op. cit.*, p. 178. On Hallâj, see also *ibid.*, p. 13, 77.

<sup>207</sup> “Simbolo [...] del soprannaturale”. Carlo Saccone, “La canzone di Rosa e Usignolo: paradigmi dell’amore nella poesia persiana medievale”, in *ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>208</sup> “L’iniziatore agli arcani divini e a una sorta di esoterica sapienza”. *Ibid.*

<sup>209</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>210</sup> See Luigi Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d’Amore*, p. 137.

<sup>211</sup> “Lontano dal volgo”. Farîd al-dîn ‘Attâr, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

<sup>212</sup> “Chiunque non abbia a guida un maestro / avrà i demoni a compagni lungo la sua via”. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>213</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 79. The theme of the master and the importance of initiation in attaining mystical truths represent two fundamental motifs in the Sufi tradition. See Carlo Saccone, “Note”, in *ibid.*, p. 80.



master, he will know “the language of ecstasy”,<sup>214</sup> of divine ecstasy, “the divine secrets”.<sup>215</sup> And the poet knows those secrets which correspond to the invisible reality: “O ‘Attâr, you are truly the soul of the Lovers / aware of the gift of the one who knows of the Invisible”.<sup>216</sup> The secret of the lovers is that of the Invisible. The rose sought by the lovers symbolises the knowledge of this invisible reality. It also has to do, like love, with magic. Love and magic go hand in hand, as Saccone notes in “The Nightingale Song”.<sup>217</sup> The Italian scholar sums up perfectly the nature of the lover evoked by ‘Attâr: “the mystic (namely the lover) is often defined with the expression *bi-khwish* (without-self), that is to say ‘going out of oneself’ in order to meet the spiritual Self or God (namely the beloved woman)”.<sup>218</sup> Love and mysticism, love and divinity, God in the form of a beloved woman, these are the elements of ‘Attâr’s mysticism of love leading to *tawhîd*, that is to say the divine unity of Muslim theology, the unification which is at the centre of Sufi practice. This *tawhîd* is achieved through self-extinction and self-annihilation (*fanâ’*, annihilation) in God.<sup>219</sup> In other words, the individual erases himself, kills his personality, cancels himself, and experiences nothingness, as ‘Attâr says in his *Song of the Nightingale*, the lover of the rose: “look deep inside yourself, come out of Being / sink into the Path of Nothingness and preside over it”.<sup>220</sup>

The same initiatory journey can be found in *The Pleasures of the Lovers*, where the lover’s aim is to conquer the rose, which proves to be recalcitrant. The rose is difficult to reach, as in the French *Roman de la Rose*. Saccone has rightly shown the relationship between this work by ‘Attâr and the two works I analysed in the first part of my thesis: *Le Roman de la Rose* and *Il Fiore*.<sup>221</sup> The message conveyed is of a mystical nature and the central motif is the rose, the search for this esoteric flower. Whoever is lucky enough to savour the scent of the rose must, as in the *Roman de la Rose*, suffer the pains of love,<sup>222</sup> but it is only thanks to the Rose that one can know the “secrets of Love”.<sup>223</sup> Saccone has spoken of *The Pleasures of the Lovers*

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<sup>214</sup> “La lingua dell’estasi”. *Ibid.*, p. 59. The language of ecstasy in Arabic and Persian mysticism is *zabân-e hâl*, that is to say an esoteric language which corresponds, as Saccone says, to “a code of communication with the supernatural” (“un codice di comunicazione con il soprannaturale”). Carlo Saccone, “La canzone di Rosa e Usignolo: paradigmi dell’amore nella poesia persiana medievale”, in *ibid.*, p. 156. *Zabân-e hâl* means precisely “language of the moment” (“lingua dell’istante”, *ibid.*, p. 163), namely a metatemporal language, a language of ecstasy, a divine language. See *ibid.*, p. 163.

<sup>215</sup> “I segreti divini”. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>216</sup> Italian translation. “O ‘Attâr, tu sei davvero l’anima degli Amanti / cosciente del dono di chi sa dell’Invisibile!”. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>217</sup> See Carlo Saccone, “Note”, in *ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>218</sup> “Il mistico (ovvero l’amante) è spesso definito con l’espressione *bi-khwish* (senza-sé), ovvero come ‘uscito di se stesso’ per andare incontro al Sé spirituale o a Dio (ovvero all’amata)”. *Ibid.*

<sup>219</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>220</sup> “Guarda in fondo a te stesso, esci dall’Essere / inoltrati nel Vicolo del Nulla e presidialo”. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>221</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>222</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 97-98.

<sup>223</sup> “Segreti d’Amore”. *Ibid.*, p. 97. In *The Parliament of the Birds*, ‘Attâr confirms that the rose leads to the knowledge of the secrets of Love: “I know the secrets of love [...]. Only the rose knows my secret” (French

in terms of a “Persian *Roman de la Rose*”,<sup>224</sup> whose main characteristic is the “presence of a mystic-erotic double meaning language”.<sup>225</sup> Here Saccone confirms what Luigi Valli had written about Persian poetry, linked to that of the European *Fedeli d’Amore*. In this respect, the *The Pleasures of the Lovers* expresses the concept of faithfulness in love, since the rose of the poem asks for faithfulness to love.<sup>226</sup> The nightingale in love with the rose is defined by Carlo Saccone as the “true ‘fedele d’Amore’ (faithful of love)”.<sup>227</sup> He alludes, in fact, to Dante and the Italian *Fedeli d’Amore*, underlining “the vaguely esoteric climate in which the exchanges of messages between the lovers take place, the reminder to ‘speak low’”<sup>228</sup> and the rose “would represent the esoteric truth or God himself”.<sup>229</sup> The rose-loving nightingale thus symbolises the Sufi *Fedele d’Amore*, while “the other birds hostile to the nightingale would allude [...] to the representatives of an Islam faithful to legality, to the codified ‘rule’”.<sup>230</sup> Now, Saccone asks himself: “how can we not recall, if we consider our context [the Western context], the different readings of Dante and the *Fedeli d’Amore* as a key to religious and esoteric polemic?”<sup>231</sup>

Like the Italian (and more generally European) love poets, the language of the Persian love poets is an obscure one, using anecdotes (*hekâyat*) and parables (*tamthil*).<sup>232</sup> Carlo Saccone perfectly sums up the reasons for the obscure speech of those who can be called (following Corbin’s definition) the Eastern *Fedeli d’Amore*, and these reasons are the same as the Western *Fedeli d’Amore* studied by the so-called Dantean heterodox school:

There are four reasons [...] for using anecdotes (*hekâyat*) and parables (*tamthil*). Firstly, people cannot follow too complex reasoning, because they like to “listen to stories” [...]; secondly, the subtleties of spiritual truths and ecstatic revelations are often only expressible through images and allegorical stories: thirdly, people would be upset by a too direct description of certain esoteric truths and their faith would even be shocked or disturbed: finally, the fanaticism of certain bigots who are always on the lookout pushes the poet to take his counter-measures: a bold position is more likely to go unnoticed in a “story” than in a direct statement.<sup>233</sup>

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translation: “je connais les secrets de l’amour [...]. La rose seule connaît mon secret”). Georges Frilley, *La Perse littéraire*, Paris, L. Michaud, 1909, p. 152.

<sup>224</sup> “Persiano roman de la rose”. Carlo Saccone, “Introduzione”, in Farîd al-dîn ‘Attâr, *op. cit.*, p. 18. Among the first scholars to show the similarities between Attâr’s work (especially *The Parliament of the Birds*) and the *Roman de la Rose*, we should remember Garcin de Tassy (1794-1878).

<sup>225</sup> “Un linguaggio a doppio senso mistico-erotico”. Farîd al-dîn ‘Attâr, *La rosa e l’usignolo*, p. 19.

<sup>226</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 97, 118, 121.

<sup>227</sup> “Autentico ‘fedele d’Amore’”. *Ibid.*, p. 193.

<sup>228</sup> “Il clima vagamente esoterico in cui avvengono gli scambi di messaggi tra gli amanti, il richiamo a ‘parlare piano’”. *Ibid.*

<sup>229</sup> “Verrebbe a rappresentare la verità esoterica o Dio stesso”. *Ibid.*, p. 194.

<sup>230</sup> “Gli altri uccelli ostili all’usignuolo alluderebbero [...] agli esponenti di un islam ligio alla legalità, alla ‘regola’ codificata”. *Ibid.*

<sup>231</sup> “E chi non ricorda, se guardiamo vicino a noi, le varie letture di Dante e dei fedeli d’Amore in chiave di polemica religioso-esoterica?” *Ibid.*

<sup>232</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>233</sup> “Ci sono quattro buone ragioni, egli dice, per far uso di aneddoti (*hekâyat*) e parabole (*tamthil*). In primo luogo, il volgo non può seguire i ragionamenti troppo complessi, mentre ama ‘ascoltare storie’ [...]; in secondo luogo, le sottigliezze delle verità spirituali e delle estatiche rivelazioni spesso non sono esprimibili in altro modo che per

Based on this passage, there is another reason related to the use of allegory and literary obscurity, which is of a political nature, namely the idea of a personal “heterodox” religion that opposes orthodoxy, in this case, the orthodoxy of Islam. The esoteric doctrine of Sufi Gnosis leads to a personal religion, free from all rules and impositions dictated by the ecclesiastical Institutions. This motif can be found in *Le Jasmin des Fidèles d’Amour* (The Jasmine of the Faithful of Love) by Rûzbehân,<sup>234</sup> as noted by Henry Corbin, who states that this work leads the reader towards “the passage from legalistic and socialised Islam to the spiritual and personal Islam of Sufism”,<sup>235</sup> that is to say, “the passage from the exoteric *tawhîd*, from the monotheistic faith of the naive and objectifying consciousness, to the esoteric *tawhîd*, perceiving and stating the secret of unity”.<sup>236</sup> Corbin adds that “this esotericism operates a veritable alchemical transmutation of the *tawhîd*, to such an extent that official Islam no longer finds itself in it and refuses to recognise itself in it”.<sup>237</sup> There is thus, as Corbin confirms, a distinction to be made between the orthodoxy of the official religion and the heterodoxy of a personal and subjective religion that is the fruit of a spiritual journey: “the distance between the one God as affirmed by the literal faith of official Islam, and the way in which Sufism understands the mystery of divine unity as absolute subjectivity, that is to say absolved of any relation to anything *other* than oneself, in order to measure the spiritual transmutation that Sufism represents in relation to the exoteric religion of the Law”.<sup>238</sup>

In *Le Jasmin des Fidèles d’Amour*, the divine theophany<sup>239</sup> is symbolised by the rose, a flower always associated with the *topos* of love: an initiatory love and an initiatory rose. Corbin speaks of the love of *Le Jasmin* (in particular, referring to chapter XIII) in terms of “*initiatory pedagogy of love (tarbiyat-e ’ishq [...])*”,<sup>240</sup> which also applies to the tradition of Western love poetry, by virtue of the correspondences between the *Fedeli d’Amore* of the Islamic-Persian

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immagini e storie allegoriche; in terzo luogo, il volgo sarebbe sconvolto da una descrizione troppo diretta di certe verità esoteriche e la sua fede ne sarebbe magari scossa o turbata; infine, il fanatismo di certi bigotti sempre in agguato induce il poeta a prendere le sue contromisure: una posizione ardità ha più probabilità di passare inosservata in una ‘storia’ che non in una diretta enunciazione”. *Ibid.*

<sup>234</sup> On the *Le Jasmin des Fidèles d’Amour* by Rûzbehân, see Henry Corbin, *L’Imâm cache*, p. 79-124.

<sup>235</sup> “Le passage de l’Islam légalitaire et socialisé à l’Islam spirituel et personnel du soufisme”. Henry Corbin, *En Islam iranien. Aspects spirituels et philosophiques. Les Fidèles d’amour. Shî’isme et soufisme*, t. III, p. 66.

<sup>236</sup> “Le passage du *tawhîd* exotérique, de la foi monothéiste de la conscience naïve et objectivante, au *tawhîd* ésotérique, percevant et énonçant le secret de l’unité”. *Ibid.*

<sup>237</sup> “Cet ésotérisme opère une véritable transmutation alchimique du *tawhîd*, à tel point que l’Islam officiel ne s’y retrouve plus et refuse de s’y reconnaître”. *Ibid.*

<sup>238</sup> “La distance entre le Dieu unique tel qu’il est affirmé par la foi littérale de l’Islam officiel, et la manière dont le soufisme entend le mystère de l’unité divine comme subjectivité absolue, c’est-à-dire absoute de toute relation avec quelque chose d’*autre* que soi-même, pour mesurer la transmutation spirituelle que le soufisme représente par rapport à la religion exotérique de la Loi”. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>239</sup> See, for example, *ibid.*, p. 52, 89.

<sup>240</sup> “*Pédagogie initiatique de l’amour (tarbiyat-e ’ishq [...])*”. *Ibid.*, p. 113. See also Henry Corbin, “Pédagogie initiatique de l’amour”, in Rûzbehân Baqli Shirâzi, *Le Jasmin des fidèles d’amour (Kitâb-e ‘Abhar al-’âshiqîn)*, p. 142-147.

tradition and the *Fedeli d'Amore* of the West, brought to light by scholars such as Henry Corbin and Carlo Saccone. But these relationships had already been exposed by Gabriele Rossetti and Luigi Valli in their work, and, as I have already shown, it was Henry Corbin himself who underlined the merit of Gabriele Rossetti in this respect. Luigi Valli sums up these relationships perfectly, highlighting the importance of Rossetti's contribution:

In Persia and in general in the Islamic world, between the ninth and fifteenth centuries, a substantial mystical and religious movement had developed *exactly like the one Rossetti had shown for the sect of the "Fedeli d'Amore"*. Muslim mystics and Sufis in Persia had written an enormous quantity of poems in which the mystical Wisdom that leads to God were represented and expressed simultaneously by the symbol of a woman [...]. In these poems (exactly as Rossetti saw in the poetry of the Italian "Fedeli d'Amore") when referring to the woman they were, in fact, representing Wisdom and God using conventional terms in which the *mouth, hair, smile, and the mole* of the woman had a precise mystical and initiatory meaning [ . . . ] and they spoke this way so that the "gente grossa" [the populace] would not understand and perhaps because it was the jealous Muslim orthodoxy which, like Christianity, [...] was opposed to this mysticism which tended to place man directly before God and in contact with him.<sup>241</sup>

In his *Mistero dell'Amor Platonico*, Rossetti had shown that the double language, amphibological, was used by the Manicheans and then developed in Persia. It was introduced into Europe, especially through the Bulgarians, and reached the Cathar and Albigensian heresy. From there it spread to the Provençal love poets and then to the Italian poets of the *Dolce Stil Novo*. This was, according to Rossetti (and to Valli), the path of the teaching of esoteric love which from the East came to the West: one spoke of earthly love to speak of mystical love, one spoke of a fresh and beautiful rose to indicate a mystical rose. And as in the case of the Italian *Fedeli d'Amore* studied by Rossetti and Valli, so in the Sufi tradition the same word could mean several things. Thus, the word *tariqat* indicated in Sufi jargon the "mystical path" (or *via perfectionis*, the path of spiritual perfection) and, at the same time, the religious and initiatory Brotherhood or Order.<sup>242</sup> The rose therefore allows us to approach this double aspect, that of the mystical dimension linked to this symbol and the one concerning the initiatory Orders that have shaped the history and culture of peoples. I have focused mainly on the first aspect, the

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<sup>241</sup> "In Persia e in genere nel mondo islamico, tra il secolo IX e il XV, un vastissimo movimento mistico e religioso si era svolto *proprio a quel modo che il Rossetti aveva delineato per la setta dei 'Fedeli d'Amore'*. Mistici musulmani e Sūfī, in Persia, avevano scritto una quantità enorme di poesie nelle quali la mistica Sapienza che conduce a Dio o Dio stesso erano rappresentati e cantati simultaneamente sotto la figura della donna [...]: poesie nelle quali (proprio come vedeva il Rossetti nella poesia dei 'Fedeli d'Amore' italiani) si fingeva di parlare della donna e si parlava della Sapienza o di Dio con termini convenzionali secondo i quali *la bocca, i capelli, il sorriso, il neo* della donna avevano un preciso significato mistico iniziatico [...] e si parlava così perché la plebe della 'gente grossa' *non intendesse* e forse perché non intendesse la gelosa ortodossia musulmana che, come la cristiana, sebbene meno ferocemente, era avversa a quel misticismo che tendeva a rimettere l'uomo direttamente nel cospetto e nel contatto di Dio". Luigi Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d'Amore*, p. 20.

<sup>242</sup> See Carlo Saccone, "La canzone di Rosa e Usignuolo: paradigmi dell'amore nella poesia persiana medievale", in Farīd al-dīn 'Attār, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

mystical dimension, but the second is not at all secondary. Among the twentieth-century scholars who have dealt with the question of the initiatory Orders of the Sufi tradition, mention should be made of Idris Shah, an eclectic scholar who wrote a book titled *The Sufis*, whose approach can be summed up in the following words from the introduction: “the last thing one wants in writing this book is for it to be seen as hostile to scholasticism or the academic method”.<sup>243</sup> The introduction of Shah’s *The Sufis* was written by Robert Graves (1895-1985), the famous poet and essayist who published in 1948 *The White Goddess*, in which he presented the Welsh and Irish mythology and literature, pointing out their hidden esoteric dimension and their relations with the Greek and Jewish traditions.<sup>244</sup> Graves defines the Sufis – in his introduction to Shah’s work – as “an ancient spiritual freemasonry”.<sup>245</sup> This is the same idea expressed by Gabriele Rossetti in his *Mistero*.

Like Gabriele Rossetti, Idris Shah could be considered a “heterodox” scholar, and on the subject of the rose associated with Sufi initiatory Orders, he speaks of the existence of initiatory groups such as “The Rose of Baghdad” or “The Path of the Rose”.<sup>246</sup> But what is important to note is that these Sufi initiatory Orders based on the symbolism of the rose are said to be the origin of the European Rosicrucian brotherhood. According to Shah, “Rosicrucian symbolism is Sufi”<sup>247</sup> and the Rosicrucians owe their secret doctrine to the Sufi initiation tradition.<sup>248</sup>

On the literary side, Idris Shah points out that ‘Attar’s *The Parliament of the Birds* influenced Chaucer’s work.<sup>249</sup> He defines this work as “a forerunner of Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*”.<sup>250</sup> Interestingly, Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, as well as Chaucer’s literary production, were considered by Gabriele Rossetti to be fundamental to understanding the esoteric doctrine of love of the *Fedeli d’Amore*.<sup>251</sup> *The Pilgrim’s Progress* was, according to Rossetti, the continuation of the doctrine of love in the centuries following the Middle Ages, during which time the doctrine of esoteric love would be preserved, by works such as Chaucer’s in England, as well as *Le Roman de la Rose* (which deeply influenced Chaucer) in France. Thus,

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<sup>243</sup> Idris Shah, *The Sufis*, London, ISF Publishing, 1988, p. XXIII.

<sup>244</sup> Robert Graves speaks about the symbolism of the rose in his book *The White Goddess*. See Robert Graves, *The White Goddess. A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* [1948], New York, The Noonday Press, 1966, p. 201, 261, 265, 279, 420, 431.

<sup>245</sup> Idris Shah, *op. cit.*, p. X.

<sup>246</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 252, 277, 441.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 252, 277, 441.

<sup>248</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 252, 441. Alberto Cesari Ambesi confirms Shah’s statement, saying that “Sufism can be considered the Asian counterpart of the wisdom of the Rosicrucians” (“il sufismo può considerarsi il corrispettivo asiatico della saggezza dei Rosa+Croce”). Alberto Cesari Ambesi, *op. cit.*, p. 27. An allusion to this relationship between Sufi and the Rosicrucian tradition was also made, as we have seen above, by Henry Corbin.

<sup>249</sup> See Idris Shah, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>251</sup> On the relationship between John Bunyan’s work and the esoteric doctrine of the *Fedeli d’Amore* studied by Gabriele Rossetti, see the letters from Gabriele Rossetti to Charles Lyell dated 12 June 1833 and to John Hookham Frere dated 31 March 1834, in *Gabriele Rossetti. Carteggi. Volume terzo (1832-1836)*, p. 254-255, 364.

if one follows the studies of Idris Shah, the origin of this filiation is to be sought in the Arab and Sufi tradition, which preceded European love literature in the Middle Ages.

What emerges in this framework that I have outlined about the rose of the Sufi tradition is that there is an Islamic esotericism.<sup>252</sup> Recent research in the field of esoteric studies confirms this esoteric dimension of the Islamic tradition, and more specifically the Persian tradition in the case of the poetry considered in this chapter. Liana Saif points out that “Islamic esotericism (ar. *bāṭiniyya*) can exist independently from Western esotericism as modern heuristic construct, yet its inclusion, though not exclusively, in the study of Western esotericism is extremely fruitful because of its entanglement with the historical currents that are being expressed by and negotiated within the construct”.<sup>253</sup> Here Saif introduces the concept of “*bāṭin*” as a synonym for “esoteric”, as opposed to the concept of “*ẓāhir*”, which corresponds to “exoteric”.<sup>254</sup> Furthermore, she highlights two aspects: the independence of Islamic esotericism and, at the same time, the influences and relations with Western esotericism. This dialogue between Eastern and Western esoteric currents had been highlighted by Antoine Faivre, as recalled by Liana Saif, who asserts that – despite the reductionism operated by an approach she rightly calls “Westernist” – “credit must be given to Faivre’s implicit invitation to look at Islamic esotericism as the other side of the story of Western esotericism, something that is often overlooked by his critics”.<sup>255</sup> Wouter Hanegraaff confirms the importance of the relationship between Western and Islamic esotericism, emphasising the common “universalia” of both traditions: “Western esotericism must have its parallels in the East. The logical result of such a perspective is that the study of ‘esotericism’ turns into a form of comparative religious studies that seeks to discover the universalia of ‘inner’ religion world-wide”.<sup>256</sup>

### *From Nerval to the Rosicrucian and Masonic rose of Goethe and Mozart*

Nerval’s rose has led us to the Sufi esoteric tradition, from the Dantean rose to that of Persian mystical poetry. Nerval is, in fact, an author who enables us to consider several esoteric traditions, from Pythagorism to the Cabala, and from Rosicrucianism to Freemasonry. But Gérard de Nerval’s work provides an insight into a particularly esoteric context, that of Germany, to which I have already alluded (Chapter V) in terms of the role played by Germany

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<sup>252</sup> On Islamic esotericism (in particular Sufi esotericism), see Liana Saif, “What is Islamic Esotericism”, *Correspondences. Special issue. Islamic esotericism*, n. 7.1, 2019, p. 1-59.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5-6.

<sup>254</sup> For a detailed and comprehensive analysis of the meaning of words *bāṭin* and *ẓāhir*, respectively used as synonyms for “esoteric” and “exoteric”, see *ibid.*, p. 18-25; Sophie Latour, “Zāhir et bāṭin. Islam”, in *Dictionnaire critique de l’ésotérisme*, p. 1387-1392.

<sup>255</sup> Liana Saif, “What is Islamic Esotericism”, *Correspondences. Special issue. Islamic esotericism*, p. 4.

<sup>256</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism. A Guide for the Perplexed*, p. 15.

in the history of Rosicrucianism. The importance of German mysticism in the nineteenth century had already been the subject of the writings of Madame de Staël who, in her *De l'Allemagne* (Germany, 1813) devoted a chapter to German mystical philosophy and theosophy. In this respect, she distinguishes three classes: the mystical Illuminati (Illuminated), the visionary Illuminati, and the political Illuminati. The first group includes figures like Jacob Boheme, Martinès de Pasqually and Louis-Claude de Saint Martin, the second group figures like Swedenborg, and the third group personalities like Weishaupt, namely the founder of the Bavarian Illuminati.<sup>257</sup> Antoine Faivre recalls that Madame de Staël's residence, the Château de Coppet (the Castle of Coppet), was "the setting of a veritable 'congress of religions', in which the theosophical element predominates".<sup>258</sup> Through her book *De l'Allemagne*, Mme de Staël spread not only a taste for German literature in France, but also an interest in Germanic theosophy.<sup>259</sup> Thus, her role in the dissemination of esoteric doctrines was by no means insignificant,<sup>260</sup> and especially of esoteric doctrines coming from Germany which, as Antoine Faivre remarks, saw a notable proliferation of secret societies and organisations of an initiatory nature from the last third of the eighteenth century, such as the Golden Rosy-Cross or the Initiated Brothers of Asia.<sup>261</sup> Faivre recalls that most of these German secret societies cultivated hermetic traditions and strove to reawaken a 'medieval' ideal, borrowed from the chivalric tradition, where the knight undergoes formidable trials before finding the Grail or the Philosopher's Stone.<sup>262</sup> German literature of this period was deeply influenced by this esoteric cultural context, as Antoine Faivre points out, highlighting the "Masonic literature, or rather the literature of secret societies"<sup>263</sup> and the role played by the novel, especially in authors such as Zacharias Werner, Achim von Arnim or Novalis. The latter, in particular, was one of the sources of inspiration for Nerval's work, as I have mentioned. However, the German author that had the greatest influence on Nerval was Goethe, for whom the rose plays a pivotal role: Goethe's rose is also an initiatory rose, linked to the Rosicrucian tradition.

"The cross is closely entwined with roses / who married roses to the cross?":<sup>264</sup> with these words, in his poem *The Mysteries*, Goethe refers to the emblem of the Rosicrucians, as

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<sup>257</sup> Germaine de Staël, *De l'Allemagne II*, ed. Simon Balayé, Paris, Flammarion, v. II, 1968.

<sup>258</sup> Antoine Faivre, *L'Ésotérisme au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle en France et en Allemagne*, p. 189. Zacharias Werner, the German writer who imbued his works with Masonic creed and mysticism, often attended the salons organised by Mme de Staël.

<sup>259</sup> It was during a trip to Germany in 1804 that Mme de Staël met Goethe, the Schlegel brothers and other German writers. See *ibid.*

<sup>260</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>261</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 41; Antoine Faivre, *Accès de l'ésotérisme occidental*, t. II, p. 84-85.

<sup>262</sup> See Antoine Faivre, *L'Ésotérisme au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle en France et en Allemagne*, p. 41-42.

<sup>263</sup> "La littérature maçonnique, ou plutôt des sociétés secrètes". *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>264</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Mysteries*, in Rudolf Steiner, *Goethe's Rosicrucian Poem "The Mysteries"*, in Rudolf Steiner, *The Secret Stream. Christian Rosenkreutz and Rosicrucianism. Selected Lectures and Writings*, ed. Christopher Bamford, Great Barrington, Antroposophic Press, 2000, p. 104.

Pierre Riffard has pointed out.<sup>265</sup> Goethe also stresses in this poem that “not a word surrounded the image / to give the mystery sense and clarity”.<sup>266</sup> The rose, united with the cross, is a mystery, as the title of Goethe’s poem *The Mysteries* makes clear. The same motif is found in the poem *The Secrets*, which focuses on Rosicrucian esoteric symbolism: the cross and the rose.<sup>267</sup> It is a poetic composition that speaks of initiatory journeys whose difficulty is represented by the image of the mountain. It is a mountain that the pilgrim must climb, which symbolises the initiatory trials that the initiate must overcome in order to reach the metaphysical states of being, a higher state of consciousness. The theme of the initiatory journey conceived as the realisation of higher levels of consciousness and knowledge is also present in one of Goethe’s masterpieces: *The Magic Flute* (which is but a continuation of Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*), where the hermetic motif of the journey as an initiatory experience is strictly linked to the *topos* of love. Love, roses, initiation – these motifs that characterise the esoteric literature of the Middle Ages, are at the centre of Goethe’s literary production, which is strongly influenced by Rosicrucianism and the Masonic tradition. Goethe’s rose is both a Rosicrucian and a Masonic rose.<sup>268</sup>

Goethe was a Freemason and imbued his works with the Masonic creed. He makes clear references to Freemasonry in his poems, such as in *Symbolum*, which can be considered as a hymn to Freemasonry.<sup>269</sup> But there are also other works by Goethe linked to the Masonic tradition, such as the poem *The Secrets*, the works *The Magic Flute*, *The Grand Cophte*, *Wilhelm Meister* and above all *Faust*, defined by Marino Freschi as the “true monument of seventeenth-century Freemasonry”.<sup>270</sup> For Goethe, the rose is not only a literary symbol but also the emblem of the Masonic lodge where he was initiated on 23 June 1780 in Weimar: the Anna Maria Lodge of the Three Roses (Amalia Zu den drei Rosen Lodge in Weimar).<sup>271</sup> He

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<sup>265</sup> See Pierre Riffard, *op. cit.*, p. 801.

<sup>266</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, “*The Mysteries*”, in Rudolf Steiner, *Goethe’s Rosicrucian Poem “The Mysteries”*, in Rudolf Steiner, *The Secret Stream. Christian Rosenkreutz and Rosicrucianism. Selected Lectures and Writings*, p. 104.

<sup>267</sup> See Marino Freschi, *Goethe Massone*, Acireale, Tipheret, 2017, p. 74-75.

<sup>268</sup> On the esoteric dimension of Goethe’s work, see Christian Lepinte, *Goethe et l’occultisme*, Paris, Belles Lettres, 1957; Alice Raphael, *Goethe and the Philosophers’ Stone: Symbolical Patterns in “The Parable” and the Second Part of “Faust”*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965; *Goethe. Cahiers de l’hermétisme*, eds. Gonthier-Louis Fink, Yvette K. Centeno, Antoinette Fink-Langlois and Rolf Christian Zimmermann, Paris, A. Michel, 1979; Sonia Giorgi, *Goethe illuminato*, Milan, Archè Edizioni, 1989; Ronald Douglas Gray, *Goethe the alchemist. A study of alchemical symbolism in Goethe’s literary and scientific works*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010; Paolo Mariani, *L’“altro” Goethe. Gnosi, esoterismo, massoneria. Ricerche sui testi letterari*, Chieti, Edizioni Solfanelli, 2018.

<sup>269</sup> See Marino Freschi, *op. cit.*, p. 93-94. On the relationship between Goethe and Freemasonry, see Roland Guy, *Goethe franc-maçon. La pensée et l’œuvre maçonniques de J. W. von Goethe*, Paris, Éditions du Prisme, 1974.

<sup>270</sup> “Il vero monumento settecentesco alla massoneria”. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>271</sup> On Goethe’s initiation into the Anna Maria Lodge of the Three Roses, see *ibid.*, p. 7-9. Legend has it that Goethe refused to have his eyes blindfolded, having given his assurance that he would not open them. See *ibid.*, p. 18. When Goethe applied for membership of the Anna Amalia Lodge of the Three Roses, the Grand Master was Jakob Friedrich von Fritsch (1731-1814), who was President of the Secret Council in Germany (similar to a Prime Minister of the German Government). See *ibid.*, p. 61.



became a Master on 2 March 1782 and in December 1782 he joined the Order of the Illuminati founded by Weishaupt.<sup>272</sup> It was in German initiatory and secret circles that Goethe acquired his knowledge of the European political situation in the eighteenth century. In particular, as the letter on 22 June 1781 to Johann Caspar Lavater demonstrates, Goethe speaks of a hidden history, in which secret societies exerted an invisible influence on the course of political and social events.<sup>273</sup> In another letter, written to Philipp Kayser on 14 June 1782, Goethe speaks of this subterranean world of initiates, sheltered from profane eyes, and claims to know “the unbelievable”.<sup>274</sup> This secret history evoked by Goethe seems to refer to the same hidden history as the one referred to by Balzac or Gabriele Rossetti a few years later. In fact, as we have already seen in the previous chapters, both Balzac and Rossetti stressed this “unbelievable” aspect of history – this unspeakable truth. We do not know what “unspeakable” refers to, but we do know that Goethe, as well as Balzac and Rossetti, spoke of it by covering up this mystery with silence.

The Masonic milieu that Goethe frequented was of interest to another central figure in the Germanic cultural context, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791), for whom love and the rose symbolised the initiatory dimension of his masterpiece *Zauberflöte* (The Magic Flute, 1791). As Antoine Faivre remarks, Mozart’s *Magic Flute* is an esoteric and Masonic work, similar in literary terms to Zacharias Werner’s *Sons of the Valley* (1802-1804), a novel that can be considered a true summary of the initiatory doctrines of the time.<sup>275</sup> Mozart was, like Goethe, another major influence on Gérard de Nerval. In *Journey to the Orient*, Nerval states that he would like to perform *The Magic Flute* in the Egyptian Pyramids: “how beautiful it would be, I said to the German, to perform and represent Mozart’s *Magic Flute* here”.<sup>276</sup>

Mozart was a freemason, and, like Nerval, he frequented the initiatory circles of their times, but what is interesting to note is the initiatory value that Mozart attributes – as does Nerval – to the *topos* of love and the symbol of the rose, whose esoteric dimension in Mozart’s work has been brilliantly studied by Lidia Bramani.<sup>277</sup> In *The Magic Flute*, the rose and love are symbols of an initiatory journey. This work is based on the love story between Tamino and Pamina, and in this initiatory love the rose appears, which is an initiatory symbol for Mozart,

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<sup>272</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 22-23.

<sup>273</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 71; Jean Lacoste, *Le “Voyage en Italie” de Goethe*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 1999, p. 55.

<sup>274</sup> See Gotthold Diele, *Goethe als Freimaurer*, Berlin, E. S. Mittler & Sohn, 1908, p. 34; Marino Freschi, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

<sup>275</sup> Antoine Faivre, *L’Ésotérisme au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle en France et en Allemagne*, p. 186-187. On the relationship between Mozart and Freemasonry, and on the esoteric dimension of the Austrian musician’s work, see Lidia Bramani, *Mozart massone e rivoluzionario*, Milan, Bruno Editori, 2005.

<sup>276</sup> Gérard de Nerval, *Voyage en Orient*, in Gérard de Nerval, *Œuvres complètes. II*, t. II, p. 391. Another French writer like Nerval who was influenced by Mozart was Jules Verne. Michel Lamy has shown the deep analogies, or rather symmetries, between Mozart’s *Magic Flute* and Verne’s *The Black Indies*, underlining the esoteric dimension shared by the French author and the Austrian musician. See Michel Lamy, *Jules Vernes initié et initiateur*, p. 52-58.

<sup>277</sup> On the esoteric dimension of the rose in Mozart, see Lidia Bramani, *op. cit.*, p. 43-46, 53-54.

as in the case of the rose garden evoked when Pamina has to fight her own demons and her disorderly passions and instincts (act II, scene 7).<sup>278</sup> These are initiatory trials with which Mozart associates roses.

Thus, as with Nerval, Mozart's entire work is characterized by its initiatory dimension. When he speaks of initiation, he does so in terms of "the heavenly delight of the Initiates",<sup>279</sup> thus affirming that initiation is a privileged state that is granted only to those worthy of receiving it. The characters in *The Magic Flute* undergo initiation tests, but the final results are not the same. Papageno, for example, will not be able to pass them, whilst Tamino succeeds in the enterprise. In fact, whilst Tamino is determined to achieve his goal and accepts the suffering caused by initiation, Papageno is unable to bear the *metànoia*, namely the intellectual metamorphosis that initiation entails, accompanied by the feeling of loneliness that characterises the abandonment of profane life.<sup>280</sup> Tamino is a perfectible being, a profane who becomes an initiate, and in doing so he discovers his latent potentialities that he was unaware of when he was still a layman.<sup>281</sup>

The initiatory dimension of the *Zauberflöte*, has been studied by Fabrizio Alfieri, who shows the analogies between Mozart's masterpiece and the esoteric tradition of the *Fedeli d'Amore*, and thus of Dante, or rather of the "esoteric" Dante.<sup>282</sup> Fabrizio Alfieri is, to my knowledge, the only scholar who has linked Mozart's work with the esotericism of Dante and the *Fedeli d'Amore*, relying on the exegetical criteria of the 'heterodox' school of Dantean studies, in particular the contribution of Luigi Valli. He shows the analogies and affinities between the initiatory love that characterised the *Fedeli d'Amore* and Mozart's work in which love – like the *Fedeli d'Amore* of the Middle Ages (or in the authors praising esoteric love in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as Nerval or Yeats) – is nothing but death: "love-death", love understood as "a-mors" – initiatory death in the form of love,<sup>283</sup> which I have already discussed in previous chapters.

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<sup>278</sup> Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *The Magic Flute. Die Zauberflöte. Libretto by Emanuel Schikaneder*, English translation by Andrew Porter, London, Faber Music Limited, 1985, p. 53. In this scene, the major obstacle to overcome is Monostatos. On the struggle between Pamina and her own demons, referred to in Act II, Scene 7 of *The Magic Flute*, see Fabrizio Alfieri, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

<sup>279</sup> Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

<sup>280</sup> On Papageno and Tamino's different approaches to the initiation tests, see Fabrizio Alfieri, *op. cit.*, p. 119-120.

<sup>281</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 90-91.

<sup>282</sup> See Fabrizio Alfieri, *op. cit.* On the relationship between Mozart and Dante, based on a spiritual interpretation of the two authors, see Maria Soresina, *Mozart come Dante. Il Flauto magico: un cammino spirituale*, Bergamo, Moretti&Vitali, 2011. From the opening of *The Magic Flute* there are striking analogies with Dante's *Inferno* (I, 1-6). The key of C minor expresses the dramatic nature of the action, where Mozart depicts the devil (represented by the serpent) whom Tamino must face. See Fabrizio Alfieri, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

<sup>283</sup> On Mozart's concept of love (*amor*) as "without death" (*a-mors*), as in the case of the *Fedeli d'Amore*, see *ibid.*, p. 83-84, 120-121. On the concept of initiatory death in Mozart, see *ibid.*, p. 113-119, 135, 150-152. On the "love-death" association, there is a significant passage in which Pamina says to Tamino: "see, Tamino, see my weeping, / tears that flow for you alone. / Not a word to say you love me? / So, despairing, I shall die! / O Tamino, I implore you! / Ah, Tamino leaves me weeping! / Death alone will bring release; / alone I'll die". Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

Drawing on Luigi Valli's work *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d'Amore*, Fabrizio Alfieri highlights that the woman in Mozart's *Magic Flute* is the same as the woman of the *Fedeli d'Amore*: "the female figure symbolises [...] the *active Intellect*, that is to say the 'celestial ray' that links the human soul to its own divine *centrum*, a ray that must be considered the same as the *Buddhi* (or *Mahat*) in the Hindu tradition, namely the universal principle that in the language of the *Fedeli d'Amore* is symbolised by the Woman".<sup>284</sup> Here Alfieri links the Hindu tradition (as Giovanni Pascoli had done, as we have seen in his studies of Dantean esotericism), to the tradition of the *Fedeli d'Amore* and Mozart's music. A domain, a time and a tradition that are distant from each other, but which communicate through the *topos* of love for a woman. It is a symbolism that, as Fabrizio Alfieri remarks, acts as a link between different traditions, from Persian Sufism to Hindu Ksatryia, from medieval poetry to Mozart's eighteenth century, which would greatly influence the nineteenth century.<sup>285</sup>

Pamina is the angelic wife of Mozart.<sup>286</sup> She corresponds to the Beatrice of Dante or the Aurélia of Nerval, and like Dante and Nerval, three veiled women present themselves to the protagonist Tamino (act I, scene I) when he experiences the fainting that is the *excessus mentis*.<sup>287</sup> As in Dante and Nerval, the three women are the same woman, three faces of the same image.<sup>288</sup> And as in Dante and Nerval, Mozart's love is, as Fabrizio Alfieri points out, a "love understood in an initiatory way".<sup>289</sup> The union between Tamino and Pamina represents the completion of the divine prerogatives,<sup>290</sup> and the completion of an inner journey that leads to self-knowledge.<sup>291</sup> It is the completion of an inner journey that leads to the knowledge of oneself. This knowledge is preceded by the protagonist going astray and experiencing the descent into hell: he goes astray, he struggles and emerges victorious, he dies and then is reborn. And the rebirth is metaphorically described as a love story.<sup>292</sup>

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<sup>284</sup> "La figura femminile simboleggia [...] l'*Intelletto attivo*, cioè il 'raggio celeste' che lega l'anima umana al proprio *centrum* divino, raggio da considerarsi lo stesso della *Buddhi* (o *Mahat*) nella tradizione indù, ovvero sia quel principio universale [che] nel linguaggio dei Fedeli d'Amore, è simboleggiato dalla *Donna*". Fabrizio Alfieri, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

<sup>285</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 45-46. With regard to the relationship between Eastern and Western traditions, in his study on the initiatory dimension of *The Magic Flute*, Fabrizio Alfieri refers to the work of Miguel Asín Palacios, *La escatología musulmana en la Divina Commedia* (Muslim Eschatology in the *Divine Comedy*, 1919), which I alluded to in Chapter II of this Thesis. As mentioned, Palacios' work shows the relationship between the Dantean and the Islamic mystical tradition. East and West dialogue with each other and the echoes of this dialogue between apparently different cultures can also be detected in Mozart, as Fabrizio Alfieri has shown. See *ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>286</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 161-162. Fabrizio Alfieri speaks of "an identity in principle between the Mozartian Pamina [...] and the Dantean Beatrice" ("una identità in principio tra la Pamina mozartiana [...] e la Beatrice dantesca"). *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>287</sup> Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *op. cit.*, p. 12-14.

<sup>288</sup> See Fabrizio Alfieri, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

<sup>289</sup> "Amore iniziaticamente inteso". *Ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>290</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>291</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 171.

<sup>292</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 27.

Tamino's encounter with his demon, the dark part, is the source of his aspiration for self-knowledge, and this knowledge will only be possible through love with Pamina. Through her love he will obtain knowledge (Sophia). Therefore, Mozart's initiation leads to the eternal truth, to the absolute of the poets; his initiatory journey takes the form of love – an initiatory love that leads to knowledge of divine things.<sup>293</sup> It is a love forged by a traditional spirit, namely that of an esoteric doctrine transmitted from one era to the next, and which, according to Fabrizio Alfieri, Mozart received through the Masonic initiation.<sup>294</sup>

The completion of the initiatory journey described by Mozart in his *Magic Flute* is symbolised by the rose. The Mozartian initiatory rose, like the *Fedeli d'Amore* and all the love poets we have encountered in this study, goes hand in hand with the *topos* of love and is linked to two fundamental esoteric concepts: the identification of man with woman (or vice versa) and the death of the lovers. Rose, love and death, their value is initiatory: an initiatory rose, an initiatory love and an initiatory death. Thus, in Pamina's words we find all these elements:

I'll gladly brave all danger / when I am by your side; / and I shall lead you on,  
 / for love will be my guide; / (*she takes him by the hand.*) / And roses will  
 bestrew the ground, / for roses bloom where thorns are found. / So take your  
 flute and boldly play; / that magic flute will guard our way. / 'Twas carved in  
 strange enchanted hour / by my father; long ago he hewed it / from deep  
 withing an ancient oak, / mid storm and thunder, lightning stroke – / yes, take  
 that magic flute and play, / and it will guard us on our way.<sup>295</sup>

Thus, in Mozart's work the rose and the flute are symbols of the death and rebirth of the protagonists, Tamina and Pamina. To the *topos* of love and the symbol of the rose, associated with death, Mozart adds the power of music, which becomes the bearer of an esoteric message: "set forth and trust in music's might / to lead us/you safely through this night",<sup>296</sup> with these words Pamina and Tamino will say of their pleasure at dying "safely through this night".

In Mozart, as in Apuleius or Nerval, the initiatory path leading to death allows the initiate to discover the supreme mysteries of theophany: Isis. The character of Armigieri in *The Magic Flute* describes the initiatory path to Isis thus: "each man who treads this fearful pathway fraught with danger, / by fire and water, earth and air is tested; / and if he overcomes his mortal fear of death, / he leaves this earth and rises toward bright heaven. / Enlightened, mind and heart will strive for right, / and in the holy rites of Isis seek true light".<sup>297</sup> As Agnès Spiquel remarks in her study of the initiatory dimension of *Isis* by Nerval, "in *The Magic Flute* [...]"

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<sup>293</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 16-17.

<sup>294</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>295</sup> Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *op. cit.*, p. 74-75.

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

Tamino faces the trials only if accompanied by Pamina”.<sup>298</sup> The scholar draws an analogy between Mozart and Nerval, emphasising that in both of them “the link with the feminine is [...] both the mediation and the end of the initiation”.<sup>299</sup> Like the *Fedeli d’Amore*, for Mozart and Nerval, the woman is the path that allows the completion of the initiatory journey. For Nerval, as for Mozart, Agnès Spiquel writes, “the crowning achievement of initiation is the mystical marriage” or union with the feminine principle, “represented in myth by hierogamy, which Nerval privileges in the image of Isis”,<sup>300</sup> and which he calls in *Sylvie* “the goddess” that is “forever young, forever pure”.<sup>301</sup> This is evidence of the thread linking Nerval with Mozart, but also with Dante and the *Fedeli d’Amore*, because of the relationships I have described in this chapter on Nerval’s rose.

Woman as theophany, initiatory love and death, the symbolism of the rose – these are the elements found in Mozart, in the love poets of the Middle Ages and in the poets who moved in nineteenth-century esoteric circles. For the author of *The Magic Flute*, it is also an initiatory rose. A rose that manifests itself not with literature, but with music.

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<sup>298</sup> “Dans *La Flûte enchantée* [...] Tamino n’affronte les épreuves qu’accompagné de Pamina”. Agnès Spiquel, “La déesse dévoilée”, in Gérard de Nerval. *Les filles du feu. Aurélia. “Soleil noir”. Actes du Colloque d’Agrégation des 28 et 29 novembre 1997*, p. 109.

<sup>299</sup> “Le lien avec le féminin est [...] à la fois la médiation et le terme de l’initiation”. *Ibid.*

<sup>300</sup> “Le couronnement de l’initiation est le mariage mystique”; “figuré par le mythe par l’hiérogamie, que Nerval privilégie dans l’image d’Isis”. *Ibid.*

<sup>301</sup> Gérard de Nerval, *Sylvie*, in *ibid.*, p. 146.

## CHAPTER VIII

### PÉLADAN AND THE ROSICRUCIAN ROSE

#### *“Provençal esotericism” and the doctrine of Dante according to Péladan*

In the context of nineteenth-century French literature, the figure of Péladan is fundamental as far as my study on the initiatory symbolism of the rose is concerned. In fact, whilst Nerval is the writer most influenced by Dante, and above all by what can be called “Dantean esotericism”, the writer who, more than any other, expounded the doctrine of the *Fedeli d’Amore* and of Dante in the nineteenth century is Joséphin Péladan. He spoke openly about Gabriele Rossetti and his *Mistero dell’Amor Platonico* at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – a period in which occultism, magic, Kabbalah, Rosicrucianism, Martinism and theosophy were at the centre of intellectual debate in Parisian literary and artistic circles. Moreover, Péladan is particularly important for my research as he links Dantean esotericism to the esotericism of medieval French love poetry, to the Rosicrucian tradition, the Kabbalah, Egyptian hermeticism, and even the Sumerian tradition of antiquity. It is the same syncretism that characterised the work of Gérard de Nerval and Honoré de Balzac, with whom Péladan shares the syncretic spirit but, more importantly, a mystical conception of existence and the links between the visible and the invisible. In particular, Péladan perpetuated Balzac’s legacy, as Maurice Barrès remarked in his *Au Seuil du Mystère* (On the Threshold of Mystery), where he wrote that Péladan had given a definitive and systematic form to what Balzac had outlined: “Mérodack of the *Vice Suprême* is a *Louis Lambert* of action, and *Curieuse* recalls *Séraphîtus-Séraphîta*; but this mystery that Balzac intuitively sketched out, M. Péladan formulates with the boldness and authority of one who guesses right”.<sup>1</sup> The point of connection between Péladan and Balzac, as well as Nerval, is Dante.

Like Dante, Péladan expounds the theory of love and speaks for the first time of the “esotericism of love”,<sup>2</sup> in his work *La Science d’amour* (The Science of Love). In Chapter II, we saw that Péladan produced two works on the esoteric and initiatory dimension in Dante’s work, as well as in medieval love poetry, especially troubadour love poetry: *Le Secret des Troubadours: de Parsifal à Don Quichotte* (1906) and *La Doctrine de Dante* (1908). It is in *Le*

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<sup>1</sup> “Mérodack du *Vice Suprême* est un *Louis Lambert* d’action, et *Curieuse* fait songer à *Séraphîtus-Séraphîta*; mais ce mystère que Balzac balbutiait d’intuition, M. Péladan le formule avec la hardiesse et l’autorité de celui qui devine”. Stanislas de Guaita, *Essais de sciences maudites. I. Au seuil du Mystère*, Paris, G. Carré, 1890, p. 71.

<sup>2</sup> “Ésotérisme de l’amour”. Joséphin Péladan, *Amphithéâtre des sciences mortes. La Science de l’amour: éthique*, Paris, Messein, 1911, p. 147.

*Secret des Troubadours* that Péladan speaks of “Provençal esotericism”,<sup>3</sup> which he believed was opposed to the cardinal sin of the ecclesiastical institutions, namely, perverting the esoteric tradition of original Catholicism.<sup>4</sup> This is the same idea proposed by Gabriele Rossetti in his *Mistero dell’Amor Platonico* and by the heterodox Dantean school, in particular by Luigi Valli. Péladan, like Gabriele Rossetti and Luigi Valli, considers the Cathars, Albigensians, Troubadours and Templars as the holders of the esoteric knowledge, opposed by the medieval Church, that repressed any desire for a renewed spirituality:

Those who have not the right to show their face put on a mask. The mask of the *joculator* or juggler was offered, excellent for propaganda. The heretics thus became troubadours in Provence and trouvères in the North, *guillari*, men of joy in Italy, minnesingers in Germany, skalds in Norway, minstrels in Wales.<sup>5</sup>

Troubadour love poetry is, according to Péladan, a mask veiling a subversive and heretical message. He presents the troubadours as followers of the Albigensian sect, whose stronghold was the city of Toulouse. This city was mentioned by the love poets such as Guido Cavalcanti who, as I remarked in Chapter V, met a woman there, similar to the one he had left in Italy, and for whom he felt an immediate love. As confirmation of the troubadours’ rejection of the authority of the Roman Catholic clergy, Péladan refers to the papal bull of 1245 which designated the Provençal language – the language of love songs – as a “heretical idiom”.<sup>6</sup> For the author of *Le Secret des Troubadours*, the history of the French heretics of the Middle Ages is associated with the Knights Templar. According to Péladan’s historical reconstruction, these heretics were guided by their mystical fervour and took refuge in the “Rule of the Temple” in order to escape persecution by the Church. Their founding and inspirational figure was Saint Bernard, the same character who accompanies Dante on his conquest of the rose at the end of *The Divine Comedy*. Moreover, Péladan maintains that Montsalvat, the castle guarding the Grail in Wagner’s *Parsifal*, is none other than Monségur, the fortress of the Cathars. All these elements are present in Péladan’s *La Vertu suprême* (The Supreme Virtue, 1900), a work in which Mérodack is the Grand Master of the Rosicrucians gathered in the Abbey of Montségur:

At the threshold, the Rosicrucians, in a semicircle, wearing the white mantle with the red cross, were there, and one knee on the ground, except for Alta. The Grand Master, according to the Albigensian rite of the *consolamentum*,

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<sup>3</sup> “Ésotérisme provençal”. Joséphin Péladan, *Le Secret des troubadours: de Parsifal à Don Quichotte*, Paris, Sansot, 1906, p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> See Michela Gardini, *Joséphin Péladan. Esthétique, magie et politique*, Paris, Garnier, 2015, p. 109.

<sup>5</sup> “Qui n’a pas le droit de montrer son visage met un masque. Celui du *joculator* ou jongleur s’offrait, excellent pour la propagande. Les hérétiques devinrent donc troubadours, en Provence, et trouvères dans le Nord, *guillari*, hommes de joie en Italie, minnesingers en Allemagne, scaldes en Norvège, ménestrels au pays de Galles”. Joséphin Péladan, *Le Secret des troubadours: de Parsifal à Don Quichotte*, p. 53.

<sup>6</sup> “Idiome hérétique”. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

knelt in turn before each of them, kissed them on the mouth and raised them up. Then, Isdubar put the Templar mantle on his shoulders [...].<sup>7</sup>

Péladan gives birth to a historical filiation, through literature linking the Templars, Albigensians and Rosicrucians. He confirms this idea in *Le Dernier Bourbon* (The Last Bourbon, 1895): “Grail, Vehme, Temple and Rose+Croix are different dates of a same evolution”.<sup>8</sup> The union of the two Orders, the Knights Templar and the Rosicrucians, under the guidance of Grand Master Mérodack (chosen for his superior knowledge), aims to create a new humanity through the formation of a kind of spiritual masonry:

All that remains for the initiates is to prepare for the next civilisation, since the Latin one is over. [...] This masonry of high culture would have the first effect of destroying nationalistic differentiations by book, word, image and example. [...] The flag of science and art raised in place of the flags of the people, and this effort will bear the symbol of the Rose+Cross which is the search for God through free and profane paths.<sup>9</sup>

This idea of the aspiration to a new humanity finds its counterpart in English literature in Edward Bulwer Lytton’s *The Coming Race*, where the author prophesies a future world dominated by a kind of initiatory group – half esoteric sect, half chivalric order: the Vril.

For Péladan, the myth of the creation of a new humanity is characterised by its association with magic and an occult politics imbued with magism.<sup>10</sup> Péladan proposes the constitution of “another State within the State”, which aims at linking magic and the Templar and Grail traditions:

Whilst cultured beings are important to humanity, it is not enough to group them together, they must defend themselves and form another State within the State, an officially law-abiding state, virtually immune from the law, and this care for safety and even for combat is part of the old Templar activity whose weapons and rites should be revived. Finally, a corporation of thinkers is needed to provide the world with: the Magi, that is to say some beings who are susceptible of all commandments, and this militia of the Holy Spirit will have the Grail as its emblem.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> “Au seuil, les Rose+Croix, en demi-cercle, portant le manteau blanc à croix rouge, étaient là, et un genou en terre, sauf Alta. Le Grand Maître, selon le rite albigeois du *consolamentum*, s’agenouilla à son tour devant chacun d’eux, le baisa sur la bouche et le releva. Puis, Isdubar lui mit aux épaules le manteau templier”. Joséphin Péladan, *La Décadence latine: éthiopée. XIV. La Vertu suprême*, Paris, Ernest Flammarion, 1900, p. 376.

<sup>8</sup> “Gaal, Vehme, Temple et Rose+Croix sont des dates différentes d’une même évolution”. Joséphin Péladan, *La Décadence latine: éthiopée. XII. Le dernier Bourbon : avec un argument*, Paris, Chamuel, 1895, p. 243.

<sup>9</sup> “Il ne reste aux initiés qu’à préparer la civilisation prochaine, puisque la latine est finie. [...] Cette maçonnerie de la haute culture aurait pour premier effet de détruire par le livre, la parole, l’image et l’exemple, les différenciations nationalistes. [...] Le drapeau de la science et de l’art élevé en place des drapeaux du peuple, et cet effort portera le symbole de la Rose+Croix qui est la recherche de Dieu par les voies libres et profanes”. *Ibid.*, p. 248-249.

<sup>10</sup> See Michela Gardini, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

<sup>11</sup> “Comme les êtres cultivés importent à l’humanité, il ne suffit pas de les grouper, il faut qu’ils se défendent et qu’ils forment un autre État dans l’État officiellement respectueux des lois, virtuellement à l’abri des lois, et ces soins de sûreté et même de combat relèvent de la vieille activité Templière dont il convient de raviver les armes et les rites. Enfin, il faut une corporation de ceux qui pensent, propre à fournir au monde: des Mages, c’est-à-dire des êtres de synthèse susceptibles de tous commandements, et cette milice du Saint-Esprit aura le Gaal pour



The Templarism postulated by Péladan fits into a logic which coincides with the Dantean “heterodox” interpretation proposed by Gabriele Rossetti. In fact, the Templars, holders of occult knowledge, are considered by Péladan as heretics who fight against the corrupted ecclesiastical institutions, and Mérodack is the embodiment of this heresy. As Michela Gardini remarks, “the journey to the Holy Land of Péladan and his double Mérodack turns them both into modern Templars, following the tracks of these Crusaders who used their journey to the East in order to wring the esoteric knowledge from the Eastern tradition”.<sup>12</sup> This synthesis between East and West was, as I have shown in the previous chapters, already central to the love poetry of the troubadours and of Dante, and important in nineteenth century literature which, starting with authors such as Balzac or Gérard de Nerval, saw in the Templar tradition a link between the Western Christian tradition and the Eastern esoteric one. This synthesis is of interest not only to literature since, as Michela Gardini has pointed out, it is at the origin of Masonry, where the Masons present themselves as the descendants of the Templars, and have Saint Bernard as their Master.<sup>13</sup> Templarism, Freemasonry, Saint Bernard, the vision of the Dantean “candida rosa” thanks to Saint Bernard, nineteenth-century literature, the esoteric tradition – all these elements communicate with each other, whilst the work of Joséphin Péladan embodies the synthesis of them.

Even the initiatory Order that Péladan created, the Order of the Catholic Rose-Cross of the Temple and Grail, claims this syncretic spirit, whose name refers to a filiation between the ancient brotherhood of the Rose-Cross, the legend of the Grail and the history of the Templars. In particular, Péladan claims to belong to the Rose-Croix by virtue of his family lineage, as he explains in *Comment on devient Mage* (How One Becomes a Magus):

Through my father, Chevalier Adrien Péladan, affiliated since 1840 to the neo-templar Order of the Genoude and of the Lourdoueix, [...] I am one of the descendants of Hugues de Payens..

Through my brother, Doctor Péladan, who was with Simon Brugal, of the last branch of the Rose+Cross, known as the Toulouse branch, like the Aroux, the D’Orient and the Viscounts of Lapasse families – and those who practise occult medicine without remuneration – I originate from Rosenkreutz.

Through my work, I am the dean of contemporary Magic; by my name and my Word, I belong to the race of the Kaldaeans, but I belong to Peter, my suzerain and to the holy Order which has committed its destiny to me.<sup>14</sup>

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emblème”. Joséphin Péladan, *La Décadence latine: éthopée. XII. Le dernier Bourbon: avec un argument*, p. 249-250.

<sup>12</sup> “Le voyage en Terre Sainte de Péladan et de son double Mérodack les transforme tous les deux en templiers modernes sur les traces de ces Croisés qui ont mis à profit leur voyage en Orient pour arracher le savoir ésotérique à la tradition orientale”. Michela Gardini, *op. cit.*, p. 112-113. With regard to the East in Péladan, Michela Gardini recalls that the author of *Comment on devient mage* “considers the East as the cradle of the founding fathers of esotericism” (“considère l’Orient comme le berceau des pères fondateurs de l’ésotérisme”). *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>13</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>14</sup> “Par mon père, le chevalier Adrien Péladan, affilié dès 1840 à la néo-templerie des Genoude, des Lourdoueix, [...] j’appartiens à la suite de Hugues de Païens.

In this passage Péladan mentions a name that we have already seen in the previous chapters, namely Aroux. With “Aroux’s family”, in fact, he is referring to one of the pioneers (if not the pioneer) of esoteric studies in France: Eugène Aroux.<sup>15</sup> Péladan draws extensively on Eugène Aroux in terms of knowledge and theory about Dantean esotericism and love poetry in the Middle Ages. But Aroux’s work is merely plagiarism of Gabriele Rossetti’s work.

*Eugène Aroux, Péladan and the history of an “indirect influence”*

Joséphin Péladan’s reception of Dante in the nineteenth century is undoubtedly one of the most original and interesting examples of research approaches, given that the work of Italy’s *Sommo poeta* is presented in a new light, that of the *fin de siècle* occultist wave. In the fashionable esoteric milieu of the time, Péladan traces a filiation based on esoteric love, which links the Mysteries of Eleusis to the nineteenth century and includes in this initiatory chain the love poetry of Dante and the *Dolce Stil Novo* poets, the French Troubadours and Trouvères, Catharism, the German Minnesänger, the Scandinavian scaldes and the theory of Platonic love propounded by Marsilio Ficino and Gemistos Plethon.<sup>16</sup> This idea of an undercurrent associated with Dante and love poetry, running from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century, was taken up by Péladan mainly due to Eugène Aroux.<sup>17</sup> But one aspect that literary criticism has overlooked, if not almost forgotten, is that Aroux’s contribution is nothing short of plagiarism of Gabriele Rossetti’s work.

“L’eminente plagiatario del Rossetti”,<sup>18</sup> “Rossetti’s eminent plagiarist” is how Alfonso Ricolfi describes Aroux, claiming that his ideas are simply appropriations of Gabriele Rossetti’s

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Par mon frère, le docteur Péladan qui était avec Simon Brugal, de la dernière branche des Rose+Croix, dite de Toulouse, comme les Aroux, les D’Orient, les vicomtes de Lapasse – et qui pratique la médecine occulte, sans rémunération – je procède de Rosenkreutz.

Par mon œuvre, je suis le doyen de la Magie contemporaine; par mon nom et mon Verbe, j’appartiens à la race des Kaldéens, mais j’appartiens à Pierre, mon suzerain et au saint Ordre qui m’a commis son destin”. Joséphin Péladan, *Amphithéâtre des sciences mortes. I. Comment on devient mage: éthique*, Paris, Chamuel et Cie, 1892, p. XVIII-XIX.

<sup>15</sup> Aroux was affiliated to the Rosicrucian branch of Toulouse, the same Order that Josephin Péladan and his brother Adrien later joined. See Francesco Zambon, “Il catarismo e i miti del Graal” in *Tradizione letteraria, iniziazione, genealogia*, p. 86-87. On the figure of Eugène Aroux, see Maria R. Lacalle Zalduendo, “Il Dante eretico, rivoluzionario e socialista di Eugène Aroux”, in *L’idea deforme. Interpretazioni esoteriche di Dante*, p. 79-105.

<sup>16</sup> On the continuity of an esoteric and initiatory tradition handed down through the centuries, see Leon Surette, *A Light from Eleusis. A Study of the Cantos of Ezra Pound*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1979, p. 34-39, 40-41, 57-60; Demetres P. Tryphonopoulos, *The Celestial Tradition. A Study of Ezra Pound’s The Cantos*, Waterloo, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1992, p. 134-135. On the relationship between this filiation and Péladan (especially the Rosicrucian-Templar filiation) in Péladan, see Ida Morello, *Esoterismo e letteratura fin de siècle*, p. 38.

<sup>17</sup> On the influence of Eugène Aroux on Péladan, see Christophe Beaufils, *Joséphin Péladan (1858-1918). Essai sur une maladie du lyrisme*, Grenoble, Jérôme Millon, 1993, p. 374, 391; Jean-Pierre Laurant, “Le Moyen Âge sous le regard des mages fin de siècle”, in *La Fabrique du Moyen Âge au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Représentation du Moyen Âge dans la culture et la littérature française du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, p. 674; Francesco Zambon, “Il catarismo e i miti del Graal”, in *Tradizione letteraria, iniziazione, genealogia*, p. 82-112.

<sup>18</sup> Alfonso Ricolfi, *Studi sui “Fedeli d’Amore”*, p. 45.

intellectual work. To my knowledge, only Pompeo Giannantonio and Silvia Fabrizio-Costa have examined the question of Aroux's plagiarism in detail.<sup>19</sup> Between 1842 and 1853, Aroux had established an epistolary correspondence with Gabriele Rossetti, whom he addressed as "mon cher maître",<sup>20</sup> "my dear master". Aroux continually expressed his esteem (which verged on a kind of veneration) for Gabriele Rossetti, and in 1851 he offered to translate *La Beatrice di Dante* into French free of charge. Rossetti had published part of this work in 1842, but the complete version only came out after his death.<sup>21</sup> Aroux had reassured Rossetti that his work would simply be a translation, with a view to making him better known in France. In particular, he stressed that *La Beatrice di Dante* was to be considered the sole intellectual property of Gabriele Rossetti, adding that he was merely a disciple who faithfully followed the teachings of his master, as can be seen in the letter he sent to Rossetti on 21 November 1851: "your work is yours, my dear Sir, and it must remain yours, that is to say it must be exclusively yours. My work would be nothing other than a work of a pupil who is too happy to be instructed by copying the lessons of his master. If there is to be any profit from it, it must at least be yours, and yours alone".<sup>22</sup> At the beginning, Rossetti was hesitant about sending his work to Eugène Aroux, as confirmed by the letter to Giuseppe Ricciardi on 12 December 1851:

Our friend M. Aroux has written to me three times. He would like to undertake the translation of my great work *La Beatrice du Dante* in French for free, in order to publish it. I am inclined to entrust him with the manuscript. Can I do so? What do you think about it? That work is reduced to mathematical demonstration. I have discovered incredible things, beyond those that you have read, and maxims on the school of love.<sup>23</sup>

Although he hesitated at first, Rossetti finally decided to accept Eugène Aroux's offer and sent him his manuscript.<sup>24</sup> However, instead of translating it into French (as he had promised in his

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<sup>19</sup> On the plagiarism of Eugène Aroux, see Pompeo Giannantonio, *Endiadi: dottrina e poesia nella Divina Commedia*, Florence, Sansoni, 1983, p. 356-396; Silvia Fabrizio-Costa, "Eugène Aroux: profilo d'un plagiatore", in *I Rossetti e l'Italia. Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi. Vasto, 10-12 dicembre 2009*, eds. Gianni Oliva and Mirko Menna, Lanciano, Carabba, 2010, p. 89-108; Maria Luisa Giartosio de Courten, "La 'Beatrice di Dante' di Gabriele Rossetti", *Nuova Antologia*, 1930, p. 429-444; Maria Luisa Giartosio de Courten, "Storia del manoscritto", in Gabriele Rossetti, *La Beatrice di Dante. Ragionamenti critici*, ed. Maria Luisa Giartosio de Courten, Milan, La Vita Felice, 1993, p. 10-11.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, the letters from Eugène Aroux to Gabriele Rossetti on 6 June 1853 and 17 December 1853, in *Gabriele Rossetti. Carteggi. Volume sesto (1848-1854)*, eds. Alfonso Caprio, Philip Horne, Sergio Minichini, John Woodhouse, Naples, Loffredo, v. VI, 2006, p. 291, 342.

<sup>21</sup> *La Béatrice de Dante* by Gabriele Rossetti was published in full in 1935.

<sup>22</sup> "Votre œuvre est vôtre, mon cher monsieur, et elle doit rester telle, c'est-à-dire vôtre exclusivement. Mon travail ne sera qu'un labeur d'écolier trop heureux de s'instruire en copiant les leçons du maître. S'il doit en revenir quelque profit, c'est bien le moins qu'il vous appartienne, et à vous seul". Letter from Eugène Aroux to Gabriele Rossi on 21 November 1851, in *ibid.*, p. 244.

<sup>23</sup> "Il nostro amico M.<sup>r</sup> Aroux mi ha scritto tre volte. Egli vorrebbe intraprendere a tradurre gratis il mio lavoro della *Beatrice di Dante* in francese per farlo indi pubblicare. Io sono inclinato a fidargli il manoscritto. Posso farlo? Che dite? Quel lavoro è ridotto a dimostrazione matematica. Ho scoperto cose incredibili, oltre quelle che avete lette, e massime sulla scuola d'amore". Letter from Gabriele Rossetti to Giuseppe Ricciardi on 12 December 1851, in *ibid.*, p. 247.

<sup>24</sup> Eugène Aroux received the manuscript from Gabriele Rossetti in April 1852.

letters), Aroux used Rossetti's research to publish in 1854 his own work, *Dante hérétique, révolutionnaire et socialiste, révélations d'un catholique sur le Moyen-Âge*, which was out-and-out plagiarism of *La Beatrice di Dante*. Aroux had, though, added his own ideas, which suggested hints of socialism in Dante. Thus, Aroux exploited Rossetti's good faith (who by then was elderly with serious health problems, especially poor eyesight) to appropriate his literary discoveries, drawing notions wholesale from Rossetti's material to bring his works to life: *La Comédie de Dante traduite en vers selon la lettre, et commentée selon l'esprit* (1856); *Clef de la comédie anti-catholique de Dante Alighieri, pasteur de l'Église albigeoise dans la ville de Florence, affilié à l'Ordre du Temple, donnant l'explication du langage symbolique des fidèles d'amour dans les compositions lyriques, romans et épopées chevaleresques des troubadours* (1856); *L'Hérésie de Dante démontrée par Francesca de Rimini, devenue un moyen de propagande vaudoise, et coup d'œil sur les romans du Saint-Graal, notamment sur le Tristan de Léonois – Preuves de l'hérésie de Dante notamment au sujet d'une fusion opérée en 1312 entre la massenie albigeoise, le Temple et les Gibelins* (1857) and *Les Mystères de la chevalerie et de l'amour platonique au moyen âge* (1858).<sup>25</sup> It should have just been a straightforward translation, but events took a different turn and in one of his books, *Les Mystères de la chevalerie et de l'amour platonique au moyen âge*, Aroux claims the originality of his work, conveniently forgetting his "cher maître". "On n'aura certes rien à revendiquer au nom de Rossetti"<sup>26</sup> – "there is certainly nothing that can be attributed to Rossetti", he writes in his "Foreword" to *Les Mystères de la chevalerie et de l'amour platonique au moyen âge* (The Mysteries of Chivalry and Platonic Love in the Middle Ages), whose title, among others, is reminiscent of Rossetti's masterpiece, *Il Mistero dell'Amor Platonico del Medio Evo: The Mystery of Platonic Love of the Middle Ages*.

Thus, Gabriele Rossetti's ideas and theories reached France indirectly, through Eugène Aroux.<sup>27</sup> One could speak of an "indirect influence" – an aspect of fundamental importance, because the idea of a Dantean esotericism and an esoteric love literature spread not only in the French literary and cultural context, but also in Europe and America in the late nineteenth and

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<sup>25</sup> Eugène Aroux, *La Comédie de Dante traduite en vers selon la lettre, et commentée selon l'esprit*, Paris, J. Renouard, 1856; Eugène Aroux, *Clef de la comédie anti-catholique de Dante Alighieri, pasteur de l'Église albigeoise dans la ville de Florence, affilié à l'Ordre du Temple, donnant l'explication du langage symbolique des fidèles d'amour dans les compositions lyriques, romans et épopées chevaleresques des troubadours*, Paris, J. Renouard, 1856; Eugène Aroux, *L'Hérésie de Dante démontrée par Francesca de Rimini, devenue un moyen de propagande vaudoise, et coup d'œil sur les romans du Saint-Graal, notamment sur le Tristan de Léonois, note lue à l'Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres dans la séance du 24 avril 1857. – Preuves de l'hérésie de Dante notamment au sujet d'une fusion opérée en 1312 entre la massenie albigeoise, le Temple et les Gibelins*, Paris, J. Renouard, 1857; Eugène Aroux, *Les Mystères de la chevalerie et de l'amour platonique au moyen âge*, Paris, J. Renouard, 1858.

<sup>26</sup> Eugène Aroux, *Les Mystères de la chevalerie et de l'amour platonique au moyen âge*, p. XV.

<sup>27</sup> See Leon Surette, *The Birth of Modernism. Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, and the Occult*, Montreal & Kingston, London, Buffalo, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993, p. 46, 107-108.

early twentieth century. In fact, Eugène Aroux's contribution influenced Joséphin Péladan, who in turn influenced French and foreign literary, artistic and esoteric circles. For example, Péladan influenced the artistic and literary movement of Belgian Symbolism, as well as the American poet Ezra Pound (who was very interested in the question of esoteric love in Dante and in the medieval poets, and in Gabriele Rossetti, as I will show in the following chapters). René Guénon, one of the most important figures in French esoteric circles, was strongly influenced by the writings of Eugène Aroux, whilst in academia the influence of Aroux, as well as Péladan, was evident in specialists such as René Nelli or Denis De Rougemont (whom I have already referred to in Chapter I). The latter, in particular, in *Love in the Western World*, speaks of the esoteric love of the medieval poets, citing the contributions of Aroux, Péladan and Luigi Valli, but without ever mentioning Gabriele Rossetti.

To my knowledge, only Leon Surette has addressed this oblivion of Gabriele Rossetti. He does so, in his book *Birth of Modernism* (1993), where he focuses on the relationship between literature and occultism, and more precisely, between occultism and Modernism, studying authors such as Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot or James Joyce. Surette shows particular interest in Joséphin Péladan and studies him specifically in relation to Gabriele Rossetti and Eugène Aroux. Importantly, Surette highlights Aroux's plagiarism, stating that "[this] event has so far entirely escaped the notice of scholarship despite its very considerable progeny in the canonical literature of this century".<sup>28</sup>

Thus, the oblivion surrounding Gabriele Rossetti, and especially his "indirect influence" on European literature and culture, is one of the most significant instances of "amnesia" in the history of ideas.<sup>29</sup> In addition to the twentieth-century specialists who rely on Luigi Valli, but fail to mention Gabriele Rossetti, there are writers and scholars who were influenced by Eugène Aroux and who completely ignored the author of *Il Mistero*. Péladan is, as we have seen, one of these writers. He absorbed Aroux's ideas, which feature the chivalric and amorous literature of the troubadours in terms of a doctrine for initiates that would be expounded in allegorical, exoteric form in order to conceal the esoteric content of medieval works, such as the novels of Tristan, Jaufré, Aucassin and Nicolette, the *Roman de Renard*, *Fleur et Blanchefleur* and especially *The Romance of the Rose*. Aroux points out the importance of the rose symbol within the doctrine of esoteric love and, in addition to the initiatory filiation, he refers to the "Massenie du Saint Graal" (Massenie of the Holy Grail), in his view the ancestor of Freemasonry, whose

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>29</sup> On the influence of Gabriele Rossetti's contribution to English and French literature, see Piero Latino, "L'esoterismo dantesco del dimenticato Gabriele Rossetti e la sua influenza sulla letteratura francese e inglese", *Rivista di Studi Italiani / Journal of Italian Studies*, XL, n. 2, 2022, p. 25-37. See also Piero Latino, "The esoteric interpretation of Dante's work and its reception in the English and French literatures of the nineteenth century", *Comparatio*, v. 14, issue 2, 2022, p. 181-190.

members “met in the woods to celebrate the mysteries of the Eastern rose, which had been reduced to a wild state by persecution, and had become for them either the rosehip or the violet”.<sup>30</sup> The aim of Aroux’s “Massenie” appears to have been “to bring the Christian Church back to apostolic times, to the faithful observation of the precepts of the Gospel”,<sup>31</sup> whilst *The Divine Comedy* would be the key to understanding the character of this initiatory organisation:

Around a round table, a perfect figure, which admitted neither first nor last, sat, in order to participate in the fraternal banquet, the Perfect Knights admitted to this community of valiant, pure and courteous, having in their hearts only uprightness and loyalty, with the love of God and their lady. One was only admitted after having undergone long and numerous tests, and after having committed oneself to secrecy under the most inviolable oaths. An idea of the mode of reception and the precautions taken against indiscretion can be gained from what is practised today in Freemasonry, which is nothing more than the continuation of the “massenie”. The grades, which at first numbered only three, were later increased to seven, and then to thirty-three, when Dante merged the Albigensians, Templars and Ghibellines. Also *The Comedy* proceeds by 3 and 33.<sup>32</sup>

This Massenie evoked by Aroux was later taken up by Péladan and René Guénon. The latter speaks of it, in particular, in *Symboles de la Science sacrée* (Symbols of the Sacred Science) and in *L’Ésotérisme de Dante*.<sup>33</sup> Although both Péladan and René Guénon rely on the work of Eugène Aroux, it should be noted that both do mention Gabriele Rossetti. Péladan does so in *La doctrine de Dante* and in *Le Secret des Troubadours*. However, Péladan’s incoherence is evident because whilst he speaks of Rossetti’s works and judges them, he claims not to have read them:

Everyone knows that Dante was a Ghibelline, but one saw him only as a partisan of the emperor until the moment in which Rossetti in England and Aroux in France revealed the heresy of the poet. Notwithstanding, though I have not read his works, Mr. Rossetti went too far, if one considers only the title *Disquisitions on the Antipapal Spirit which Produced the Reformation*.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> “Se réunissaient dans les bois, pour célébrer les mystères de la rose d’Orient, réduite à l’état sauvage par la persécution, et devenue pour eux soit l’églantine, soit la violette”. Eugène Aroux, *Les mystères de la chevalerie et de l’amour platonique au moyen âge*, p. 10.

<sup>31</sup> “De ramener l’Église chrétienne aux temps apostoliques, à la fidèle observation des préceptes de l’Évangile”. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>32</sup> “Autour d’une table ronde, figure parfaite, qui n’admettait ni premier ni dernier, s’asseyaient, pour participer au banquet fraternel, les Parfaits chevaliers admis dans cette communauté de preux, de purs et de courtois, n’ayant au cœur que droiture et loyauté, avec l’amour de Dieu et de leur dame. On n’y était reçu qu’après avoir subi de longues et de nombreuses épreuves, qu’après s’être engagé au secret sous la foi des serments les plus inviolables. On peut se faire une idée du mode de réception et des précautions prises contre l’indiscrétion par ce qui se pratique aujourd’hui dans la franc-maçonnerie, qui n’est que la massenie continuée. Les grades, qui d’abord ne furent qu’un nombre de trois, se trouvèrent ensuite portés à sept, puis à trente-trois, lors de la fusion opérée par Dante entre les Albiges, les Templiers et les Gibelins. Aussi la Comédie procède par 3 et 33”. *Ibid.*, p. 73-74.

<sup>33</sup> See René Guénon, *Symboles de la Science sacrée*, p. 92; René Guénon, *L’Ésotérisme de Dante*, p. 39-40.

<sup>34</sup> “Tout le monde sait que Dante était un gibelin, mais on se borna à voir en lui un partisan de l’empereur jusqu’au jour où Rossetti en Angleterre et Aroux en France dévoilèrent l’hérésie du poète. Toutefois M. Rossetti, dont je n’ai pas lu les ouvrages, alla trop loin, à en juger sur le seul titre *De l’esprit antipapale qui produisit la réforme*”. Joséphin Péladan, *Les Idées et les formes. La doctrine de Dante*, Paris, Sansot, 1908, p. 71-72.

Thus, Péladan gives his opinion on Gabriele Rossetti's research work, although he has not read it, and he repeats this concept elsewhere: "I do not know the work of Rossetti, but the title indicates that he has partly guessed the Dantean enigma".<sup>35</sup>

In *Le Secret des Troubadours*, Péladan refers again to Gabriele Rossetti and his *Mistero dell'Amor Platonico* to speak of the troubadours' doctrine of esoteric love:

Rossetti consecrated five volumes to his *Mistero dell'Amor Platonico* in the Middle Ages; nothing can reduce such a topic to an exposition of few pages. Sexual love has never had the possibility to become a religion with rites, hierarchy, missionaries and martyrs. The lady of the troubadours is the doctrine; when it has a name of place, she is lady diocese, lady-parish, lady-lodge. One thus understands why these troubadours who are more in love at eighty-one, and that the profession of Roman orthodoxy (marriage) does not prevent affiliation (love); finally, that a lady-lodge can have two worshippers (pastors) and that one worshipper (pastor) can serve two lady-parishes.<sup>36</sup>

Rossetti's name is mentioned once again by Péladan when he speaks of a secret of the troubadours, jealously guarded by the Vatican:

In the library of the Vatican, there are some archives which are very secret and which have never been communicated to anyone [...]. They contain the real secret of the troubadours of Provence and of the heretics of Aquitaine. The Church has continued, through a secular willingness of silence, the extermination of Innocent III and the abolition of the Templars.

Franciscan and Dominicans have worked with vigorous zeal to extinguish a Christianity that had its heroes, its martyrs and inspired the greatest poets of our era. The romans of Chivalry lead, spiritually, to *The Divine Comedy*. Someone, Rossetti, father of the Pre-Raphaelite painter, Aroux, an unknown erudite, have hinted at the dream of justice, of charity and of beauty that was conceived in Occitania and from there it spread everywhere, by enchanting the imaginations.

Mistral, in reviving the Provençal language, has not wanted to give life to the Provençal idea and he has been wise.

Our time could not understand any longer an anticlerical faith, an independent mysticism. But the course of the historical researches will fatally lead the scholars to discover that Western freedom of thought flourished first in the Midi of France, which inspired the genius of the Middle Ages who was apparently orthodox, and that the Troubadours were Christian dissidents whose doctrine was immortalised by the greatest among the modern poets and the troubadours: Dante Alighieri.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> "Je connais mal les in-8° de Rossetti, mais son titre seul indique qu'il a deviné en partie l'énigme dantesque". *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>36</sup> "Rossetti consacra cinq volumes à son *Mystère de l'amour platonique* au Moyen Âge; nul ne réduira un tel sujet à quelques pages. L'amour sexuel n'a jamais pu devenir une religion avec des rites, une hiérarchie, des missionnaires et des martyrs. La dame des troubadours est la doctrine; lorsqu'elle porte un nom de lieu elle est dame diocèse, dame-paroisse, dame-loge. On comprend ainsi ces troubadours plus amoureux à quatre-vingt-un ans, et que la profession d'orthodoxie romaine (mariage) n'empêche pas l'affiliation (l'amour); enfin qu'une dame-loge peut avoir deux adorateurs (pasteurs) et qu'un adorateur (pasteur) peut desservir deux dames-paroisses". Joséphin Péladan, *Le Secret des troubadours: de Parsifal à Don Quichotte*, Paris, Sansot, 1906, p. 68.

<sup>37</sup> "Il y a, dans la bibliothèque du Vatican, des archives très secrètes qui n'ont jamais été communiquées à personne, et qui se sont augmentées de tout ce que le dernier légat emporta du Palais des Papes d'Avignon. Elles contiennent

When reading Péladan, we seem to read Gabriele Rossetti. The thousands of pages written by Rossetti are summarised in a few pages by Péladan. In *La Doctrine de Dante*, we find the same themes and characteristics that I highlighted in Chapter VI in relation to the esoteric rose of Dante and of the *Fedeli d'Amore*, such as the symbolism of the number nine,<sup>38</sup> or the woman as an allegory of wisdom,<sup>39</sup> as well as the tortures suffered by other love poets such as Cecco D'Ascoli,<sup>40</sup> or the torture that Cardinal Bertrando del Poggetto wanted to inflict on Dante (which I mentioned in Chapter II). To explain Dantean esoteric love with examples, Péladan quotes an entire passage from the *Vita Nova* that evokes the rose: the “*succisa rosa*”, the “cut rose”.<sup>41</sup> But he goes beyond the Middle Ages up to the Renaissance, from the esotericism of the Middle Ages to the Renaissance represented by Rabelais,<sup>42</sup> devoting an entire work to him: *La Clé de Rabelais* (The Key of Rabelais, 1905).<sup>43</sup> Through Rabelais, Péladan links the Renaissance and the Middle Ages. “If we were to study the hidden meaning of medieval literature, the Renaissance would cease to seem a sudden resurrection of Antiquity”,<sup>44</sup> writes Péladan in *Le Secret des troubadours. De Parsifal à Don Quichotte*, and adds:

Neo-Platonism already penetrates deeply into our adventure novels, and when it shows itself openly under the Medici, it is because they provide it with effective protection against the Roman Inquisition.

Gemistus Plethon and Marsilio Ficino are the official doctors of ancient Albigenianism, as Dante is its prodigious Homer.<sup>45</sup>

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le véritable secret des troubadours de Provence et des hérétiques d'Aquitaine. L'Église a continué, par une séculaire volonté de silence, l'extermination d'Innocent III et l'abolition des Templiers.

Franciscains et Dominicains ont travaillé avec un zèle ardent à éteindre et à déshonorer un christianisme qui eut des héros, des martyrs et inspira le plus grand poème de notre ère. Les romans de chevalerie, spirituellement, aboutissent à la *Divine Comédie*. Quelques-uns, Rossetti, le père du peintre préraphaélite, Aroux, un érudit méconnu, ont aperçu quel rêve de justice, de charité et de beauté fut conçu en Occitanie et de là se répandit par l'univers, enchantant les imaginations.

Mistral, en ressuscitant la langue provençale, n'a pas voulu rendre la vie à l'idée provençale et il a été sage.

Notre temps ne comprendrait plus une foi anticléricale, un mysticisme indépendant. Mais le cours des recherches historiques amènera fatalement les érudits à découvrir que la libre pensée occidentale florit d'abord dans le midi de la France, qu'elle inspira le génie du Moyen Âge d'apparence si orthodoxe et que les troubadours étaient des chrétiens dissidents dont la doctrine fut immortalisée par le plus grand des poètes modernes et des troubadours: Dante Alighieri”. *Ibid.*, p. 69-71.

<sup>38</sup> Joséphin Péladan, *Les Idées et les formes. La doctrine de Dante*, p. 6-9.

<sup>39</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 10-26.

<sup>40</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>41</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 41-42.

<sup>42</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>43</sup> Joséphin Péladan, *La Clé de Rabelais: le secret des corporations*, Paris, E. Sansot, 1905. On the esotericism of Rabelais, see Claude Sosthène Grasset d'Orcet, *Le double langage de Rabelais*, Paris, Éditions Édite/ODS, 2015. This edition of Grasset d'Orcet's work contains two chapters from Péladan's book mentioned above, “La Clé de Rabelais” and “Les Songes drolatiques de Rabelais”. *Ibid.*, p. 340-379.

<sup>44</sup> “Si on étudiait le sens caché de la littérature médiévale, la Renaissance cesserait de paraître une subite résurrection de l'Antiquité”. Joséphin Péladan, *Le Secret des Troubadours: de Parsifal à Don Quichotte*, p. 44.

<sup>45</sup> “Le néo-platonisme pénètre déjà profondément nos romans d'aventure, et lorsqu'il se montre ouvertement sous les Médicis, c'est que ceux-ci lui assurent une protection efficace, contre l'inquisition romaine.

Gémisthe Plethon et Marsile Ficin sont les docteurs officiels de l'antique Albigeisme, comme Dante en est le prodigieux Homère”. *Ibid.*, p. 45.



The Neo-Platonism of Plethon and Ficino, patronised by the Medici, conceals Dante's doctrine which, according to Péladan, was the same as the doctrine of the Albigensians and the troubadours, and a mystical one as he clearly states: "the troubadours are mystics, not sexual poets".<sup>46</sup> This mystical doctrine is said to have been kept within a "gnostic chain", as Péladan calls it in a passage of *Le Secret des Troubadours*, where he mentions many of the writers I covered in the first part of my thesis, such as Joachim of Fiore, Cecco d'Ascoli, Dante and the authors of *The Romance of the Rose*:

To the mystical movement of a Joachim de Flore, a Jean d'Oliva, to the Little Brethren, to the Beghards, one must add the pullulation of secret societies. Rutebeuf, the novel of the *Rose* and that of *Renart* read between the lines, are clear example of heresy. The Gnostic chain that has its first ring among the Neo-Platonists continues without interruption until the Ghibellines. Cecco d'Ascoli, a friend of Dante's who was first condemned to give up his books and attend the Dominicans' sermon every Sunday, was burnt for his poem *Acerba* and yet he was only guilty of critical allusions, whereas the *Divine Comedy* is a divine diatribe.

The troubadours were not the harmless poets we suppose; their *Sirventes* hide more than one secret. Fauriel has noted that only one, a unique troubadour had been favourable to the crusaders of orthodoxy. The gay science was far beyond the riddles. When Ulderich Utter said: *In Italia quaerite Turcas*, he was denouncing doctrines of oriental origin. The Order of the Temple had the most extraordinary advocate, the poet of the *New Life*. The lyricism enveloped the heterodoxy so well that the popes accepted as a religious poem the most appalling pamphlet ever written against any clergy, if we except Michelangelo's Christ in the Sistine, whose inspiration is identical to the Ghibelline.<sup>47</sup>

Péladan also speaks about another subject that I analysed in the chapters of the first part of my thesis: the Courts of Love, in relation to the concept of amorous initiation and "Provençal esotericism",<sup>48</sup> and mentions the "sect of love":

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<sup>46</sup> "Les troubadours sont des mystiques, et non des lyriques sexuels". *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>47</sup> "Au mouvement mystique d'un Joachim de Flore, d'un Jean d'Oliva, aux fraticelles, aux bégards, il faut ajouter le pullulement des sociétés secrètes. Rutebeuf, le roman de la *Rose* et celui du *Renart* lus entre les lignes, offrent de véritables cours d'hérésie. La chaîne gnostique qui a son premier anneau parmi les néo-platoniciens se continue sans interruption jusqu'aux Gibelins. Cecco d'Ascoli, ami du Dante condamné d'abord à se défaire de ses livres et à assister tous les dimanches au sermon des dominicains, fut brûlé pour son poème *Acerba* et cependant il n'était coupable que d'allusions critiques, tandis que la *Divine Comédie* est une divine diatribe.

Les troubadours n'étaient pas les poètes anodins qu'on suppose; leurs *Sirventes* cachent plus d'un secret. Fauriel a remarqué qu'un seul, un unique troubadour avait été favorable aux croisés de l'orthodoxie. La gaie science dépassait de beaucoup de coudées la rimaillerie. Lorsque Ulderich Utter disait: *In Italia quaerite Turcas*, il dénonçait des doctrines de source orientale. L'ordre du Temple eut le plus extraordinaire des avocats, le poète de la *Vie nouvelle*. Le lyrisme enveloppa si bien l'hétérodoxie que les papes acceptèrent comme poème religieux le plus épouvantable pamphlet qui ait jamais été écrit contre aucun clergé, si on en excepte le Christ de Michel-Ange à la Sixtine, identique d'inspiration gibeline". *Ibid.*, p. 20-22.

<sup>48</sup> "Ésotérisme provençal". *Ibid.*, p. 22-23. The whole passage is the following: "Heresy is an abscess of faith. Nowadays no one would be passionate about a doctrinal matter; the best scholars refuse to believe in a Provençal esotericism and teach that the courts of love were simply the blue salons of Arthenice in the twelfth century.

The oldest map of the Tendre was seen in the four degrees of the Albigensian initiation: hesitating, praying, listening and being a friend; we have seen that the lady makes coquettish demands of the knight before granting before granting him her amorous grace. Fauriel ingenuously gives this as a usage of the thirteenth century, the fact of devoting oneself to the worship of a lady by a vow similar to the vows of religion" ("L'hérésie est un abcès

Let us not forget, in this study, that the Inquisition was created by Innocent III to fight against the Albigensians, and that it took no less than a crusade of extermination to reassure the Papacy. This sect, so powerful that it pushed the Church into such a defence, counted all the troubadours as followers. Their poems, under the guise of novels, tell only religious stories.<sup>49</sup>

In particular, Péladan refers to the love cult of a French city, “Toulouse, home of the cult”. More specifically, he refers to the Love Sect of Toulouse when he speaks of William IX, Count of Poitiers: “Love here means the religion of love to which William had affiliated himself with the avid purpose of conquering Toulouse, home of the sect”.<sup>50</sup> This recalls Gabriele Rossetti, when he speaks of William IX and the sect of Love which he probably belonged to. Thus, Péladan appears to transpose Gabriele Rossetti’s theories into literary form.

### *From the Platonic rose to the Sumerian rose of Péladan*

Like the *Fedeli d’Amore* and the troubadours of the Middle Ages, Péladan’s rose is linked to the esoteric doctrine of love. He saw love as initiation, an absolute and spiritual love, which would lead to the primitive androgyny that allows the individual to emerge, as he writes in a work entirely devoted to androgyny, *De l’Androgyne*: “the androgyne transports us out of time and place, out of the passions, into the domain of the Archetypes, the highest domain that our thoughts can reach”.<sup>51</sup>

There is one work in particular in which the theme of androgyny is combined with the Italian culture of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: the play *Le Prince de Byzance* (1896). Although the title clearly refers to the eastern city of Byzantium, the location of the action in this work is Apulia, in particular, the two cities of Lecce and Taranto. One of the two protagonists clearly evokes the lineage with the tradition of the *Fedeli d’Amore*: Cavalcanti. The Prince of Byzantium is the story of a princess, Antonia Tarras, who does not know her true identity. Before moving to Taranto, Antonia Tarras lives in the convent of St. George in Lecce,

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de la foi. Actuellement personne ne se passionnerait pour une matière doctrinale; les meilleurs érudits refusent créance à un ésotérisme provençal et enseignent que les cours d’amour étaient simplement les salons bleus d’Athénice du XII<sup>e</sup> siècle.

On a vu la plus ancienne carte du Tendre dans les quatre degrés de l’initiation albigeoise: hésitant, priant, écouté et ami; on a vu que la dame impose au chevalier des exigences de coquette avant d’octroyer l’amoureuse merci. Fauriel avec ingénuité donne comme usage du XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, le fait de se consacrer au culte d’une dame par un vœu analogue aux vœux de religion”). *Ibid.*, p. 22-23.

<sup>49</sup> “N’oublions pas, dans cette étude, que l’Inquisition fut créée par Innocent III pour lutter contre les Albigeois, et qu’il ne fallut pas moins qu’une croisade d’extermination pour rassurer la Papauté. Cette secte, si puissante qu’elle poussa l’Église à une telle défense, comptait comme fidèles la totalité des troubadours. Leurs poèmes, sous des traits romanesques, ne racontent que des faits d’ordre religieux”. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>50</sup> “L’amour ici veut dire la religion d’amour à laquelle Guillaume s’était affilié dans l’avidité dessein de conquérir Toulouse, foyer de la secte”. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>51</sup> “L’androgyne nous transporte hors du temps et du lieu, hors des passions, dans le domaine des Archétypes, le plus haut où atteigne notre pensée”. Joséphin Péladan, *De l’Androgyne*, Puiseaux, Pardès, 1910, p. 63.

under the male name of Brother Tonio. She lives with the other monks: a woman (Antonia, whose diminutive is Tonia) who leads her life disguised as a man, with a male name (Tonio) and identity. In Taranto, where she becomes a prince (Prince Tonio), she falls in love with Cavalcanti. (An)Tonia/Tonio and Cavalcanti symbolize the two androgynes *par excellence*. *Le Prince de Byzance* is a drama of absolute love, meaning the drama of the “I” which finds its missing part because love is but a journey through the meanders of the mind, a journey in search of the missing part, namely the androgyne who has a feeling of nostalgia that makes him suffer, as Péladan explains: “love is only the effort of the Self to complete and confirm itself”.<sup>52</sup> In this struggle to find ourselves, the esoteric dimension of love in Péladan is symbolised by the rose which, in the love story between Cavalcanti and Tonio/Tonia, expresses the spirituality of the protagonist Tonio/Tonia with its existential anxiety: “I am a prior of the road that walks towards the unknown; I am a prior of the rivers that flow in adventure, prior of the cloud and the wind, prior of the diamonds, of the birds and of the roses”.<sup>53</sup> The rose is but a “walk into the unknown”, towards the initiatory love which is none other than death, an initiatory death. Just like medieval and Renaissance love, the *topos* of love is associated with death, since both protagonists die when they declare their love. The final realisation of love in primitive androgyny coincides with the death of the protagonists. It is an initiation to death through love, a path of elevation by degrees that allows access to the absolute. It is death that permits the definitive union of the two androgynes – a death that leads to ecstasy, as Cavalcanti says: “Delirium! This is death [...] That Antonia merges with Georges; that beyond this double death in one being springs”.<sup>54</sup> It is death that dissolves and destroys all that is material so that one immerses oneself solely in the sphere of spirituality, where opposites cancel each other out. In another work by Péladan, *Les onze chapitres mystérieux du Sépher Bereschit* (The eleven mysterious chapters of Sépher Bereschit, 1894), Aïsch must merge with his Aïscha to achieve primitive androgyny: “so Aïsch, the sensitive intellectual, must forget his androgynous state where he was both Aïsch and Aïscha, that is to say relating to himself, to indulge in her unconscious passion Aïscha, in order to form with him, momentarily, the initial androgyny”.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> “L’amour n’est que l’effort du Moi pour se compléter et se confirmer”. Joséphin Péladan, *Amphithéâtre des sciences mortes. La Science de l’amour: éthique*, p. 35.

<sup>53</sup> “Je suis prier de la route qui marche vers l’inconnu; je suis prier des rivières qui coulent à l’aventure, prier du nuage et du vent, prier des diamants, des oiseaux et des roses”. Joséphin Péladan, *Le Prince de Byzance: drame romanesque en cinq actes*, Paris, Chamuel, 1896, p. 9-10.

<sup>54</sup> “Délire!... Voici la mort... Qu’Antonia se confonde avec Georges; qu’au-delà de ce double trépas en seul être jaillisse”. *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>55</sup> “Aussi Aïsch, l’intellectuel sensible, doit oublier son état androgyne où il était à la fois Aïsch et Aïscha, c’est-à-dire relatif à lui-même, pour se complaire en son inconscient passionnel Aïscha, afin de former avec lui, momentanément, l’androgynat initial”. Joséphin Péladan, *Introduction aux sciences occultes. Les onze chapitres mystérieux du Supérieur Bereschit*, Lausanne, L’Âge d’Homme, 2011, p. 121.

The peculiarity of Péladan's work is to link the Western tradition with the Eastern one, showing a filiation of an esoteric nature between different cultures. For example, Péladan's syncretism leads to the fusion of the *topos* of Platonic love with other traditions, such as the Sumerian one. The setting of Péladan's play *Le Fils des Étoiles*<sup>56</sup> (The Son of the Stars, 1891) was the Sumerian-Akkadian civilization of ancient Babylon, which the author had discovered during the courses held at the "École du Louvre".<sup>57</sup> The play *Le Fils des étoiles* focuses on the figure of Gudea, prince of Girsu around 2140 BCE, considered one of the protagonists of the development of the Sumerian tradition and culture, after the Akkadian occupation. The play consists of three acts: "The Vocation", "The Initiation" and "The Incantation". In this story, the author tells of the "fatality of love"<sup>58</sup> that burdens Izel, the daughter of Goudea,<sup>59</sup> who asks for help from the Archimage (Archimagus) of the city of Erech.<sup>60</sup> She falls in love with a young shepherd, Elohil, who will be initiated by the Archmage into the sacred mysteries. Only when Elohil receives divine wisdom will he finally be worthy of Izel's love. This love is opposed by Izel's father, who does not want his daughter to love the young shepherd. The love between Izel and Elohil is based on the initiatory *topos* of the descent into hell, associated with the goddess Ishtar. In fact, Gudea built a temple to the goddess Ishtar, who was called E-Anna in the Sumerian tradition. E-Anna was an earlier deity than Ishtar, and through a process of mythological assimilation E-Anna became Ishtar, who is an important deity in Mesopotamian mythology.<sup>61</sup> She is the goddess of war, but also of love. She falls in love with Tammuz (the god of spring vegetation but also of hell, chthonic and solar divinity) who will be killed by a boar. She descends to hell to liberate her lover Tammuz. The goddess overcomes many obstacles, but she finally succeeds in bringing Tammuz back to life. From the sidereal point of view, Ishtar is the equivalent of Venus as the evening and morning star. She has a double aspect because she is the daughter of the moon, and therefore its nature changes according to its double appearance, from evening to morning. Considered from the point of view of the morning, it is

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<sup>56</sup> The play *Le Fils des Étoiles* was also performed in the early twentieth century in the Théâtre Ésotérique, which was founded in the 1920s by Paul Castan and the actress Berthe d'Yd, and entirely dedicated to esotericism. Between 1924 and 1930, some sixty plays devoted to the occult were performed. See Marisa Verna, *L'opera teatrale di Joséphin Péladan. Esoterismo e Magia nel Dramma simbolista*, Milan, Vita e Pensiero - Pubblicazioni dell'Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, 2000, p. 185.

<sup>57</sup> In 1882, the "École du Louvre" held courses on Oriental art following the discoveries made in Iraq, in Basra and in Girsu (ancient name of Telloh), between 1877 and 1881, after the excavations carried out by the Consul Ernest de Sarzec. The objects found were exhibited at the Louvre, which set up the Department of Oriental Antiquities. Péladan was a habitué of the Louvre and the lessons he learned in the Oriental tradition inspired many of his works, in particular for the creation of its main character: Mérodack. Marisa Verna, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

<sup>58</sup> "Fatalité d'amour". Joséphin Péladan, *Le Fils des étoiles : pastorale kaldéenne en trois actes*, Paris, Imprimerie Professionnelle Beauvois, 1895, p. 6.

<sup>59</sup> Goudea is the francized form of Gudea.

<sup>60</sup> Erech is a town near Girsu whose original spelling is Erech or Uruk, and not Ereck, which is a form devised by Péladan. See Marisa Verna, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

<sup>61</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 187; Arthur Amiaud, "Sirpourla, d'après les inscriptions de la collection de Sarzec", *Revue Archéologique*, v. XII, July-December 1888, p. 67-85.

the cruel and cold star which announces the day, meaning the arena where people must fight their battles. But it can also be considered at planetary level as the evening star where Ishtar symbolises the love that excites the desire of a man for a woman.<sup>62</sup> In his work *Le Fils des étoiles*, Péladan celebrates the doctrine of eternal love, the mysterious representation of divine truths, through the love story of Izel and Ćlohil, which is an allegory of the love story between Ishtar and Tammuz. The symbolism of the rose features in the discourse of love between Izel and Ćlohil, thus embodying a conception of love linked to the Sumerian tradition, and more specifically to the goddess Ishtar. We could say that a Sumerian-Akkadian Platonism is embodied in the flower of the rose: “A flower, a rose, reopens my eyes. O omen of Istar”,<sup>63</sup> says Ćlohil in *Le Fils des étoiles*.

Thus, in Péladan the esoteric Platonic love of the Western tradition is mixed with the ancient Sumerian tradition. It is an eternal love which, according to Péladan’s syncretism, is in a dimension linked to the stars, where the mystery of love is explained through astrology. But at the basis of this love there is, once again, the concept of initiation, an initiatory love, since the love between Izel and Ćlohil symbolising the love of Tammuz and Ishtar is only possible after the hellish ordeal of death and rebirth that the two protagonists must overcome.<sup>64</sup> In doing so, they give life to divine and eternal love, a love at the threshold of the Absolute, which Péladan calls in another work *Une cœur en peine*, “absolute love”.<sup>65</sup> In *Le Fils des Etoiles*, this “absolute love” acts as an astrological mystery, and it is a Master, as the Archimage says: “Istar presides over heaven at this time. / Tammuz is reborn under his kisses: Love is Master”.<sup>66</sup> Through the love story of Istar and Tammuz, Péladan evokes an initiatory love that leads to a “land of no return”, a concept that is explained in a Babylonian poem dating back to about 650 BCE: “In the land of no return, in the reign of Ereskigal, / Istar, daughter of Sin, offered to go. / She proposed herself the daughter of Sin [to go] / to the house of darkness, the dwelling of Irkalla, / in the house, from which he who enters it does not come out, / for the street from

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<sup>62</sup> On the figure of Ishtar, see Marisa Verna, *op. cit.*, p. 190-191; Giuseppe Furlani, *La Religione babilonese e assira: le divinità*, Bologna, Zanichelli, v. I, 1928, p. 172-176; Giuseppe Furlani, *Miti Babilonesi e assiri*, Florence, Sansoni, 1958, p. 285.

<sup>63</sup> “Une fleur, une rose, rouvre mes yeux. O présage d’Istar”. Joséphin Péladan, *Le fils des étoiles: pastorale kaldéenne en trois actes*, p. 15. The spelling Istar is a poetic modification made by Péladan which transforms the original name: Ishtar. Péladan also wrote an essay on Ishtar: Joséphin Péladan, “Hymne à Ishtar, essai de restauration du lyrisme en l’an 3500 av. J. C. dans le bas Euphrate”, *La Grande Revue de Paris*, 1888. See also Marisa Verna, *op. cit.*, p. 213-214.

<sup>64</sup> See Marisa Verna, *op. cit.*, p. 197-199.

<sup>65</sup> “Amour absolu”. Joséphin Péladan, *La Décadence latine: éthopée. VII. Cœur en peine*, Paris, E. Dentu, 1890, p. 1. *Un cœur en peine* is the seventh novel of the *Décadance Latine*, a work which features the character of Tammuz (symbol of ideal love) who is in love with *Lady Sommerset* (emblem of love-passion), a beautiful and perverse English woman with whom he has an unsatisfactory love affair. Tammuz is defined here as “the alchemist of love” (“l’alchimiste de l’amour”, *ibid.*, p. 204) and as the “lover of love” (“amant de l’amour”, *ibid.*, p. 232).

<sup>66</sup> “Istar préside au ciel, en ce moment. / Tammuz renaît sous ses baisers: l’Amour est maître!” Joséphin Péladan, *Le Fils des étoiles: pastorale kaldéenne en trois actes*, p. 6.

which the path has no return”.<sup>67</sup> Initiation is a journey of no return, and Péladan’s love is a “land of no return”.

*Ad rosam per crucem: the initiatory rose of Péladan*

Whilst James Joyce said he wrote *Dubliners* to spiritually elevate his Irish homeland, Péladan writes his work to regenerate and renew the world through a spiritual refinement of humanity through poetry and art. For Péladan, the laicization of the Western world is at the root of the spleenful suffering of modern people, overwhelmed by the suffering and pain of ordinary life: “reality subjugates ordinary and scarcely developed souls, a sensation in keeping with the species”.<sup>68</sup> This is how Péladan explains the condition of the existential malaise that affects modern man, the man without religion, the man of Nietzsche’s “death of god”.

Péladan sees the occult doctrine of love and the mystical rose as the way to transform people into initiates capable of performing the great alchemical work, namely an act of personal auto-transformation. Individuals thus become the artificers of themselves, through the death of their former persona and the metamorphic creation of a new regenerated one, as Péladan writes in his *Comment on devient Mage*: “man has the duty and the power to create himself a second time, according to the good”, since “the first care of the superior man, as soon as he is conscious of himself, lies in sculpting, in chiselling his moral being: the theory of Christian perfection is none other than the sublimated initiation”.<sup>69</sup> He adds: “one wonders what the purpose of life is: it can only be, for a sentient being, the opportunity and the means to make a masterpiece of that block of soul which God has given him to work”.<sup>70</sup> Through this process of transformation, a person becomes an initiate, and “the occult teaches initiates to prepare their eternity”.<sup>71</sup> Initiates are immortal not because they do not die, since every being is born and dies: they are immortal because they die several times during their lives and, as soon as their deaths become apparent in the course of existence, nothing touches them anymore, neither passions nor emotions nor fear. They become insensitive to the life of this world, and contemplate the mystery of eternity,

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<sup>67</sup> Italian translation. “Nella terra senza ritorno, nel regno d’Ereskigal, / Istar, figlia di Sin, si propose di andare. / Si propose la figlia di Sin [di andare] / nella casa delle tenebre, sede d’Irkalla, / nella casa, dalla quale non esce colui che vi entra, / per la strada dalla quale non ha ritorno l’andata”. In Giuseppe Furlani, *Miti Babilonesi e assiri*, p. 24-25. The poem is kept at the Museum of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. See Marisa Verna, *op. cit.*, p. 214.

<sup>68</sup> “La réalité subjugue les âmes ordinaires et peu développées, sensation conforme à l’espèce”. Joséphin Péladan, *Amphithéâtre des sciences mortes. V. L’occulte catholique*, Paris, Chamuel, 1898, p. 96.

<sup>69</sup> “L’homme a le devoir et le pouvoir de se créer une seconde fois, selon le bien”; “le premier soin de l’homme supérieur, dès qu’il est conscient de lui-même, réside à sculpter, à ciseler son être moral: la théorie de la perfection chrétienne n’est que l’initiation sublimée”. Joséphin Péladan, *Amphithéâtre des sciences mortes. I. Comment on devient mage: éthique*, Paris, Chamuel et Cie, 1892, p. 23.

<sup>70</sup> “On se demande quel est le but de la vie: il ne peut être, pour l’homme qui pense, que l’occasion et le moyen de faire un chef-d’œuvre de ce bloc d’âme que Dieu lui a donné à travailler”. *Ibid.* On the metamorphic vision of life linked to magic, according to Péladan, see Michela Gardini, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

<sup>71</sup> “L’Occulte [...] apprend à l’initié à préparer son éternité”. Joséphin Péladan, *Introduction aux sciences occultes. Les onze chapitres mystérieux du Sépher Bereshit*, p. 63.

the “Rose of Eternity”, as Péladan calls it: “Rose of Eternity, Beauty of Love, are you present! Cross of immortality, effort towards the absolute, rise up!”.<sup>72</sup> The “ineffable rose”<sup>73</sup> is summarised in this passage. The rose of eternity is the rose of love which, through the suffering of the cross, leads us to the absolute: “*Ad rosam per crucem, ad crucem per rosam, in ea, in eis gemmatus resurgam*”,<sup>74</sup> meaning “from the rose by the cross, from the cross by the rose, in her (the rose), in them (the rose and the cross), I resurrect like a precious stone”. In other words, it is through the union of the rose and the cross that we can regenerate ourselves from the suffering of the cross to the ecstatic peace of the rose, or revelation of the Divine.

The symbolism of the rose stands for theophany in Péladan and is related to magic, which consists of a very simple truth made possible through an act of will: “do not look for any other measure of magical power than that of your inner power: nor any other process to judge a being, except for the light it spreads. Perfecting yourself to become luminous, and like the sun, warming up the ideal life around you, this is the mystery of the highest initiation”.<sup>75</sup> The true initiation to magic is practised on oneself, not on others; it is an act of will that modifies the being: this is the magic of Péladan, which has nothing to do with the charlatanism that often infests the world of magic and, more generally, everything that concerns the world of the occult. This knowledge has always existed, according to Péladan, since the beginning of humanity, in the form of a mystery accessible to few people, the initiates:

As long as there have been men, some have devoted themselves to the cult of the mystery in each epoch; they form an uninterrupted succession of beautiful intelligences, sometimes the most beautiful of their race. Their works do not express their individual thoughts, they embody and manifest the scattered appetites around them, prodigious coryphaeus of general feeling. Faust studies the same material that becomes a superstition for the simple.<sup>76</sup>

For Péladan, the author of *Faust*, Goethe, was a man who had pierced the veil dividing the visible world from the invisible one, as Dante and Shakespeare had done: “neither Dante, nor Shakespeare, nor Goethe made evocations, they were wisely content to create eternal images; and in this they were incomparable Magi. To create in the abstract, to create in the souls of men,

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<sup>72</sup> “Rose d’Éternité, Beauté d’Amour, es-tu présente! Croix d’immortalité, effort vers l’absolu, relève-toi!”. Joséphin Péladan, *La Décadence latine: éthopée. VII. Cœur en peine*, p. 275.

<sup>73</sup> “Rose ineffable”. *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 273, 318-319.

<sup>75</sup> “Ne cherche pas d’autre mesure du pouvoir magique que celle de ton pouvoir intérieur: ni d’autre procédé pour juger un être, que la lumière qu’il répand. Se perfectionner pour devenir lumineux, et comme le soleil, échauffer la vie idéale autour de soi, voilà tout le mystère de la plus haute initiation”. Joséphin Péladan, *Amphithéâtre des sciences mortes. I. Comment on devient mage: éthique*, p. 27.

<sup>76</sup> “Depuis qu’il y a des hommes, quelques-uns se sont consacrés au culte du mystère dans chaque époque; ils forment une suite ininterrompue de belles intelligences, parfois les plus belles de leur race. Leurs œuvres n’expriment pas leurs pensées individuelles, ils incarnent et manifestent les appétences éparses autour d’eux, coryphées prodigieuses du sentiment général. Faust étudie la même matière qui se constitue en superstition pour le simple”. Joséphin Péladan, *Introduction aux sciences occultes. Les onze chapitres mystérieux du Sépher Bereshit*, p. 66.

invigorating reflections of the mystery, this is the great work”.<sup>77</sup> This great work achieved on the self is symbolised in Péladan by the “rose mystique”<sup>78</sup>, the “mystical rose”, associated with Love, and the “Rose of Love” with the cathartic and initiatory pains of the Cross:

Rose of Love, frame the dreaded cross with a smile.  
Cross of salvation, purify with tears, the too earthly rose.  
Rose of the body, blossom grace on the symbol of accepted torment.  
Cross of renunciation, sublimates life, soothes its dizziness and consecrates the Rose.  
Entangle, a very perfect symbol: charity with beauty, thought with form; and may the Rose garland the cross, and may the cross live in the heart of the Rose.<sup>79</sup>

The rose, love, cross and suffering represent the way to Holy Wisdom, the “Saint Rose”, the “eternal flower” (“fleur éternelle”), the flower that acts as an initiation, the initiatory flower that leads to Holy Wisdom, as one can read in *La Queste du Graal*: “you are elected to suffer, Bélit, adorn yourself with your pain; you are elected to love, prepare to moan. Believe and hope in this cross; oh! rose of love, she alone, by making your tears flow, will germinate your beauty into an eternal flower”.<sup>80</sup> And again, about this initiatory “rose of love”, Péladan writes in *Istar*: “one day, after suffering, after weeping, after crying out, you will wear the black and white Cross starred by the Holy Rose”.<sup>81</sup> He evokes “the Holy Rose”, underlining that “the holy rose, blooming and colossal, embraces and kisses with its pious volutes the redeeming Cross”.<sup>82</sup>

For Péladan, this mystical rose finds its *raison d'être* in Christianity which, in turn, finds its *raison d'être* in occultism. Occultism and Catholicism go hand in hand for Péladan, and his mystical rose is addressed to the “mother of Jesus”, “mère de Jésus”,<sup>83</sup> the Virgin Mary: “I will be crowned by you as a winner, humble soldier of your cult; and in your feasts you will give me the banner of stars to carry, where the *superexcellence* of the mystical rose shines and groans”.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> “Ni Dante, ni Shakespeare, ni Goethe ne faisaient d'évocations, et tous trois savaient l'Occulte; ils se sont sagement contentés de créer des images éternelles; et en cela ils furent des Mages incomparables. Créer dans l'abstrait, créer dans l'âme des hommes, des reflets vivifiants du mystère, voilà le grand œuvre”. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>78</sup> Joséphin Péladan, *La Queste du Graal: proses lyriques de l'éthopée, la décadence latine*, Paris, Chamuel, 1894, p. 89.

<sup>79</sup> “Rose d'Amour, encadrez de sourire la redoutable croix. / Croix du salut, purifiez de larmes, la rose trop terrestre. / Rose du corps, épanouis la grâce sur le symbole du supplice accepté. / Croix du renoncement, sublimise la vie, apaise ses vertiges et consacre la Rose. / Emmêlez, symbole très parfait: la charité au beau, la pensée à la forme; et que la Rose enguirlande la croix, et que la croix vive au cœur de la Rose”. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>80</sup> “Tu es élue à souffrir, Bélit, pare-toi de ta douleur; tu es élue à aimer, prépare-toi à gémir. Crois et espère en cette croix; oh! rose d'amour, elle seule, en faisant couler tes larmes, gemmera ta beauté en une fleur éternelle”. *Ibid.*, p. 195.

<sup>81</sup> “Un jour, après souffrir, après pleurer, après crier, tu porteras la Croix noire et blanche qu'étoile la Rose sainte”. *Ibid.*, p. 208.

<sup>82</sup> “La rose sainte, épanouie et colossale, enserme et baise de ses pieuses volutes la Croix rédemptrice”. *Ibid.*, p. 276.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>84</sup> “Je serai couronné par vous comme un vainqueur, humble soldat de votre culte; et vous me donnerez, dans vos fêtes, à porter la bannière d'étoiles où rougeoie, où gemmisse la super excellence de la rose mystique”. *Ibid.*, p. 89.



In order to understand the esotericism of love and the initiatory rose in Péladan, we need to understand the occult significance of the woman and her link with the concept of pain. A good example of this is given by Péladan in *La Prométhéide*, where he introduces the figure of Pandora – the *femme fatale* who helps us to understand the mystery of love, which is explained by recognising the importance of pain for the evolution of humanity. In fact, according to Péladan, human evolution needs pain, and Pandora imparts this lesson which is the basis for the spiritual improvement of individuals.<sup>85</sup> In *La Prométhéide*, Prometheus announces to men the path they must follow in order to evolve:

Mortals, raise your hearts!  
I wanted to put you out of your suffering,  
but it is the means to immortality!  
[...]  
So receive the attractive pain,  
Mortals, here the woman!<sup>86</sup>

Woman is an “attractive pain” (“douleur attrayante”), and the only way to immortality is through suffering, Baudelaire’s “noblesse unique”: “man’s sorrow is a nobleness”.<sup>87</sup> Suffering is the path that leads to God. It is through the journey of pain that the divinity manifests itself:

Absolute, unique God!  
Finally I have found you; I know where you are hidden:  
In the allowed suffering and in the sacrifice.<sup>88</sup>

Pain for Péladan is the “the very law of evolution”,<sup>89</sup> and the initiate is like a super-human who knows how to suffer: “the superman is the one who knows how to suffer and who relieves the suffering around him: synonymous with voluntary holocaust. The superman, far from using his human rights, imposes superhuman duties on himself. Selfishness, vanity, wickedness, this is man. Selflessness, generosity, humility, charity, this is the superman”.<sup>90</sup> According to Péladan,

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<sup>85</sup> On the concept of “salvific suffering” associated with the figure of Pandora (and with women, more generally) in Péladan, see Marisa Verna, *op. cit.*, p. 267-312.

<sup>86</sup> “Mortels, haussez vos cœurs ! / Je voulais vous arracher à la souffrance, / mais elle est le moyen de l’immortalité ! [...] / Recevez donc la douleur attrayante, / Mortels, voici la femme”. Joséphin Péladan, *La Prométhéide: trilogie d’Eschyle en quatre tableaux, avec un portrait en taille douce*, Paris, Chamuel, 1895, p. 47.

<sup>87</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, p. 14-15. We find this concept of pain as an “attractive form” in *Comment on devient fée* (How one becomes a fairy), where Péladan writes: “the accepted pain is the whole matter of becoming human, and love appears the providential and attractive form of pain” (“la douleur acceptée est toute la matière du devenir humain, et l’amour apparaît la forme providentielle et attrayante de la douleur”). Joséphin Péladan, *Amphithéâtre des sciences mortes. II. Comment on devient fée: érotique*, Paris, Chamuel, A. Messein, 1892, p. VII.

<sup>88</sup> “Absolu, Dieu unique ! / Enfin je t’ai trouvé; je sais où tu te caches: / dans la souffrance consentie et dans le sacrifice”. Joséphin Péladan, *La Prométhéide : trilogie d’Eschyle en quatre tableaux, avec un portrait en taille douce*, p. 135-136.

<sup>89</sup> “La loi même de l’évolution”. Joséphin Péladan, *Origine et esthétique de la tragédie*, Paris, E. Sansot, 1905, p. 37.

<sup>90</sup> “Le surhomme est celui qui sait souffrir et qui soulage la souffrance autour de lui: synonyme d’holocauste volontaire. Le surhomme loin d’user de ses droits humains s’impose des devoirs surhumains. Égoïsme, vanité,

man must become a superman since he must face invisible forces. He stresses, in fact, that humanity's destiny is managed by unknown entities that he defines as "our invisible drivers"; moreover, we must confront the law of chance:

Our destinies are played out in unknown hands; we lose without having put into play; and the Lords of Baux had a proud motto: "By chance".

"By chance", but yet in our immortal soul there is something strong and that fate does not break us to desire the chimeras and dreams that the earth does not bear; and always taunted by the sublime sting, driven by God, we walk a path where, constantly disappointed, hope, heavenly thistle, is incessantly reborn; and docile to our invisible drivers we go from desire to desire, shouting: "by chance!"<sup>91</sup>

This passage sums up human existence, divided between the torments of life managed by occult and invisible forces and the awareness that, although the body is mortal, the soul is immortal. This is where human beings must continue their search during life, must aim at the immortal soul, to what Péladan calls the "Rose of eternity", which reminds Dante's "eternal rose".

Péladan's rose can have a double meaning, as in the case of the Medieval *Fedeli d'Amore* where the word "love", "woman" or "rose" could have different meanings. It can have a mystical meaning, namely the dimension that I have explored in previous chapters. Here, it is an esoteric knowledge conveyed by the initiatory symbolism of the rose. But the rose in Péladan's work is sometimes a symbol referring to the initiatory Order of the Rosicrucians. In *L'Art idéaliste et mystique, précédé de la réfutation de Taine* (1909),<sup>92</sup> precisely in the passage where Sigismondo Malatesta is mentioned and the Tempio Malatesta, Péladan refers to the coat of arms of the elephant and the rose. As Marisa Verna has shown, this rose associated with the image of the elephant is a clear reference to the Rosicrucian Initiatory Order, described by Péladan as an Order belonging to a "special mysticism" ("mysticisme spécial").<sup>93</sup> Malatesta,

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méchanceté, c'est l'homme. Désintéressement, générosité, humilité, charité, c'est le surhomme". Joséphin Péladan, *L'Allemagne devant l'humanité*, Paris, E. de Boccard, 1916, p. 14.

<sup>91</sup> "Nos destinées se jouent en des mains inconnues; nous perdons et gagnons sans avoir mis au jeu; et les seigneurs des Baux avaient fière devise: 'Au hasard'".

'Au hasard', mais pourtant en notre âme immortelle quelque chose de fort et que le sort ne brise pas nous pousse à désirer les chimères et les rêves que la terre ne porte pas; et taonnés toujours par l'aiguillon sublime, poussés par Dieu, nous marchons un chemin où déçu constamment, l'espoir, chardon céleste, renaît incessamment; et nous sentant l'enjeu de parties formidables entre de plus grands que nous, dociles à nos conducteurs invisibles, nous allons de désir en désir, en criant: 'au hasard!'" Joséphin Péladan (princesse A. Dinska), *Étrennes aux dames. Le Livre du désir*, Paris, Librairie des auteurs modernes, 1885, p. 12. Péladan wrote this book under the pseudonym of "Princess A. Dinska".

<sup>92</sup> See Marisa Verna, "Sigismondo Malatesta, un criminale platonico", *L'Analisi Linguistica e Letteraria*, v. 26, n. 3, 2018, p. 89-90. See also Michela Gardini, "Il Tempio Malatestiano tra il sacro e il profano: lo sguardo di Joséphin Péladan e Henry de Montherlant", *L'Analisi Linguistica e Letteraria*, v. 26, n. 3, 2018, p. 49-59.

<sup>93</sup> The full passage in which Péladan refers to "special mysticism" is as follows: "when Sigismondo Malatesta brings back from Morea the ashes of Gemistos Plethon, the revealer of Plato, when he prepares magnificent tombs for his residents and honours the culture as others honour holiness, when he built the Malatesta Temple, he does not do pagan work. The man who puts the elephant and the rose in his coat of arms is neither epicurean nor positivist: he belongs to a special mysticism. For him there are sacred things and men, but these things and men are not those generally revered. This excommunicate, whom the Bull of 1461 called the 'prince of traitors, enemy of Gods and men', practises an ardent religion: humanism. This religion does not prevent him from murdering his

according to Péladan, belongs to this “special mysticism” associated with the symbol of the rose, which refers to a Neo-platonic tradition linking Plethon and Plato. The rose is a mystical symbol, also a symbol of the Rosicrucian Order, both of which are present in Péladan.

The rose is the flower of recognition for the members of the Rosicrucian Order. In fact, the day after the opening of the Rosicrucian Salons on 10 March 1892, the Rosicrucians met in the Chapel of the Virgin at Notre-Dame, and each one displayed a rose, the symbol of the Rosicrucian brotherhood.<sup>94</sup> Moreover, on the occasion of the first Rosicrucian exhibition, Péladan stressed the importance of the symbolism of the rose: “our mission began the day blasphemy became king: for chivalry to appear and honour and serve the Ideal: imperfect and sinful, let us at least be brave; that the Rose of shapes and colours becomes the Tabernacle, and the redeeming Cross will take pleasure in it”.<sup>95</sup>

### *The war of the two roses and the Rosa Mystica by Stanislas de Guaita*

In 1890, Péladan abandoned the Kabbalistic Rosicrucian Order and established the Catholic Order of the Rose+Cross. The resignations of the Sâr caused a scandal, which the press called the “Guerre des deux Roses” (War of the two Roses), between the Kabbalistic Rosicrucian Order of Stanislas de Guaita and the Catholic Rosicrucian Order of Péladan.<sup>96</sup> His loyalty to Catholicism was, in fact, one of the reasons that caused Péladan to leave the Kabbalistic Rosy-Cross Order. He did not agree with the anti-Catholic (and excessively

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wife, raping the lady that he meets and killing her though she resists. Sigismondo is a criminal, but he believes in Plato, not in the gods of Athens, who only represent to him forms to express his dream of beauty” (“lorsque Sigismond Malatesta rapporte de Morée les cendres de Gémiste Pléthon, le révélateur de Platon, lorsqu’il prépare des tombeaux magnifiques à ses pensionnaires et honore la culture comme d’autres la sainteté, lorsqu’il élève le Tempio Malatesta, il ne fait pas œuvre païenne. L’homme qui met dans son blason l’éléphant et la rose n’est ni épicurien ni positiviste: il appartient à un mysticisme spécial. Pour lui existent des choses et des hommes sacrés, mais ces choses et ces hommes sont autres que ceux de la vénération générale. Cet excommunié, que la bulle de 1461 appelle ‘prince des traîtres, ennemi des Dieux et des hommes’, pratique une religion ardente: l’humanisme. Elle ne le gêne point pour assassiner sa femme, violer la dame qu’il rencontre et la tuer même si elle résiste, Sigismond est un criminel, mais il croit à Platon, non aux dieux d’Athènes qui ne lui représentent que des formes propres à exprimer son rêve de beauté”). Joséphin Péladan, *L’Art idéaliste et mystique, précédé de la réfutation de Taine*, Paris, E. Sansot et Cie, 1909, p. 59-60. Péladan’s essay, *L’Art idéaliste et mystique*, was published for the first time in 1894.

<sup>94</sup> See Michela Gardini, *op. cit.*, p. 15. Christopher McIntosh also confirms the importance of the rose as a symbol of recognition for the members of the Rosicrucian Order created by Péladan: “the order’s meetings took place in Péladan flat in the Rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs, where he officiated dressed in a monk’s robe with a rose cross on the chest”. Christopher McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians*, p. 95.

<sup>95</sup> “Notre mission a commencé du jour où le blasphème devint roi: qu’une chevalerie paraisse pour honorer et servir l’Idéal: imparfaits et pécheurs, soyons au moins des preux; que la Rose des formes et des couleurs devienne le Tabernacle, et la Croix rédemptrice s’y complaira”. Joséphin Péladan in *Catalogue du Salon de la Rose+Croix: Geste esthétique (10 mars au 10 avril)*, Paris, Galerie Durand-Ruel, 1892, p. 10.

<sup>96</sup> On the war of the two roses, see Ida Morello, *Esoterismo e letteratura fin de siècle*, p. 38; Jean-Pierre Bayard, *La Symbolique de la Rose-Croix*, p. 210-211; Christopher McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians*, p. 94-95; Jean-Pierre Laurant, *op. cit.*, p. 141-142; Sébastien Clerbois, *L’Ésotérisme et le symbolisme belge*, p. 39-40, 82; Christophe Beaufils, *Le Sâr Péladan, 1858-1918: biographie critique*, Paris, Aux amateurs de livres, 1986, p. 69-114; Christophe Beaufils, *Joséphin Péladan (1858-1918). Essai sur une maladie du lyrisme*, p. 157-331.

Buddhist) approach taken by the Kabbalistic Rosy-Cross. For Guäita, Catholicism had nothing to do with occultism, whilst for Péladan, occultism goes hand in hand with Catholicism; thus, the Catholic faith and occultism complement each other: religion explains itself through occultism. However, the two initiatory Orders, of Guäita and of Péladan, did agree on one point: the rose of Dante and the rose of *The Romance of the Rose* were the avatar of the Rosicrucian rose of the nineteenth century. In fact, notwithstanding the split between Guäita and Péladan, the Supreme Council of the Kabbalistic Rosy-Cross Order confirmed the importance of Dante and *The Romance of the Rose* by Guillaume de Lorris in the initiatory lineage linking the Middle Ages to the Rosicrucians of the nineteenth century.<sup>97</sup> The document begins with confirmation of the resignation by Péladan (“Considering that a resigning member of the said Council, Mr. JOSÉPHIN PÉLADAN, founded, in August 1890, a schismatic sect, under the name of Intellectual Third Order of the Catholic Rose-Cross”)<sup>98</sup> and specifies “the essence of the Rose-Cross and the trends of Rosicrucian teaching in all periods”.<sup>99</sup> Therefore, according to the document drawn up by the Supreme Council of the Rose-Cross Kabbalistic Order (composed of Stanislas de Guäita, Papus, Barlet, Paul Adam, Julien Lejay and Oscar Wirth), the Rose-Cross has existed in every era, and in the Middle Ages the two pillars of the Rosicrucian tradition were Dante’s *Comedy* and *The Romance of the Rose*: “what we can already state is that the Rose † Cross, whose constitutive emblems refer us to the poems of Dante and Guillaume de Lorris, operated for a long time in the shadows, before manifesting itself through the works of today”.<sup>100</sup>

Gabriele Rossetti, as we have seen throughout the first part of this thesis, maintained that the Rosicrucianism of the Renaissance and the nineteenth century had its origins in the work of Dante and *The Romance of the Rose*. Péladan and Guäita, even though they were adversaries after the split, agreed that Dante’s rose was the same rose of the nineteenth century Rosicrucian occult tradition. This idea was shared by other figures in the French esoteric context in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, such as Paul Sédir and René Guénon, as Susanna Åkermann points out: “Paul Sédir and René Guénon argue that the Rose symbolism of Dante is of Sufi origin and that Dante delivers essentially the same message as that of the

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<sup>97</sup> On the Order of the Kabbalistic Rose-Cross and the Catholic Rose-Cross, as well as the split between Péladan and Guäita, see Jean-Pierre Bayard, *La Symbolique de la Rose-Croix*, p. 210-215; Ida Merello, *Esoterismo e letteratura fin de siècle*, p. 37-38; Jean-Pierre Laurant, *op. cit.*, p. 141-143.

<sup>98</sup> “Considérant qu’un membre démissionnaire dudit Conseil, M. JOSÉPHIN PÉLADAN, a fondé, en août 1890, une secte schismatique, sous le nom de Tiers-ordre intellectuel de la *Rose-Croix catholique*”. *Le Suprême conseil de la Rose-Croix. Ordre kabbalistique de la Rose-Croix*, Paris, Ordre kabbalistique de la Rose-Croix, 1891, p. 1.

<sup>99</sup> “L’essence de la Rose Croix et les tendances de l’enseignement rosicrucien à toutes les époques”. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>100</sup> “Ce qu’il nous est loisible d’affirmer d’ores et déjà, c’est que la Rose † Croix, dont les emblèmes constitutifs nous reportent aux poèmes de Dante et Guillaume de Lorris, a très longtemps fonctionné dans l’ombre, avant de se manifester par des œuvres de plein jour”. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

Rosicrucians”.<sup>101</sup> For Sédir and Guénon, the Rosicrucian rose at the turn of the nineteenth century is the same rose of Dante and of the Sufi tradition.

In terms of this filiation, beyond the ironic question of the war of the two roses between Joséphin Péladan and Stanislas de Guaita, it is important to stress that the literary production of the latter is extremely interesting in terms of the initiatory symbolism of the rose. In fact, Guaita wrote a collection of poems entirely devoted to the rose: *Rosa mystica*.<sup>102</sup> He had already revealed the esoteric significance of the rose in his *Au seuil du Mystère* (On the Threshold of the Mystery),<sup>103</sup> but it is in *Rosa mystica* that he gives this flower all its esoteric and initiatory significance; it is the “cabalistic flower”:

Mystical rose, with a sweet soliciting perfume,  
Flower of ironic love, of mad hope without truce!  
Splendid illusion, blooming on the shore  
That gilds and transfigures an Ideal liar!

Me your dupe? – Well, so be it! Provided that your scent  
Evokes in me the embracing ecstasy of dreams,  
So inattentive to the flight of the brief hours,  
I savour life as a slow taster.

What does the Real matter? – Ranting has its charms:  
My tender candour will have sweet tears  
For the being who is inert to evil and also inert to pleasure;

And, with closed eyes, sniffing the cabalistic flower,  
I will know how to absorb and melt myself, at leisure,  
In the imposing charm of my mystical Dream.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Susanna Åkermann, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>102</sup> Stanislas de Guaita, *Rosa mystica*, Paris, A. Lemerre, 1885.

<sup>103</sup> In *Au seuil du Mystère*, Guaita describes the rose thus: “in the centre, a Christ on the cross in a rose of light: it is the resplendence of the Word or the *Adam Kadmon* [...]; the identity of essence between Man-synthesis and God manifested has never been more boldly revealed” (“au centre, un Christ en croix dans une rose de lumière: c’est le resplendissement du verbe ou de l’Adam Kadmon [...]; c’est l’emblème du Grand Arcane: jamais on n’a plus audacieusement révélé l’identité d’essence entre l’Homme-synthèse et Dieu manifesté”). Stanislas de Guaita, *Essais de sciences maudites. I. Au seuil du Mystère*, p. 104-105.

<sup>104</sup> “Rose mystique, au doux parfum solliciteur, / fleur d’ironique amour, de fol espoir sans trêves! / Illusion splendide, épanouie aux grèves / que dore et transfigure un Idéal menteur! / Moi ta dupe? – Eh bien, soit!... Pourvu que ta senteur / évoque en moi l’extase enlaçante des rêves, / si bien qu’inattentif au vol des heures brèves, / je savoure la vie en lent dégustateur. / Qu’importe le Réel? – Divaguer a ses charmes: / ma candeur attendrie aura de douces larmes / Pour l’être inerte au mal comme inerte au plaisir; / et, les yeux clos, flairant la fleur cabalistique, / je saurai m’absorber et me fondre, à loisir, / dans le charme imposteur de mon Rêve mystique”. Stanislas de Guaita, *Rosa mystica*, p. 65-66.

The rose that Stanislas de Guaita “invites you to pick”<sup>105</sup> in his Preface (where he names Dante and Virgil),<sup>106</sup> is an “esoteric rose”<sup>107</sup> as Barbara Seward remarks. It is a mystical rose that gives poetry its true nature since poetry, according to Guaita, is a creative act of a mystical nature: “mysticism! all the poetry is there”.<sup>108</sup> According to him, poetry has nothing to do with the emotions, passions and feelings of the poet. True poetry is esoteric, steeped in mysticism. And he adds, in his Preface: “mysticism makes the vulgar hate it; and this makes us [mystical poets] outcasts!”.<sup>109</sup> He traces the origins of the idea of mystical poetry to antiquity and to Apuleius. Guaita evokes the filiation between antiquity and modern times expressing himself in verse as follows:

– Staius! Apuleius, and you, Martial goat-foot,  
Decadent poets! Our filial song  
Must vibrate to you, our ancestors of Rome!  
–To you, Claudius! – To you, Juvenal, man  
Whose wrath made Caesar blaze  
The formidable stop, terror of Balthazar!  
– Let us glorify your illustrious names, O Masters of ours!  
May our gratitude, enclosed in the heart of the resounding lines  
Flow away and fly to your tombs  
Sing the pious hymn of the new poets;  
And scatter in abundance, over your cherished ashes,  
Our tributes, woven into flowery wreaths!<sup>110</sup>

Like Péladan, the aim of Guaita’s mystical rose is the elevation of humanity, of human beings who are chained slaves unable to see what only the initiate can see, namely the theophany of the goddess: “men, chained to their foul clay, / do not guess you, wandering through the world, / o goddess, and visible only to the initiates”.<sup>111</sup> The common people cannot know and understand the “Béatrix éternelle”,<sup>112</sup> the “eternal Beatrix”, nor indeed the mystery of esoteric

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<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2. The entire passage is as follows: “The Rose that I invite you to pick... does not bloom on the shores of distant lands... Are you susceptible to vivid emotion of the intellect? And do your favourite thoughts haunt you to the point of sometimes giving you the illusion of reality? - You are therefore a magician, and the Mystic Rose will, if you want it to, bloom in your garden” (“la Rose que je vous invite à cueillir – ami bienveillant qui feuillotez ces pages – ne fleurit pas aux rives des contrées lointaines [...]. Êtes-vous susceptible d’une émotion vive de l’intellect? et vos pensées favoris vous hantent-ils jusqu’à vous donner parfois l’illusion du réel?... – Vous êtes donc magicien, et la Rose mystique ira d’elle-même, pour peu que vous le vouliez, fleurir en votre jardin”). *Ibid.*, p. 2-3.

<sup>106</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>107</sup> Barbara Seward, *The Symbolic Rose*, Dallas, Spring Publications, 1989, p. 78.

<sup>108</sup> “Le mysticisme! toute la poésie est là”. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>109</sup> “Le mysticisme fait haïr du vulgaire; ce qui fait de nous [les poètes mystiques] des proscrits!” *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> “– Stace! Apulée, et toi, chèvre-pieds Martial, / poètes décadents! Notre chant filial / doit vibrer jusqu’à vous, nos ancêtres de Rome! / – Jusqu’à toi, Claudien! – À toi, Juvénal, homme / dont la colère a fait flamboyer sur César / le formidable arrêt, terreur de Balthazar! / – Glorifions vos noms illustres, ô nos Maîtres! / Que notre gratitude, enclose au cœur des mètres / retentissants, s’essore et vole à vos tombeaux / chanter l’hymne pieux des poètes nouveaux; / et répande à foison, sur vos cendres chéries, / nos hommages, tressés en couronnes fleuries!” *Ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>111</sup> “Les hommes, enchaînés à leur argile immonde, / ne te devinent pas, errante par le monde, / o déesse, et visible aux seuls initiés”. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

love to which Guaĩta alludes in his poem *L'Aimant* (The Lover), where he speaks of the “vertiginous lover of the ideal Azure / towards which all noble Being oscillates”. By this he means whoever understands the meaning of true love, of mystical love: “nothing remains of myself: / my true Being has joined, in heaven, / the Lover whom I adore – and who loves me”.<sup>113</sup>

Beyond the literary and poetic aspects of Guaĩta’s love and rose, which are linked to a mystical dimension, it is important to emphasise the influence that the author of the *Rosa mystica* had not only on French *fin-de-siècle* culture and literature, but also on European literature. In Italy, for example, his influence was strongly felt by an author who apparently had nothing to do with the world of *fin de siècle* occultism: Luigi Capuana (1839-1915). The figure of this latter is particularly interesting as he belonged to the literary *Verismo* movement, which can be considered as the extension of French Realism in Italy, and the association between Realist literature and esotericism has been largely ignored by the critics. Notwithstanding this literary oblivion, there has been some excellent work on this subject by Cecilia Gatto Trocchi and Simona Cigliana,<sup>114</sup> who have shown the esoteric dimension of certain authors of the Realism movement, whilst pointing out the relations with the French *fin de siècle* esoteric milieu. Thus, even a writer like Luigi Capuana was interested in the world of occultism. One of the most important influences on Capuana’s work was Stanislas de Guaĩta,<sup>115</sup> and it was he who promised to introduce Capuana to the temple of the so-called *sciences maudites* (the cursed sciences). He also explained occult truths to him, such as the distinction between the concept of the soul (spiritual element), the body (material element) and the astral body (fluidic element), as well as notions about elemental spirits.<sup>116</sup> But beyond Guaĩta’s influence on Capuana, we should note his influence (also of Péladan and, more generally, of the French Rosicrucians in the late nineteenth century) on the English occultist milieu at the turn of the century.<sup>117</sup> In this regard, Susanna Åkermann points out that “Rosicrucian texts were transmitted from Paris and Berlin to London, where by 1888 the Hermetic society of the Golden Dawn established the secret inner circle Ordo Roseae Rubeae et Aureae Crucis”.<sup>118</sup> Åkermann adds that “these groups had a tremendous influence on literary culture”.<sup>119</sup> Thus, English literature was strongly

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<sup>113</sup> “Vertigineux aimant de l’Azur idéal / vers qui tout Être noble oscille” ; “rien ne reste plus de moi-même: / mon Être véritable a rejoint, dans les cieux, / l’aimant que j’adore – et qui m’aime”. *Ibid.*, p. 140-141.

<sup>114</sup> See Cecilia Gatto Trocchi, *Storia esoterica d’Italia*, Casale Monferrato (AL), Piemme, 2001; Simona Cigliana, *Futurismo esoterico. Contributi per una storia dell’irrazionalismo italiano tra Otto e Novecento*, Naples, Liguori Editore, 2002.

<sup>115</sup> On the relations between Luigi Capuana and esotericism, as well as on the influence of Stanislas de Guaĩta on him, see Simona Cigliana, “Introduzione”, in Luigi Capuana, *Mondo occulto*, ed. Simona Cigliana, Catania, Edizioni del Prisma, 1995, p. 9-41.

<sup>116</sup> See Cecilia Gatto Trocchi, *op. cit.*, p. 67-68.

<sup>117</sup> It is worth pointing out the influence exerted by Stanislas de Guaĩta on Oswald Wirth, a Swiss esotericist who was Guaĩta’s secretary and a collaborator of Madame Blavatsky, the Russian occultist who founded the theosophy movement.

<sup>118</sup> Susanna Åkermann, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

influenced by the French occultist tradition represented by Guäita, Péladan, Papus and Eliphas Lévi. Let us think of the influence exerted on Edward Bulwer Lytton, William Butler Yeats and Aleister Crowley, the magician par excellence of the early twentieth century. I will discuss the two latter figures in the following chapters, whilst in this chapter I shall introduce the work of Edward Bulwer Lytton, after outlining what can be called the French “Rosicrucian literature” of the nineteenth century in authors such as Villiers de l’Isle-Adam and Joris-Karl Huysmans.

*The Rosicrucian rose of French literature in the nineteenth century: Évariste Parny, Villiers de l’Isle-Adam and Joris-Karl Huysmans*

The Rose of Péladan and Guäita leads the reader to the discovery of the Rosicrucian tradition. The relations between literature and Rosicrucianism have yet to be fully explored, although they are frequently referred to, especially in studies on Western esotericism. Literature is constantly considered as written evidence of the existence of the Rosicrucian movement, but in the field of literary studies there is, to my knowledge, no research work devoted exclusively to evidence of the Rosicrucian tradition in literary works.<sup>120</sup> In his book *The Rosicrucians*, Christopher McIntosh devotes a chapter to the presence of traces of Rosicrucianism in literature (“The Rosicrucian Adept in Literature”),<sup>121</sup> particularly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. McIntosh focuses on English literature, introducing works that can be defined as “Rosicrucian”: the novel *St. Irvyne, or the Rosicrucian* (1811) by Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Confession of the Kibbo Kift* (1927) by John Hargrave, and *The Rosicrucian* (1930) by Temple Thurston. In addition to studying the English context, McIntosh also outlines the European one. He mentions *Die Rosenkreuzer in Wien* (1852) by Eduard Breier, who speaks of a Rosicrucian lodge linked to subversive activities, the novel *Meister Leonhard* (1916) by Gustav Meyrink, *Moderne Rosenkreuzer* (1907) by the German G. W. Surya (pseudonym of Demeter Georgiewitz-Weitzer) and *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* (1940) by the Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges. In particular, the profile of German literature in the history of Rosicrucianism is undeniable. In previous chapters, I alluded to the links between Rosicrucianism and German literature in authors such as Franz Hartmann in his *An Adventure Among the Rosicrucians* (1887) or Goethe who, in his poem *The Mystery*, mentions the marriage of the rose with the cross: “who married roses to the cross”.<sup>122</sup> And when discussing

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<sup>120</sup> On the relationship between the Rosicrucian tradition and French and European literature, see Piero Latino, “La tradition des Rose-Croix dans les littératures européenne et française du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle”, in *Mondes invisibles*, p. 182-186.

<sup>121</sup> See Christopher McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians*, p. 107-118.

<sup>122</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Mysteries*, in Rudolf Steiner, *Goethe’s Rosicrucian Poem “The Mysteries”*, in Rudolf Steiner, *The Secret Stream. Christian Rosenkreutz and Rosicrucianism. Selected Lectures and Writings*, p. 104.



the presence of Rosicrucian traces in Goethe, one cannot forget to mention the figure of Rudolph Steiner (1861-1925), founder of the theosophical doctrine of Anthroposophy. Steiner was one of the protagonists of Rosicrucianism in the early twentieth century, as well as one of the most important figures of occultism at that time. He was an expert on Goethe's work and revealed its esoteric dimension. Moreover, he also expounded the history of the Rosicrucians and stressed the occult knowledge of the Rosicrucian tradition. Steiner spoke about this in several lectures that are collected in *Theosophie und Okkultismus des Rosenkreuzers*, where he exposes the occult knowledge of the Rosicrucians, which was closely linked to the invisible world.

With regard to French literature, the nineteenth century saw the rise of what can be defined as "Rosicrucian literature". At the turn of the century, Évariste Parny (1753-1814) was one of the first to introduce the Rosicrucian tradition in his poem in twelve songs entitled *Les Rosecroix* (The Rosicrucians, 1808), where the Middle Ages and Rosicrucianism go hand in hand in the context of the battle of Queen Elfrida of England (widow of Chérébert, King of Paris) against the Danes of King Harold. Chant III of the poem *Les Rosecroix* evokes the rose that is married to the cross, like Goethe's Rosicrucian rose:

A great danger threatens our altars.  
To Christians this word alone should suffice.  
But the bold delirium of the brigands  
Spare nothing: fierce and cruel,  
Love still inflames their souls.  
Your value will protect women [...].  
To the armed brave men for heaven and for them  
I offer in their name new scarves;  
The rose shines there under the cross.<sup>123</sup>

Another author who imbues his work with Rosicrucian ideas is Villiers de l'Isle-Adam in his novel *Axël*. The esoteric dimension predominates in Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, to such an extent that Pierre Riffard has defined *Axël* as one of the twelve great literary works of Western esotericism.<sup>124</sup> However, once again, like many authors we have met so far, there are no in-depth studies on this fundamental aspect: the presence of esoteric elements in Villiers de l'Isle-Adam.<sup>125</sup> In her study on the symbolism of the rose, Barbara Seward spoke in terms of the

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<sup>123</sup> "Un grand danger menace nos autels. / À des chrétiens ce mot seul doit suffire. / Mais des brigands l'audacieux délire / n'épargne rien: farouches et cruels, / l'Amour encore envenime leurs âmes. / Votre valeur protégera les femmes [...]. / Au brave armé pour le ciel et pour elles / j'offre en leur nom des écharpes nouvelles; / la rose y brille au-dessous de la croix". Évariste Parny, *Ceuvres complètes. Deuxième volume*, Paris, L'Harmattan, v. II, 2010, p. 137-138. On *Les Rosecroix* by Évariste Parny, see Daniel Madelénat, "Modèles médiévaux et épopée romantique", in *La Fabrique du Moyen Âge au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Représentation du Moyen Âge dans la culture et la littérature française du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, p. 739. On the figure of Évariste Parny, see Catriona Seth, *Évariste Parny (1753-1814). Créole, révolutionnaire, académicien*, Paris, Hermann, 2014.

<sup>124</sup> See Pierre A. Riffard, *op. cit.*, p. 943.

<sup>125</sup> On the esoteric dimension of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's work, see Teresa Di Scanno, *Villiers de l'Isle-Adam e i limiti dell'umano*, Fasano, Schena-Nizet, 1994; Teresa Di Scanno, "Il Grande Iniziato e il tema della fatalità

“occult symbolism of Villiers”<sup>126</sup> that characterises *Axël*’s rose – a work that, as Seward remarks, “gave literary expression to Rosicrucian doctrines”.<sup>127</sup> This novel tells the story of Axël and Sara, two exiles in this world, who are linked to the Rosicrucian tradition. Sara’s words recall the divine origin of the eternal rose: “this royal rose, symbol of my destiny, a kindred and divine *correspondence*”,<sup>128</sup> and she invites Axël (“see, – you who alone can understand me!”)<sup>129</sup> to follow the path of the rose: “pretend we are alone on earth, lost between dream and life, and look at this mysterious flower, Axel! [...] See the unconsolable rose!”.<sup>130</sup>

There is one particular passage where Villiers de l’Isle-Adam, through Sara’s words, refers to the mystical rose, linking it to Dante’s mystical rose:<sup>131</sup>

I remembered, for example, that one of the seers of Humanity had made use of the form of this flower to express in his poetry the sacred, vermilion circles of the paradise of New Hope! – Then in spite of the cold, I could not muse on the mocking pretences of mankind without smiling – when I recalled that the gravest, oh! the most industrious of peoples had fought a century-long fratricidal war over roses.

[*A pause.*] Yes, she was my sole companion and my mysterious love down the long road I walked in pilgrim guise. – I kept my eyes upon the star which shines over your forests, while the other passers-by shouted insults in the twilight! And the dear perfume of this succouring flower revived me until I reached the first large city and sold my pearl and opal necklace of Jews. For until hunger, wakefulness, and sleep exhausted my lonely feet.<sup>132</sup>

In his analysis of this passage, Émile Drougard points out the relationship between the mystical rose of Dante and that of Villiers de l’Isle-Adam, noting that in these words pronounced by Sara the author has borrowed the mystical symbolism of the rose from Éliphas Lévi. Émile Drougan has, in fact, shown analogies with two passages in Lévi’s work, one from *Dogme et*

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nell’*Annonciateur* de Villiers de l’Isle-Adam”, in *Le culture esoteriche nella letteratura francese e nelle letterature francofone. Problemi di lessicologia e lessicografia dal cinquecento al settecento. Atti del XV convegno della Società Universitaria per gli Studi di Lingua e Letteratura Francese. Pavia 1-3 ottobre 1987*, eds. Elisa Biancardi, Margherita Botto, Dario Gibelli, Giorgetto Giorgi, Fasano, Schena Editore, 1989, p. 157-162; Alain Mercier, *Les Sources ésotériques et occultes de la poésie symboliste*, 2 t., Paris, Nizet, t. I, 1969, p. 145-156; *Dictionnaires des sociétés secrètes en Occident*, ed. Pierre Mariel, Paris, Culture, Arts, Loisirs, 1971, p. 453-459; Paolo Mariani, *op. cit.*, p. 81-92.

<sup>126</sup> Barbera Seward, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78. Paul Sédir considers the character Master Janus in *Axël* as a connoisseur of magic, as well as of ancient and evangelical initiation, symbolised by the rose. In particular, he writes: “the real evangelical initiation, so little known after nineteen centuries that scarcely a hundred people follow it in Europe, this doctrine of constant immolation whose faithful walk as if drunk with love among the sick, the poor and the desperate has as its hieroglyph the cold, naked Cross. The union of the two symbols is the rose cross” (“la véritable initiation évangélique, si peu connue après dix-neuf siècles qu’à peine cent personnes la suivent en Europe, cette doctrine d’immolation constante dont le fidèle marche comme ivre d’amour parmi les malades, les pauvres, les désespérés a pour hiéroglyphe la Croix froide et nue. La réunion des deux symboles est la rose crucifère”). Paul Sédir, *op. cit.*, p. XIX. For Sédir, therefore, the true evangelical initiation is represented by the rose cross.

<sup>128</sup> Villiers de L’Isle-Adam, *Axel*, translated by Marilyn Gaddis Rose, Preface by W. B. Yeats, Dublin, The Dolmen Press, 1970, p. 161.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> Émile Drougard, “Villiers de l’Isle-Adam et Eliphas Lévi”, *Revue belge de philologie et d’histoire*, t. 10, fasc. 3, 1931, p. 505-530.

<sup>132</sup> Villiers de L’Isle-Adam, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

*Rituel de la Haute Magie* and the other from *Histoire de la magie*. These two passages specifically refer to the Rosicrucian movement by linking it to Dante's rose and *The Romance of the Rose*.<sup>133</sup>

In another passage from *Axël*, the Rosy-Cross is evoked in relation to the light caused by a lamp in a dialogue between Axël and Maître Janus: "what strange glimmers that lamp casts! Is it the old Isaiac lamp the Rosicrucians found in Palestine?"<sup>134</sup> This lamp thus links the East and the West, and is related to what Axël calls "the Light-Increate", that "everyman simply calls God".<sup>135</sup> The reference to the Rosicrucians also appears in the dialogue between the abbess and the archdeacon. The abbess mentions "the Rosicrucian books",<sup>136</sup> while the archdeacon speaks of "a very ancient sect of Rosicrucians"<sup>137</sup> and he adds an interesting detail: "in order to escape the stake the Rosicrucians used to conceal abominable formulas within ostensible prayers".<sup>138</sup> By referring to the "abominable formulas" of the Rosicrucians, the Archdeacon highlights something sinister about this secret sect. This nefarious feature associated with the Rosicrucians in Villiers de l'Isle-Adam leads us to another French author of the nineteenth century with connections to Rosicrucianism: Joris-Karl Huysmans.

In *Là-bas* (Down There, 1891) Huysmans speaks at length about the Rosicrucians, linking them to sinister phenomena such as Satanism and black magic. This can be seen in the dialogue between the protagonist Durtal and Hyacinthe Chantelouve, in which the latter speaks of "ordinary, well-known magic that of Rosicrucians and tyros".<sup>139</sup> Durtal replies: "what astonishes me more than that is to hear of the Rosicrucians actively satanizing. I confess that I had never considered them as anything more than harmless suckers and funeral fakes".<sup>140</sup> In this respect, Hyacinthe specifies that:

all societies are composed of suckers and the wily leaders who exploit them. That's the case of the Rosicrucians. Yes, their leaders privately attempt crime. One does not need to be erudite or intelligent to practice the ritual of spells. At any rate, and I affirm this, there is among them a former man of letters whom I know. He lives with a married woman, and they pass the time, he and she, trying to kill the husband by scorcery.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> See Émile Drougard, art. cit., p. 513.

<sup>134</sup> Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>139</sup> Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Là-Bas (Down-There)*, translated by Keene Wallace, New York, Dover Publications, 1972, p. 224. The original French version runs: "ordinary, well-known magic that of Rosicrucians and tyros in Satanism" ("envoûtement ordinaire, connu, celui des Rose-Croix et autres débutants en Satanisme"). Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Là-Bas*, in Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Romans et nouvelles*, eds. André Guyaux and Pierre Jourde, with the collaboration of Jean-Pierre Bertrand, Per Buvik, Jacques Dubois, Guy Ducrey, Francesca Guglielmi, Gaël Prigent and Andrea Schellino, Paris, Gallimard, 2019, p. 1108.

<sup>140</sup> Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Là-Bas (Down-There)*, p. 224.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 224-225.

*Là-bas* presents the Rosicrucian tradition in a new light, which sees Rosicrucian doctrine intertwined with the magical practices of *fin de siècle* occultist sects, including the degenerations of magic. Thus, in Huysmans' novel, black magic, Satanism and eroticism go hand in hand, and we can see this tendency in one of the characters of *Là-bas*: Gilles de Rais. André Guyaux and Pierre Jourde have defined him as a "profane and perverse being, whose cruelty tends towards the spiritual".<sup>142</sup>

According to Huysmans, the background that explains the connection between Rosicrucianism and magic is to be found in modern materialism, as can be seen from a passage pronounced by the character Des Hermies:

When materialism is rotten-ripe magic takes root. This phenomenon reappears every hundred years. Not to go further back, look at the decline of the last century. Alongside of the rationalists and atheists you find Saint Germain, Cagliostro, Saint-Martin, Gabalis, Cazotte, the Rosicrucian societies, the infernal circles, as now. With that, good-bye and good luck.<sup>143</sup>

In these words spoken by Des Hermies, we notice that Rosicrucianism, materialism and magic go hand in glove – an association that is common in Huysmans' work, in which magic is seen as the result of materialism, but at the same time, magic exists in its own right. Magic has to do with the invisible, and the invisible exists, according to Des Hermies, who comments: "the supernatural does exist, Christian or not. To deny it is to deny evidence".<sup>144</sup>

Through the words of Des Hermies, Huysmans speaks of an occult reality, dangerous for all who are profane and who are unaware of the invisible world:

You see it won't do to play with the world spirits of Evil. I used to know a rich bachelor who had a mania for the occult sciences. He was president of a theosophic society and he even wrote a little book on the esoteric doctrine, in the Isis series. Well, he could not, like the Péladan and Papus tribe, be content with knowing nothing, so he went to Scotland, where Diabolism is rampant. There he got in touch with the man who, if you stake him, will initiate you into the Satanic arcana. My friend made the experiment. Did he see him whom Bulwer Lytton in *Zanoni* calls 'the dweller of the thresholds'? I don't know, but certain it is he fainted from horror and returned exhausted, half dead.<sup>145</sup>

In this passage, Huysmans evokes a fundamental concept of the occult, namely "the dweller of the thresholds". He does so by mentioning a novel which can be considered a masterpiece of English Rosicrucian literature: *Zanoni* by Edward Bulwer Lytton. This chapter concludes with a section devoted to *Zanoni*, before moving on to the English literary context, from Dante Gabriele Rossetti to William Butler Yeats and Ezra Pound.

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<sup>142</sup> "Profanateur et pervers, dont la cruauté tend au spirituel". André Guyaux and Pierre Jourde, "Préface", in Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Romans et nouvelles*, p. XXIV.

<sup>143</sup> Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Là-Bas (Down-There)*, p. 239.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 279.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 277-278.

One of the pivotal figures in English esoteric circles and occult milieus of the nineteenth century was the writer Edward George Bulwer Lytton (1801-1872), who represents a thread linking the English and French contexts, as well as the Italian one. In fact, he was well acquainted with the esoteric and initiatory milieus of the nineteenth century, not only in England but also abroad, especially in Italy and in France.<sup>146</sup> Bulwer Lytton frequented the French salons, such as that of the countess Marie D'Agoult (1805-1876), that gathered figures such as George Sand, Pierre Leroux, Lamartine, Ferdinand d'Eckstein and Charles Nodier.<sup>147</sup> He also met the occultist Éliphas Lévi.<sup>148</sup> Moreover, Bulwer Lytton was familiar with the initiatory milieu of Naples,<sup>149</sup> namely the same esoteric milieu with which Gabriele Rossetti came into contact before his exile in London; like the author of the *Mistero*, he was also a political figure and a Member of Parliament between 1831 and 1841, and held other political roles in Britain during his lifetime.

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<sup>146</sup> The attitude of Edward George Bulwer Lytton towards the esoteric and initiatory world is controversial: although he is widely associated with the occult circles of the nineteenth century and his writings confirm extensive knowledge of such milieus, there is no confirmation of a direct affiliation to a specific Order. As Joscelyn Godwin writes: "contrary to later rumors and claims, Bulwer Lytton is not known to have belonged to any secret society or Order. He was not a Freemason. The Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia (S.R.I.A.), apparently unaware of this, elected him their 'Grand Patron' in 1872, but without his consent, for which the head of the Manchester College, John Yarker, humbly apologised". Joscelyn Godwin, "Bulwer Lytton, Edward George", in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, p. 215. On the contrary, in the work *Massoneria e sette segrete. La faccia occulta della storia* by Epiphanius, we learn that Bulwer Lytton was the leader of the English Rosicrucians. See Epiphanius, *op. cit.*, p. 878. Concerning Lytton's involvement in 19th-century initiatory milieus, see Christopher McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians*, p. 99; Marsha Keith Manatt Schuchard, *Freemasonry, secret societies, and the continuity of the occult traditions in English literature*, PhD Thesis, University of Texas, Austin, 1975, p. 563-564; Gérard Galtier, *Maçonnerie égyptienne, Rose-croix et néo-chevalerie: les fils de Cagliostro*, Monaco, Paris, Éditions du Rocher, 1989, p. 174-178. Michel Lamy claims that Edward George Bulwer Lytton was the descendant of a seventeenth-century alchemist, Dr John Bulwer, who invented a language for the deaf and dumb. See Michel Lamy, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

<sup>147</sup> See Jean Pierre Laurant, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

<sup>148</sup> On the relationship between Éliphas Lévi and Edward George Bulwer Lytton, see Joscelyn Godwin, "Bulwer Lytton, Edward George", in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, p. 215; Christopher McIntosh, "Éliphas Lévi", in *The Occult World*, ed. Christopher Partridge, Abingdon, Routledge, 2015, p. 223-224; Massimo Introvigne, *op. cit.*, p. 153; Marsha Keith Manatt Schuchard, *op. cit.*, p. 563-569; Paul Chacornac, *Éliphas Lévi, rénovateur de l'occultisme en France (1810-1875)*, Paris, Librairie générale des sciences occultes, Chacornac frères, 1926, p. 149.

<sup>149</sup> On the relationship between Bulwer Lytton and nineteenth century Neapolitan esoteric circles, see Hans Thomas Hakl, "The Theory and Practice of Sexual Magic, Exemplified by Four Magical Groups in the Early Twentieth Century", in *Hidden Intercourse. Eros and Sexuality in the History of Western Esotericism*, 2008, p. 453; Gaetano Lo Monaco, "Edward Bulwer Lytton e l'ambiente iniziatico partenopeo-nilense", *Rivista Atrium*, n. 3, 2004, p. 6-57; Giuseppe Maddalena Capiferro, Cristian Guzzo, *L'arcano degli arcani. Storia dell'Ermetismo Egizio-Partenopeo fra i secoli XVIII-XX*, Viareggio, Edizioni Rebis, 2011, p. 63-70; Gérard Galtier, *op. cit.*, p. 48. On the importance of Naples for Bulwer Lytton, Gérard Galtier points out that he remained in that city from autumn 1833 to spring 1834, and that during this stay he was taught by a master of the occult sciences: "Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton stayed in Naples from autumn 1833 to spring 1834, during which he also took lessons from a master of the occult sciences" ("Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton fit, de l'automne 1833 au printemps 1834, un séjour à Naples pendant le quel [sic] lui aussi aurait suivi les leçons d'un maître en sciences occultes"). Gérard Galtier, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

Lytton's masterpiece is *Zanoni* (1842), considered by Antoine Faivre to be "the most celebrated esoteric novel of the 19th century".<sup>150</sup> Similarly, Joscelyn Godwin considers it "the most significant occult novel of 19th-century English literature" and "an encyclopedia of ideas about the occult sciences".<sup>151</sup> The figure and literary production of Bulwer Lytton were by no means insignificant. Charles Dickens admired Bulwer Lytton and was profoundly influenced by him. In fact, the character of Steerforth in *David Copperfield* owes a great deal to Bulwer Lytton.<sup>152</sup> Mary Shelley (who, as we have seen, admired Gabriele Rossetti) praised Bulwer Lytton, and considered him one of the most important (perhaps the most important) author of the nineteenth century.<sup>153</sup> Another admirer was Oscar Wilde, whose work *Dorian Gray* has many analogies with *Zanoni* and, as pointed out by Madeline Merlini, *L'Œuvre au Noir* (1968, translated by Grace Frick under the title *The Abyss* or alternatively *Zeno of Bruges*) by Marguerite Yourcenar (whose main protagonist is Zénon) also shows interesting parallels with Lytton's work.<sup>154</sup> Like Gabriele Rossetti, Edward George Bulwer Lytton influenced not only the literary world but also the esoteric milieu of the nineteenth century, and to such an extent that C. Nelson Stewart affirms: "if one asked to name a book which more than any other provided the matrix for the building-up of modern philosophical theosophy in the English language, *Zanoni* seems the inevitable choice".<sup>155</sup>

*Zanoni* was published in 1842 – two years after the publication of Rossetti's book *Il Mistero dell'Amor Platonico*, which confirms the esoteric atmosphere typical of the period. The Italian mathematician, philosopher and esotericist Arturo Reghini believed *Il Mistero* was dedicated by Rossetti to Edward Bulwer Lytton, but this inaccuracy was corrected by Luigi Valli, who specified that it was actually dedicated to Seymour Kirkup, not to Lytton:

Negri believes, like me, that Rossetti arrived at his interpretation through knowledge of ancient traditions. Rossetti's *Il mistero dell'Amor platonico* is not dedicated, as far as he remembers, to a B. L. (i.e. Bulwer-Lytton, a scholar

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<sup>150</sup> Antoine Faivre, "Cazotte, Jacques", in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, p. 250. On the esoteric dimension of *Zanoni*, see Pierre Riffard, *op. cit.*, p. 51, 736, 805, 825, 959; Jean-Pierre Laurant, *op. cit.*, p. 133-134; Massimo Introvigne, *op. cit.*, p. 144, 149, 153, 185, 214; *Dictionnaires des sociétés secrètes en Occident*, p. 90-91; *Guida alla letteratura esoterica*, ed. Claudio Ascutti, Bologna, Odoia, 2016, p. 528-535; Paolo Mariani, *Letteratura europea ed esoterismo. Novalis, Balzac, Nerval, Bulwer-Lytton, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Schuré, Yeats, Pessoa, Hesse, Breton, Borges, Daumal*, San Marino, Il Cerchio, 2023, p. 61-79.

<sup>151</sup> Joscelyn Godwin, "Bulwer Lytton, Edward George", in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, p. 216. Jean Pierre Laurant defined *Zanoni* as an "initiatic novel" (Jean Pierre Laurant, "Saint-Yves d'Alveydre, Joseph", in *ibid.*, p. 1031), and Anna Francesca Maddison points out that this novel "featured Rosicrucianism as a central theme". Anna Francesca Maddison, *Conjugal Love and the Afterlife: New Readings of Selected Works by Dante Gabriel Rossetti in the Context of Swedenborgian-Spiritualism*, PhD Thesis, Edge Hill University, 2013, p. 54.

<sup>152</sup> See Madeline Merlini, "Presentazione", in Edward George Bulwer Lytton, *Zanoni. Un romanzo sul mistero dei Rose-Croce*, Milan, Tea, 2010, p. 6.

<sup>153</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>154</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>155</sup> C. Nelson Stewart, *Bulwer Lytton as Occultist*, London, Theosophical Publishing House, 1927, p. 1.

of esotericism), but to S. K., namely Seymour Kirkup, who was also a scholar of the esoteric.<sup>156</sup>

Reghini was confused by the initials of the dedication: he remembered that the initials were “B. L.”, though the real initials were “S. K.”, (Seymour Kirkup). So it was to Kirkup, not Bulwer Lytton, that the book was dedicated. However, what is relevant here is the proximity between Gabriele Rossetti and Edward George Bulwer Lytton in terms of milieu, in particular, the esoteric one. Rossetti in his critical work and Bulwer Lytton in his literary works expressed virtually the same concepts – a type of literature which conceals esoteric and initiatory doctrines and meanings in the guise of a love story. In fact, *Zanoni* contains all the elements relating to esoteric love highlighted by Gabriele Rossetti, in particular, the concept of a secret history and occult wisdom transmitted down the centuries by initiatory Orders composed of a few enlightened people. In his literary work, Lytton suggested that these people possessed superhuman powers. The novel is a love story between Viola, an Italian girl (daughter of the musician Gaetano Pivani) and Zanoni, a mysterious Englishman who belongs to the Rosy-Cross Order. Viola is to Lytton what Beatrice was to Dante in some respect, whilst Viola is the vehicle used by Lytton to develop his ideas on the mystery of esoteric love.<sup>157</sup>

But *Zanoni* is not only a love story that conceals esoteric meanings, since it is also the story of a disciple, Zanoni, and his master Mejnour. In the novel, Zanoni and Mejnour are the only two survivors of a very ancient Brotherhood and thanks to an elixir they have prolonged their lives. However, there is a substantial difference between the master Mejnour and the disciple Zanoni, since the former has obtained the supreme degree of initiation to such an extent that he has become a “warmer than an abstraction”,<sup>158</sup> completely indifferent to humanity, and to the passions and desires which characterise common men. He has become “immortal”, whilst Zanoni has reached the high initiatory degree, but is still human. He falls in love with Viola, thus gradually losing his immortality – in contrast to the impassive Mejnour, who has achieved a seraphic detachment from worldly things. This aspect is very interesting because it shows that to be initiated a certain detachment must be achieved from all that is human – a cold objectivity devoid of passion or emotion. “Our errors arise from our passions”,<sup>159</sup> Bulwer Lytton writes,

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<sup>156</sup> “Il Negri ritiene con me che il Rossetti sia stato condotto alla sua interpretazione dalla conoscenza di antiche tradizioni. *Il mistero dell’Amor platonico* del Rossetti non è dedicato come gli par di ricordare a un B. L. che sarebbe Bulwer Lytton, erudito d’esoterismo, bensì a un S... K... Questi è Seymour Kirkup che era però anche lui un erudito d’esoterismo”. Luigi Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d’Amore*, p. 664. See also Stefano Salzani, *op. cit.*, p. 338.

<sup>157</sup> In reality, in *Zanoni* there is a Dantean echo of Beatrice, but she is a secondary character, the niece of Viola, who is the main female character in Lytton’s novel.

<sup>158</sup> Edward Bulwer Lytton, *Zanoni. A Rosicrucian Tale*, Preface by Paul M. Allen, Blauvelt, N. Y., Steinerbooks, 1971, p. 42.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127. Another passage describes what it means to be fully initiated, which requires a lack of emotion and complete indifference: “eternal age, serene and passionless, is a happier boon than eternal youth, with its yearnings and desires. Until we can be all spirit, the tranquillity of solitude must be indifference”. *Ibid.*, p. 257.

with Zanoni stating that worldly desires do not allow him to be completely absorbed by the occult reality of the invisible: “the desires of earth chain me to the Present, and shut me from the solemn secrets which Intellect, purified from all the dross of the clay, alone can examine and survey”.<sup>160</sup> Paradoxically, the love expounded by Zanoni excludes his love for Viola, as it gives rise to earthly desires. According to Bulwer Lytton, the real initiate must not indulge in desire, passion or any emotion typical of human beings. This concept is evident in the text, for example, when Glyndon asks Zanoni to be initiated. Glyndon is another character in the novel, who has fallen in love with Viola, like Zanoni. In this dialogue between the two men, Zanoni warns Glyndon about proceeding with initiation, as this would mean abandoning the emotions and the passions of this world, in particular, love:

“What do you ask?” said Zanoni passionately. “Learn, first, the conditions. No neophyte must have, at his initiation, one affection or desire that chains him to the world. He must be pure from the love of woman, free from avarice and ambition, free from the dreams even of art, or the hope of earthly fame. The first sacrifice thou must make is – Viola herself. And for what? For an ordeal that the most daring courage only can encounter, the most ethereal natures alone survive! Thou art unfit for the science that has made me and others what we are or have been; for thy whole nature is one fear!”<sup>161</sup>

Lytton is very explicit in saying that there are initiatory secrets known only by the initiates, that imply a rethinking of life, and he confirms the existence of an invisible world, unknown by the profane:

if I told thee that I could initiate thee into the secrets of that magic which the philosophy of the whole existing world treats as a chimera, or imposture, if I promised to show thee how to command the beings of air and ocean, how to accumulate wealth more easily than a child can gather pebbles on the shore, to place in thy hands the essence of the herbs which prolong life from age to age, the mystery of that attraction by which to awe all danger and disarm all violence, and subdue man as the serpent charms the bird; if I told thee that all these it was mine to possess and to communicate, thou wouldst listen to me then, and obey me without a doubt!”<sup>162</sup>

*Zanoni* contains esoteric teachings, but it also explicitly makes reference to the existence of a secret Order, which possesses the key to occult wisdom:

There is a Fraternity as to whose laws and whose mysteries the most inquisitive schoolmen are in the dark. By those laws all are pledged to warn, to aid, and to guide even the remotest descendants of men who have toiled, though vainly, like your ancestor, in the mysteries of the Order. We are bound to advise them to their welfare; nay, more – if they command us to it, we must accept them as our pupils. I am a survivor of that most ancient and immemorial

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<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.



union. This it was that bound me to thee at the first; this, perhaps, attracted thyself unconsciously, Son of our Brotherhood, to me.<sup>163</sup>

The Brotherhood of which Lytton speaks is that of the Rosicrucians, and in another passage, Zanoni speaks about this “Venerable Brotherhood”, and stresses the importance of Eros – the basis of the initiatory secrets of this Order:

Venerable Brotherhood, so sacred and so little known, from whose secret and precious archives the materials for this history have been drawn; ye who have retained, from century to century, all that time has spared of the august and venerable science – thanks to you, if now for the first time, some record of the thoughts and actions of no false and self-styled luminary of your Order be given, however imperfectly, to the world. Many have called themselves of your band; many spurious pretenders have been so-called by the learned ignorance which still baffled and perplexed, is driven to confess that it knows nothing of your origin, your ceremonies or doctrines, nor even if you still have local habitation on the earth. Thanks to you if I, the only one of my country, in this age, admitted, with a profane footstep, into your mysterious Academe, have been by you empowered and instructed to adapt to the comprehension of the uninitiated, some few of the starry truths which shone on the great Shemaia of the Chaldean Lore, and gleamed dimly through the darkened knowledge of later disciples, labouring, like Psellus and Iamblichus, to revive the embers of the fire which burned in the *Hamarin* of the East. Though not to us of an aged and hoary world, is vouchsafed the NAME which, so say the earliest oracles of the earth, “rushes into the infinite worlds,” yet is it ours to trace the reviving truths, through each new discovery of the philosopher and chemist. The laws of Attraction, of Electricity, and of the yet more mysterious agency of that Great Principle of Life, which, if drawn from the Universe, would leave the universe a Grave, were but the code in which the Theurgy of old sought the guides that led it to a legislation and science of its own. To rebuild on words the fragments of this history, it seems to me as if, in a solemn trance, I was led through the ruins of a city whose only remains were tombs. From the sarcophagus and the urn I awake the Genius of the extinguished Torch, and so closely does its shape resemble Eros, that at moments I scarcely know which of ye dictates to me – O Love! O Death!<sup>164</sup>

Here we see the association of Love with Death, namely the fundamental initiatory truth that we have encountered in this study of the initiatory symbolism of the rose. Death and love were the basis of Dante’s work, of medieval love poetry, and of Renaissance love literature (as we have seen with Shakespeare), and this motif persists in the esoteric literature of the nineteenth century.

With regard to the relations and analogies between *Zanoni* and medieval esoteric love studied by Gabriele Rossetti, it is worth noting that in chapter IX of *Zanoni*’s book VII (*The reign of terror*), Bulwer Lytton informs the reader that the secret doctrine is hidden in literary works, and in particular he affirms that one of the most important works which contains the secret doctrine is by Torquato Tasso who – with Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio – was

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<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136-137.

fundamental to Gabriele Rossetti's theories about the secret doctrine of the *Fedeli d'Amore*. In fact, according to Rossetti, Tasso's mysticism is the same mysticism as in Dante – one based on the mystery of Love.<sup>165</sup> Tasso explains the mystery of this esoteric love in one of his works, *Il Messaggero* (The Messenger), where he writes: “secret loves of men are only known by Philosophers [...] Those who have the knowledge of these secret loves and hates, which are called occult properties by the Philosophers, have the entire and perfect knowledge”.<sup>166</sup>

Significantly, the rose is evoked by Bulwer Lytton specifically in relation to Torquato Tasso. The reference is noteworthy as the quotation is taken directly from Tasso's *La Gerusalemme Liberata* (Jerusalem Delivered) in the original Italian: “L'aurea testa / Di rose colte in Paradiso infiora.” Tasso, “Ger. Lib.” iv. 1.)”.<sup>167</sup> Tasso's love mysticism is associated with the rose, the rose of Paradise, which recalls Dante's Paradisiacal rose. Dante is evoked by Lytton, associating the Italian poet with Milton – an association that Gabriele Rossetti made when he mentioned Milton as an English poet who shared the Dantean esoteric doctrine.<sup>168</sup> But the author who is mentioned the most in *Zanoni* in connection with the esoteric doctrine of love is William Shakespeare. When Bulwer Lytton presents the mystical doctrine of love, he usually does so by evoking Shakespeare. A quotation from *Romeo and Juliet* appears at the beginning of chapter XIII of Book III (titled “Theurgia”) relating to the *topos* of love: “O, begone! / by Heaven I love thee better than myself, / for I came hither arm'd against myself. / *Romeo and Juliet*”.<sup>169</sup> And if the author of *Zanoni* (whose esoteric dimension is undeniable) mentions Shakespeare, Dante<sup>170</sup> and Tasso to construct his novel imbued with esotericism, it means that these authors are somehow linked (at least according to Bulwer Lytton) to esotericism – linked in turn to the literary *topos* of love.

Love, “the supreme mover of the world”,<sup>171</sup> according to Bulwer Lytton, is such a pervasive force that it even changes Viola, who is profane, but the fact of having met and loved Zanoni transforms her: “till I knew thee, I was as a slave to the earth. Thou hast given to me the liberty of the universe! Before, it was life; it seems to me now as if I had commenced

<sup>165</sup> On the esoteric dimension of Torquato Tasso, see Fabio Giunta, *Magia e storia in Torquato Tasso*, Milan, Edizioni Unicopli, 2012.

<sup>166</sup> “Gli amori segreti degli huomini, non sono conosciuti, se non dai Filosofi [...]. Coloro dunque, che di questi amori, e di questi odij segreti, che proprietà occulte son dette dai Filosofi, hanno conoscenza intiera, e perfetta”. Torquato Tasso, *Il Messaggero*, Venice, Bernardo Giunti e fratelli, 1582, p. 10.

<sup>167</sup> Edward Bulwer Lytton, *op. cit.*, p. 361.

<sup>168</sup> On the parallel between Dante and Milton, proposed by Gabriele Rossetti, see the letter from Gabriele Rossetti to Charles Lyell dated 21 October 1831, in *Gabriele Rossetti. Carteggi. Volume secondo (1826-1831)*, p. 633. See also Gabriele Rossetti, *Il mistero dell'Amor platonico del Medio Evo*, v. I, p. 102.

<sup>169</sup> Edward Bulwer Lytton, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

<sup>170</sup> Another figure who plays a major role in *Zanoni* is Virgil, Dante's guide in the *Comedy*. It is interesting to note that Bulwer Lytton associates Virgil with magic: “at Naples, the tomb of Virgil, beetling over the cave of Posilipo, is revered, not with the feelings that should hallow the memory of the poet, but the awe that wraps the memory of the magician”. *Ibid.*, p. 150. We have here another figure linked to Dante, Virgil, who is read in the nineteenth century through the lens of the esoteric tradition.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 256.

eternity!”<sup>172</sup> Love for Bulwer Lytton is the path to elevating the soul, and quoting Iamblicus (“from Iamblich, on the Mysteries, c. 7, sect. 7.”)<sup>173</sup> he stresses that “when the soul is elevated to natures above itself, it deserts the order to which it is a while compelled, and by a religious magnetism is attracted to another and a loftier, with which it blends and mingles”.<sup>174</sup> In effect, this is the higher dimension sought by Nerval, Yeats or Ezra Pound. But the Platonic love described by Edward George Bulwer Lytton not only leads to this higher dimension of a mystical nature, it also reveals the existence of an initiatory chain that goes back to the Middle Ages and spread into the nineteenth century, according to him. Thus, in this respect, Torquato Tasso is once again mentioned by Bulwer Lytton, who includes Tasso in this initiatory chain handed down through the centuries. In fact, as we read in *Zanoni*, Tasso was “deeply versed [...] for his age, in the mysteries of the nobler Platonism, which hints at the secrets of all the starry brotherhoods, from the Chaldæan to the later Rosicrucian”.<sup>175</sup> The Platonism of Tasso and of Dante is linked by Bulwer Lytton to the ancient Chaldean tradition and to the Rosicrucians. The Rosicrucian Brotherhood described by Bulwer Lytton is directly linked to the Platonic tradition through a filiation: “this fraternity is but a branch of others yet more transcendent in the powers they have obtained”, such as the “Platonists” who share with the Rosicrucians “the initiatory learning [that] is the knowledge to be gleaned from the elder Pythagoreans, and the immortal masterpieces of Apollonius”.<sup>176</sup> And in another passage from *Zanoni*, Bulwer Lytton writes that “the Rosicrucians formed a sect descended from the greater and earlier school” and “they were wiser than the Alchemists”.<sup>177</sup> Thus, *Zanoni* enables confirmation, at least from the literary standpoint, of one of the main *foci* of Gabriele Rossetti’s work, namely the existence of a *philosophia perennis* transmitted for centuries by the different esoteric currents that spread and developed throughout history. *Zanoni* is a work which allows us to link the medieval love doctrine of Dante and Tasso to that of the Renaissance as represented by Shakespeare and to the Rosicrucian tradition, such as the one mentioned by the Abbé de Villars who, as Bulwer Lytton recalls, was killed for disseminating the presumed occult doctrine of the Rosicrucians: “the fate of the Abbé de Villars is a sufficient warning to all men not to treat idly of the realms of the Salamander and the Sylph. Everybody knows how mysteriously that ingenious personage was deprived of his life, in revenge for the witty mockeries of his ‘Comte de Gabalis’”.<sup>178</sup> Rosicrucianism, Alchemy, the Pythagorean tradition, the medieval doctrine of Love, all these currents belong to the same family according to Edward

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<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 363.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 361.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 217.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

George Bulwer Lytton who, like Gabriele Rossetti, associates the *philosophia perennis* with the mysterious doctrine of Love.

In particular, one of the main messages in Bulwer Lytton's work is that the knowledge held by the mysterious Rosicrucian Order (whose only living members are Mejnour and Zanoni) must be kept secret, as this occult knowledge can be harmful if used by evil persons:

Suppose we were to impart all our knowledge to all mankind indiscriminately, alike to the vicious and the virtuous – should we be benefactors or scourges? Imagine the tyrant, the sensualist, the evil and corrupted being possessed of these tremendous powers; would he not be a demon let loose on earth? Grant that the same privilege be accorded also to the good; and in what state would be society? Engaged in a Titan war – the good for ever on the defensive, the bad for ever in assault. In the present condition of the earth, evil is a more active principle than good, and the evil would prevail. It is for these reasons that we are not only solemnly bound to administer our lore only to those who will not misuse and pervert it; but that we place our ordeal in tests that purify the passions, and elevate the desires. And Nature in this controls and assists us: for it places awful guardians and insurmountable barriers between the ambition of vice and the heaven of the loftier science.<sup>179</sup>

This passage shows that, according to Mejnour, the secret doctrine must be kept secret and shared only with the initiates, who are prepared to receive such knowledge.<sup>180</sup> The initiation of Glyndon is emblematic in this respect because it encapsulates two important concepts: the metamorphosis of the being and the harmful effects of the use of the occult knowledge for personal interests – a kind of Mephistophelian and Faustian desire for possession. On the first point, when Glyndon is initiated, he experiences what Eliade calls the “ontological transformation”<sup>181</sup> of the being: he is no longer the person he was. When Glyndon seeks an old friend, Mervale, and his wife he realizes that he no longer has anything in common with his former friends. He is a different man now, detached from everything that represented his previous life. It is like someone who leaves their homeland and emigrates in search of a better life, and on returning home, realizes that home is no longer the same place: something has changed, the old world belongs to the past and the present one will never be a real home because one will always be a foreigner in a foreign land. The same happens to the initiate: he is no longer profane, and the world of the profane does not speak his language.

The dangers of initiation are frequently described by Bulwer Lytton in his work, as in the case of Glyndon's initiation. Glyndon asks Zanoni to undergo initiation because he wants to achieve “preternatural knowledge and unearthly power”,<sup>182</sup> but Zanoni advises him to think

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<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218.

<sup>180</sup> In a passage from *Zanoni*, Bulwer Lytton remarks that the initiates represent a minority guiding humanity towards evolution: “the few in every age improve the many”. *Ibid.*, p. 218.

<sup>181</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Patanjali and yoga* [1962], New York, Schocken Books, 1975, p. 114.

<sup>182</sup> Edward Bulwer Lytton, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

about this decision because the initiatory path is a perilous one: “I bid thee consider well; on the one hand, Viola, a tranquil home, a happy and serene life. On the other hand, all is darkness, – darkness, that even these eyes cannot penetrate”.<sup>183</sup> Then Zanoni adds, “knowledge and power are not happiness”.<sup>184</sup> The initiatory knowledge is not for everyone: “earth holds but few to whom nature has given the qualities that can bear the ordeal”.<sup>185</sup> One of the main obstacles in this tortuous path is the “Dweller of the Treasure”, who defends the entrance in the invisible world, and to know this world one must face him:

Thou hast entered the immeasurable region. I am the Dweller of the Threshold.  
What wouldst thou with me? Silent? Dost thou fear me? Am I not thy beloved?  
Is it not for me that thou hast rendered up the delights of thy race? Wouldst  
thou be wise? Mine is the wisdom of the countless ages. Kiss me, my mortal  
lover.<sup>186</sup>

This passage is extremely important because one can see the association of the Dweller of the Treasure with the *topos* of love and of the kiss. Moreover, this Dweller of the Threshold has a corresponding image in Dante’s *Comedy*. In fact, if we consider the interpretation of a theosophist scholar such as the Italian Emma Cusani (mentioned in chapter II), we see that *Zanoni*’s Dweller of the Threshold corresponds to the figure of Minos in Dante’s *Comedy*.<sup>187</sup> It goes without saying that the theosophical interpretation proposed by Emma Cusani belongs to the so-called “heterodox” Dantean interpretation that is not accepted and recognized by the official critics. But what is important here is to point out that in an esoteric milieu, such as the theosophist one, the figure of the Dweller of the Threshold is associated with Dante’s Minos and with a nineteenth-century novel, *Zanoni*. This is another example of communication between medieval literature and nineteenth century literature.

The danger of the actual initiation is the encounter with the invisible world, because one must be prepared to face, as Bulwer Lytton writes in *Zanoni*, “the inhabitants of the atmosphere: some of surpassing wisdom, some of horrible malignity; some hostile as fiends to men, others gentle as messengers between earth and heaven”.<sup>188</sup> Lytton adds:

He who would establish intercourse with these varying beings, resembles the traveller who would penetrate into unknown lands. He is exposed to strange dangers and un conjectured terrors. *That intercourse once gained I cannot secure thee from the chances to which thy journey is exposed.*<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 240.

<sup>187</sup> See Emma Cusani, *op. cit.*, p. 123-128.

<sup>188</sup> Edward Bulwer Lytton, *op. cit.*, p. 227.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*

In another passage concerning a dialogue between Zanoni and Glyndon, Zanoni explains to Glyndon that the initiation is not a practice that is open to everyone, and that it requires a great deal of sacrifice and suffering:

Your mind is fevered by a desire for truth: you would compel it to your embraces; you would ask me to impart to you, without ordeal or preparation, the grandest secrets that exist in nature. But truth can no more be seen by the mind unprepared for it, than the sun can dawn upon the midst of night. Such a mind receives truth only to pollute it: to use the simile of one who has wandered near to the secret of the sublime Goetia (or the magic that lies within Nature, as electricity within the cloud), 'He who pours water into the muddy well, does but disturb the mud.'<sup>190</sup>

In this passage, Zanoni clearly warns that the initiation is not for unprepared minds: one must be totally purified before receiving the initiation. Once again, this dialogue between Zanoni and Glyndon is focused on the theme of love.

Initiation is presented by Bulwer Lytton in his *Zanoni* as a means “to front the worlds beyond”,<sup>191</sup> which requires preparation, both physical and mental. This ascent towards a higher dimension of being is possible only if one suppresses the feeling of fear, “for FEAR is the attraction of man to earthiest earth; and while he fears, he cannot soar”.<sup>192</sup> Analysis of this highly significant point needs to consider a broader perspective related to the issue of mass control. How and to what extent, in the course of history, has Power used fear as a way of controlling the masses? In *Zanoni*, as we have seen, that occult wisdom becomes dangerous when it is used by evil people. In his novel, Bulwer Lytton alludes to this aspect by linking it to historical events. Following the reading of history that he proposes, what can we say about evil people who have been in power and probably used this presumed occult knowledge to govern their countries? I have already pointed out that the relationship between politics and esotericism has been studied by eminent scholars such as James Webb and Giorgio Galli,<sup>193</sup> who have shown the influence of the occult on many of the most important events in the history of humanity. In *Zanoni*, Lytton presents a love story imbued with esoteric knowledge, but also with history and politics – in particular, the French eighteenth century revolutionary

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<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 298.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>193</sup> In the works of James Webb (*The Occult Underground; The Occult Establishment*) and Giorgio Galli (*La magia e il potere. L'esoterismo nella politica occidentale; Esoterismo e politica; Hitler e il nazismo magico. Le componenti esoteriche del Reich millenario; Le coincidenze significative. Da Lovecraft a Jung, da Mussolini a Moro, la sincronicità e la politica*), there is a constant reference to literature, to certain poets or writers involved in literary circles as well as political ones linked to esotericism. In Webb's case, we find the names Katherine Mansfield, Arthur Conan Doyle, Gustav Meyrink, Charles Williams, Franz Hartmann, Joséphin Péladan, Stanislas de Guaita, John Hargrave, G. K. Chesterton, Aldous Huxley, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien and Vladimir Sergejevich Solovyov. Giorgio Galli also references Huxley, Guaita and Péladan, adding other authors such as Marguerite Yourcenar, Antonin Artaud, Maurice Leblanc, Jules Verne, Fernando Pessoa, Dante, Gabriele D'Annunzio, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Howard Phillips Lovecraft, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, William Butler Yeats, Bram Stoker and Dion Fortune.

environment. The last chapter of the novel conveys the idea of this period in political and social terms: “The Reign of Terror”. The question that arises is: how is fear used by power to suppress the spiritual elevation of the masses? This is a point which merits specific and in-depth research, which is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, it is worth highlighting this aspect so that it may be developed in other studies.

We can conclude this section consecrated to Edward George Bulwer Lytton by saying that the esoteric doctrine of love propounded by the author of *Zanoni* shows many similarities with Gabriele Rossetti’s theories about the esotericism of Platonic love. More generally, the figures of Rossetti and Bulwer Lytton have many points in common.<sup>194</sup> Like Rossetti in Italy, Bulwer Lytton had a significant role in political circles in England, and they both reference politics in their writings on the esotericism of love. In the case of Bulwer Lytton, the narrative is set in the period of the French Revolution and the Terror (1791-1793). Like Rossetti, Lytton knew and had contact with the nineteenth-century initiatory milieu of Naples – an experience that marked the lives and literary careers of both writers. They both focused on the esoteric dimension of literature, specifically love literature, stressing the existence of a filiation which lasted from Antiquity to the Middle Ages, thence to the Renaissance, and eventually to the nineteenth century, based on Platonic love.<sup>195</sup> Love, a cross and a rose are the origin of this perennial wisdom which spread throughout the century, and Edward Bulwer Lytton uses the *topos* of love and the symbol of the rose to express an esoteric knowledge, which is also found in his poetic compositions.<sup>196</sup> Both Gabriele Rossetti and Edward Bulwer Lytton influenced, directly and especially indirectly, the literature and the culture of the nineteenth century, though this influence has been underestimated. At the basis of this common effort of Rossetti and Bulwer Lytton lies a peculiarity shared by this two nineteenth century figures: the fact of going against the flow. And this approach is summed up in the words of *Zanoni*: “we commenced research where modern Conjecture closes its faithless wings”.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> An interesting theory about the links between Bulwer Lytton and Gabriele Rossetti was suggested by Marsha Keith Manatt Schuchard. See Marsha Keith Manatt Schuchard, *op. cit.*, p. 7, 538.

<sup>195</sup> On the importance of the concept of platonic love and its esoteric meaning in Lytton’s literary production, see Giuseppe Maddalena Capiferro, Cristian Guzzo, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

<sup>196</sup> Edward Bulwer Lytton was not just a novelist but also a poet and the rose plays a pivotal role in his poetry, which merits an in-depth study as it contains many references to the esoteric tradition. See *The Poetical and Dramatic Works of Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton*, London, Chapman and Hall, v. IV, 1854.

<sup>197</sup> Edward Bulwer Lytton, *op. cit.*, p. 253.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE ROSE OF DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI AND WILLIAM BLAKE'S LEGACY

#### *Dante Gabriel Rossetti's mystery of love and his mystical rose*

As I have specified in the introduction to my thesis, the starting point of my research is the work of Gabriele Rossetti's *Il Mistero dell'Amor Platonico*, a book which marks a crucial moment in the history of literary criticism because it shows for the first time the relations between literature and esoteric currents throughout the centuries. I have shown the direct and indirect influence that this forgotten book had on the literary, historical and cultural context of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Rossetti did not continue his research beyond the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, while I focus on the nineteenth century and in part on the twentieth century. He focused on the topic of esoteric love, hinting at the initiatory rose, while I explore the symbol of the rose, always linked to the *topos* of love. But this mystical rose and esoteric love are particularly relevant to Gabriele Rossetti's children, especially to Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

More generally, in the English literary context of the nineteenth century, a plausible influence of Gabriele Rossetti's ideas can be found in the medievalism of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, whose founding members were his sons Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Michael Rossetti, and whose influence on European literature and art is well known.<sup>1</sup> However, it is not easy to establish and demonstrate a direct filiation between Gabriele Rossetti's theories and the Pre-Raphaelite movement represented by his sons. This difficulty is also due to the fact that during his lifetime Gabriele Rossetti tried to prevent any direct association of his children with him in order to protect and ensure a better future for them, as can be seen, for example, in a letter to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, in which he suggests that his son should avoid the name of Gabriel if he were to stay in Italy: "if you have to go to Italy, I suggest, my dear son, that you always have others call you Dante Rossetti".<sup>2</sup> In any event, despite this attempt to dispel any association with Gabriele Rossetti, his influence on Dante Gabriel Rossetti and on his other

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<sup>1</sup> It is noteworthy that although the principles of the Pre-Raphaelite movement were essentially aesthetic, the word "Brotherhood" undoubtedly refers to the initiatory world to which Gabriele Rossetti belonged. In this respect, see Albert Boime, "The Pre-Raphaelites and the 1848 Revolutions", in Albert Boime, *Art in an age of civil struggle, 1848-1871*, Chicago & London, Chicago University Press, 2008, p. 225-264.

<sup>2</sup> "Se tu devi andare in Italia, io ti consiglio, mio caro figliuolo, di farti sempre chiamare Dante Rossetti". Letter from Gabriele Rossetti to Dante Gabriel Rossetti on 4 October 1853, in *Gabriele Rossetti. Carteggi. Volume sesto (1848-1854)*, p. 318.



children is undeniable.<sup>3</sup> Both the artistic and literary production of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Michael Rossetti, Christina Rossetti and Maria Francesca Rossetti owes a great deal to their father's work. Even Maria Francesca Rossetti (1827-1876), who was the least well known of the children, wrote a book called *A Shadow of Dante*, which was profoundly influenced by the symbolic interpretation of the *Divine Comedy* proposed by her father Gabriele Rossetti.

In fact, of Gabriele Rossetti's children, it was Dante Gabriel Rossetti in particular who expressed in his poetic and artistic production the esoteric symbolism of Dante and love literature propounded by his father. As far as artistic production is concerned, a good example is the paintings *Beata Beatrix* or *Roman de la Rose* (p. 334-335), which are typical of the themes used by Gabriele Rossetti to develop his ideas on the esoteric nature of love in medieval literature. This is also confirmed by the letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, such as the one dated 1873 to William Morris, in which he explains the inspiration for his artistic work, *Beata Beatrix*, which recall the esoteric symbolism revealed by his father: "the picture must of course be viewed not as a representation of the incident of the death of Beatrice but as an ideal of the subject, symbolized by a trance or a sudden spiritual transfiguration".<sup>4</sup> In another letter to Ellen Heaton on 19 May 1863, Dante Gabriel Rossetti writes:

I thought of a Dantesque subject which I have long meant to do [...]. This would be Beatrice seated by a sundial, the shadow of which should be falling on the hour of nine. You probably remember the singular way in which Dante dwells on the number nine in connection with Beatrice in the Vita Nuova. He meets her at nine years of age, she dies at nine o'clock on the 9<sup>th</sup> of June 1290. Of all this much is said, and he declares her to have been herself "a nine", that is the perfect number, or symbol of perfection.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, the symbolism of the number nine with its esoteric implications was widely explored by Gabriele Rossetti in his studies on Dantean esotericism, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti seems to follow the path initiated by his father. Furthermore, the painting *Roman de la Rose* (1864) presents the mystical atmosphere with many images and concepts linked to the esoteric medievalism of Gabriele Rossetti, such as the couple of lovers and the kiss joining the lovers, the androgynous figure and especially the rose garden.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> On the influence on Dante Gabriel, see *Gabriele Rossetti. Carteggi. Volume terzo (1832-1836)*, p. 30; Laura Falqui, *La Gemma. Estetismo e esoterismo nei preraffaelliti*, Rimini, Il Cerchio Iniziative Editoriali, 1994, p. 13; Nathan A. Cervo, "Petrarch's *Cervo* and *Cerva*: The Secret of D. G. Rossetti's *The Stream's Secret*", *Victorian Poetry*, v. 28, n. 2, 1990, p. 158-163.

<sup>4</sup> Letter from Dante Gabriel Rossetti to William Graham on 11 March 1873, in *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti 6. The Last Decade, 1873-1882: Kelmscott to Birchington. Volume VI. 1873-1874*, ed. William E. Fredeman, Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, v. VI, 2006, p. 89.

<sup>5</sup> Letter from Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Ellen Heaton on 19 May 1863, in *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti 3. The Chelsea Years, 1863-1872. Prelude to Crisis. Volume III. 1863-1867*, ed. William E. Fredeman, Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, v. III, 2003, p. 51.

<sup>6</sup> As Anna Francesca Maddison has pointed out, the pictorial images of *Roman de la Rose* reveal the imagery of symmetry between the lovers described in *The House of Life* sonnets. See Anna Francesca Maddison, *Conjugal*

With regard to the literary production of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, some of his most important poems show a clear debt to Gabriele Rossetti. For instance, *Dantis Tenebræ* (*in memory of my father*) is dedicated to his father, and focuses on the revelation of Dante's secrets: "the vale of magical dark mysteries".<sup>7</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poetic works also represent a bridge between Dante's esoteric symbolism and the visionary imagery of Swedenborg, this connection being one of the main themes of his father Gabriele Rossetti in *Il Mistero dell'Amor Platonico del Medio Evo*.<sup>8</sup> The influence of the Swedish mystic on the work of Dante Gabriel Rossetti concerns the visionary imagery linked to the *topos* of love, in particular the theme of the beloved woman departed, which was widely analysed by Gabriele Rossetti. Another Swedenborgian element which can be detected in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poetry is the image of two becoming one, and their joining in heaven to form one angel,<sup>9</sup> as in "two blent souls"<sup>10</sup> (*Youth's Antiphony*, sonnet XIII) or "I am thine, thou'rt one with me" (*Love's Testament*, sonnet III).<sup>11</sup> In particular, this verse recalls the identification of the man with the woman evoked by the Italian medieval poet Cecco d'Ascoli, as seen in the previous chapters. This immediately brings to mind Cecco d'Ascoli exclaiming "whence I am she" in his *Acerba*. Previously, I have also shown that this identification is characteristic of Sufi poetry, for instance, in the love story of Majnûn and Layla – the archetypal lovers of the Arabic and Persian traditions. "I am Layla", says the mad lover Majnûn; "dunque, io son ella", "whence I am she", says Cecco d'Ascoli; "I am thine, thou'rt one with me!", says Dante Gabriel Rossetti: from the esoteric Soufi tradition to Italian medieval love poetry, to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, from the Western and Eastern Middle Ages to nineteenth century Pre-Raphaelitism. There is no carnal love, nor emotions, nor passions, nor eroticism, because this love is spiritual ecstasy, in which the lovers merge to become one, indistinguishable from each other: "two separate divided silences, / which, brought together, would find loving voice",<sup>12</sup> writes Dante Gabriel Rossetti in his sonnet *Severed Selves* (sonnet XL).

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*Love and the Afterlife: New Readings of Selected Works by Dante Gabriel Rossetti in the Context of Swedenborgian-Spiritualism*, p. 209.

<sup>7</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Collected Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, edited with preface and notes by William Michael Rossetti, London, Ellis and Elvey, v. 1, 1890, p. 299.

<sup>8</sup> Concerning the influence of Swedenborg on Dante Gabriel Rossetti, see Anna Francesca Maddison, "Through Death to Love': Swedenborg imagery in the painting and poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti", in *Philosophy, Literature, Mysticism. An Anthology of essays on the thought and influence of Emmanuel Swedenborg*, ed. Stephen McNeilly, London, The Swedenborg Society, 2013, p. 291-316. See also Philip Tickner, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, London, Tate Gallery Publishing, 2003, p. 54; Philip Hoare, *England's Lost Eden: Adventures in a Victorian Utopia*, London, Fourth Estate, 2005, p. 206-207; *The Age of Rossetti, Burne-Jones & Watts: Symbolism in Britain 1860-1910*, ed. Andrew Wilton et Robert Upstone, London, Tate Gallery Publishing, 1997, p. 155-157.

<sup>9</sup> See Anna Francesca Maddison, "Through Death to Love': Swedenborg imagery in the painting and poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti", in *Philosophy, Literature, Mysticism. An Anthology of essays on the thought and influence of Emmanuel Swedenborg*, p. 306.

<sup>10</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Jerome McGann, New Haven, London, Yale University Press, 2003, p. 133.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

Another important theme of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's work is that of the beloved woman's death, which can be found in *The Blessed Damozel*, *The Raven* or *Festus* and, as Anna Maddison highlights, "all three [of the above-mentioned sonnets] can be said to contain a shade of Swedenborgian theology".<sup>13</sup> In particular, *The Blessed Damozel* contains striking evidence of Swedenborgian imagery.<sup>14</sup> The Damozel, the beloved in heaven, laments the separation from her lover, and the love bond between them is essentially spiritual:

We two will lie i' the shadow of  
That living mystic tree  
Within whose secret growth the Dove  
Sometimes is felt to be.<sup>15</sup>

The mystical meaning of the lovers' death is expressed by Dante Gabriel Rossetti himself also in relation to his paintings of *Beata Beatrix*: "it must of course be remembered, in looking at the picture, that it is not intended at all to *represent* death, but to render it under the semblance of a trance, in which Beatrice, seated at a balcony overlooking the city, is suddenly rapt from earth to heaven [...]. She, through her shut lids, is conscious of a new world".<sup>16</sup>

Now, all these features refer to an esoteric dimension characteristic of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's work – both in his artistic and his literary production – but this aspect has not been fully explored. One of the few works that does address it is, to my knowledge, the book *Tendances ésotériques et mystiques chez Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (Esoteric and mystical tendencies in Dante Gabriel Rossetti) by Jacques Savarit, who remarks that not only is Dante Gabriel Rossetti's literary and artistic production steeped in esotericism but "the entire Rossettian personality is invested by the supernatural and perpetually prowls on the borders of the occult".<sup>17</sup> Firstly, Savarit analyses the esoteric milieu of the nineteenth century, as well as the first decades of the twentieth century. By so doing he introduces the context of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, that was characterized by the "mystical eroticism of the Pre-Raphaelites",<sup>18</sup> and it is especially in the author of *Beata Beatrix* that one finds what Savarit calls "esoteric

<sup>13</sup> Anna Francesca Maddison, "'Through Death to Love': Swedenborg imagery in the painting and poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti", in *Philosophy, Literature, Mysticism. An Anthology of essays on the thought and influence of Emmanuel Swedenborg*, p. 296-297.

<sup>14</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 293-298.

<sup>15</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti also produced different painted versions of *The Blessed Damozel*, and one of these versions depicts the union of the two lovers in heaven described in the poem: they embrace in a rose garden, which references the rose garden in Swedenborg's *Conjugal Love*, as Anna Francesca Maddison has shown. See Francesca Maddison, *Conjugal Love and the Afterlife: New Readings of Selected Works by Dante Gabriel Rossetti in the Context of Swedenborgian-Spiritualism*, p. 92.

<sup>16</sup> Letter from Dante Gabriel Rossetti to William Cowper-Temple on 26 March 1871, in *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti 5. The Chelsea Years 1868-1872. Prelude to Crisis. Volume V. 1871-1872*, ed. William E. Fredeman, Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, v. V, 2005, p. 42.

<sup>17</sup> "Toute la personnalité rossettienne est investie par le surnaturel et rôde perpétuellement aux frontières de l'occulte". Jacques Savarit, *Tendances ésotériques et mystiques chez Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, Paris, Didier, 1961, p. 260-261.

<sup>18</sup> "Érotisme mystique des préraphaélites". *Ibid.*, p. 66.

eroticism”.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, Jacques Savarit highlights the importance of Gabriele Rossetti’s influence on the literary and artistic production of Dante Gabriel Rossetti.<sup>20</sup> In fact, as Jacques Savarit has shown, Dante Gabriel Rossetti was influenced by his father’s writings and by the authors studied by his father, such as Swedenborg or Boccaccio and his *Genealogia Deorum Gentilium*. But there is one work in particular that Savarit highlights in this regard: the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* by Francesco Colonna. I have already mentioned this work in the chapter on the rose of Nerval, and Jacques Savarit provides evidence of this link between Nerval and Rossetti in the wake of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*:

It is important to note that this work of Neoplatonic inspiration, written by Francesco COLONNA, has, as its main theme the fusion of human and divine love, the same syncretistic conception that illuminates the whole of Rossetti’s mysticism. It would undoubtedly be risky to speak of an absolute source, but it is permissible, on the other hand, to deem illogical the generalised indifference of the critics towards such a revealing text. [...] The Chronicle of Francesco COLONNA and Princess Lucretia POLIA from TREVISO who are consumed by platonic ardour for each other, separated by the conventual rule, contains, *inter alia*, the typical Rossettian and Nervalian idea that pursuing the same feminine ideal under various guises is equivalent to a higher allegiance.<sup>21</sup>

Concerning Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s rose, it was already present, even as a title, in one of his first compositions, in the poem *Roderick & Rosalba, a Story of the Round Table* (inspired by the Arthurian cycle),<sup>22</sup> or in the poem *Rose Mary*, where the author addresses the “Pale Rose Mary” and speaks of “the known and unknown things of earth”,<sup>23</sup> as well as “the mystic sphere”.<sup>24</sup> The image of the Lady is present in this poem and the mystical atmosphere evoked by Dante Gabriel Rossetti refers to divine mysteries known only by a few: “God be thanked for the thing we know!”; “we know in the vale what perils be: / now look once more in the glass, and see / if over the hills the road lies free”.<sup>25</sup> It is Rose Mary that knows the secrets of the invisible world:

<sup>19</sup> “Érotisme ésotérique”. *Ibid.*, p. 227.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>21</sup> “Il est capital de noter que cette œuvre d’inspiration néo-platonicienne, due à Francesco COLONNA, a, pour motif majeur, la fusion de l’amour humain et de l’amour divin, cette même conception syncrétiste illuminant tout le mysticisme rossettien. Sans doute serait-il aventuré de parler de source absolue, mais il est permis, en revanche, de trouver illogique l’indifférence assez générale de la critique à l’égard d’un texte aussi révélateur. [...] La Chronique de Francesco COLONNA et de la princesse Lucretia POLIA de TRÉVISE qui se consomment l’un pour l’autre d’ardeurs platoniques, séparés par la règle conventuelle, contient, *inter alia*, l’idée bien rossettienne et bien nervalienne que poursuivre le même idéal féminin sous divers traits, équivaut à une fidélité supérieure”. *Ibid.*, p. 99. Jacques Savarit repeatedly emphasises the relationship between Nerval’s work and Rossetti’s, especially on the angelic bride mystically embodied in human love; the basis of this mystical conception of women in Dante Gabriel Rossetti can be found in Dante, Jacopo da Lentini, Fra Guittone d’Arezzo, Jacopone da Todì, in Arnaut Daniel and the transalpine singers of the Joy of Love: the same figures at the centre of Gabriele Rossetti’s studies in his *Mistero dell’Amor Platonico*. See *ibid.*, p. 109-110.

<sup>22</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 103

<sup>23</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 200.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

Rose Mary pressed to her mother's cheek,  
And almost smiled but did not speak;  
Then turned again to the saving spell,  
With eyes to search and with lips to tell  
The heart of things invisible.<sup>26</sup>

This poem ends with the words of the Lady who confirms the mystical meaning of Rose Mary, by evoking the “secret stair”, the “girth [which] was graved with a mystic rune / in a tongue long dead ‘neath sun and moon’”,<sup>27</sup> while the last four verses allude to the mystery of the rose, formed as a question, as Shakespeare did in *Romeo and Juliet* with regard to the rose:

She breathed the words in an undertone: –  
“None sees here but the pure alone.”  
“And oh!” she said, “what rose may be  
In Mary's bower more pure to see  
Than my own sweet maiden Rose Mary?”<sup>28</sup>

Dante Gabriel Rossetti even uses the symbolism of the rose to describe his poetic art: for example, he explains it to his mother in a letter dated 27 April 1880, where he speaks about the nature of his sonnet *Anima – The Sonnet*, included in a drawing (also featuring the image of the rose) that Dante Gabriel Rossetti made for his mother's birthday.

I have no doubt that your discerning eyes plucked out the heart of the mystery in the little design. In it the Soul is instituting the “memorial to one dead deathless hour”, a ceremony easily affected by placing a winged hour-glass in a rose-bush, at the same time that she touches the fourteen-stringed harp of the sonnet, hanging round her neck. On the rose branches trailing over the opposite corner is seen hanging the Coin, which is the second symbol used for the sonnet. Its “face” bears the Soul, expressed in the butterfly; its “converse”, the Serpent of Eternity enclosing the Alpha and Omega. All this I doubt not you had seen for yourself.<sup>29</sup>

It is the rose that explains the mystical meaning of the poem, and more generally Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poetic artistry, which contains all the symbols of the esoteric tradition according to Jacques Savarit: the beloved as an occult manifestation of the Divine, reconciliation of “flesh and soul”, erotic syncretism, the interceding angel, the spiritual union of the lovers, the deification of sex, Pandora considered as an allegory of the world of the senses and Orphic transmigration followed by reincarnation.<sup>30</sup> Once again, Savarit emphasises Gabriele Rossetti's influence over his son Dante Gabriel Rossetti, which he does by quoting William Michael

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti 9. The Last Decade, 1873-1882: Kelmscott to Birchington IV. 1880-1882*, ed. William E. Fredeman, Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, v. IX, 2002, p. 158.

<sup>30</sup> Jacques Savarit, *op. cit.*, p. 259-300.

Rossetti who writes in a letter about “l’air de famille”, the family atmosphere that the Rossetti children absorbed at home:

Our father, when writing about the *Commedia* or the *Vita Nuova*, was seen surrounded by ponderous folios in italic type, ‘libri mistici’ and the like (often about alchemy, freemasonry, Brahminism, Swedenborg, the Cabbala, etc.) and filling page after page of prose, in impeccable handwriting, full of underscorings, interlineations, and cancellings.<sup>31</sup>

However, the subject of Dante Gabriel Rossetti inevitably involves the Pre-Raphaelite movement, whose poets and artists show traces of esoteric thought in their works.<sup>32</sup> In fact, there is evidence of the themes of mystical rapture and theophanic vision in the form of love towards an angelic woman and a mystical rose. In terms of the rose symbol, a good example is William Morris’s rose in *A Garden by the Sea* (1867), or the rose in the artistic works of Edward Burne-Jones (1833-1898), such as *The Pilgrim and the Heart of the Rose* (p. 336), produced in collaboration with William Morris. But in the artistic and literary production of the Pre-Raphaelites (especially Dante Gabriel Rossetti), there is a concept that is strictly linked to Dante’s esotericism, namely faithfulness to love.<sup>33</sup> This aspect has been stressed by Anna Falqui, who also pointed out the esoteric dimension of some Pre-Raphaelite themes, such as contemplation of the angelic woman leading to new life, or the death of the beloved leading to ascent to heaven.<sup>34</sup> The peculiarity of Pre-Raphaelite esotericism is that it is not an esotericism linked to the political context, as in the case of the *Fedeli d’Amore* or the Troubadours, who inspired the Pre-Raphaelite poets and artists. It is an esotericism based on visual ecstasy, on the emotions generated by mystical contemplation. For Gabriele Rossetti, the political context was fundamental, whilst for Dante Gabriel Rossetti what was important was the mystical dimension. There is a clear transition from Gabriele Rossetti’s critical work to Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s literary and artistic production: from the sectarian and political discourse applied to love in literature by Gabriele Rossetti to the mystical love of his son Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Therefore, it was also the esoteric doctrine of love as revealed by Gabriele Rossetti that gave rise to one of the most important chapters in nineteenth century English and European culture, the impact of which is still evident today.

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<sup>31</sup> *Dante Gabriel Rossetti. His Family Letters with a Memoir by William Michael Rossetti*, London, Ellis and Elvey, 1895, p. 64.

<sup>32</sup> See Laura Falqui, *op. cit.*

<sup>33</sup> See Laura Falqui, *op. cit.*, p. 17-20.

<sup>34</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 21-23.

In my analysis on Dante Gabriel Rossetti's work I have mentioned the relationship between Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Emmanuel Swedenborg, and in this respect, as Anna Maddison points out, another source through which the author of *The House of Life* accessed Swedenborg's ideas is William Blake.<sup>35</sup> However, Blake is not only important for his association with the Swedish mystic: Blake was a poet as well as an artist, directly linked to Dante, and so much so that Jean-Paul Corsetti considers him "a romantic English Dante".<sup>36</sup> In particular, Blake is linked to the esoteric dimension of Dante's literary work. Rodney Baine has shown that Blake's engravings of *The Divine Comedy* are an esoteric illustration of Dante's work described in terms of mystical vision.<sup>37</sup> However, on the relationship between Blake and Dantean esotericism, it is worth pointing out one aspect that merits particular attention, namely the link between Blake and another crucial figure in the history of Dantean esotericism proposed by Gabriele Rossetti: Seymour Stocker Kirkup (1788-1880). This latter was the English artist and bibliophile who discovered the portrait of Dante attributed to Giotto in the Chapel of Palazzo del Podestà in Florence,<sup>38</sup> and he was a friend of Blake, with whom he had an intense intellectual exchange of ideas, and they both shared a passion for Dante.<sup>39</sup> But Kirkup was also the person to whom Gabriele Rossetti dedicated *Il Mistero dell'Amor Platonico del Medio Evo*.<sup>40</sup> The book should have been dedicated to Charles Lyell, but he did not want to see his

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<sup>35</sup> See Anna Francesca Maddison, "'Through Death to Love': Swedenborg imagery in the painting and poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti", in *Philosophy, Literature, Mysticism. An Anthology of essays on the thought and influence of Emmanuel Swedenborg*, p. 292-293, 314.

<sup>36</sup> "Dante romantique anglais". Jean-Paul Corsetti, *Histoire de l'ésotérisme et des sciences occultes*, p. 285.

<sup>37</sup> See Rodney M. Baine, "Blake's Dante in a Different Light", *Dante Studies*, n. 105, 1987, p. 113-136. The mystical rose is present in some of Blake's engravings of *The Divine Comedy*, such as one relating to Canto XXX of *Paradise* (Tate Museum in London), which depicts Dante in the Empyrean drinking at the River of Light, as well as the Luminous Rose with the groups of blessed spirits. Dante's Luminous Rose is also present in another illustration by Blake, which represents *Paradise* Canto XXXI (Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria) and depicts Mary, Beatrice, Eve, Rachel, Sarah, Rebecca, Judith and Ruth: here the Jewish mystical tradition meets the Christian one, under the sign of the rose symbol. See Sebastian Schütze, Maria Antonietta Terzoli, *The Complete Drawings. William Blake. Dante's Divine Comedy* [2014], Köln, Taschen, 2020, p. 428-430, 432-434.

<sup>38</sup> Seymour Stocker Kirkup left England and moved to Italy in 1816. He lived in Florence, at the end of the Ponte Vecchio in number 2 – a house suspended over the river. It is interesting to note that this house was a Templar residence, the site of the Chapel of the Holy Sepulchre where, by a strange coincidence, Ludovico Ariosto had also lived during his stay in Florence. Under bombardment in 1943 the house was destroyed, but in the nineteenth century, when it became the permanent home of Kirkup, many artists and poets visited it, including the American writer Nathaniel Hawthorn. This latter was so impressed by Kirkup that, after his trip to Italy, he included the English artist and bibliophile (as well as his house) in his novel *The Marble Faun* (1860), in which he speaks of Roman hecatombs as mysterious places characterised by the presence of spirits, evoked by artists on an excursion into the realm of the dead. In fact, as Pier Luigi Vercesi recalls, Kirkup – in addition to being an artist, a bibliophile and a lover of Dante – was a profound connoisseur of alchemy and the occult sciences and frequented the world of nineteenth century spiritualism. It was in these presumed encounters with the evoked spirits that the English artist "conversed" with emperors of the past, artists or poets now dead, including Dante. See Pier Luigi Vercesi, *op. cit.*, p. 10, 17, 23, 27.

<sup>39</sup> See Stefano Salzani, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

<sup>40</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti produced a work of art that owes much to his father's friendship with Kirkup: *Giotto Painting the Portrait of Dante* (1852). In fact, Gabriele Rossetti gave his son the copy of Giotto's portrait that Kirkup had sent him, after finding it in Palazzo del Potestà. See *ibid.*, p. 71; Ben Downing, *Queen Bee of Tuscany*,

name associated with the *Mistero*, as is evident from his letter on 29 October 1838: “I beg there may be no dedication to me, nor preliminary letter, nor the least allusion to my assistance”.<sup>41</sup> Lyell believed that his association with Rossetti’s work would have damaged his reputation, and so the Italian exile dedicated his book to Seymour Stocker Kirkup, who, on the contrary, was enthusiastic of seeing his name impressed in the first page of the *Mistero*. In fact, Kirkup was one of Gabriele Rossetti’s fervent supporters and regularly corresponded with him, mainly to speak about the esoteric dimension of Dante’s work. In his letter on 19 August 1841, he expressed his gratitude towards Rossetti for the dedication in the *Mistero*:

My dear & excellent Friend,

After your kindness in allowing me so to address you, I ought not perhaps to feel surprise at any other mark of favor you bestow on me; but the magnitude of this last has, I assure you, overpowered me. My duty is to take courage, to accept so great an honor, & to thank you, which I do heartily. All I could express of your known benevolence, & my unworthiness, would be weak & common. I prefer giving myself and totally to the pleasure of enjoying this brilliant & distinguished proof of your Friendship.

I observe your delicacy & solicitude for my tranquillity on the subject of my name, but absolutely there is not the least danger; & if there were I would not, for all the world, shrink from standing openly & proudly in the rank to which you raise me. Put me therefore at length, unless you think a little mystery & modesty are in better taste. Your judgement & experience will best decide. Let me entreat you to consider it a question of style only, & not of prudence.

I have been earnestly anticipating the delight of exploring this new world of wonders in addition to your already numerous & important discoveries. I have often thought what an amazing list of them would be furnished alone by a simple index to your former volumes. I have not yet seen even your conjectures of the slightest nature controverted with success. There has been much assertion, some foul play, no proof, & but little attempt at it. All this will be forgotten, & your Triumph will alone remain, which it must, because it will be of use to posterity.<sup>42</sup>

In other letters, such as one dated 19 August 1841, Kirkup informed Rossetti about the reception of the book in Italy and the interest aroused by it, strongly encouraging him not to stop and to persevere with his research on the esoteric love of Dante and medieval literature: “courage My Dear Rossetti. You have made a great impression & a mighty name, even here where there is so much prejudice. But in Naples, I hear that you are hailed with enthusiasm. It marches: Truth will find its way”.<sup>43</sup>

To my knowledge, there are no studies on the connection between William Blake, Seymour Stoker Kirkup and Gabriele Rossetti (as well as Dante Gabriel Rossetti), who were

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New York, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2013, p. 86. On the question of Giotto’s portrait discovered by Giotto, see Pier Luigi Vercesi, *op. cit.*, p. 31-49.

<sup>41</sup> *Gabriele Rossetti. Carteggi. Volume quarto (1837-1840)*, p. 207.

<sup>42</sup> Letter from Seymour Stocker Kirkup to Gabriele Rossetti on 19 August 1841, in *Gabriele Rossetti. Carteggi. Volume quinto (1841-1847)*, p. 148.

<sup>43</sup> Letter from Seymour Stocker Kirkup to Gabriele Rossetti on 26 May 1842, in *ibid.*, p. 219.



linked to each other by direct and indirect ties of friendship, but especially by a common interest: the mystical and esoteric dimension of Dante's work. These investigations would open up new research opportunities, possibly leading to academic discoveries on relations between the Middle Ages and nineteenth century European art and literature, where the leitmotiv is esotericism.

*The sick rose of Blake and the litanies of the rose by Remy de Gourmont*

To date, there are few studies on the esoteric dimension of Blake's work, but a significant one is *William Blake* (1954) by Denis Saurat. In the last few decades, although an attentive and systematic study of Blake's esotericism is lacking, recent scholarship has revealed a strong presence of esoteric elements in his literary and artistic production.<sup>44</sup> In Christopher McIntosh's study on the Western esoteric roots of the Rosicrucian movement, the author remarks that "the poetry of William Blake [...] remained largely uncomprehended until recent research showed that he spoke the language of the esoteric tradition".<sup>45</sup> Moreover, Sheila A. Spector produced an entire section on Blake's esotericism in the *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, where she ends her contribution by stressing the relationship between Blake and Dantean esotericism, and in particular Blake's pertinence to *The Divine Comedy*, in "demonstrating how organized religion had occluded the medieval Italian poet's true vision".<sup>46</sup>

Blake is defined by Sebastian Schütze as an "esoteric mystic" and "visionary poet",<sup>47</sup> and "in his pursuit of the imaginary, the supernatural, and the mystical, and in his visionary investigations into subjectivity, the erotic, and the psychic, into dreams and nightmares, he became both a hero and a model for the Romantics and the Pre-Raphaelites, for the Symbolists and the Surrealists, and even for the adherents of late 20th and early 21st-century sociocultural movements, such as New Age or Gothic".<sup>48</sup> Sebastian Schütze affirms that Blake was not only an esoteric writer and artist, but that his esotericism influenced the following century, especially the esoteric currents of the future, such as New Age in the twentieth century. Blake's esotericism has its roots in Dante, whose importance is so significant that in a letter to John Linnel on 25 April 1827, a few days before his death, he writes: "I am too much attached to

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<sup>44</sup> On Blake's esotericism, see Kathleen Raine, *Blake and Tradition*, 2 v., Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1968; Sheila A. Spector, "*Glorious incomprehensible*": *The Development of Blake's Kabbalistic Language*, Lewisburg, Bucknell University Press, 2001; Sheila A. Spector, "*Wonders Divine*": *The Development of Blake's Kabbalistic Myth*, Lewisburg, Bucknell University Press, 2001.

<sup>45</sup> Christopher McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians. The History, Mythology, and Rituals of an Esoteric Order*, p. 1.

<sup>46</sup> Sheila A. Spector, "Blake", in *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, p. 176.

<sup>47</sup> Sebastian Schütze, "Two Masters of 'visibile parlare': Dante and Blake", in Sebastian Schütze, Maria Antonietta Terzoli, *The Complete Drawings. William Blake. Dante's Divine Comedy*, p. 47.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47-48.

Dante to think much of anything else”.<sup>49</sup> William Butler Yeats confirmed this connection between Blake and Dante, stating that Blake “was very certain that he and Dante represented spiritual states which face one another in an eternal enmity”.<sup>50</sup> And if for Dante the rose was the most important symbol, for Blake, too, the rose (as well as the motif of love) played a pivotal role in his artistic and literary production.

Anna Francesca Maddison has studied the relations and analogies between the flower symbolism in Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Blake, pointing out the dual nature of the rose in both poets: the rose as both celestial and sinister. For instance, *The Blessed Damozel* and *Jenny* by Rossetti represent two types of spiritual influence: angelic yet dark.<sup>51</sup> Blake’s rose is also a mystical one, as evidenced by Barbara Seward.<sup>52</sup> In particular, Blake dedicates an entire poem to the rose – *The Sick Rose* (1794), in which he speaks of a “secret love”, with nuances that reference sexuality:

O Rose thou art sick.  
The invisible worm,  
That flies in the night  
In the howling storm:

Has found out thy bed  
Of crimson joy:  
And his dark secret love  
Does thy life destroy.<sup>53</sup>

As Barbara Seward affirms, in relation to the poem *The Sick Rose*, “Blake believed that humanity’s misery stemmed from a distorted conception of reality” and “the Church [...], missing Christ’s point, had promoted the notion of original sin and had followed this up with a system of ethics often corrupting to man’s true original innocence”.<sup>54</sup> As a result, “based on reason and not imagination, the Christian moral values guiding Western society had fostered repression, sublimation, and self-doubt, all of which in turn had fostered human ills and human anguish”.<sup>55</sup> This is the same conception exposed, in different terms, by Gabriele Rossetti and Luigi Valli in their studies on the esoteric nature of love in medieval literature. For Blake, the sick rose is the symbol of this spiritual decadence of humanity, whilst representing the secret of love, namely the religion that allows people to be free and to experience the divine. The

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<sup>49</sup> *The Letters of William Blake. With Related Documents*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1980, p. 170.

<sup>50</sup> William Butler Yeats, “William Blake and his Illustrations to *The Divine Comedy*. His Opinions on Dante”, *The Savoy*, n. 3, July 1896, p. 25.

<sup>51</sup> See Anna Francesca Maddison, *Conjugal Love and the Afterlife: New Readings of Selected Works by Dante Gabriel Rossetti in the Context of Swedenborgian-Spiritualism*, p. 125-126.

<sup>52</sup> See Barbara Seward, *op. cit.*, p. 63-64.

<sup>53</sup> William Blake, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Alicia Ostriker, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 2004, p. 83.

<sup>54</sup> Barbara Seward, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

poem *The Sick Rose* in Blake's *Songs of Experience* depicts the suffering that a child must face on the journey of life. It is an initiatory path and Blake's rose is an initiatory rose.

This idea of a rose which opposes the Church's moral corruption can also be found in the Symbolist French poet Jules Laforgue (1860-1887) in *Les Miracles des Roses* (The Miracles of the Roses); on this aspect, Barbara Seward comments that "Laforgue [...] admired the Catholic ideals but not their usual manifestations in the Church of this world".<sup>56</sup> This is an interesting point, shared also by Gabriele Rossetti: there is no opposition to Catholic values, but to men who represent the ecclesiastical establishment. Another French poet who adopted a similar stance was Remy de Gourmont (1858-1915), who was even more extreme than Laforgue. In his *Litanies de la rose* (1892), through the symbol of the rose, Gourmont references the spiritual values perverted by the ecclesiastical institution which disseminated them.<sup>57</sup> What is relevant here is the link with Blake, as both authors devote great importance to the concept of sex. As Barbara Seward remarks, "Gourmont, believing like Blake in the supreme importance of sex, likewise opposed the religion he felt had distorted and stifled it".<sup>58</sup> But there is one particular aspect that Barbara Seward stresses – the fact that in Blake's work a mystical and spiritual belief is present that is absent in the French poet: "Gourmont, unlike Blake, had no transcendental faith to support his sensual views and therefore was forced to confront the hard core of disillusion in mortal as well as religious values".<sup>59</sup> For Remy de Gourmont, the rose is the symbol of lost illusion: "fleur hypocrite / fleur du silence",<sup>60</sup> "hypocritical flower / flower of silence". The rose is the symbol of the "néant", nothingness: "dawn-coloured rose, colour of the sky, colour of nothing [...] smile opening upon nothingness".<sup>61</sup> Gourmont's rose also represents betrayal, of humanity betrayed by its spiritual representatives on earth: "papal rose, rose watered by the hands that bless the world, papal rose, your golden heart is of copper, and the tears that bead on your vain corolla are the tears of Christ, hypocritical flower, flower of silence".<sup>62</sup>

Beyond Gourmont's obvious dissatisfaction with the Church, it is worth pointing out that he wrote a book, *Dante, Béatrice et la poésie amoureuse* (Dante, Beatrice and Love Poetry, 1908), in which he examines the question of the veracity of Dante's Beatrice existence and the relationship between her presumed identity and her idealised one. Remy de Gourmont alludes

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Remy de Gourmont is extremely interesting on relations with Ezra Pound and the symbolism of the rose. In this respect, see Richard Sieburth, *Instigations. Ezra Pound and Remy de Gourmont*, Cambridge (Massachusetts), Harvard University Press, 1978.

<sup>58</sup> See Barbara Seward, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Remy de Gourmont, *Litanies de la Rose*, Paris, Mercure de France, 1892, p. 9-29.

<sup>61</sup> "Rose couleur d'aurore, couleur du temps, couleur de rien [...] sourire ouvert sur le néant". *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>62</sup> "Rose papale, rose arrosée des mains qui bénissent le monde, rose papale, ton cœur d'or est un cuivre, et les larmes qui perlent sur ta vaine corolle, ce sont les pleurs du Christ, fleur hypocrite, fleur du silence". *Ibid.*, p. 29.

to Gabriele Rossetti and his two works on Dante's esotericism and medieval love poetry: *Il Mistero dell'Amor Platonico* and *La Beatrice de Dante*. He also mentions other representatives of the so-called "heterodox" school of Dantean studies, such as Francesco Perez and Eugène Aroux.<sup>63</sup> In particular, on the latter, Remy de Gourmont states that Aroux's book *Dante hérétique, révolutionnaire et socialiste* "is curious by its singularity, it is full of interesting details about heresies in the Middle Ages".<sup>64</sup> It is thanks to Aroux, writes Remy de Gourmont, that in the French context the idea of Beatrice appears as "a representation of a kind of Albigenian freemasonry to which Dante would have been affiliated".<sup>65</sup> Once again, Gabriele Rossetti is ignored and the credit given to Eugène Aroux.

This critical work by Remy de Gourmont also uses the symbol of the rose to explain Beatrice's celestial nature, which he does by mentioning Canto XXX of *Purgatory*, where the rose is associated with the sun, the East and the image of woman.<sup>66</sup> The history of Dantean esotericism and the theory of esoteric love, hidden in the form of a rose, is of interest not just to a few Italianists, but also to a considerable number of authors on European literature, especially French and English ones, of which Remy de Gourmont is a good example. In a silent, even invisible way, the history of the esoteric doctrine of love proposed by Gabriele Rossetti has penetrated the history of literature, of literary criticism and of the history of Western esotericism, almost inadvertently.

### *William Blake: the modern Cathar*

Denis Saurat has studied the esoteric dimension of Blake's work, highlighting one of the main points that relate to the subject of my thesis: Catharism. Saurat's book *William Blake* is entirely devoted to demonstrating the links between the author of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and Catharist ideas. For Saurat, "Blake represents [...] an evolved form of Catharism, a kind of 'Cathar modernism'".<sup>67</sup> Blake is therefore seen as a modern Cathar, according to Saurat, who suggests that the English poet shared, with the Cathar credo, the fundamental

<sup>63</sup> See Remy de Gourmont, *Dante, Béatrice et la Poésie amoureuse. Essai sur l'idéal féminin en Italie à la fin du XII<sup>e</sup> siècle* [1908], Paris, Mercure de France, 1922, p. 18, 55. On Remy de Gourmont's interest in Dante, see Antonio Jiménez Millán, "Remy de Gourmont, lector de Dante", in *Medioevo y literatura, Actas del V Congreso de la Asociación Hispánica de Literatura Medieval (Granada, 27 septiembre - 1 octubre 1993)*, ed. Juan Paredes, Granada, Universidad de Granada, v. II, 1995, p. 489-498. This contribution by Antonio Jiménez Millán also recalls the importance of the book by Gabriele Rossetti, *Il Mistero dell'Amor Platonico*, with a view to understanding the esoteric meaning of Beatrice and love poetry. See *ibid.*, p. 492.

<sup>64</sup> "Ce livre [*Dante hérétique, révolutionnaire et socialiste*] est curieux par sa singularité, il est rempli de détails intéressants sur les hérésies au moyen-âge". Remy de Gourmont, *Dante, Béatrice et la Poésie amoureuse. Essai sur l'idéal féminin en Italie à la fin du XII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, p. 55.

<sup>65</sup> "Une représentation d'une sorte de franc-maçonnerie albigeoise à laquelle Dante aurait été affilié". *Ibid.*, p. 55-56.

<sup>66</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 66-67.

<sup>67</sup> "Blake représente [...] une forme évoluée du catharisme, une sorte de 'modernisme cathare'". Denis Saurat, *William Blake*, Paris, La Colombe, 1954, p. 119.

concept of the imprisonment of the soul in matter, which is associated with evil, because the material world would be none other than the work of the so-called Devil, Satan.<sup>68</sup> It is he who would have imprisoned souls by making them suffer on earth, in the material world which worships Mosaic law and the Old Testament, that is to say the work of the evil God (the Yahweh or Elohim of the Old Testament) who deceived humanity. But at the end of the world, in Blake's view, the Good God will triumph. Between God and the world of men, there would thus be intermediate powers: human life would be influenced and managed by invisible forces. According to Blake, it is Christ who will set souls free. It is Christ, by his example, who offers reincarnation to humanity. Purgatory and hell are on this earth; heaven, too, must be found on this earth, following the example of Christ. Beyond each single life there is another reality, based on the concept of reincarnation, which can be considered a purgatorial process: at each death, the individual is reincarnated in order to purify himself, by degrees, from his past life.<sup>69</sup>

Blake considers the postlapsarian world as a living hell ruled by Urizen – the false sinister God worshipped by humanity that is governed by the two Powers, the political and the religious ones. Here one could speak of a political and religious aspect relating to the invisible world, and it is above all religion that, according to Blake, has a fundamental role in bringing about the submission of the masses. Denis Saurat remarks that “Urizen's principal crime is the foundation of Religion”, because “worse than the treason by which souls are imprisoned in matter, is the treason by which Urizen made them believe lies”.<sup>70</sup> According to Blake, the spiritual world is the real driving force behind the history of humanity and the political and religious Powers are merely the material instruments of a higher design coming from a world that humanity cannot see.<sup>71</sup>

Saurat highlights a very important aspect concerning Blake's esotericism – the esoteric dimension of sex, which was to be the focus of attention of twentieth-century occultists, such as the esotericist and magician Aleister Crowley.<sup>72</sup> Sexual energy plays a major role in Blake's doctrine where, as Denis Saurat recalls, “one must rid sexual love first of the burden of reproduction (Tharmas, the instinct), then of passion (Luvah), and raise up to Jerusalem the spiritual Union which leads to God”.<sup>73</sup> For Blake, sex is the force that excites desire and, in so

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<sup>68</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 7, 40.

<sup>69</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 7-9, 17-18.

<sup>70</sup> “C'est la fondation de la Religion qui est le crime principal d'Urizen”; “pire que la trahison par laquelle les âmes sont emprisonnées dans la matière, est la trahison par laquelle Urizen leur a fait croire des mensonges”. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>71</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 39-42, 105. The same concept of a world governed by invisible realities was expounded in the twentieth century by Rudolf Steiner.

<sup>72</sup> On the importance attributed by Aleister Crowley to sexuality in the quest for occult wisdom, and in particular in magical rituals, see Mario Arturo Iannaccone, *Templari. Il martirio della memoria. Mitologia dei Cavalieri del Tempio*, Milan, Sugarco Edizioni 2005, p. 119-12.

<sup>73</sup> “Il faut débarrasser l'amour sexuel d'abord de la charge de la reproduction (Tharmas l'instinct), puis de la passion (Luvah), et élever jusqu'à Jérusalem, l'Union spirituelle qui mène à Dieu”. Blake held that man is divided

doing, imprisons human beings who seek each other out to satisfy this need.<sup>74</sup> In fact, as Saurat puts it, “under the influence of sexual desire all beings become both male and female, and each is condemned to pursue the other half in remorse and lamentation”.<sup>75</sup> Blake believes that the sexes survive in a spiritual life, and it is in the poem *To Tirzah* that this survival of the sexes on the spiritual level is clearly stated.<sup>76</sup> Blake’s concept of spiritual sex consists of the union of opposites in unity, which is the purpose of the initiatory journey outlined in previous chapters: “the first effect of spiritual Sexual Union is to rid the man and woman, the Male and Female, of their narrow individuality, to make of two, One, and then to merge this One with others, and to reconstitute a multiple Unity, in which each one keeps a personality, but merges with all the others”.<sup>77</sup> This is the same principle of destruction of the Self, the “I”, that we have seen in connection with the *Fedeli d’Amore*, Balzac or Nerval. This initiatory journey requires annihilation of the Self, and in Blake we find the same principle: “I come to Self Annihilation / such are the Laws of Eternity that each shall mutually / annihilate himself for others good, as I for thee”,<sup>78</sup> it is Milton (Blake’s incarnation) who speaks these words to Urizen, meaning Satan.

As in the case of Nerval, in Blake’s work the reader is confronted with a reality that has nothing to do with poetic fantasy, since Blake states that the spiritual truths he propounds are real experiences:

I travel thro’ a Land of Men,  
A Land of Men & Women too,  
And heard & saw such dreadful things  
As cold Earth wanderers never knew.<sup>79</sup>

Yeats would do the same, and speak, like Nerval or Blake, of these experiences with the invisible world, this unattainable reality, the spiritual reality that – according to the author of “The Sick Rose” – cannot be seen as human life is ruled by this invisible reality. Blake’s sick rose points to this invisible reality which, as I have shown in this chapter, is not detached from politics.

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into four powers that govern him: Urizen (the intellect), Los (the imagination), Luvah (the passion), Tharmas (the instinct). See Denis Saurat, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

<sup>74</sup> In nineteenth-century French literature, the same idea is evoked by Joséphin Péladan.

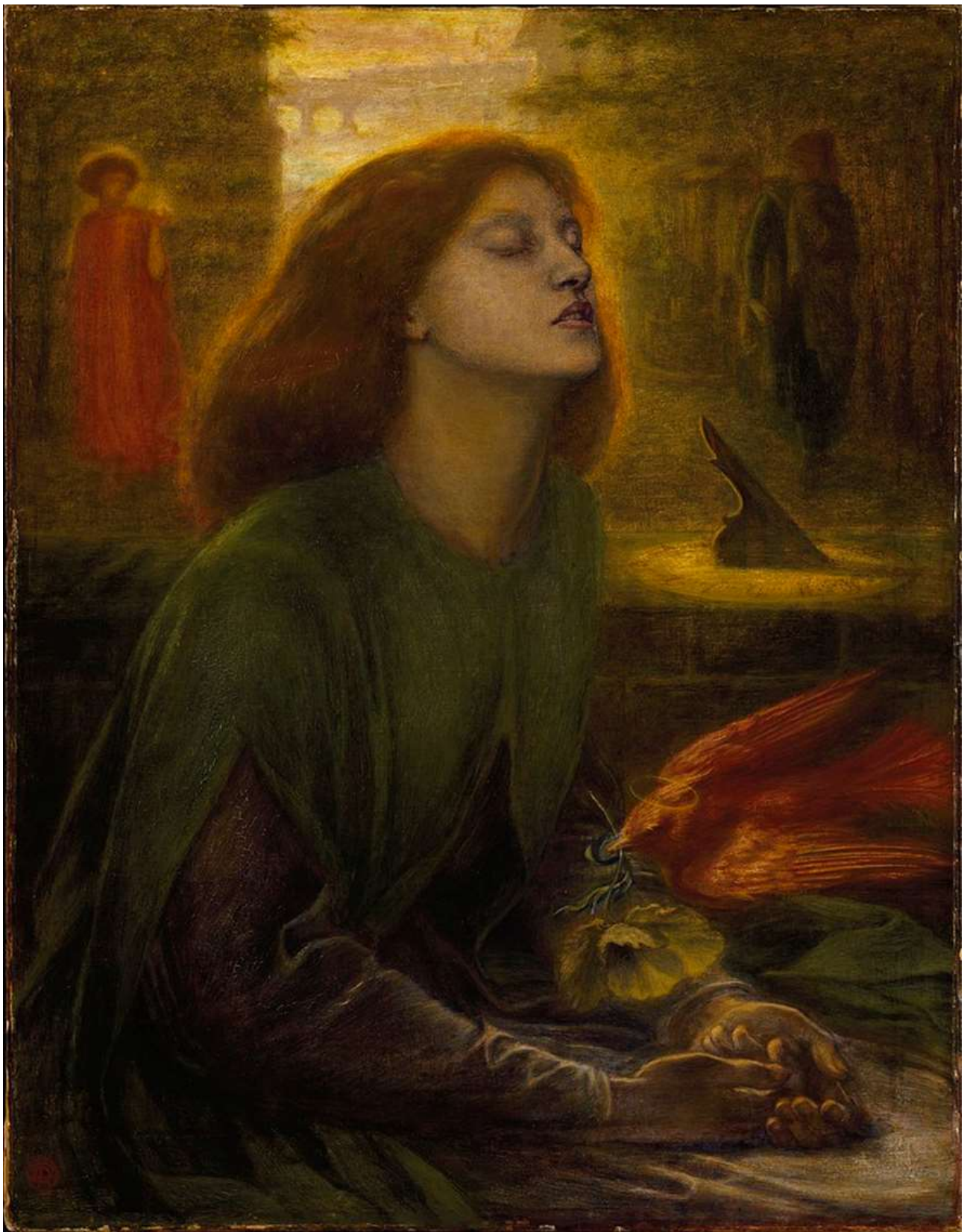
<sup>75</sup> “Sous l’influence du désir sexuel tous les êtres deviennent à la fois mâles et femelles, et chacun est condamné à poursuivre l’autre moitié de lui-même dans les remords et les lamentations”. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>76</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>77</sup> “Le premier effet de l’Union Sexuelle spirituelle est de débarrasser l’homme et la femme, le Mâle et la Femelle, de leur étroite individualité, de faire de deux, Un, puis d’aller mêler cet Un à d’autres, et de reconstituer une Unité multiple, dans laquelle chacun garde une personnalité, mais fusionne avec tous les autres”. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>78</sup> William Blake, *Milton*, in William Blake, *op. cit.*, p. 364.

<sup>79</sup> William Blake, *The Mental Traveller*, in *ibid.*, p. 308.



Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Beata Beatrix* (1872, Tate Britain, London)





Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Roman de la Rose* (1864, Tate Britain, London)





Edward Burne-Jones, William Morris, *The Pilgrim and the Heart of the Rose* (1874-1876, William Morris Gallery, London Borough of Waltham Forest)

## CHAPTER X

### FROM THE SECRET ROSE OF WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS TO THE MYSTICAL ROSE OF JAMES JOYCE

#### *The secret rose of William Butler Yeats*

In English late nineteenth and early twentieth century literary circles, a poet who had much in common with Dante in terms of the initiatory symbolism of the rose and adherence to esoteric Orders was William Butler Yeats.<sup>1</sup> He is particularly important for my research because his rose contains all the instances and features that I have presented so far. He could be defined as a kind of an “Irish Nerval”, since he shares several analogies with the French writer. These similarities include the influence of Dante, the attraction of the occult, adherence to esoteric and initiatory Orders, and the importance of the *topos* of love and rose symbolism in their works.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the mysterious doctrine of love that I have set out is clearly visible in the poems and writings of William Butler Yeats – the author who, more than any other in English literary circles, places the rose at the centre of his work. It is in the *Secret Rose* that Yeats speaks of the mystery of love, affirming that Eros has a hidden face, “because no man or woman from the beginning of the world has ever known what love is”.<sup>3</sup> According to Yeats, love is a secret which has nothing to do with carnal and human love. One of the main sources in Yeats’ work was Dante. He discovered and admired Dante thanks to two important figures in English literature: his close friend Ezra Pound and Dante Gabriel Rossetti.<sup>4</sup> Once again, we see the indirect influence of Gabriele Rossetti, through his son. In fact, the adaptation of Dante’s *Vita*

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<sup>1</sup> The relations between Dante and Yates have been studied by Stephen Paul Ellis, who stressed Dante’s influence on Yeats and pointed out the importance of the esoteric dimension as a link between the two poets: “Pound and Eliot were not the only major twentieth-century poets who were interested in Dante. William Yeats’s interest is less celebrated, partly because references to Dante occur in his prose writings rather than in his poetry and particularly in the esoteric philosophy eventually embodied in *A Vision*”. Stephen Paul Ellis, “Yeats and Dante”, *Comparative Literature*, v. 33, n. 1, 1982, p. 1. A very interesting article written by Yeats on Dante is “William Blake and his illustrations to the Divine Comedy” (1896), where the link between Blake and Dante is the visual description of the doctrine contained in the *Comedy*. On the links between Yeats and Dante, see also Steve Ellis, *Dante and English Poetry*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 140-170.

<sup>2</sup> On the symbolism of the rose in William Butler Yeats, see Alana White, *Symbolism in the Poetry of William Butler Yeats*, Masters Theses & Specialist Projects – Paper 1035, Bowling Green, Western Kentucky University, 1972; Jacqueline Genet, *La poésie de William Butler Yeats*, Villeneuve d’Ascq, Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2007, p. 263-265.

<sup>3</sup> William Butler Yeats, *The Secret Rose. Stories by W. B. Yeats: Variorum Edition*, eds. Warwick Gould, Phillip L. Marcus and Michael J. Sidnell, second edition revised and enlarged, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, London, Macmillan Academic and Professional, 1992, p. 147.

<sup>4</sup> Yeats focused on Dante in particular during the period when Ezra Pound worked with Yeats at Stone Cottage, between 1913 and 1916. See Stephen Paul Ellis, “Yeats and Dante”, *Comparative Literature*, p. 1-17.

*Nuova* in Yeats' poetry is a Rossettian legacy, as Piero Boitani points out.<sup>5</sup> A good example is the metaphysical problem of the quest for the self, presented in *Ego Dominus Tuus* in a dialogue between "Hic" and "Ille". In this poem, the title of which is taken from Dante's *Vita Nuova* – specifically where Dante speaks of the nature of love linked to a vision (the "maravigliosa visione",<sup>6</sup> the "tremendous vision")<sup>7</sup> and of the *Fedeli d'Amore* –, Love appears to him and says: "Ego dominus tuus",<sup>8</sup> "I am your Lord". Love holds in his arms the "donna de la salute",<sup>9</sup> "the lady of the saving gesture",<sup>10</sup> the beloved lady of Dante, and with the other hand he holds the poet's heart, which will subsequently be eaten by the lady. This is virtually the same symbolism found in Dante's work (*Vita Nuova*, III, 3-6) and, as Boitani affirms, "it is a Rossettian, Pre-Raphaelite type of reference".<sup>11</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Dante, Yeats: they are all linked to each other. Dante Gabriel Rossetti is the means, for Yeats, to access Dante's doctrine and his spiritual teaching.

Dante and Yeats had a religious vision which, in some respects, was similar, as confirmed by George Bornstein, who underlines, as did Stephen Ellis, the strong relationship between the Irish poet and the author of *The Divine Comedy*, from different points of view: "he [Yeats] saw Dante above all as a quest poet, with whom he shared devotion to an unattainable woman, political office in a strife-torn land, exile (voluntary in Yeats's case), acceptance of an abstruse system of belief, and a host of poetic goals, not least of which was to become a character in his own work".<sup>12</sup> Yeats, like Dante, becomes the protagonist of his own literary work and dialogues with Dante, who is none other than the mask of Yeats himself. In the following passage we have an example of this imaginary dialogue between "Hic" and "Ille", in which Dante (as well as Guido Cavalcanti and Lapo Gianni) is the focus of this metaphysical

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<sup>5</sup> See Piero Boitani, "Irish Dante: Yeats-Joyce-Beckett", in *Metamorphosing Dante. Appropriations, Manipulations, and Rewritings in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Century*, eds. Manuele Gragnolati, Fabio Camilletti and Fabian Lampart, Wien-Berlin, Verlag Turia+Kant, 2010, p. 37-38.

<sup>6</sup> Dante, *Vita Nuova*, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nova*, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> William Butler Yeats, *Ego Dominus Tuus*, in *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats. Volume I. The Poems*, ed. Richard J. Finneran, New York, Scribner, 1997, p. 162. In *Ego Dominus Tuus*, Yeats refers to another medieval Italian love poet that I have studied: Guido Cavalcanti. More specifically, Yeats uses a Cavalcanti sonnet, *I' vegno il giorno a te infinite volte*, in order to develop his metaphysical ideas in *Ego Dominus Tuus*. Moreover, in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, Yeats quote lines from this sonnet, and the translation used by Yeats is the one used by Gabriele Rossetti in his *The Early Italian Poets from Ciullo d'Alcamo to Dante Alighieri, 1100-1200-1300, in the Original Metres, together with Dante's "Vita Nuova"* (London, 1861). Dante Gabriel Rossetti's translation of the early Italian poets owes a great deal to the teaching of his father Gabriele Rossetti. This is a further example of an indirect influence of Gabriele Rossetti on European literature and culture: a translation whose origin is rooted in the history of Dantean esotericism.

<sup>9</sup> Dante, *Vita Nuova*, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nova*, p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Piero Boitani, "Irish Dante: Yeats-Joyce-Beckett", in *Metamorphosing Dante*, p. 38. On the influence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Pre-Raphaelitism on William Butler Yeats, see Jacqueline Genet, *La poésie de William Butler Yeats*, p. 77-79.

<sup>12</sup> George Bornstein, "Yeats's Romantic Dante", *Colby Library Quarterly*, v. 15, n. 2, 1979, p. 93.

discussion, through which the two poets, although distant in historical terms, share doctrinal beliefs:

*Hic.* Dante Alighieri...  
Has made that hollow face of his  
More plain to the mind's eye than any face  
But that of Christ.

*Ille.* ... is that spectral image  
The man that Lapo and that Guido knew?  
[...], he found  
The most exalted lady loved by a man.<sup>13</sup>

Here we find one of the main themes of the esoteric doctrine of love – the beloved woman whose nature is mystical, and this *topos* is shared by Yeats with the early Italian poets, in particular Dante. It is due to Dante that Yeats develops one of the most important concepts of his poetry, as well as his spiritual stance: the “Unity of Being”.

Yeats’ “Unity of Being” derives from Dante’s discussion (*Convivio* III, II, 7-9) on the attempt of the human soul to reconcile itself with God, through the means of physical objects or realities in which the Divine reveals itself, such as in the beauty of the beloved woman.<sup>14</sup> Yeats expresses the same concept about the nature of love: “by *love* is meant love of that particular unity towards which the nature is tending, or of those images and ideas which define it”.<sup>15</sup> In his *Autobiographies*, Yeats specifies that his concept of “Unity of Being” has its origin in Dante: “I thought that in man and race alike there is something called ‘Unity of Being’, using that term as Dante used it when he compared beauty in the *Convito* to a perfectly proportioned human body”.<sup>16</sup> The attainment of this “Unity of Being” corresponds to the union of the three different natures of man, namely the sensitive one, the vegetative one, combined in a harmonious one. This implies the encounter and the destruction of the “mask” that every man wears – a mask that makes someone face their dark side, the demon, the evil part of the individual that must be faced so as not to be destroyed by it. Thus, human beings must come to terms with themselves by killing the beast inside them.<sup>17</sup> This is the conquest of Yeats’ “anti-self”, which implies mastering the demon in the human soul – a characteristic shared, according to Yeats, by the great mystical poets throughout history: “the strength and weight of Shakespeare, of Villon, of Dante, even of Cervantes, come from their preoccupation with

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<sup>13</sup> William Butler Yeats, *Ego Dominus Tuus*, in *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats. Volume I. The Poems*, p. 162.

<sup>14</sup> See Dante, *Convivio. A Dual-Language Critical Edition*, p. 136.

<sup>15</sup> *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats. Volume XIII. A Vision (1925). The Original 1925 Version*, eds. Catherine E. Paul and Margaret Mills Harper, New York, London, New Scribner, 2008, p. 51.

<sup>16</sup> *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats. Volume III. Autobiographies*, eds. William H. O’Donnell and Douglas Archibald, New York, Scribner, 1999, p. 154.

<sup>17</sup> See Stephen Paul Ellis, *Yeats and Dante*, p. 8-9; Piero Boitani, *op. cit.*, p. 38-39.

evil”.<sup>18</sup> In Yeats’ view, the encounter with the devil represents the initiatory phase of the hellish descent before achieving paradisiacal states – the states of bliss represented by the rose in Dante’s doctrine of love.

Like Dante, Yeats’ esoteric doctrine of love is represented by the symbol of the rose, which pervades his literary production and his esoteric writings. In his poem *To the Secret Rose*, contained in *The Secret Rose* (1896), Yeats speaks of a rose which is inaccessible, the most secret and inviolate flower: “far off, most secret, and inviolate Rose”.<sup>19</sup> *The Secret Rose* contains different stories, in which the rose plays a pivotal role and spreads occult teaching. One of these stories is *The Crucifixion of the Outcast*, where Yeats introduces the tradition of the minstrels and of the medieval singers of love. The name of Yeats’ minstrel in *The Crucifixion of the Outcast* is Cumhal, the son of Cornac, who features in Irish folklore. In this work, Yeats introduces the Celtic divinities including Aengus, the Celtic God of Love.<sup>20</sup> It is through Cumhal’s words that Yeats expresses his contempt for ecclesiastical power, while he praises the religion of love of the bards and the minstrels: “o cowardly and tyrannous race of friars, persecutors of the bard and the gleeman, haters of life and joy! O race that does not draw the sword and tell the truth! O race that melts the bones of the people with cowardice and with deceit!”<sup>21</sup> This story is particularly interesting because it seems to hint at the subterranean current represented by the Celtic minstrels, who recall the subterranean history of the medieval love poets studied by Gabriele Rossetti in his *Mistero dell’Amor Platonico*. The logic is the same: the poet of love who opposes ecclesiastical power and tries to spread the esoteric doctrine of love among the masses, in the hope of being understood one day. Thus, in *The Crucifixion of the Outcast* one can read the words pronounced by the monk who tries to discourage the minstrel in his attempt to spread his doctrine – which is immoral, according to this representative of institutionalized religion: “‘Gleeman,’ said the lay brother, as they led him back to the guest-house, ‘why do you ever use the wit which God has given you to make blasphemous and immoral tales and verses?’”<sup>22</sup>

In the end, as in the case of the Italian love poet Cecco d’Ascoli or the Persian Soufi Al-Hallaj, Yeats’ minstrel is sentenced to death: crucifixion is the punishment for his crime, namely of having spread his doctrine of love. One aspect here is of particular significance: while the minstrel, like Jesus, made his way to the top of the hill, the place of the crucifixion, bearing the cross on his shoulders, he frequently stopped to be listened to. He was, in fact, accompanied by

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<sup>18</sup> William Butler Yeats, “If I were Four-and-Twenty (1919)”, in *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats. Volume V. Later Essays*, ed. William H. O’Donnell, with assistance from Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux, New York, London, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1994, p. 60.

<sup>19</sup> William Butler Yeats, *The Secret Rose. Stories by W. B. Yeats: Variorum Edition*, p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> See Luca Gallesi, *Esoterismo e Folklore in William Butler Yeats*, p. 141, 145-146.

<sup>21</sup> William Butler Yeats, *The Secret Rose. Stories by W. B. Yeats: Variorum Edition*, p. 9.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

a cortège composed of monks and common people: younger and older monks, and some beggars. The minstrel always found an excuse to capture the attention of the younger ones and to stop and speak to them. The young monks were enthusiastic when they heard the stories the minstrel told, but the older monks did not agree: they did not want him to speak. But the younger monks wanted to hear, and learn things they did not know; however, the older ones did not want this to happen because the minstrel would spread the teaching and knowledge that must not be divulged. The minstrel's words seem to be dangerous, bearing a truth that must not be spread – something hidden in the conscience that could be awakened. The younger monks wanted to know, and listen to what the minstrel had to say, but the older monks (theoretically the wise ones) were against this, as they wanted to be the only ones to pass on their truth to their followers: lies in the shape of truth. But here the discussion becomes even more complicated, because once the younger monks did hear what the minstrel had to say, they became angry with him and they beat him. They then placed the cross on his shoulders and took him to the top of the hill to be crucified. The minstrel had aroused in some of the younger men desires, aspirations and truths about themselves that they did not want to hear. They preferred the false teachings of the older monks to the true but embarrassing truths of the minstrel. So they vented their wrath on the person who was trying to arouse them. Following the logic of this story, we can claim that people prefer to be passive, submissive and indoctrinated to avoid going beyond their limited and restricted world. Novelty can be frightening, especially when it threatens the 'comfort zone' – the certainties that enable people to live better, or the "necessary illusion",<sup>23</sup> as Noam Chomsky calls it, in his studies on propaganda and mass control by Power. In Yeats' *The Crucifixion of the Outcast*, this control also seems to be associated with a spiritual dimension in which the spiritual control of the masses is directly linked to each form of power. In this sense Jesus Christ is a revolutionary, and the example of the minstrel crucified in Yeats' story recalls the figure of Jesus, who spoke for the few (his disciples), but not for all. Understanding the Christian message requires suffering, sorrow, solitude, and especially a sensitivity of the soul which is hard to possess: it is the result of a long process of self-improvement that transforms an individual from a brutish animal to a spiritual being. This is the initiatory metamorphosis spread by Yeats' minstrel, who expresses his doctrine, once again, by using the symbol of the rose:

I am myself the poorest, for I have travelled the bare road, and by the edges of the sea; and the tattered doublet of particoloured cloth upon my back and the torn pointed shoes upon my feet have ever irked me, because of the towered city full of noble raiment which was in my heart. And I have been the more alone upon the roads and by the sea because I heard in my heart the rustling of the rose-bordered dress of her who is more subtle than Aengus, the

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<sup>23</sup> Noam Chomsky, *Necessary Illusions. Thought Control in Democratic Societies*, Boston, South End Press, 1989.



Subtle-hearted, and more full of the beauty of laughter than Conan the Bald, and more full of the wisdom of tears than White-breasted Deirdre, and more lovely than a bursting dawn to them that are lost in the darkness. Therefore, I award the tithe to myself; but yet, because I am done with all things, I give it unto you.<sup>24</sup>

This is the truth imparted by the minstrel to the beggars: he is very poor, he has suffered, but he knows the truth about the invisible world. He is not a common person; he is an initiate who has suppressed his own self and has found the rose – an occult rose, unknown to the profane: the secret rose.

But can we link Yeats' secret rose to the esoteric love and the initiatory rose of the *Fedeli d'Amore*? To my knowledge, the only author who has linked Yeats' literary production with the *Fedeli d'Amore* (and with the Rosy-Cross) is Fernando Picchi in his *Esoterismo e magia nel poesie di W. B. Yeats* (Esotericism and Magic in the Poems of W. B. Yeats).<sup>25</sup> The symbol that creates this relationship is the rose, which underpins Picchi's reasoning. The importance of Picchi's study lies in the esoteric dimension of Yeats' rose, approached by linking this flower to different esoteric traditions: the *Fedeli d'Amore* (based on Luigi Valli's research), Rosy-Cross esotericism, alchemy (based on Fulcanelli's contribution), the kabbalistic tradition, and the occultism spread by Éliphas Lévi in the second half of the nineteenth century or by the Italian esotericist Giulian Kremmerz between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

According to Fernando Picchi, the rose of the collection titled *The Rose* is not an aesthetic identification with the concept of beauty, rather the flower of the Rosy-Cross tradition, which shows many similarities with the rose of the *Fedeli d'Amore*, as well as with their symbolic woman.<sup>26</sup> In particular, it is in the poem already mentioned *Ego Dominus Tuus* that the Italian scholar recognizes the woman of the *Fedeli d'Amore*, Sophia, the last Eon of the dodecade of the Gnostics.<sup>27</sup> Both the woman and the rose in Yeats are esoteric and the rose, in particular, leads to the encounter with the invisible world. This secret rose of Yeats is an esoteric flower. Alain Mercier affirms that "one can consider the poems contained in *The Rose* as a first literary interpretation of magic penetrating the world in order to transform it through its

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>25</sup> Fernando Picchi, *Esoterismo e magia nelle poesie di W. B. Yeats*, Florence, Nardini Editore, 1977. In the acknowledgements of this book, Fernando Picchi points out that to write his work he came into contact with initiatory Orders and Associations that allowed him to better understand some esoteric and doctrinaire aspects, thanks to texts provided by these organizations: "I feel the need to thank the brotherly friends Lucio Camporeale and Guido Guidetti for the advice that they gave me on the doctrinaire and esoteric aspects and all the Initiatory Associations and Schools with which I came into contact, which put at my disposal published and unpublished texts that could help me in this pleasant and welcome work. Naples, 1977" ("sento il bisogno di ringraziare i fraterni amici Lucio Camporeale e Guido Guidetti per i consigli che mi hanno dato sugli aspetti dottrinari esoterici e tutte le Associazioni e Scuole Iniziatiche con le quali sono venuto a contatto, che mi hanno messo a disposizione testi editi e inediti che potessero aiutarmi in questo piacevole e gradito lavoro. Napoli, 1977"). *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>27</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 175.

enchantments and its evil spells”.<sup>28</sup> Magic is of pivotal importance in Yeats, and his rose is also a flower linked to magic. Interestingly, Fernando Picchi remarks that this magic and occult rose of the Irish poet shows striking similarities with the esoteric doctrine of the *Fedeli d’Amore* studied by Gabriele Rossetti and Luigi Valli. In this respect Yeats’ rose, which seems to be linked to the rose of the *Fedeli d’Amore* is – as Picchi suggests – the one in *The Rose of the World*. Picchi’s reasoning is based on research by Luigi Valli (not Gabriele Rossetti), and has analogies with the rose of the *Dolce Stil Novo* Italian poets, the French troubadours, the rose of Frederick II (Emperor of Germany and of the two Sicilies), the rose of Soria and the mystical Persian tradition.<sup>29</sup> Thus, based on Luigi Valli’s contribution, Fernando Picchi shows the points of contact between the *Fedeli d’Amore* mystical doctrine of love and the poem by Yeats, focusing on the rose symbolism. Moreover, Picchi highlights the alchemical images present in the same passages and uses the work of Fulcanelli (*Le Mystère des Cathédrales*) to demonstrate the relationship between Yeats’ rose and the alchemical mystical rose. Significantly, the latter is also related to the mystical rose of the *Fedeli d’Amore*; in fact, the contact between Yeats, the alchemy explained by Fulcanelli and the rose of the *Fedeli d’Amore* is represented in the second and third strophes of the poem *The Rose of the World*.<sup>30</sup> This is echoed in another of Yeats’ poems, *The Rose of the Battle*, and here again Fernando Picchi sees analogies with Dante, more specifically in a passage of *Paradiso*: the first fifteen lines of *Canto II*, starting with the expression: “O voi che siete in piccoletta barca”,<sup>31</sup> “O you who are in your little boat”.<sup>32</sup> Here marine imagery is linked to the song of love and the rose symbolism in both Dante and Yeats, whilst Yeats’ rose, “Rose of all Roses, Rose of all the World”,<sup>33</sup> has to do with magic.<sup>34</sup> In fact, as Picchi points out, “part of the symbolism of this poem [*Rose of the Battle*] will be, then, taken up by Yeats in his essay *Magic*”.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, Yeats’ rose is closely linked with magic and the occult. In *The Rose Upon the Rood of Time*, Yeats presents an occult rose. More precisely, in this poem, as Dario Calimani remarks, the symbol of the rose represents two kinds of roses: the symbolic-esoteric rose and the natural one.<sup>36</sup> In fact, following the Pre-Raphaelite model, Yeats expresses the difficulties

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<sup>28</sup> “On peut considérer les poèmes contenus dans *The Rose* comme une première interprétation littéraire de la magie pénétrant le monde pour le transformer par ses enchantements et ses maléfices”. Alain Mercier, *Les Sources ésotériques et occultes de la poésie symboliste*, t. II, p. 31.

<sup>29</sup> See Fernando Picchi, *op. cit.*, p. 74-75.

<sup>30</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>31</sup> Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia*, p. 796.

<sup>32</sup> Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, p. 355.

<sup>33</sup> William Butler Yeats, *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Richard J. Finneran, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 1989, p. 37.

<sup>34</sup> Fernando Picchi, *op. cit.*, p. 78-80.

<sup>35</sup> “Parte del simbolismo di questa poesia [*Rose of the Battle*] sarà, poi, ripreso da Yeats nel suo saggio *Magic*”. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>36</sup> See Dario Calimani, “Note ai testi”, in William Butler Yeats, *Verso Bisanzio Poesie*, ed. Dario Calimani, Venice, Marsilio, 2015, p. 209.



of reconciling the transcendental reality and the sensory one, the mystical aspirations and the reality of ordinary life, which stifles and suppresses the imagination and the spirit. The mystical union of the feminine element of the rose with the masculine element of the cross, the symbol of suffering, is present in this poem by Yeats, who mixes the mystical element with the figure of the *femme fatale* (Maud Gonne) and the political and cultural tradition of Ireland.<sup>37</sup> In particular, Yeats asks the rose to approach him (“Red Rose, proud Rose, sad Rose of all my days! / Come near me, while I sing the ancient ways”),<sup>38</sup> but at the same time he asks it not to come too close (“come near, come near, come near – Ah, leave me still / a little space for the rose-breath to fill! / Lest I no more hear common things that crave / [...] and heavy mortal hopes that toil and pass”)<sup>39</sup> since, as Fernando Picchi remarks, the poet knows that those who approach the occult world are completely sucked into it, a concept represented in Yeats’ poem by the rose.<sup>40</sup> The risk is to be fully absorbed by the invisible and occult reality and lose interest in daily life. In fact, as the critic points out, it is in order to avoid such a danger (the thorns of the rose) that he actively participates in the political life of his country.<sup>41</sup> In *All Souls’ Night* (1920), Yeats speaks of the danger of encountering the invisible: “meditations upon unknown thought / make human intercourse grow less and less”.<sup>42</sup> In other words, the unknown may be dangerous and have a negative impact on human life. Yeats’ rose is a symbol of the unknown, an occult rose.

As I have mentioned, Yeats’ esoteric rose is not only linked to Dante and his doctrine of love but also to the Rosicrucian tradition. William Butler Yeats is a fundamental figure in this respect, both from the literary and historical point of view, as he belonged to the initiatory Orders linked to the Rosicrucian tradition. The legendary figure of Christian Rosenkreutz is clearly present in one of his poetic compositions, *The Mountain Tomb*, where the founder of the Rosy-Cross Order is praised by the Irish poet, and roses are evoked as a symbol of the Rosicrucian esoteric tradition:

Pour wine and dance if manhood still have pride,  
 Bring roses if the rose be yet in bloom;  
 The cataract smokes upon the mountain side,  
 Our Father Rosicross is in his tomb.

Pull down the blinds, bring fiddle and clarionet  
 That there be no foot silent in the room  
 Nor mouth from kissing, nor from wine unwet;  
 Our Father Rosicross is in his tomb.

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<sup>37</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> William Butler Yeats, *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, p. 31.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> See Fernando Picchi, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

<sup>41</sup> See *ibid.* Fernando Picchi remarks that the two themes discussed by Yeats in his collection *The Rose* are political and esoteric: Ireland and the occult.

<sup>42</sup> William Butler Yeats, *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, p. 229.

In vain, in pain; the cataract still cries;  
The everlasting taper lights the gloom;  
All wisdom shut into his onyx eyes,  
Our Father Rosicross sleeps in his tomb.<sup>43</sup>

Christopher McIntosh highlights the importance of William Butler Yeats in relation to the Rosicrucian tradition and shows that Yeats believed magic was strongly linked to Rosicrucianism.<sup>44</sup> In 1895, Yeats wrote an essay about the Rosicrucians, “The Body of a Father Christian Rosencrux”, in which he affirms that the tomb of the founder of the Rosicrucian movement was discovered accidentally by some students who belonged to a magical Order. For the author of *The Secret Rose*, Magic and Rosicrucian beliefs go hand in hand, and his rose – beyond its links with his private life and his political commitment – is also connected with his membership of initiatory and magic Orders, such as the Order of the Alchemical Rose. Yeats speaks of this in his *Adoration of the Magi* and in another story in *The Secret Rose*, namely *Rosa Alchemica*, where the narrator is visited by Michael Robartes, who asks him if he would like to become an adept of the Order of the Alchemical Rose. He asks him if he would like to be initiated into this Order of the Rose. It is a rose that has nothing to do with occult knowledge, but it symbolizes an initiatory Order, the one of the Alchemical Rose.<sup>45</sup>

The involvement of William Butler Yeats in the occult milieu of this period is undeniable and represents an extremely important aspect of his life and literary career. All his works, as well his personal experiences, are profoundly influenced by esotericism.<sup>46</sup> Magic and the occult characterized his life and consequently his written work. Occultism and his private life came together for William Butler Yeats. With George Russell, he founded the Dublin Hermetic Society – an esoteric group interested in theosophy, magic, cabala and esoteric Buddhism. He was influenced by the ideas of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky. He met her in London

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121-122.

<sup>44</sup> Christopher McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians. The History, Mythology, and Rituals of an Esoteric Order*, p. 114. In particular, McIntosh underlines the importance of the rose symbol, linked to the Rosicrucian tradition evoked by Yeats.

<sup>45</sup> Robartes tells the narrator of *The Secret Rose* that there are different gods which appear to artists, poets and writers as moods, representing different moods. Therefore, there is an eternal god but also many others. See Peter Liebrechts, *op. cit.*, p. 4. This idea is also present in the *Red Book* by Jung, which I will discuss in later chapters. At the end of *Rosa Alchemica* the narrator has an exceptional psychic experience and achieves the higher reality, namely the state of pure being through the visions he has.

<sup>46</sup> On the esoteric and initiatory dimension of William Butler Yeats, see Luca Gallesi, *Esoterismo e folklore in William Butler Yeats*; Kathleen Raine, *Yeats the initiate: essays on certain themes in the work of W. B. Yeats*, Mountrath, Dolmen Press, 1986; Graham Hough, *The Mystery Religion of W. B. Yeats*, Brighton, The Harvester Press, 1984; *Yeats and the Occult*, ed. George Mills Harper, London, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1976; Hazard Adams, *The Book of Yeats's Vision. Romantic Modernism and Antithetical Tradition*, Ann Arbor [Mich.], The University of Michigan Press, 1995; William T. Gorsky, *Yeats and Alchemy*, Albany (N.Y.), State University of New York Press, 1996; *Yeats, Philosophy, and the Occult*, eds. Matthew Gibson and Neil Mann, Clemson, Clemson University Press, 2016; Fernando Picchi, *op. cit.*; Jacqueline Genet, *La Poétique de William Butler Yeats*, Lille, Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1989, p. 73-125; Jacqueline Genet, *La poésie de William Butler Yeats*, p. 112-121; Steven Helming, *The Esoteric Comedies of Carlyle, Newman, and Yeats*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 155-215.

and aged 22, joined the Theosophical Society of London. On 2 March 1890 he was initiated into the Golden Dawn, taking the name of *Daemon est Deus inversus*. As I have suggested in chapter VII, the Golden Dawn is one of the most interesting examples of esoteric and initiatory organizations, which was associated with a large number of writers, and whose literature owes a great deal to this membership. Its members included Florence Farr, Algernon Blackwood, Arthur Machen, Bram Stoker and Oscar Wilde.<sup>47</sup>

Studying William Butler Yeats inevitably leads to investigating occult circles in England in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and to one figure in particular: Aleister Crowley. Crowley's literary production also contains esoteric teaching hidden in the *topos* of love and in the symbol of the rose, as I will show under the next heading.

### Rosa Mundi: *the flower of Aleister Crowley*

The study of the rose in William Butler Yeats' literature leads to research that deals with the esoteric and occult milieu of English occult circles,<sup>48</sup> in particular, Rosicrucianism and one of the main initiatory Orders, the Golden Dawn. In fact, as Christopher McIntosh points out, a "fruitful source of Rosicrucian material is the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn".<sup>49</sup> One of the most interesting figures in this esoteric Order was Aleister Crowley who, after a period of militancy, left the group and founded the O. T. O. (Ordo Templis Orientis).<sup>50</sup> It was not just W. B. Yeats that introduced Rosicrucian themes and the image of the rose into his poems and stories; Aleister Crowley also wrote poems featuring Rosicrucian motifs and the esoteric symbolism of the rose. Crowley's poetic production is often overlooked, as he is associated mainly with involvement in magical practices, considered to be sinister in nature and linked to black magic.<sup>51</sup> "The Great Beast" – an appellation attributed to Crowley – perfectly captures the idea of this sinister nature associated with the English esotericist and magician, founder of

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<sup>47</sup> See Claudio Foti, *Scrittori maledetti della Golden Dawn*, Milan, Mursia, 2022; *Guida alla letteratura esoterica*, p. 54-55.

<sup>48</sup> In the English occult milieu at the turn of the century, a pivotal figure who merits further study is Arthur Edward Waite (1857-1942), whom I mentioned in the last chapter of the first part of this thesis. Edward Waite is particularly known for his work on Rosicrucianism, occultism and, more generally, on esotericism, but he also wrote many poems of a metaphysical nature. This aspect is beyond the scope of my thesis, though his poetry is relevant as it contains the symbol of the rose. In particular, see *The Garden of Spiritual Flowers*, in Arthur Edward Waite, *The Open Vision*, with an introduction of Algernon Blackwood, Windsor, The Shakespeare Head Press Eton, 1959, p. 39-42. See also Arthur Edward Waite, *The Collected Poems of Arthur Edward Waite*, 2 v., London, William Rider & Son, 1914. Arthur Edward Waite's entire output is kept at the Ritman Library (Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica) of Amsterdam, to which I am particularly indebted for allowing me to access numerous works written by Waite.

<sup>49</sup> Christopher McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians. The History, Mythology, and Rituals of an Esoteric Order*, p. 114.

<sup>50</sup> On the figure of Aleister Crowley see Marco Pasi, *Aleister Crowley and the Temptation of Politics*, Abingdon, Oxon, New York, Routledge, 2014; Marco Pasi, "Crowley, Aleister", in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, p. 281-287; Marco Pasi, "Crowley, Aleister", in *Dictionnaire critique de l'ésotérisme*, p. 358-360; *Dictionnaires des sociétés secrètes en Occident*, p. 131-139.

<sup>51</sup> See *Guida alla letteratura esoterica*, p. 54-56, 91-97, 103-110.

the Gnostic religion of Thelema.<sup>52</sup> Aleister Crowley is best known for his work *Magick* (1929), which can be considered a kind of handbook of the occult. In *Magick*, Crowley sets out an esoteric doctrine, explaining the techniques needed to establish contact with spirits, demons and elemental forces: or rather, with extra-terrestrial entities. Thus, all readers become self-initiates. Interestingly, in this work by Crowley, Dante, the rose and love are presented as part of the esoteric thread: they are linked to magic. But Crowley was not only an occultist who spread knowledge about magic through his work. He was also a poet, and some of his most important poems feature the rose symbolism, such as *Rosa Mundi* or *The Rose and the Cross*. The latter clearly refers to Rosicrucianism:

Out of the seething cauldron of my woes,  
Where sweets and salt and bitterness I flung;  
Where charmed music gathered from my tongue,  
And where I chained strange archipelagos  
Of fallen stars; where fiery passion flows  
A curious bitumen; where the tune unsung  
Of perfect love: thence grew the Mystic Rose.

Its myriad petals of divided light;  
Its leaves of the most radiant emerald;  
Its heart of fire rubies. At the sight  
I lifted up my heart to God and called:  
How shall I pluck this dream of my desire?  
And lo! There shaped itself the Cross of Fire!<sup>53</sup>

“Crowley here”, Christopher McIntosh comments, “beautifully and vividly expresses the mystical aspects of the Rosicrucian symbol”,<sup>54</sup> and the “Mystic Rose” evoked by the English magus and poet is the symbol that references the Rosy-Cross doctrine.

Whilst *The Rose and the Cross* is the poem that contains Rosicrucian doctrine, *Rosa Mundi* is where Aleister Crowley depicts the occult mysticism of the rose. As is the case of the rose in medieval and Renaissance love poets, Crowley’s rose is associated with the *topos* of love: “Rose of the World! / Red glory of the secret heart of Love!”.<sup>55</sup> It is a rose that is also linked with the image of woman (“Sister and wife, dear wife, / light of my love and lady of my life”), which leads to ecstasy (“the unshakable state / of constant rapture”):<sup>56</sup>

All thine, O rose, O wrought of many a muse  
In Music, O thou strength of ecstasy  
Incarnate in a woman-form, create  
Of her own rapture, infinite, ultimate,

<sup>52</sup> See John Symonds, *The Great Beast. The Life of Aleister Crowley*, London, Rider and co., 1955.

<sup>53</sup> Aleister Crowley, *The Rose and the Cross*, in *Oxford Book of Mystical Verse*, Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1917, p. 524.

<sup>54</sup> Christopher McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians. The History, Mythology, and Rituals of an Esoteric Order*, p. 115.

<sup>55</sup> Aleister Crowley, *Rosa Mundi*, in *The Works of Aleister Crowley*, v. III, London, Foyers Society for the Propagation of Religious Truth, 1907, p. 51.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

Not to be seen, not grasped, not even imaginable.<sup>57</sup>

Crowley says that the rapture produced by the rose is a mental state which is unimaginable, and which cannot be understood by the masses. But this rose is present everywhere in the world: “Rose of all the gardens of the world”.<sup>58</sup> It is because of this rose, which is invulnerable and inviolate, that it is possible to understand divine secrets, in Crowley’s opinion. Here he seems to blend Yeats and Blake, Yeats’ inviolate rose and the Evil God(s) depicted by Blake in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*:

There is no need to answer: God is God,  
A jealous God and evil; with His rod  
He smiteth fair and foul, and with His sword  
Divideth tiniest atoms of intangible time,  
That men may know he is the Lord.  
Then, with that sharp division,  
Did He divide our wit sublime?  
Our knowledge bring to nought?  
We had no need of thought.  
We brought His malice in derision.  
So thine eternal petals shall enclose  
Me, O most wonderful lady of delight,  
Immaculate, indivisible circle of night,  
Inviolate, invulnerable Rose!<sup>59</sup>

Crowley claims that he had direct contact with the divine, not only the Christian God, but others as well:

I have seen the eternal Gods  
Sit, star-wed, in old Egypt by the Nile;  
The same calm pose, the inscrutable, wan smile,  
On every lip alike.<sup>60</sup>

In this truth about the divine mysteries revealed by Crowley, the rose is considered as the symbol that can spiritually elevate man, by allowing him to achieve what Yeats calls the Unity of Being:

the Rose  
Of the World, the Rose of all Delight,  
The Rose of Dew, the Rose of Love and Night,  
The Rose of Silence, covering as with a vesture  
The solemn unity of things.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

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

For Aleister Crowley, the rose is the path towards eternity: “the first flower of the garden the stored treasure / that lies at the heart’s heart of eternity”;<sup>62</sup> “O living Rose! O dowered with subtle dew / of love, the tiny eternities of time”.<sup>63</sup>

The symbolism of the rose and the *topos* of love go hand in hand in Crowley’s *Rosa Mundi*, and are linked to divine truths (“the garden of God’s roses”)<sup>64</sup> and ecstatic rapture:

Delight of Love; not in mere lips and eyes  
The secret of these bridal ecstasies,  
Since thou art everywhere,  
Rose of the World, Rose of the Uttermost  
Abode of glory, Rose of the High Host  
Of heaven, mystic, rapturous Rose!<sup>65</sup>

Love is the real mystery of life (“Life is but Love”)<sup>66</sup> and of the whole universe which contains “the filaments of the great web of Love”.<sup>67</sup> For Crowley, the mystery of love is preserved by the inviolate mystical rose: “O Rose, inviolate, utterly withdrawn / in the truth: – for this is truth: Love knows! / Ah! Rose of the World! Rose! Rose!”<sup>68</sup>

Moreover, an interesting aspect of Crowley’s *Rosa Mundi* is that his mystical rose is associated with “the quintessential plume of Keats /and Shelley and Swinburne and Verlaine”.<sup>69</sup> Thus, according to him, poets such as Keats, Shelley, Swinburne and Verlaine share with the English magician the mystical knowledge represented by the symbol of the rose. Among the authors mentioned above, Verlaine is particularly important. To my knowledge, there are no specific studies on the esoteric dimension of his literary production, and Crowley believes he is linked to the occult knowledge. Verlaine is not the only nineteenth-century French poet considered by Crowley to be a figure whose work is infused with magic and occult knowledge. In fact, in his masterpiece *Magick*, Crowley mentions some French poets who he claims are directly linked to presumed occult knowledge. In fact, beyond the reference to the French occultists Papus and Éliphas Lévi in his *Le Dogme et Rituel de la Haute Magie*,<sup>70</sup> Aleister Crowley mentions Stanislas de Guaita, and in particular Joris-Karl Huysmans.<sup>71</sup> According to

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>70</sup> See Aleister Crowley, *Magick* [1973], ed. John Symonds et Kenneth Grant, York Beach, Maine, Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1986, p. 446. Among the other readings suggested by Aleister Crowley are the Indian sacred texts par excellence, the *Bhagavad-Gita*.

<sup>71</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 220-221, 311.

Crowley, the French poet Huysmans' works promoted magic, and the literary work that features this esoteric knowledge is *Là-bas*, which also enables the reader to understand black magic.<sup>72</sup>

However, Aleister Crowley did not just refer to French symbolists since, in his speculation about the invisible world, he references Dante and the doctrine of love that I have discussed. In the *Liber Aleph* he introduces Dante and Beatrice in a chapter titled "Gesta de Amore" (Feats of Love), where he links Dante's esoteric love with other figures of medieval love literature and of the twentieth century, including the theme of the war:

Now as Literature overfloweth with the Murders of Love, so also doeth History, and the Lesson is ever the same.  
Thus the Loves of Abelard and of Heloise were destroyed by the System of Repression in which they chanced to move.  
Thus Beatrice was robbed of Dante by social Artificialities; and Paolo slain on account of Things external to his Love of Francesca.  
Then, per contra, Martin Luther, being a Giant of Will, and also the Eighth Henry of England, as a mighty King, bent them to overturn the whole World that they might have satisfaction of their Loves.  
And who shall follow them? For even now we find great Churchmen, Statesmen, Princes, Dramamakers, and many lesser Men, overwhelmed utterly and ruined by the conflict between their Passions and the Society about them. Wherein which Party errs is no matter of Moment for our Thought; but the Existence of the War is Evidence of Wrong done to Nature.<sup>73</sup>

Moreover, in the chapter "Legenda de Amore" (Legend of Love), which precedes the chapter "Gesta de Amore", Crowley speaks of another love that I have referred to in previous chapters: that between Romeo and Juliet. He does so by linking it to the esoteric tradition of the Kabbalah:

The Fault, that is Fatality, in Love, as in every other Form of Will, is Impurity. It is not the Spontaneity thereof which worketh Woe, but some Repression in the Environment.  
In the Fable of Adam and Eve is this great Lesson taught by the Masters of the Holy Qabalah. For Love were to them the eternal Eden, save for the Repression signified by the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Thus their Nature of Love was perfect; it was their Fall from that Innocence which drove them from the Garden.  
In the Love of Romeo and Juliet was no Flaw; but family Feud, which imported nothing to that Love, was its Bane; and the Rashness and Violence of their Revolt against that Repression, slew them.  
In the pure Outrush of Love in Desdemona for Othello was no Flaw; but his Love was marred by his consciousness of his Age and his Race, of the Prejudices of his Fellows and of his own Experience of Woman-Frailty.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 220.

<sup>73</sup> Aleister Crowley, *The Book of Wisdom or Folly: in the Form of an Epistle of 666 the Great Wild Beast to his Son 777 Being the Equinox Volume III n° vi: Liber Aleph Vel CXI / by the Master Therion (Aleister Crowley)* [1962], York Beach, Maine, Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1991, p. 5.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

Dante's love and Shakespeare's love are considered occult by Crowley in his *Liber Aleph*, a work in which he also deals with the esoteric dimension of the symbol of the rose. In comparing the esoteric love and rose expounded by Aleister Crowley and those studied by Gabriele Rossetti, it is clear that Rossetti did not know a great deal about the 'occult doctrine'; in fact, he said as much, unlike Crowley who believed in, and played a part in, that world and gave voice to his experience, thus explaining what love and the rose represented in occult practices, even those of a sinister nature.

In Crowley's *Liber Aleph*, the symbol of the rose is associated with the Cross,<sup>75</sup> the colour red ("Red Rose")<sup>76</sup> and the quality of being golden and mystical.<sup>77</sup> This rose symbolism is also present in *The Confessions* by Aleister Crowley, where he links the "facts of Magick"<sup>78</sup> with Dante, but also with Milton, who was – as I have already suggested – one of the English writers that Gabriele Rossetti considered as the bearer of the esoteric doctrine of love professed by the author of *The Divine Comedy*.<sup>79</sup> Crowley speaks of a "Dantesque quality",<sup>80</sup> and the rose is repeatedly evoked with different nuances of meaning: sometimes it is the rose of the soul ("omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent, yet blossoming in my soul as if the entire forces of the universe from all eternity were concentrated and made manifest in a single rose");<sup>81</sup> sometimes it is associated with the cross ("invoking the angels of Earth, I obtained wonderful effect. The angel, my guide, treated me with great contempt and was very rude and truthful. He showed me divers things. In the centre of the earth is formulated the Rose and Cross. Now the Rose is the Absolute Self-Sacrifice"),<sup>82</sup> and it is even associated with an Initiatory Order of the Rose: "the Order of the Rose of Ruby and the Cross of Gold".<sup>83</sup> This initiatory Order of the Rose is also confirmed by Yeats, who spoke, as I have mentioned, of a magical Order of the Rose. It is also noteworthy that Gabriele Rossetti wrote about the Orders of the Rose and the Order of Love in the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance, repeatedly affirming, as we have seen, that this initiatory Order of Love or of the Rose still existed in the nineteenth century. Aleister Crowley's works introduce the reader to the world of initiatory and secret Orders in the late the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The poem *The Neophyte* provides a good description of the Golden Dawn's initiation ceremony, as specified in a note in the *Oxford Book of Mystical Verse* (edited by D. H. S. Nicholson and A. H. E. Lee): "this poem [*The Neophyte*]

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<sup>75</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 189.

<sup>77</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 203.

<sup>78</sup> Aleister Crowley, *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley, an Autohagiography* [1929], eds. John Symonds and Kenneth Grant, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979, p. 362.

<sup>79</sup> In *The Confessions*, Crowley refers to the work of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. See *ibid.*, p. 230, 338, 354.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196.



describes the initiation of the ‘Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn’ in its spiritual aspect”.<sup>84</sup> Literature is, in this case, a means of transforming into words what happens in the occult and secret Orders. The symbols which are present in this poem are merely images used to describe the initiation stage. “The gates of death”, “the Great Unseen”, “this deadly night”, “this amazing darkness”, “my life has been the death, / this death may be the life”, “I am come / into this darkness to attain the light”, “to gain my voice I make myself as dumb”, “the Gates of Dawn”:<sup>85</sup> all these expressions poetically symbolize an initiation. The readers will never understand the text if they do not know the occult language to which the initiates are privy. For the profane reader, this poem will simply remain obscure.

### *Joyce’s rose*

I started this chapter with Yeats’ rose, which led us to explore the anglophone occult milieu in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. But William Butler Yeats does not merely point us in this direction – he enables us to establish a link with Ezra Pound (the focus of my next chapter) and another great writer of his age, James Joyce, with whom he shared not only Irish nationality but also a source of inspiration: Dante Alighieri.<sup>86</sup> As Piero Boitani points out, “the image of Dante that takes shape in twentieth-century Irish literature begins with an adaptation of *Vita nuova* (itself a Rossetian legacy) in Yeats’s poetry and in Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*”.<sup>87</sup> Here we have another example of the indirect influence of Gabriele Rossetti’s ideas through his son Dante Gabriel: a Rossetian legacy that characterizes not only the work of William Butler Yeats, but also of James Joyce. Beyond the coincidence that links James Joyce with Gabriele Rossetti – the experience of exile (compulsory for Rossetti; self-imposed for Joyce), the two figures were indirectly linked through Antonio Agresti, the husband of Olivia Rossetti Agresti.<sup>88</sup> Antonio Agresti wrote some essays on Dante, as well as on Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and his writings profoundly influenced James Joyce. Therefore, we see, yet again, another indirect influence of Gabriele Rossetti, but this time not through his children, but through the husband of one of Rossetti’s nieces, Olivia Rossetti Agresti, daughter of William Michael Rossetti. Rossetti’s family influence goes well beyond the father, Gabriele, because

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<sup>84</sup> *Oxford Book of Mystical Verse*, p. 522.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 522-523.

<sup>86</sup> Dante exerted a strong influence on twentieth-century Irish writers. Yeats, Joyce, Beckett and Heaney were all influenced by Dante, as were other Irish writers, such as Louis MacNeice, Ciaran Carson, Eiléan Ní Cuilleánáin and Thomas Kinsella. See Piero Boitani, “Irish Dante: Yeats-Joyce-Beckett”, in *Metamorphosing Dante*, p. 37. See also Piero Boitani, “*Ersed Irredent*: Irish Dante”, in *Dantean Dialogues: Engaging with the Legacy of Amilcare Iannucci*, p. 231-264.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37-38

<sup>88</sup> I will deal with Olivia Rossetti Agresti in more detail in the chapter on Pound’s rose.

the impact of Rossetti's children and his circle gave rise to one of the richest examples of cultural heritage that spread across Europe and the world.

As regards the literature of James Joyce, the impact of Dante on the Irish writer is very evident.<sup>89</sup> As Piero Boitani remarks, *Dubliners* is a kind of adaptation of the *Divine Comedy*,<sup>90</sup> with many Dantean references from the first story, "Sisters", which begins with an echo of the inscription over the gate of hell, "There was no hope".<sup>91</sup> *Ulysses* is, as Boitani points out, an attempt to rewrite "the *Odyssey* with the scope and ambition of the *Divine Comedy*",<sup>92</sup> and it is in *Ulysses* that one also finds the Joycean "white rose" when Molly, in her stream of consciousness, wonders, "shall I wear a white rose".<sup>93</sup> Molly's rose recalls Dante's "white rose", the "*candida rosa*" of Canto XXXI of the *Comedy*. And the final cantos of Dante's masterpiece, as well as the *Vita Nuova*, are used by Joyce to frame Stephen's epiphanies in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.<sup>94</sup> Stephen's initial epiphany takes place on the Dollymount beach when, "arisen from grave of boyhood" (a metaphor recalling the death of boyhood, the initiatory death of the boyhood state), he starts walking barefoot in the water and suddenly sees a girl "in midstream, alone and still, gazing out to sea".<sup>95</sup> Stephen goes into raptures and contemplates the girl's body, whose image passes into his soul "for ever", and in the silence he experiences a moment of ecstasy: "the holy silence of his ecstasy".<sup>96</sup> He glimpses a "wild angel, the angel of mortal youth and beauty",<sup>97</sup> and when he turns landward and runs towards the shore, he has a vision of a heavenly world: "above him the vast indifferent dome and the calm processes of the heavenly bodies".<sup>98</sup> He closes his eyes "in the languor of sleep" of these ecstatic moments, with his soul "swooning into some new world, fantastic, dim, uncertain as under sea, traversed by cloudy shapes and beings".<sup>99</sup> In this initiatory path, the fulfilment of the epiphany is associated with the symbol of the rose:

A world, a glimmer or a flower? Glimmering and trembling, trembling and  
unfolding, a breaking light, an opening flower, it spread in endless succession

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<sup>89</sup> On the relations between Joyce and Dante, see Lucia Boldrini, *Joyce, Dante and the Poetics of Literary Relations*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001; Mary T. Reynolds, *Joyce and Dante: The Shaping Imagination*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1981. The strong influence of Dante on James Joyce is confirmed by Joyce's brother Stanislaus, who underlines the analogies between the two, particularly in the short story "Grace". See Stanislaus Joyce, "The Background to *Dubliners*", *The Listener*, 25 March 1954, p. 526-527. See also Robert Boyle, "Swiftian Allegory and Dantean Parody in Joyce's 'Grace'", *James Joyce Quarterly*, v. 7, n. 1, 1969, p. 11-21.

<sup>90</sup> See Piero Boitani, "Irish Dante: Yeats-Joyce-Beckett", in *Metamorphosing Dante. Appropriations*, p. 38.

<sup>91</sup> James Joyce, *Dubliners*, ed. Jeri Johnson, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 2.

<sup>92</sup> Piero Boitani, "Irish Dante: Yeats-Joyce-Beckett", in *Metamorphosing Dante. Appropriations*, p. 38.

<sup>93</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. 900, 931.

<sup>94</sup> See Piero Boitani, "Irish Dante: Yeats-Joyce-Beckett", in *Metamorphosing Dante. Appropriations*, p. 41.

<sup>95</sup> James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, edited with an Introduction and Notes by Jeri Johnson, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 144.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

to itself, breaking in full and unfolding and fading to palest rose, leaf by leaf  
and wave of light by wave of light, flooding all the heaven with its soft flushes,  
every flush deeper than the other.<sup>100</sup>

Piero Boitani has shown that this passage references Dante's *Paradiso* canto XXX, when Dante sees "the flowers and sparks",<sup>101</sup> a "so great a light" and the rose: "the amplitude / of that rose at its extremist petals".<sup>102</sup> *Paradiso* XXXIII also offers an equivalent in Joyce's *Portrait*, specifically in the passage where the protagonist sees the whole world "forming one vast symmetrical expression of God's power and love".<sup>103</sup> All these correspondences between Dante's work and Joyce's *Portrait* have been brilliantly analysed by Piero Boitani, who points out another passage in which Stephen's new epiphany is linked to the beloved Beatrice. The Dantean passage that inspired Joyce is *Vita Nuova* III (3-9) which, as Boitani stresses, is "the very passage Yeats was concentrating upon contemporaneously"<sup>104</sup> (as we have seen at the beginning of this chapter). What is interesting is that, in this passage, Dante evokes the *Fedeli d'Amore*:

And thinking about her, a sweet sleep came over me, in which appeared a tremendous vision.

I seemed to see a fiery cloud in my room, inside which I discerned a figure of a lordly man, frightening to behold. And it was marvelous how utterly full of joy he seemed. And among the words that he spoke, I understood only a few, including: "Ego dominus tuus." In his arms I thought I saw a sleeping person, naked but for a crimson silken cloth that seemed to be draped about her, who, when I looked closely, I realized was the lady of the saving gesture, she who earlier that day had deigned to salute me. And in one of his hands it seemed that he held something consumed by flame, and I thought I heard him say these words: "Vide cor tuum." And when he had been doing all he could to get her to eat the thing burning in his hands, which she anxiously ate. Then his happiness turned into the bitterest tears, and as he cried he picked up this woman in his arms, and he seemed to go off toward the sky. At which point I felt more anguish than my light sleep could sustain, and I woke.

And immediately I started to think, realizing that the hour in which this vision appeared to me had been the fourth hour of that night, in other words the first of the last nine hours of night. Thinking over what had happened to me, I decided to relate it to several of the well-known poets of that time, and since I already had some experience in the art of writing verse, I decided to compose a sonnet in which I would greet all of Love's faithful [*Fedeli*

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<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, p. 484.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 485.

<sup>103</sup> The whole passage is the following one: "but he could no longer disbelieve in the reality of love, since God Himself had loved his individual soul with divine love from all eternity. Gradually, as his soul was enriched with spiritual knowledge, he saw the whole world forming one vast symmetrical expression of God's power and love. Life became a divine gift for every moment and sensation of which, were it even the sight of a single leaf hanging on the twig of a tree, his soul should praise and thank the Giver. The world for all its solid substance and complexity no longer existed for his soul save as a theorem of divine power and love and universality. So entire and unquestionable was this sense of the divine meaning in all nature granted to his soul that he could scarcely understand why it was in any way necessary that he should continue to live. Yet that was part of the divine purpose and he dared not question its use, he above all others who had sinned so deeply and so foully against the divine purpose". *Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>104</sup> Piero Boitani, "Irish Dante: Yeats-Joyce-Beckett", in *Metamorphosing Dante. Appropriations*, p. 142.

*d'Amore*]. And asking them to interpret my vision, I wrote to them about what I had seen in my sleep. And then I started the sonnet "To all besotted souls."<sup>105</sup>

This passage, where the *Fedeli d'Amore* (as well as the troubadours) are evoked features exactly the same imagery and sequence as in Joyce's *Portrait*, more specifically when Stephen awakes in the morning and thinks back to the enchanted night in which, "in a dream or vision", he "had known the ecstasy of seraphic life".<sup>106</sup> In this ecstatic atmosphere, Joyce adds another Dantean symbol, the mystical rose:

The instant of inspiration seemed now to be reflected from all sides at once from a multitude of cloudy circumstances of what had happened or of what might have happened. The instant flashed forth like a point of light and now from cloud of vague circumstance confused from was veiling softly its afterglow. O! In the virgin womb of the imagination the world was made flesh. Gabriel the seraph had come to the virgin's chamber. An afterglow deepened within his spirit, whence the white flame has passed, deepening to a rose and ardent light. That rose and ardent light was the strange wilful heart, strange that no man had known or would know, wilful from before the beginning of the world; and lured by that ardent rose-like glow the choirs of the seraphim were falling from heaven.<sup>107</sup>

The association between the rose and ecstasy is also present in *Ulysses*, when Molly is transfigured into a Flower of the Mountain and is enraptured:

O and the sea the sea crimson sometimes like fire and the glorious sunsets and the figtrees in the Alameda gardens yes and all the queer little streets and geraniums and cactuses and Gibraltar as a girl where I was a Flower of the mountain yes when I put the rose in my hair like the Andalusian girls used or shall I wear a red yes and how he kissed me under the Moorish wall and I thought well as well him as another and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes.<sup>108</sup>

Thus, Joyce's mystical rose is the path towards ecstasy and owes a great deal to Dante and his rose. The influence is also evident in another masterpiece by James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, and as Lucia Boldrini points out, "it is precisely in the *Wake* that Joyce's use of Dante becomes most pervasive and far-reaching".<sup>109</sup> To my knowledge, the most complete work on the relations between *Finnegans Wake* and Dante (and, more generally, between Joyce and Dante) is Lucia Boldrini's *Joyce, Dante and the Poetics of Literary Relations*, in which she refers to the links between Dante and Joyce as an "eclectic conception of literary interrelations"

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<sup>105</sup> Dante, *Vita Nova*, p. 4-5.

<sup>106</sup> James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, p. 182.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182-183.

<sup>108</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. 932-933.

<sup>109</sup> Lucia Boldrini, *Joyce, Dante and the Poetics of Literary Relations*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 6.

or, more specifically, the “poetics of literary relations”.<sup>110</sup> But what kind of literary relationship is this? Is it purely literary, or could it be literary and esoteric at the same time? If we subscribe to the latter view, Joyce was influenced not only by Dante’s literature, but also by the esoteric teaching that Dante disseminated. If this is the case, could we thus speak of an esoteric Joyce? If so, we realize that Joyce was directly and indirectly involved with the world of esotericism. Few scholars have explored the relations between Joyce and esotericism; however, the paucity of studies does not mean that this is impossible, or of secondary importance. Of the few studies that exist, the work of Enrico Terrinoni, *Occult Joyce. The Hidden in Ulysses* is interesting.<sup>111</sup> Terrinoni has brilliantly demonstrated the relations between James Joyce and the esoteric and occult world, which have also been confirmed in the excellent treatise by Leigh Wilson in her *Modernism and Magic*.<sup>112</sup> More precisely, the concern of Terrinoni’s book is not “to demonstrate that Joyce was an adept of some remote occultist sect”, but “to assess the actual relevance of occult authors, themes, and methodologies of investigation in the hidden structure of *Ulysses*, as well as to propose an interpretation of Joyce’s response to the subject”.<sup>113</sup> We know that the personal libraries of Joyce contained several books dealing with the occult,<sup>114</sup> and as Terrinoni points out, “it is also beyond doubt that, from his earlier works until his most mature books, he constantly referred to occult authors and themes on many occasions”.<sup>115</sup> It is no coincidence that one of the most important occultists of the twentieth century, Aleister Crowley, published an article in 1923 titled “The Genius of Mr. James Joyce”.<sup>116</sup>

Though Joyce’s approach towards esoteric and occult themes is ambiguous (a tendency of many modernist writers and poets, such as Pound), ranging from scepticism to interest and finally to belief,<sup>117</sup> the presence of esoteric elements in Joyce’s literature is undeniable. More

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<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14-15.

<sup>111</sup> Enrico Terrinoni, *Occult Joyce. The Hidden in Ulysses*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007.

<sup>112</sup> On the relations between Joyce and the occult, as well as the theosophical current, see Leigh Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 19-22, 66-76, 95-102.

<sup>113</sup> Enrico Terrinoni, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>114</sup> Among the books on occult subjects that Joyce had in his personal library in Trieste are esoteric works by Jacob Boehme, Giordano Bruno, Blake, Yeats the Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg, the theosophist Annie Besant, and the founder of anthroposophy Rudolph Steiner, in addition to other books on spiritualism, magic, Yogi philosophy and oriental occultism. Moreover, Joyce remained interested in the occult in his later years. In his Paris library he had various works on esoteric subjects, such as a copy of *The Occult Review* of July 1923, featuring the practical Qabala, the Akasic Records and Madame Blavatsky. See Enrico Terrinoni, *op. cit.*, p. 6; Thomas Edmund Connolly, *The Personal Library of James Joyce: A Descriptive Bibliography*, Buffalo, University of Buffalo, 1955; Juan Rodolfo Wilcock, “La biblioteca di Joyce”, in James Joyce, Juan Rodolfo Wilcock, *Finnegans Wake*, trad. by Juan Rodolfo Wilcock, preface by Edoardo Camurri, with an essay by Samuel Beckett, Macerata, Giometti Antonello, 2016, p. 137-140.

<sup>115</sup> Enrico Terrinoni, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>116</sup> Aleister Crowley, “The Genius of Mr. James Joyce”, *New Pearson’s Magazine*, XLIX, 1923.

<sup>117</sup> On the presumed mocking scepticism of Theosophist practices, Declan Kiberd affirms that “Joyce’s satirical use of the Theosophists was often restrictive and conveniently masked indebtedness”. Bonnie Kime Scott, “Joyce and the Dublin Theosophists: ‘Vegetable Verse and Story’”, *Eire-Ireland*, 13, II, 1978, p. 70. On the question “scepticism-belief” in Joyce’s work, see Enrico Terrinoni, *op. cit.*, p. 2, 12-14, 21, 23, 29, 37-38, 104 205.

precisely, as Enrico Terrinoni writes, “not only was Joyce’s knowledge of occult writers a fundamental part of his cultural background, to which he kept referring constantly in all his works, but it is clearly hidden behind the net of many textual allusions apparently pointing to a non-esoteric solution”.<sup>118</sup> This last sentence is particularly interesting because it stresses a peculiarity of Joyce’s work. In fact, on a number of occasions he simply alludes to an esoteric motif without giving it importance, as if that theme is commonly known and there is no need to provide further information about it. This is true, for instance, with regard to the allusion to Rosicrucianism in the story “Sisters” in *Dubliners*. ““That’s my principle, too,’ said my uncle. ‘Let him learn to box his corner. That’s what I’m always saying to that Rosicrucian there: take exercise’”.<sup>119</sup> This is the conversation reported by Joyce in his story, where the word Rosicrucian is used without showing any esoteric association, with only the evocative power of the word stressed by the author. Jeri Johnson points out that the adjective Rosicrucian “is simply used to suggest that the boy has become too interested in matters too esoteric for his own good”.<sup>120</sup> But how significant is Joyce’s allusion? Is it simply naïve, or does it lead the reader beyond the text? Revelation without explicit reference is one of the distinctive features of Joyce’s literary production, and this example of the reference to Rosicrucianism is a perfect example.<sup>121</sup> We find a similar example in *Ulysses*, in the story “Lotus-Eaters”, where the allusion to the Rosicrucian tradition is masked by the symbol of the rose. The title is already evocative and recalls the rose symbolism, since the lotus corresponds to the rose, especially in the Indian tradition. But what is relevant here is the technique used by Joyce, whose narrative, with its textual clues (such as the symbol of the rose) “directly addresses the reader in order to tell him something about the underlying secret structure that underwrites *Ulysses*”,<sup>122</sup> as Enrico Terrinoni points out. He adds, “other allusions in the chapter point to the presence of a subliminal discourse, through which the characters manage to silently exchange informations [*sic*]”; in particular, “on the surface, they appear to be unconscious, and yet they hint at a hidden explanation”.<sup>123</sup> For this reason, “Gerty’s language, though seemingly innocent, is in fact dotted with strange references, which in an occult context would prove meaningful”.<sup>124</sup> Thus, in the case of Gerty’s meditations, the rose is evoked in relation to the Rosicrucian Society, but it also alludes to the alleged freemason Bloom (“rosebloom”)<sup>125</sup> and to the Virgin Mary (“mystical rose”).<sup>126</sup> Moreover, in the dialogue between the two characters in the Joycean masterpiece,

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<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>119</sup> James Joyce, *Dubliners*, p. 4.

<sup>120</sup> Jeri Johnson, “Notes”, in *ibid.*, p. 198.

<sup>121</sup> See Enrico Terrinoni, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 453.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 463.

Gerty and Bloom, an important characteristic that emerges is the concept of secrecy, as Enrico Terrinoni has illustrated:

Bloom and Gerty [...] share a secret language known only to them. It is a language made up of apparently casual sentences which, when taken together and reorganized, may become significant. [...] They live in a world of their own, distant from everyone else's world, far away, one might say, from the world of mortals. Gerty's idealization of Bloom automatically sets him in a different and superior sphere, aloof from the rest of men. We can also find in the text evidences of her own detachment, as if she could join him in his own dimension. The very idea of a distance from humanity is suggested for instance in the following passage: "They both knew that she was something aloof, apart in another sphere, that she was not one of them and there was somebody else too that knew it." [...] Having stated that the protagonists who share a secret language which allows them to communicate silently are presented to the reader as people who do belong to a different world, the system of subliminal references goes even further, and touches on other categories of the occult such as magic, divination, astrology, metempsychosis, vampires, and finally satanic allusions.<sup>127</sup>

This concept of a secret language shared by a restricted group is also true of the *Fedeli d'Amore* and all the initiatory groups that belong to the history of esoteric currents. Of course, we cannot firmly link the *Fedeli d'Amore*'s secret language with the one used by Bloom and Gerty in *Ulysses*, but the logic of using a secret code to communicate a secret message is the same. The peculiarity of Joyce's work is that it belongs to the twentieth century and whilst it features elements and motifs of esoteric medievalism, it also contains occult concepts belonging to modern times, such as theosophist teaching. Thus, in Joyce we find a fusion of ideas and doctrines belonging to the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and to the twentieth century. In fact, Enrico Terrinoni aptly mentions Joyce's "dual tendency towards the modern and the medieval",<sup>128</sup> suggesting that his works are the result of an eclectic source that extends from Dante to the mystic Swedenborg or the theosophist Annie Besant.<sup>129</sup> William York Tindall has studied the influence of occult thought in Joyce's literary production, and among the sources of *Dubliners* he mentions Joachim of Fiore, Dante, Blake, Madame Blavatsky, Henry S. Olcott, and Yeats.<sup>130</sup> Joachim of Fiore and Dante are two pivotal figures in my study on the esoteric and initiatory dimension of the symbol of the rose and, according to William York Tindall, they represent part of the esoteric and occult background of Joyce's masterpieces. The Joycean rose is one of the main motifs in this context, and owes much to Dante's mystical rose, as we have seen in this chapter. Thus, if we follow the interpretation of Gabriele Rossetti and his

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<sup>127</sup> Enrico Terrinoni, *op. cit.*, p. 142-143.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 205.

<sup>129</sup> On the relationship between James, Swedenborg and Annie Besant (in particular, the influence of Besant's *The Path to Discipleship*), see *ibid.*, p. 45-65.

<sup>130</sup> William York Tindall, "James Joyce and the Hermetic Tradition", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, v. 15, n. 1, 1954, p. 31.

successors, the meaning of James Joyce's mystical rose (or, at least, part of its meaning) may well be found in the esoteric dimension of the rose first expounded by the author of *Mistero dell'Amor Platonico* in his studies of Dante's esoteric love and medieval European poetry.

Love is also a fundamental element in Joyce's literature, the esoteric dimension of which has been shown in this chapter. *Finnegans Wake* starts because of love: "Sir Tristram, violer d'amores".<sup>131</sup> In *Ulysses*, Joyce speaks of the "love's bitter mystery".<sup>132</sup> There is another theme in Joyce that we have encountered before (especially in chapter VII) in relation to the esoteric dimension of love: death by a kiss, and love and death reunited in the symbol of a kiss. Renato Giovannoli has studied this particular aspect of Joyce's work and shows there is a link with the *Song of Songs* and *De gli eroici furori* by Giordano Bruno, who saw in the *Song* "the death of the soul, which the Cabalists call the Death of the Kiss".<sup>133</sup> These are the two major themes of esoteric love discussed so far, namely the association of death and love through the kiss in the *Song of Songs* and in Bruno, who was – as Renato Giovannoli comments – one of the main influences on Joyce. In fact, Giovannoli remarks that the term "hero" given to Dedalus in the title of the first version of *Portrait of the Artist* was *Stephen Hero*, which refers to Bruno's *Eroici furori* (*Eroici* = hero).<sup>134</sup> He adds, "the death by a kiss (*mors osculi*) is naturally an 'initiatory death':<sup>135</sup> one linked to the *topos* of love. If, as the Irish author himself affirms, "yet to concentrate solely on the literal sense or even the psychological content of any document to the sore neglect of the enveloping facts themselves circumstantiating it is [...] hurtful to sound sense",<sup>136</sup> based on what this chapter shows about the esoteric dimension of Joyce's literary production, we can say that his love is also an initiatory love, which is linked to an initiatory death. Thus, this follows an esoteric tradition which considers love and death in terms of initiation, whilst the rose associated with this love is an initiatory rose. Joyce's rose, like the rose of his medieval and Renaissance predecessors, is an initiatory rose.

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<sup>131</sup> James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, with an Introduction by Seamus Deane, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1992, p. 1. On the esoteric dimension of *Finnegans Wake*, J. R. Wilcock remarks that one of the central motifs of this work is the concept of death and resurrections of the male divinity, thanks to the action of the female divinity, and that these opposites of the divinities are the basic idea of reconciliation of oppositions, of the contraries' principle (the male and female spirit, good and evil, action and contemplation) which underpins the initiatory doctrines: from duality (or rather multiplicity) to the Unity of Being. James Joyce, Juan Rodolfo Wilcock, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

<sup>132</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. 9, 10, 681.

<sup>133</sup> Giordano Bruno, *On the Heroic Frenzies. A translation of De gli Eroici Furori*, translation by Ingrid D. Rowland, text edited by Eugenio Canone, published in collaboration with UCLA Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, Toronto, Buffalo, London, University of Toronto Press, 2013, p. 113.

<sup>134</sup> See Renato Giovannoli, *Il vampiro innominato. Il caso "Manzoni-Dracula" e altri casi di vampirismo letterario*, Milan, Medusa, 2008, p. 95. See also Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* [1959], New York, Oxford, Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1982, p. 79, 114-115, 171, 179-180, 183. It is no accident that in the first version of the *Portrait* (1904), the hero (who is not yet named Stephen) studies the work of Giordano Bruno. See *ibid.*, p. 179-180; Renato Giovannoli, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

<sup>135</sup> "La 'morte di bacio' (*mors osculi*) è naturalmente una 'morte' iniziatica". Renato Giovannoli, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

<sup>136</sup> James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, p. 109.





## CHAPTER XI

### EZRA POUND, THE SECRET HISTORY AND HIS *ROSA SEMPITERNA*

#### *Pound and the Rossettian legacy*

In the English literary context, the poet most strongly linked to the esotericism of Dante – and especially to Gabriele Rossetti’s contribution – is Ezra Pound.<sup>1</sup> It was especially thanks to Olivia Rossetti Agresti (the daughter of William Michael Rossetti) that Ezra Pound knew the works of Gabriele Rossetti, namely *La Beatrice di Dante* and, in particular, *Il Mistero dell’Amor Platonico*. Few scholars have studied in depth the relations between Gabriele Rossetti and Ezra Pound, but among those that have are Leon Surette, Demetres Tryphonopoulos and Akiko Miyake. Leon Surette is the scholar who, more than any others, explored not only the relations between Ezra Pound and Gabriele Rossetti, but also the question of Eugène Aroux’s plagiarism. By doing so, he focuses on certain figures and themes that I discussed in previous chapters, such as the writer Péladan, or the scholars René Nelli and Denis de Rougemont. Surette references the theory of René Nelli, concerning the traces of Cathar doctrine and influence in Florence, the fact that Cavalcanti and Dante would then pass it on to Petrarch, and that this esoteric background would emerge in the work of William Blake, Lamartine and Victor Hugo.<sup>2</sup> Surette points out that this story is very much in the tradition of occult history, and the same can be said for Denis de Rougemont’s *Love in the Western World*, which posits a link between the Albigensian Cathars and the troubadours, who were probably adepts of an underground heretical “Church of Love” that spread to Europe from the “East”, presumably surviving from antiquity to the present day in a chain of succession; this disseminated a “perennial tradition” carried on by poets like Sordello, Cavalcanti, Dante, Boccaccio or in the Grail literature. Surette recalls that Sordello, Cavalcanti and Dante are prominent figures in Pound’s *paideia*, and that the esoteric tradition of love, according to René Nelli and Denis de Rougemont (whose sources are Péladan and Aroux),<sup>3</sup> would have reached nineteenth century English and French poets, such as Hugo or Yeats.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Leon Surette is, to my knowledge, one of the few scholars to have highlighted the oblivion affecting the influence of Rossetti’s ideas which, as I have shown, were plagiarized by Aroux and spread to France (also via Péladan) and more generally,

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<sup>1</sup> For this chapter, I am particularly grateful to Leon Surette, Peter Liebrechts and Rebecca Beasley. Particular thanks go to Leigh Wilson for all the discussions we had on Pound’s literary production.

<sup>2</sup> Leon Surette, *The Birth of Modernism*, p. 103.

<sup>3</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>4</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 103.

to the European cultural and literary context. In his book *Birth of Modernism*, Surette affirms that “[this] event [the plagiarism operated by Aroux] has so far entirely escaped the notice of scholarship despite its very considerable progeny in the canonical literature of this century”.<sup>5</sup> Recent scholars who have stressed the indirect influence of Gabriele Rossetti include Peter Liebrechts, who writes that Gabriele Rossetti “worked out part of his ideas in *La Beatrice di Dante* (1842), and made the mistake of expounding the full range of his partly unpublished theories to the French occultist Eugène Aroux, who then plagiarized them in *Dante hérétique* (1854), thus making Rossetti’s ideas better known under his own name in Britain and France”.<sup>6</sup>

However, what is relevant for my research is to recognize the importance attached by scholars such as Leon Surette to the relations between Gabriele Rossetti and Ezra Pound. In this respect, in terms of scholarship, I have also mentioned Demetres Tryphonopoulos and Akiko Miyake. In particular, Miyake argues in her book *Ezra Pound and the Mysteries of Love* that Pound’s *Cantos* draw heavily on Rossetti’s work *Il Mistero dell’Amor Platonico*.<sup>7</sup> She suggests that Pound would have used Rossetti’s themes to construct his *Cantos*, as a form of commentary on Rossetti’s *Mistero*. Leon Surette does not agree, but what he shares with Miyake and Tryphonopoulos is the centrality of the transcendental dimension in Pound’s *Cantos*,<sup>8</sup> which are profoundly influenced by Dante and by *The Romance of the Rose*,<sup>9</sup> namely the French literary work that Rossetti considered as the key to understanding the esoteric love of the Middle Age.

#### *Ezra Pound, Gabriele Rossetti and Olivia Rossetti Agresti: an esoteric correspondence*

Ezra Pound refers at various times to Dante’s esotericism,<sup>10</sup> especially with regard to Luigi Valli’s *Il Linguaggio Segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d’Amore*.<sup>11</sup> He did so, for example, in *Guide to Kulchur*, in “Terra Italica” or in the essay “Cavalcanti”, and the particularity of his approach to Valli’s work is its ambiguity, since he moves from initial scepticism and disagreement to enthusiasm. Pound did not totally agree with the idea of a secret language of

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Liebrechts, *Ezra Pound and Neoplatonism*, Madison, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004, p. 62.

<sup>7</sup> Akiko Miyake, *Ezra Pound and the Mysteries of Love*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 1991.

<sup>8</sup> See Leon Surette, *The Birth of Modernism*, p. 46-47. See also Demetres P. Tryphonopoulos, *The Celestial Tradition. A Study of Ezra Pound’s The Cantos*, Waterloo, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1992, p. 23-92.

<sup>9</sup> On the influence of Dante in Ezra Pound, see Steve Ellis, *op. cit.*, p. 171-209. On the influence of *The Romance of the Rose* in Pound, see Akiko Miyake, *op. cit.*, p. 22-24.

<sup>10</sup> For a concise and complete description of the relationship between Pound and the Dantean esotericism expounded by Luigi Valli and Gabriele Rossetti, see Peter Liebrechts, *op. cit.*, p. 397; Roberta Capelli, *Carte Provenzali. Ezra Pound e la cultura trobadorica (1905-1915)*, Rome, Carocci, 2013, p. 113.

<sup>11</sup> In order to better understand Dante and the esoteric love of the Middle Ages, Pound read not only Luigi Valli but also Francesco Perez and Giovanni Pascoli who were among the main figures of the heterodox school of Dantean studies. See Ezra Pound, *Dante*, eds. Corrado Bologna and Lorenzo Fabiani, Venice, Marsilio, 2015, p. XXXVI.

love used for political reasons, but he believed in love poetry of a metaphysical nature. Thus, one can sum up the controversial attitude of Pound towards Valli's work by affirming, as Demetres Tryphonopoulos writes, that "for Valli the message is secret and political; for Pound it is esoteric".<sup>12</sup> Yet despite these divergences, Pound recognizes Valli's merit: "Valli deserves thanks for disturbing a too facile acceptance of cut and dried acceptances. In one or two cases where I think him wrong, I certainly owe him a quickened curiosity, and a better guess than I should have made without the irritant of his volume [*Il linguaggio segreto*]"<sup>13</sup> Ezra Pound considers Valli's book as a "stimulant":<sup>14</sup>

The work of Luigi Valli has been a stimulant for me in recent years [II *Linguaggio Segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d'Amore* (Rome: Optima, 1928); Vol. II, *Discussione e note aggiunte* (Rome: Optima, 1930)]. I do not agree with many of the details of his explanations, but I am truly sorry that he died before I had the opportunity to discuss them with him. He was not always convincing, but that is no reason to ignore his intuition that there is often a hidden or indirect meaning in these poems. The most materialistic of critics concedes there are incomprehensible allusions.<sup>15</sup>

Significantly, while Pound's opinion of Valli's contribution was critical in some respects and positive in others, in the case of Gabriele Rossetti (whose ideas were rather similar to Valli's), Pound has nothing but praise for his work. This is quite clear from the letters between Ezra Pound and Olivia Rossetti Agresti. As we know, Olivia Rossetti Agresti was William Michael Rossetti's daughter, but who exactly was this figure of the early twentieth century?

Olivia Rossetti Agresti<sup>16</sup> was an active anarchist and, with her sister Helen, wrote a novel, *A Girl Among the Anarchists* (1903),<sup>17</sup> under the pen name of Isabel Meredith. Olivia Rossetti Agresti was the bridge between Luigi Valli and Gabriele Rossetti, and also between Ezra Pound and Gabriele Rossetti. In fact, she gave Luigi Valli one of the few existing copies of her grandfather's *Il Mistero dell'Amor Platonico*,<sup>18</sup> and she corresponded with Pound for

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<sup>12</sup> Demetres P. Tryphonopoulos, *The Celestial Tradition*, p. 7. See also Leon Surette, *The Birth of Modernism*, p. 113.

<sup>13</sup> *Pound's Cavalcanti. An edition on the translations, notes and essays*, ed. David Anderson, Lawrenceville (New Jersey), Princeton University Press, 1983, p. 222.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8-9.

<sup>16</sup> On the figure of Olivia Rossetti Agresti, see *The Ezra Pound Encyclopedia*, eds. Demetres P. Tryphonopoulos and Stephen J. Adams, Westport, Greenwood Press, 2005, p. 5; Demetres P. Tryphonopoulos, *The Celestial Tradition*, p. 18, 47, 65-66; Leon Surette, *The Birth of Modernism*, p. 117-118.

<sup>17</sup> Isabel Meredith, Helen Rossetti Angeli, *A Girl Among the Anarchists*, London, Duckworth & Co., 1903.

<sup>18</sup> In a note in the first chapter ["La Storia dell'idea" ("The History of the idea")] of the *Linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d'Amore*, Luigi Valli thanks Olivia Rossetti Agresti for giving him one of the few copies of the *Mistero dell'Amor Platonico* in circulation at the beginning of the twentieth century: "I would like to thank here the kind Ms. Olivia Rossetti Agresti, granddaughter of Gabriele Rossetti and wife of my dear late friend Antonio Agresti, who granted me the opportunity to examine this most precious work in the very copy left in the Poet's hands" ("ringrazio qui la gentile Signora Olivia Rossetti Agresti, nipote di Gabriele Rossetti e moglie del mio caro compianto amico Antonio Agresti, la quale mi concesse di poter largamente esaminare quest'opera preziosissima proprio nella copia rimasta tra le mani del Poeta"). Luigi Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d'Amore*, p. 17.

nearly twenty years, from 1937 to 1959. They also met in Rome on various occasions. The letters between Olivia and Pound focused on different subjects: politics, economics, history, religion, society, and on the figure of Gabriele Rossetti. For this reason, the correspondence between the two intellectuals is extremely interesting, both for scholars of literature and historians researching esotericism. One could speak of an “esoteric correspondence” between Ezra Pound and Olivia Rossetti Agresti, as the letters address topics like the secret history propounded by Gabriele Rossetti and linked – according to the author of the *Mistero* – to esoteric circles, initiatory and secret societies, freemasonry and European literature.<sup>19</sup>

The letters also show that it was Olivia Rossetti Agresti who sent *La Beatrice di Dante* to Ezra Pound. She had, in fact, two copies and sent one to her American friend, who received the book on 6 December 1956. On the same day, Pound wrote to Olivia Rossetti Agresti to confirm he had received the book (“yr/ Grampaw’s Beatrice di Dante, arrives. for which my thanks. I doubt if the Cat/ Un. will get it”),<sup>20</sup> and to ask about the *Mistero* by Gabriele Rossetti, defining him “Yr/ illustrious ancestor”:

Yr/ illustrious ancestor speaks of Three *racionamenti* [reasonings], and ends with “fine del primo”. Did he write or print the other 2/ or did yr/ bigoted grandma burn the ineditis?? Or has everyone forgotten which??

[...]

I dont spose yu remember the date the big vol/ was printed. But I can get that from Pearson at Yale. i.e. whether before or after the Beat. Di D.<sup>21</sup>

The next day, 7 December 1956, Pound wrote again to Olivia Rossetti Agresti to request more information about her grandfather Gabriele Rossetti. “Want to know more of yr/ grand-dad?”: these are the opening words with which Ezra Pound expresses, more than in any other letters sent to Olivia Rossetti Agresti, his interest in Gabriele Rossetti and his esoteric interpretation of Dante’s work and, more generally, in literature:

Want to know more of yr/ grand-dad? Political exile?? escaped from fury and bigotry of Vatican??? not a mason but student of masonry? Interested to see he hooks D/ [Dante] to Swedenborg, as I have done for 50 years, but can’t recall having found in the VERY small amount of criticism or Dante-studien that I have looked at.

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<sup>19</sup> Regarding the correspondence between Ezra Pound and Olivia Rossetti Agresti, the most complete and detailed collection of letters exchanged between them is found in “*I Cease Not to Yowl*”. *Ezra Pound’s Letters to Olivia Rossetti Agresti*, eds. Demetres P. Tryphonopoulos and Leon Surette, Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1998. See also Demetres P. Tryphonopoulos, *The Celestial Tradition*, p. 64-66; Leon Surette, “‘Dantescan Light’: Ezra Pound and Eccentric Dante Scholars”, in *Dante and the Unorthodox: The Aesthetics of Transgression*, ed. James Miller, Waterloo, Ontario, Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2005, p. 327-345; Leon Surette, “The Troubadours: A Romance of Scholarship”, *Paideuma: Modern and Contemporary Poetry and Poetics*, v. 30, n. 1/2, 2001, p. 17-19; Akiko Miyake, *op. cit.*, p. 226-227.

<sup>20</sup> “*I Cease Not to Yowl*”. *Ezra Pound’s Letters to Olivia Rossetti Agresti*, p. 237.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 237.

Prefer text to comments. Of course the Dant-Swed hook-up may have filtered thru footnotes, but I can't recall anything but my own observations of the two writers.

Real masonry, as from China etc. pure down to Mozart, and since flooded with mutts who have NOT the faintest inkling of the mysteries once guarded in an order...[...]

Your uncle Dant wrote from direct knowledge. Was yr/pa a mason? Of had he VIEWS? [...]

Dant and Swed. {are} both sound in their schema of increasing enlightened consciousness [...].<sup>22</sup>

This letter is particularly interesting because here Pound even links Dante's esotericism proposed by Gabriele Rossetti with the Chinese initiatory and masonic context, as well as with figures such as Mozart, who – as we have seen – belonged to the initiatory and masonic world. Moreover, Pound stresses that he was interested in one of the main arguments propounded by Gabriele Rossetti, namely the relations between Dante and Swedenborg. He specifies that he was involved in this kind of research for almost fifty years of his life, and that he focused on the mystical dimension shared by Dante and Swedenborg. But aside from this aspect, which I will address later in this chapter, what is relevant here is the particular interest of Ezra Pound in the forgotten figure of Gabriele Rossetti and his revolutionary interpretation of literature, read through the lens of esotericism. The author of *The Cantos* was well acquainted with the tortuous saga of Rossetti's *Mistero*. He knew that the book was burnt after publication, as evidenced in a letter sent to Olivia Rossetti Agresti on 1 February 1956: "Another point / the Amor Platonicus / and the monument at Vasto / your grandfather or great grand? The father or grandfather of WMR /D. G / and which of them the elder? D. G. being 22 in 1850. Christina 19? WMR? and the ma or grandma, who burnt the remaining copies AM/Plat?".<sup>23</sup> However, Pound's interest in Gabriele Rossetti and his work preceded the 1956 letter. In fact, in 1948 Pound proposed that he act as intermediary between Olivia Rossetti Agresti and the University of Pennsylvania for the sale of Olivia's copy of *Il Mistero*.<sup>24</sup> However, the first mention of the name Gabriele Rossetti and his *Mistero* by Ezra Pound was in 1942, in "Carta da Visita", where the American poet expressed his disappointment with T. S. Eliot for his Anglo-Catholicism (exposed in *After Strange Gods*), and called for a republication of Rossetti's *Mistero*: "Eliot loses all the threads of Arachne, and the new edition of Gabriele Rossetti's *Mistero dell'Amor Platonico* (1840) would be useful".<sup>25</sup> We do not know whether Eliot read or not *Il Mistero*

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 238-240. Olivia Rossetti Agresti replied to Pound on 25 December 1956, and in this letter she summarized Gabriele Rossetti's tormented life and work on Dantean esotericism. See *ibid.*, p. 241-244.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 226.

<sup>24</sup> On the sale of Olivia Rossetti Agresti's copy of Gabriele Rossetti's *Mistero dell'Amor Platonico* to the Library of the University of Pennsylvania through Ezra Pound, see *Ibid.*, p. 227; Akiko Miyake, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

<sup>25</sup> Ezra Pound, "A Visiting Card", translated by John Drummond from Ezra Pound, in Ezra Pound, *Selected Prose, 1909-1965*, ed. William Crookson, New York, New Directions Publishing Corporations, 1973, p. 320. "Carta da Visita" was originally written by Ezra Pound in Italian, then translated into English by John Drummond.

*dell'Amor Platonico*, but he undoubtedly saw his name associated by Pound with the name Gabriele Rossetti. The first signs of disagreement between Eliot and Pound were already evident in 1928, when the author of *The Waste Land* wrote in his review of Pound's *Personae* collection: "what does Mr Pound believe?"<sup>26</sup> Thus, if *The Waste Land* was dedicated to Ezra Pound (defined by Eliot as "il miglior fabbro",<sup>27</sup> meaning "the best craftsman"), in the review written by Eliot six years later Pound is criticized for his syncretic conception of medieval mysticism since, as Roberta Cappelli remarks, the author of the *Rosa sempiterna* posits "a Gnostic and sectarian Middle Ages, which was the repository of the Neo-Platonic heritage handed down from the philosophers of the Hellenistic age to the Ghibellines".<sup>28</sup> Pound responded: "I believe that a light from Eleusis persisted throughout the middle ages and set beauty in the song of Provence and Italy".<sup>29</sup> Here Pound expresses the same idea proposed by Gabriele Rossetti, and claims the existence of an esoteric tradition preserved, as Leon Surette suggests, "by a timeless brotherhood of artists who share a sacred mystery or arcanum esoterically expressed in their art", whilst "Dante is the pre-eminent figure in this tradition, for it is he who most perfectly exemplifies sanctity and esotericism in European poetry".<sup>30</sup> Thus, Pound adopts the occult notion of a secret tradition, which corresponds to the secret history put forward by Rossetti. This idea of an underground esoteric tradition was also shared by twentieth century figures, such as the independent medievalist scholar Jessie Weston (who strongly influenced T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*), the historian and theosophist George Robert Stow Mead, the theosophist Helena Petrova Blavatsky, Joseph Campbell, William Butler Yeats, Carl Gustav Jung and Aldous Huxley.<sup>31</sup> In particular, in occult circles in the early twentieth century London, the theory of a secret history of Western tradition was widespread, as Leon Surette remarks: "the esoteric version of secret history dominate the theosophical circles of Kensington in which Pound moved from 1909 until about 1920. Yeats, Orage, Upward, Mead, and Weston all endorsed the theosophical story of an ineffable wisdom surviving from great antiquity".<sup>32</sup> This theory of the secret history revealed in the early twentieth century mixed occult wisdom

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<sup>26</sup> Thomas Stearns Eliot, "Isolated Superiority", *Dial*, v. 84, n. 1, January 1928, p. 7. The complete quotation from Eliot runs: "he [Pound] retains some medieval mysticism, without belief; this is mixed up with Mr Yeats's spooks (excellent creatures in their negative bogs); and involved with Dr Berman's hormones; and a steamroller of Confucian rationalism (the religion of a Gentleman, and therefore an Inferior Religion) has flattened over the whole. So we are left with the question (which the unfinished *Cantos* make more pointed): what does Mr Pound believe?"

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Stearns Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ed. Michael North, New York, London, W. W. Norton & Company, 2001, p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> "Un Medioevo gnostico, settario, depositario dell'eredità neoplatonica, che dai filosofi dell'età ellenistica si tramanda fino ai Ghibellini". Roberta Cappelli, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

<sup>29</sup> Ezra Pound, "Credo", in *Selected Prose, 1909-1965*, p. 53.

<sup>30</sup> Leon Surette, "'Dantescan Light': Ezra Pound and Eccentric Dante Scholars", in *Dante and the Unorthodox: The Aesthetics of Transgression*, p. 331.

<sup>31</sup> Leon Surette, *The Birth of Modernism*, p. 226; Peter Liebrechts, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

<sup>32</sup> Leon Surette, *The Birth of Modernism*, p. 102-123.

with the political events of the history of humanity, the so-called conspiracy theories. A good example is the conspiracy theorist Nesta Helen Webster (1876-1960), who claims the reality of a forgotten secret history, in which she believes secret societies play (and have always played) a pivotal role:

from very early times occult sects had existed for two purposes – esoteric and political. Whilst the Manicheans, the early Ismailis, the Bogomils, and the Luciferians had concerned themselves mainly with religious or esoteric doctrines, the late Ismailis, the Fatimites, the Karmathites, and Templars had combined secrecy and occult rites with the political aim of domination. We shall find this double tradition running through all the secret society movements up to the present day”.<sup>33</sup>

In another passage, she sees evidence of an “Occult Power”, one that would shape the history of humanity:

How is it possible to ignore the existence of an Occult Power at work in the world? Individuals, sects or races fired with the desire of world domination, have provided the fighting forces of destruction, but behind them are the veritable powers of darkness in eternal conflict with the powers of light.<sup>34</sup>

Another scholar who explored this secret and esoteric history linked with political events was the medievalist Jessie Weston (1850-1928), who was close to the theosophical milieu and profoundly influenced T. S. Eliot (in particular, *The Waste Land*).<sup>35</sup> With regard to the secret history, Weston affirmed:

There is a stream of tradition, running as it were underground, which from time to time rises to the surface, only to be relentlessly suppressed. It may be the Troubadours, the symbolical language of whose love poems is held to convey another, and less innocent, meaning; or the Albigenses, whose destruction the Church holds for a sacred duty. Alchemy, whose Elixir of Life and Philosopher’s Stone are but names veiling a deeper and more spiritual meaning, belongs to the same family. [...] Of similar origin is that Freemasonry, which outside our own Islands is even to-day reckoned as the greatest enemy of the Christian Faith, and which still employs signs and symbols identical with those known and used in the Mysteries of longvanished faiths.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, following this common idea of a secret and occult history, the theosophist Isabel Cooper-Oakley (1854-1914) confirms the hidden knowledge and tradition that would influence the religious and political values and ideals of societies:

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<sup>33</sup> Nesta H. Webster, *Secret Societies and Subversive Movements* [1924], London, Boswell Publishing, 1946, p. 74.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 405.

<sup>35</sup> On Jessie Weston’s influence on T. S. Eliot, see Leon Surette, “*The Waste Land* and Jessie Weston: A Reassessment”, *Twentieth Century Literature*, v. 34, n. 2, 1988, p. 223-244.

<sup>36</sup> Jessie Weston, *The Quest of the Holy Grail* [1913], New York, Barnes & Noble, 1964, p. 137-138.



The doctrines hidden in the secret fraternities have been handed down in regular succession from first to last. We can see that the esoteric teachings in Egypt, in Persia, and in Greece, were kept from the ears of an illiterate multitude precisely because it was known that they could not, in their then uneducated and ignorant condition, understand the deeper truth of Nature and of God. Hence the secrecy with which these pearls of great price were guarded and handed on with slight modifications into the possession of those grand early Christians, the Gnostics, the so-called heretics; then straight from the Gnostic schools of Syria and Egypt to their successors the Manichaeans, and from these through the Paulicians, Albigenses, Templars and other secret bodies – these occult traditions have been bequeathed to the mystic bodies of our own times.<sup>37</sup>

Isabel Cooper-Oakley drew particularly on the work of Eugène Aroux to demonstrate the role and importance of the troubadours (who, in her opinion, were Cathars), Dante and the Grail literature in the transmission of esoteric wisdom down the centuries. She argues that “it is Aroux to whom we are chiefly indebted for the secret thread which guides us through much of the tangled maze of the struggles of the mystics during the Middle Ages”<sup>38</sup> and expresses “the largest debt of gratitude” to Eugène Aroux for having revealed the truth about “Mystic Studies”.<sup>39</sup> However, although Aroux is considered to be the pioneer of these studies, Cooper-Oakley attaches particular importance to Gabriele Rossetti, whom she mentions several times in her work. In fact, she affirms that “Rossetti in his valuable book [*Disquisitions on the Antipapal Spirit*] gives many proofs of the existence of a mystic language in the ‘Secret Schools’, and of the ‘double’ and even ‘triple language’ used by these Troubadours in communicating with each other”, adding that “these details must be investigated if we desire to arrive at any clear comprehension of the extent to which these Secret Schools were organised and developed during the Middle Ages”.<sup>40</sup> She also attaches particular importance to the symbolism of the rose, which she defines as “one of the ancient traditional mystic symbols, re-adapted by the Rosicrucians, and used, indeed, by all sectaries and mystics”.<sup>41</sup> Quoting Aroux, she refers to the rose in *The Romance of the Rose*, which “was not only a satire against the Pontifical Court, but also the apotheosis of heresy, for it contained the Hermetic Science under the guise of a religious poem”.<sup>42</sup> The rose, according to Isabel Cooper-Oakley, symbolises the occult doctrine of hermetic science, linked to the secret history of humanity expounded by Gabriele Rossetti. Ezra Pound, who recognised and appreciated the work of Rossetti, also shared the idea of a secret history based on occult knowledge passed down through the centuries (although he approached it in a different, personal manner). We find this idea of a single

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<sup>37</sup> Isabel Cooper-Oakley, *Traces of Hidden Tradition in Masonry & Medieval Mysticism* [1900], London, Theosophical Publishing House, 1977, p. 11.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

tradition of wisdom and gnosis, for example, in Pound's "Psychology and Troubadours" or in his *Cantos* where, as Surette points out, Pound introduces "the secret and occult history of Europe, a history of a carefully hidden albeit widely published wisdom, an esoteric revelation hidden in texts understood by the uninitiated only exoterically".<sup>43</sup> Thus, according to Ezra Pound, this secret history of Western tradition linked the Mysteries of Eleusis,<sup>44</sup> the Gnostic tradition, the Cathars, the Troubadours, the Knights Templar and the secret and initiatory Orders of the nineteenth century. In other words, it is the same history and secret tradition handed down over the centuries that Gabriele Rossetti propounded in his works.

As for the "secret history" proposed by Ezra Pound, he adopts a twofold approach, which has been brilliantly analysed by Leon Surette, who talks of "euhemeristic history" and "occult history". The former concerns the hidden and unknown history of secret societies throughout the centuries – more precisely, "secret societies maintaining themselves against political and religious oppression",<sup>45</sup> which implies that an "occult history is founded upon the supposition that an underground elite has maintained itself throughout history and is present amongst us at this very moment".<sup>46</sup> Thus, Surette continues, "euhemeristic histories gravitate irretrievably towards accounts of conspiracies and secret societies, and hence never cross easily into the mainstream".<sup>47</sup> The other variety, namely "occult history proper"<sup>48</sup> deals with "the transmission of the wisdom through texts disguising an esoteric message".<sup>49</sup> This school of thought has to do with the "transmission of the secret tradition and the nature of the revelation transmitted".<sup>50</sup> As far as the euhemeristic approach is concerned, "the histories of the tradition are less tendentious, and they easily mix with cultural history".<sup>51</sup> Thus, the reader of *The Cantos* becomes an initiate who comes into contact with "the secret history of Europe",<sup>52</sup> which has a dual nature. In terms of euhemeristic history, on Pound's *Cantos*, Surette comments that they "are intended to reveal the hidden truth about the conspiracies – both malign and benign – that have formulated the past, control the present, and generate the future".<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, when considering the field of occult history, the reader of *The Cantos* discovers the concept of *philosophia perennis*, or the eternal truth on which the initiatory teaching is founded. Ezra

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>44</sup> With regard to the relationship between the Eleusinian tradition and medieval love poetry, in "Terra Italica" Pound writes that "the cult of Eleusis will explain not only general phenomena but particular beauties in Arnaut Daniel or in Guido Cavalcanti ... I suggest that students trying to understand the poesy of southern Europe from 1050 to 1400 should try to open it with this key". Ezra Pound, *Selected Prose, 1909-1965*, p. 59.

<sup>45</sup> Leon Surette, *The Birth of Modernism*, p. 40.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38-39.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37-38.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

Pound calls it the “celestial tradition”,<sup>54</sup> corresponding, as Luca Gallesi states in his introduction to the Italian edition of *The Celestial Tradition. A Study of Ezra Pound's The Cantos* by Demetres Tryphonopoulos, to “a school of thought that dates back to the remotest antiquity and to which belong, as members of an ancient initiatory chain, the heroes immortalised in *The Cantos*”.<sup>55</sup> It is a tradition “dating back to the ancient Eleusinian mysteries was defeated and driven out of the West with the destruction of the Templar Order and the persecution of the Cathar heresy”.<sup>56</sup> Gallesi continues, highlighting that:

This tradition flowers again during the Renaissance with the Neoplatonic philosophy that inspires the artists, the philosophers and the most illuminated Lords: from Pico della Mirandola to Sigismondo Malatesta, from Gemistos Plethon to Marsilio Ficino and many more. The tradition continues with Swedenborg, John Heydon, for example, up to the contemporaries of Pound, such as G. R. S. Mead, W. B. Yeats, A. R. Orage, Allen Upward.<sup>57</sup>

This passage confirms what Demetres Tryphonopoulos suggests in his analysis of *The Cantos* in which, according to Pound, there is continuity between the rites of Delphis, Dodona, Mitra and the medieval tradition of the Albigensians and the Templars, up to John Heydon and other twentieth-century figures who perpetuated, throughout history, the work of transmitting this tradition.<sup>58</sup> Once again, this is the idea of the secret history outlined by Gabriele Rossetti in his works, particularly in his *Mistero*, and shared by Ezra Pound. Whilst Rossetti's explanation of the secret history was political, in Pound's case the explanation was given in mystical and esoteric terms. Pound did not accept the sectarian theory of a “gang of mystics”,<sup>59</sup> to which medieval love poets such as Guido Cavalcanti would have belonged, but only the idea of a “conspiracy of intelligence”,<sup>60</sup> meaning the idea of a doctrine of a metaphysical nature (associated with mystical experiences) shared by enlightened minds and transmitted down the centuries through literature. Thus, the literary writings become a way of recording a “delightful

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<sup>54</sup> Ezra Pound, *Guide to Kulchur*, New York, New Directions, 1970, p. 222. On Pound's “celestial tradition”, see Demetres P. Tryphonopoulos, *The Celestial Tradition. A Study of Ezra Pound's The Cantos*; Peter Liebrechts, *op. cit.*, p. 308-312; 324, 334, 338-339.

<sup>55</sup> “Scuola di pensiero che risale alla più remota antichità e alla quale appartengono, come membri di un'antica catena iniziatica, gli eroi immortalati nei *Cantos*”. Luca Gallesi, “Introduzione”, in Demetres Tryphonopoulos, *Pound e l'occulto. Le radici esoteriche dei Cantos*, Rome, Edizioni Mediterranee, 1998, p. 9.

<sup>56</sup> “Risalente agli antichi misteri eleusini, viene sconfitta e allontanata dall'Occidente, con la distruzione dell'Ordine dei Templari e la persecuzione dell'eresia catara”. *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> “Rifiorisce durante il Rinascimento con la filosofia neoplatonica che ispira gli artisti, i filosofi e i signori più illuminati: da Pico della Mirandola a Sigismondo Malatesta, da Gemisto Pletone a Marsilio Ficino e tanti altri. La tradizione continua con Swedenborg, John Heydon, ad esempio, fino a giungere ai contemporanei di Pound, rappresentati tra gli altri da G. R. S. Mead, W. B. Yeats, A. R. Orage, Allen Upward”. *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> See Demetres P. Tryphonopoulos, *The Celestial Tradition*, p. 166-167.

<sup>59</sup> Ezra Pound, “Cavalcanti”, in *Pound's Cavalcanti*, p. 225. This essay, in which Pound coined the expression “conspiracy of intelligence”, also appears in Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T. S. Eliot, New York, A New Directions Book, 1954, p. 177.

<sup>60</sup> Ezra Pound, *Guide to Kulchur*, New York, New Directions, 1970, p. 263.

psychic experience” and, at the same time, a “screen” from persecution, as he writes in “Psychology and Troubadours”:<sup>61</sup>

I believe in a sort of permanent basis in humanity, that is to say, I believe that Greek myth arose when someone having passed through delightful psychic experience tried to communicate it to others and found it necessary to screen himself from persecution. Speaking aesthetically, the myths are explications of mood: you may stop there, or you may probe deeper. Certain it is that these myths are only intelligible in a vivid and glittering sense to those people to whom they occur.<sup>62</sup>

This mystical ecstasy was one of the points of contact between Ezra Pound and Luigi Valli in relation to medieval love poetry. In fact, Pound believed in the possibility “that a great number of men have had certain kinds of emotion and, *magari*, of ecstasy”, and that these enlightened minds would transfer in their writings such “indelible records of ideas born of, conjoined with this ecstasy”.<sup>63</sup> Pound demonstrated his personal interest in mystical ecstasy on various occasions, such as in the letter to Viola Baxter Jordan on 24 October 1907, where he wrote: “I am interested in art and extacy [*sic*] –, extacy which I would define as the sensation of the soul in ascent, art as the expression and sole means of transmuting, of passing on that extacy to others”.<sup>64</sup> The interest of Pound in mysticism and, in particular, mystical ecstasy has been brilliantly discussed by Peter Liebrechts, who has studied the relationship between Pound and Neoplatonism. Liebrechts remarks that “Pound was interested in mysticism and *gnosis*”, namely the notion of the mystical experience of enlightenment linked to “the idea of the epiphanic as reflected in, for example, Wordsworth’s ‘spot of time’, Joyce’s ‘sudden spiritual manifestation,’ Woolf’s ‘moments or being’, or Eliot’s visionary ‘Hyacinth scene’ in *The Waste Land*”.<sup>65</sup> This

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<sup>61</sup> The essay “Psychology and Troubadours” was first published (October 1912) in the theosophical journal edited by G. R. S. Mead (Secretary of the theosophist Helena Blavatsky), *The Quest*, which appeared in 1929 in *The Spirit of Romance* (chapter five), and contained the lectures that Pound held in 1910 at the Polytechnic of London, the current University of Westminster. Thus, it was in the forerunner of the University of Westminster that Pound spoke about the mystical doctrine of Dante and troubadour poetry.

<sup>62</sup> Ezra Pound, “Psychology and Troubadours”, in Ezra Pound, *The Spirit of Romance*, New York, New Directions Books, 1968, p. 92. On the Greek tradition linked with troubadour poetry, Pound writes in *The Spirit of Romance*: “consider the history of the time, the Albigensian Crusade, nominally against a sect tinged with Manichaen heresy, and remember how Provençal song is never disjunct from pagan rites of May Day. Provence was less disturbed than the rest of Europe by invasion from the North in the darker ages; if paganism survived anywhere it would have been, unofficially, in the Langue d’Oc. That the spirit was, in Provence, Hellenic is seen readily enough by anyone who will compare the *Greek Anthology* with the work of the troubadours. They have, in some way, lost the names of the gods and remembered the names of lovers”. *Ibid.*, p. 90. In this respect, see the chapter “Eleusis, Neoplatonism and the Medieval Love Ethic”, in Peter Liebrechts, *op. cit.*, p. 60-72. It is in *The Spirit of Romance* that “Pound [...] – as Peter Liebrechts points out – connect[s] the Eleusinian Mysteries with the Provençal notion of *amor* through the idea of Platonic love”. *Ibid.*, p. 64. Pound believes, as Roberta Cappelli rightly points out, in “the survival of Hellenic paganism in southern France, which would leave traces in the *trobar clus* and in courtly mysticism” (“sopravvivenza del paganesimo ellenico nella Francia del Sud, che lascerebbe traccia nel *trobar clus* e nella mistica cortese”). Roberta Capelli, *op. cit.*, p. 98. See also *ibid.*, p. 87-88.

<sup>63</sup> Ezra Pound, *Guide to Kulchur*, p. 225.

<sup>64</sup> Letter from Ezra Pound to Viola Baxter on 24 October 1907, in “Ezra Pound. Letters to Viola Baxter Jordan”, ed. Donald Gallup, *Paideuma*, v. 1, n. 1, 1972, p. 110. On Pound’s conception of mystical ecstasy, see Furio Jesi, *Letteratura e mito*, Turin, Einaudi, 2002, p. 207-209.

<sup>65</sup> See Peter Liebrechts, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

insight into a higher reality is clearly described by Plotinus, who speaks of the possibility of attaining the vision of intelligible reality in this world, within the limits of the human physical body (Plotinus, *Ennead*, I. I. 8).<sup>66</sup>

The theme of mystical ecstasy proposed by Pound is also closely linked with the blessed state described by Dante. Pound's poetry is impregnated with Dantean echoes,<sup>67</sup> and in particular with Dante's mystical journey.<sup>68</sup> In fact, the author of *The Cantos* considers the Dantean journey as a mental and spiritual development, which implies experiencing different states of mind, and a continuous progression towards higher planes of existence.<sup>69</sup> Pound's rose reflects the attainment of such mental states, whilst the spiritual efforts of the poets are devoted to this aim, in the wake of Dante's teaching: "I have tried to write Paradise",<sup>70</sup> this is the great feat of the author of *The Cantos*, a feat of a metaphysical nature.

Pound tries to write Paradise, but this attempt is impeded by those who are against the ideal of social order, the "obstructors of knowledge" (Canto XIV).<sup>71</sup> As Peter Liebrechts recalls in his analyses of Canto XIV, "these sinners against nature include politicians, financiers, press people, academics obsessed with the details of philology (and thus burying the texts by hiding plain truths under obscure comments), and hypocritical Christians who make *charitas* subservient to dogmas. All these men deny the divine inspiring light of vision".<sup>72</sup> Liebrechts' analysis is extremely interesting, because among these "obstructors of knowledge" evoked by Pound are the academics who prefer to obscure comments and hide the truth which the literary text wants to spread. This intention expressed by Pound in Canto XVI is the same as Gabriele Rossetti's, who held that literature hides many truths under a veil: "how many masked sphinxes in the literary world!"<sup>73</sup> For Pound too, literature is a means to understand hidden truths, relating to the hidden history of the world as well as the hidden knowledge of mystical and invisible things. The concept of humanity as ignorant of such truths is brilliantly expressed by Peter Liebrechts, when he speaks of the association of the myth of the Cave and Hell described in Pound's *Cantos*:

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<sup>66</sup> In *Vita Plotini* (23), Porphyry states that his master Plotinus achieved the state of mystical ecstasy four times during the period of six years that he spent with him. See *ibid.*, p. 26. As recalled by Peter Liebrechts, Pound's poem "'The Tree' is a description of a Plotinian experience of mystical illumination, the return of the individual soul to and its identification with the *Nous*". *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>67</sup> "A Lume spento", for instance, clearly evokes this debt to the Italian poet, and it is this Dantean quotation chosen as the title of his poem that heralds the start of Pound's poetical career.

<sup>68</sup> See Ezra Pound, *Dante*, p. 51.

<sup>69</sup> See *ibid.*, p. VIII.

<sup>70</sup> Ezra Pound, "Notes for CXVII et seq.", in Ezra Pound, *The Cantos*, London, Faber and Faber, 1975, p. 803.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>72</sup> Peter Liebrechts, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

<sup>73</sup> "Quante Sfingi mascherate nel mondo letterario!" Letter from Gabriele Rossetti to John Hookham Frere on 31 March 1834, in *Gabriele Rossetti. Carteggi. Volume terzo (1832-1836)*, p. 364.

In the allegory of the cave, a symbol of earthly reality, Socrates imagines a group of men living underground in a cave, with a small opening leading upward to the light. Chained there since childhood, they can only look at the wall in front of them, and all that they see are the shadows of puppets such as people or animals, cast upon the wall by a fire burning behind them. The prisoners believe that these shadows are the only reality. This is also the state of mind of the people in Pound's Hell.<sup>74</sup>

From this perspective, the majority of humanity would appear to live in a state of ignorance about hidden truths of a mystical (as well as historical) nature – a concept that is confirmed in Canto VI, which contains the idea of a superior knowledge granted to few people in all epochs, as Peter Liebrechts remarks: “Pound's belief that a few well-informed persons can have an enormous influence on the process of history, and that individuals or governing classes can work for good or evil by their superior knowledge”.<sup>75</sup>

Thus, the possession of a superior knowledge can be considered in two ways: as knowledge secretly kept by few people with an influence (good or evil) on humanity (usually the power elite), or as occult wisdom possessed by individuals – personal knowledge which has no direct influence on other people. Pound reflects on both aspects; the second one is related to the mystical path symbolised by the rose, which leads to enlightenment and the vision of a higher reality. But, as Peter Liebrechts affirms in relation to Pound's Canto CXIII (790), “the attainment of vision is rare and hard”<sup>76</sup> and has its dangers, such as the rose which is the mystical flower *par excellence*, but which can also be dangerous. The “rose vine”<sup>77</sup> of Canto LXXXIX shows this double nature of the rose: mystical enlightenment represented by the flower of the rose, and its danger, represented by the thorns.<sup>78</sup> The “ecstatic experience” is a state that can be handled only by a mind which is prepared to face such a reality, because the risk is that of being overcome by the power of this higher dimension. This is the supreme knowledge that puts human beings in contact with God, defined by the author of *The Cantos* as “an eternal state of mind” in the essay “Religio, or, The Child's Guide to Knowledge” (1918), in which Pound distinguishes between two kinds of knowledge: “immediate knowledge and hearsay”.<sup>79</sup> The former is subjective, when a person has an illuminating contact with the invisible and higher reality, while the latter is “objective” and recounts the mystical experiences of those who have lived through them and expressed them in literature. These are the myths, and the rose belongs to this category, or rather to both categories, the subjective and the objective ones. It is the

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<sup>74</sup> Peter Liebrechts, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 376.

<sup>77</sup> Ezra Pound, *The Cantos*, p. 490-491.

<sup>78</sup> See Peter Liebrechts, *op. cit.*, p. 275-276.

<sup>79</sup> Ezra Pound, *Selected Prose, 1909-1965*, p. 47.

mystical rose known to enlightened individuals, whilst it is also the objective symbol described in literary works that show the path to God, the mystical rose.<sup>80</sup>

### *Pound's eternal Rose: Rosa sempiterna*

In the poem *Rosa sempiterna*, Pound evokes his filiation with the rose of Dante. He clearly states this in his verses where Dante is mentioned twice. His eternal rose is set, like Dante's rose, in Paradise. Pound stresses the mystical dimension of his Dantean rose, which is eternal – an eternal rose:

A rose I set within my "Paradise"  
Lo how his red is turned to yellowness,  
Not withered but grown old in subtler wise  
Between the empaged rime's high holiness  
Where Dante sings of that rose's device  
Which yellow is, with souls in blissfulness.  
Rose whom I set within my paradise,  
Donor of roses and of parching sighs,  
Of golden lights and dark unhappiness,  
Of hidden chains and silvery joyousness,  
Hear how thy rose within my Dante lies,  
O rose I set within my paradise.<sup>81</sup>

In this poem, we find the "sempiternal rose" which was present in Dante's *Comedy*, specifically in *Paradiso*, Canto XII (v. 20, "sempiternal roses")<sup>82</sup> and Canto XXX (v. 124, "the yellow of the sempiternal rose").<sup>83</sup> These passages taken from Dante are not only the material for the poem *Rosa sempiterna*, but also represent a fundamental focus in Pound's studies on the Italian poet, for example, in the essay *Dante*, where he stresses the importance of the mystical meaning of the sempiternal rose.<sup>84</sup>

The poetical production of Ezra Pound is characterized by the presence of the rose symbolism, whose nature is esoteric. Before writing *The Cantos*, Pound wrote two contemplative poems in which he used the theme of the mystical rose to express a form of

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<sup>80</sup> As Peter Liebrechts has aptly observed, Pound considers God from the angle of psychology. See Peter Liebrechts, *op. cit.*, p. 213. Thus, Pound appears to suggest a psychological dimension of the divine reality, which would be widely explored by Carl Gustav Jung in his studies on the unconscious.

<sup>81</sup> Ezra Pound, *Dante*, p. 84. Pound's poem *Rosa sempiterna*, was translated into Italian by his daughter, Mary de Rachewiltz, who sent it (together with his father's other poem, *To Guido Cavalcanti*) on 30 May 1973 to the Italian publisher Scheiwiller for publication in Italian Pound's book on Dante. See Corrado Bologna and Lorenzo Fabiani, "Il 'Dante' di Ezra Pound: breve storia di un libro sognato", in *ibid.*, p. XIII. Italian version of Pound's poem *Rosa sempiterna*: "Posto ho una rosa nel mio 'Paradiso' / mira come il rosso s'è volto al giallo, / non appassa, invecchiando s'assottiglia / fra le divine rime impaginate / ove Dante canta l'ingradar giallo / di quella rosa d'anime infiammate. / Rosa che ho posto nel mio paradiso, / tu che rose doni e sospira assetate, / di luce fulgida e dolore cieco, / chiara allegrezza e segrete maglie, / odi come la rosa mia in Dante giace, / o rosa che posi nel mio paradiso". Ezra Pound, *Dante*, p. 85.

<sup>82</sup> Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, p. 400.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 485.

<sup>84</sup> See Ezra Pound, *Dante*, p. 58, 63-64.

ascension to heaven: *Guillaume de Lorris Belated* (1909) and *Near Perigord* (1915). In *Guillaume de Lorris Belated* the rose and the mysteries of love are associated with the doctrine of Richard of St Victor, and the universe of the ancient Greek-Egyptian Mysteries.<sup>85</sup> This is virtually the same association highlighted by Gabriele Rossetti and especially Luigi Valli in his studies on the esotericism of Dante and love poetry. The presence of elements linked to Dantean esotericism is particularly evident in Pound's *Cantos*, as mentioned by Akiko Miyake, who sees here the soul's ascension to heaven through love or the rose, which recalls Dante's "candida rosa" (for example, Canto CVI, "So slow is the rose to open").<sup>86</sup> Miyake pays particular attention to the symbolism of the rose in her studies on Pound's work, and mentions Canto XX, for example, where Pound evokes the "Rose, crimson, deep crimson",<sup>87</sup> which is linked to the voyage of Odysseus, as well as the concept of the descent into the world of death – the initiatory world.<sup>88</sup> Miyake stresses that "the crimson rose [...] stands for realisation of paradise",<sup>89</sup> namely the state achieved by the higher Soul after having descended to Hell, then ascending to the Divine Mind.<sup>90</sup>

Nostalgia for the crimson rose is present in an early poem written before *The Cantos*, called *Laudantes Decem Pulchritudinis Johannaie Templi*, where Pound associates the rose with the concept of awakening ("Why hast thou awakened the sleeper?")<sup>91</sup> and of the thorn: the (spiritual) awakening of the sleeper implies the initiatory suffering caused by the thorns, but at the same time it leads to beauty, to paradise, to the meeting with the divine, the *rosa mystica*:

I am torn, torn with thy beauty,  
O Rose of the sharpest thorn!  
O Rose of the crimson beauty,  
Why hast thou awakened the sleeper?  
Why hast thou awakened the heart with me.  
O Rose of the crimson thorn?<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> See Akiko Miyake, *op. cit.*, p. 30. In *Guillaume de Lorris Belated*, Pound also refers to alchemy. In fact, he mentions John Heydon, an alchemist and astrologer, who in 1662 published *The Holy Guide* in which he asserted that by living in harmony with God one can achieve longevity. Pound also refers to Heydon in *Gaudier-Brezeska. A memoir*, where he mentions his book *The Holy Guide*. See Ezra Pound, *Gaudier-Brezeska. A Memoir* [1916], New York, New Directions, 1970, p. 127. Pound was introduced to John Heydon's *Holy Guide* by W. B. Yeats. Heydon came to the attention of nineteenth-century English occultists through the book by A. E. Waite, *The Real History of the Rosicrucians* (1887), which circulated in the Order of the Golden Dawn, to which Yeats belonged, as we have seen. There is an echo of the sixth book of Heydon's *Holy Guide*, "The Rosic Cross Uncovered", in Pound's *Ur-Canto*. See Peter Liebrechts, *op. cit.*, p. 116-117.

<sup>86</sup> Ezra Pound, *The Cantos*, p. 752.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>88</sup> Akiko Miyake, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113-114. I have retained the original American spelling used by the author of the quotation, thus I have left the word "realisation" instead of the British form "realization".

<sup>90</sup> On the concept of descent to Hell and initiatory death in Pound, see Furio Jesi, *Letteratura e mito*, p. 199-206. Jesi highlights the blend of Eleusinian and Dionysian images in *The Cantos* (in particular in Canto LXXIX).

<sup>91</sup> Ezra Pound, *Collected Early Poems of Ezra Pound*, ed. John Michael King, London, Faber & Faber, 1976, p. 117.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.



One can see here Pound's attempt to unify earth (represented by "the sleeper") and heaven, represented by the "crimson beauty" reached through an act of awakening, which is the result of a fight with the "sharpest thorn". The dichotomy "sleeping-awakening" is also present in Canto XXIII, where Pound speaks of the "garden of rose-trees",<sup>93</sup> and specifically in the passage in which Pound evokes the Dantean "selv' oscura"<sup>94</sup> ("the dark forest"). The rose grows while the poet sleeps: "and the rose grown while I slept".<sup>95</sup> The act of sleeping is associated here with the growing of the rose, but there is another remarkable aspect that characterizes Canto XXIII, namely the fact that the Dantean mystical rose of Pound is associated with different traditions which are syncretically mixed in the poem, such as the Renaissance tradition represented by Gemistos Plethon, the Cathar symbol of Montsegur, or even the Asian tradition symbolized by the Goddess Fa Han, which – as Miyake recalls, is linked with Isis, the higher Soul.<sup>96</sup> This aspect is extremely important because it highlights a peculiarity of Pound's literary production, linking traditions which are apparently distant from each other, such as the Asian and Western traditions, Confucianism and Platonism.<sup>97</sup> Peter Liebrechts aptly speaks of Pound's "Confucian-Neoplatonic tone",<sup>98</sup> and brilliantly sums up Pound's syncretic approach when he claims that the author of *The Cantos* "Neoplatonize[s] Confucian thought".<sup>99</sup> This encounter between different traditions owes a great deal to a particular figure – Ernest Fenollosa, an American scholar of Japanese art, Buddhist Mysticism and ancient Confucianism, whose writings strongly influenced Ezra Pound. In his essay of 1914, "Renaissance",<sup>100</sup> Pound asserted that Fenollosa had discovered "a new Greece in China",<sup>101</sup> and that this encounter between Eastern and Western traditions has common ground in the theme of the mysteries of Love, the mystical marriage of heaven and earth, and in the centrality of the image of Isis, whose Asian counterpart is the goddess Kuanon.<sup>102</sup>

The blend of different sapiential traditions adopted by Pound is also evident in a draft for Canto XXV, and as Akyko Miyake comments, "Pound suggests the crimson rose with the

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<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>96</sup> See Akiko Miyake, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

<sup>97</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 56, 63, 65, 66, 219.

<sup>98</sup> Peter Liebrechts, *op. cit.*, p. 293.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243. In linking Confucianism with Neoplatonism, Ezra Pound associates Cavalcanti's poem *Donna mi prega* with Confucian metaphysics: "confucian metaphysics arises from light; therefore students should compare it with medieval scholasticism; with Grossateste, or with the poetry of Guido Cavalcanti (in *Donna mi prega*)". This passage of Ezra Pound is translated by Peter Liebrechts. The original text was written in Italian by Pound: "la metafisica confuciana sorge dalla luce: per questo i studiosi dossono far confronti colla medievale scholastica; col Grosseteste, o coi versi di Guido Cavalcanti (nella *Donna mi Prega*)". Transcript of Ezra Pound, "L'asse che non vacilla", in *Ezra Pound Papers*, Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscript Library, Yale University, Box 94, Folder 3955. See Peter Liebrechts, *op. cit.*, p. 417. On Pound's Confucianism, see also *ibid.*, p. 105-110.

<sup>100</sup> Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, p. 214-226.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 215.

<sup>102</sup> See Akiko Miyake, *op. cit.*, p. 57; Peter Liebrechts, *op. cit.*, p. 197-198.

words. ‘Ut Napishtim’<sup>103</sup> which references the Babylonian-Assyrian tradition of the Gilgamesh epic. In fact, following this tradition, it appears that Napishtim holds the secret of rebirth – how to find a new life. This wisdom is associated with the flower of the rose, as one can see in the *Gilgamesh Epic*:

Gilgamesh, thou hast come hinder, thou hast become weary,  
thou hast exerted thyself;  
What shall I give thee (wherewith) thou mayest return to thy land?  
Gilgamesh, I will reveal (unto thee) a hidden thing,  
Namely, a [secret of the gods will I] tell thee:  
There is a plant like a thorn [...]  
Like a rose (?) its thorn(s) will prick thy hands].  
If thy hands will obtain that plant, [though wilt find new life].<sup>104</sup>

As in Pound’s Canto XX, in this passage from the *Gilgamesh Epic* the rose is difficult to reach because of the thorns, but the hero Gilgamesh succeeds in his aim, and finds new life. Moreover, this particular passage shows another similarity with Canto XX, that is to say, the fact that one of the main obstacles to overcome in order to reach the crimson rose is represented by water.<sup>105</sup> Like the hero of the *Gilgamesh Epic*, the poet-Odysseus described by Pound in Canto XX faces obstacles and plunges into deep water to obtain the rose: the higher soul, Isis, the mystical lady of the poet.<sup>106</sup> Once again, the *topos* of love and the symbol of the rose go hand in hand in Pound’s work, and this association is present in another of Pound’s poems, *Quia Amore Langueo* (Because I linger in Love – an evocative Latin title from the *Songs of Solomon*), in which the quest for the rose is expressed: “Tho I wander in the rain and the wind / That rose-strewn land I may not find”.<sup>107</sup>

By linking the mystical rose with different traditions (medieval French and Italian love poetry, Catharism, Renaissance Platonic Love, Egyptian wisdom represented by Isis and Babylonian-Assyrian mythology), Pound’s rose becomes the symbol of a wisdom which is common to different cultures and eras, whilst the meaning embodied by this flower is the mystical transformation of the being – a theme continuously repeated in *The Cantos*, as brilliantly shown by Riccardo Antonangeli.<sup>108</sup> The quantity of examples related to the initiatory and mystical value of the rose is huge. A good example is in Canto LXXIV, where Pound

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<sup>103</sup> See Akiko Miyake, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

<sup>104</sup> In Alexander Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1949, p. 91.

<sup>105</sup> On the initiatory meaning of the water and the sea in Pound’s descent to Hell evoked in *The Cantos*, see Furio Jesi, *Letteratura e mito*, p. 202.

<sup>106</sup> See Akiko Miyake, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

<sup>107</sup> Ezra Pound, *Collected Early Poems of Ezra Pound*, p. 265.

<sup>108</sup> See Riccardo Antonangeli, *Ezra Pound e l’ultimo Pasolini. La poesia oltraggiosa di due voci fuori dal tempo*, Milan, Edizioni Albo Versorio, 2016, p. 167-168.

evokes the Dantean reference to Lethe, as well as the poet Verlaine, whilst the rose is the symbol that links Hell to the peace of Paradise:

Serenely in the crystal jet  
as the bright ball that fountain tosses  
(Verlaine) as diamond clearness  
How soft the wind under Taishan  
where the sea is remembered  
out of hell, the pit  
out of the dust and glare evil  
Zephyrus / Apeliota  
This liquid is certainly a  
property of the mind  
nec accidens est but an element  
in the mind's make-up  
est agens and functions dust to the fountain pan otherwise  
Hast 'ou seen the rose in the steel dust  
(or swansdown ever?)  
so light is the urging, so ordered the dark petals of iron  
we who have passed over Lethe.<sup>109</sup>

Here the rose blossoms in the dust, the steel dust, closely linked with the image of the sun: as Riccardo Antonangeli comments, “the blossoming of the rose in the dust is the return of the sun from oblivion, light which is born from obscurity”.<sup>110</sup> From the obscurity of Hell to the sun of the rose: “here is the supreme peace, stillness, the *being*”,<sup>111</sup> Riccardo Antonangeli continues, on the rose of Canto LXXIV. In other words, for Pound, the rose is an initiatory flower since it entails a transformation of the being related to the “life-death” process that characterizes the initiatory path.

It is this initiatory journey that transforms the reader of *The Cantos* into an initiate who is introduced to the concept of “celestial tradition”. Pound speaks of the existence of this “celestial tradition” in Canto XC, by introducing the image of the Magus – the character who possesses the keys to the occult reality, unknown by non-initiates but clear to the initiates. From this perspective, shared by Pound with Péladan,<sup>112</sup> the initiatory death is but the death of the

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<sup>109</sup> Ezra Pound, *The Cantos*, p. 449.

<sup>110</sup> “Lo sbocciare della rosa nella polvere è ritorno al sole dall’oblio, luce che nasce dall’oscurità”. Riccardo Antonangeli, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

<sup>111</sup> “Qui è la suprema pace, stillness, dell’*essere*”. Riccardo Antonangeli, *op. cit.*, p. 168. In Canto XLIX, Pound speaks of a particular dimension linked to the attainment of “stillness”, namely the fourth dimension: “the fourth; the dimension of stillness. / And the power over wild beasts”. Ezra Pound, *The Cantos*, p. 245. On this, see Peter Liebrechts, *op. cit.*, p. 236, 321; Demetres P. Tryphonopoulos, “The fourth; the dimension of stillness”: D. P. Ouspensky and fourth dimensionalism in Canto 49”, *Paideuma: Modern and Contemporary Poetry and Poetics*, v. 19, n. 3, 1990, p. 117-122. In this article, focusing on the concept of the “fourth dimension”, Demetres Tryphonopoulos links Ezra Pound to one of the most important figures of the twentieth-century Russian esoteric tradition: P. D. Ouspensky (a disciple of the Armenian philosopher and mystic Gurdjieff), who theorised the concept of “fourth dimension”.

<sup>112</sup> In 1906, after receiving his Master’s degree from the University of Pennsylvania, Pound wrote a review of Joseph Péladan’s *Le secret des troubadours* (1906). This review of the esoteric love of the troubadours proposed by Péladan appeared in *The Book News Monthly* (Ezra Pound, “Interesting French Publications”, *The Book News Monthly* 25, 1906, p. 54-55). With regard to Pound’s ideas on troubadour tradition, see Stuart Y. McDougal, *Ezra*

senses, an entry to a higher level of existence. For Pound, initiation is an experience of palingenesis experienced by the initiate, whilst the non-initiates remain “mere shades”.<sup>113</sup> In Canto XC, Pound evokes the *mystes* who descends into the Erebo (*katabasis*) and wanders in an obscure region for a certain period (*dromena*), then returns to the world, completely transformed compared to the man he was before, as he now possesses gnosis (*epopteia*). Here Pound describes the initiation rite,<sup>114</sup> where at the end of the tortuous path the initiate is resurrected to new life, and the resurrection is metaphorically considered as a transformation of the human being into divinity during life. Thus, it is the process of metamorphosis that provides the symbolic death of the old man who is replaced by the new man, the resurrected man, who has died and is reborn to new life – the metaphor of the spiritual renewal of man who dies as part of life and is born again, becoming immortal among mortals. This concept of resurrection during life of Canto XC is aptly described by Demetres Tryphonopoulos, who writes:

There is no movement to an earthly paradise, nor is there a ‘transportation’ taking place to a celestial paradise. The *mystes* remains on earth. But as a result of his *myesis* or initiation, he is now in the possession of gnosis and thus exists on earth while at the same time he enters another level of existence, a paradisaic state of mind or being. The paradisaic images of the canto should be seen, then, as a representation of this ‘state of being’ entered by the *mystes* following his initiation.<sup>115</sup>

Thus, the paradisaic state corresponds to the attainment of gnosis, to that knowledge which allows the initiate to attain a higher plane of existence compared to common man. The initiate undergoes a metamorphosis on earth, dies on earth, and is resurrected on earth, just like the Christian tradition with Jesus who dies and is resurrected on earth: Hell, Purgatory and Paradise are not in the heavens but on earth.

The higher dimension reached by the *mystes* after having metaphorically left the world is confirmed in Canto XCI, where Pound introduces the concept of “subtle body”, a concept already present in the work of one of Pound’s main sources, George Robert Stow Mead,<sup>116</sup> who,

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*Pound and the Troubadour Tradition*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1972; Peter Makin, *Provence and Pound*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California, 1978; Pierre Pessemesse, “Les Troubadours dans la vision du monde d’Ezra Pound”, in *Actes du V<sup>e</sup> Congrès international de Langue et Littérature d’Oc et d’études franco-provençales. Nice, 6-12 septembre 1967*, eds. Gérard Moignet and Roger Lassalle, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1974, p. 208-215; George M. Gugelberger, *Ezra Pound’s Medievalism*, Frankfurt am Main, Bern, Las Vegas, Peter Lang, 1978. Among the most complete recent studies on the relations between Pound and troubadour tradition, see Roberta Capelli, *op. cit.*; Mario Mancini, *Lo Spirito della Provenza. Da Guglielmo IX a Pound*, Rome, Carocci, 2004, p. 179-189; Costanzo Di Girolamo, *I Trovatori* [1989], Turin, Bollati Boringhieri, 2021, p. 256-258.

<sup>113</sup> See Demetres P. Tryphonopoulos, *The Celestial Tradition*, p. 199.

<sup>114</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

<sup>116</sup> Carroll F. Terrell points out that the word “body” in Canto XCI is an allusion linked to the mystical symbolism of Alchemy. See Carroll F. Terrell, *A Companion to the Cantos of Ezra Pound*, 2 v., Berkeley, University of California Press, v. 2, 1984, p. 546. Mead speaks about the concept of “subtle body” in three essays published in *The Quest* (v. 1, n. 1-4, October 1901-July 1901): “The Resurrection of the Body” (p. 271-287), “The Spirit-Body: An Excursion into Alexandrian Psychology-Physiology” (p. 472-488), and “The Augoeides or Radiant Body” (p.

in his book *Subtle Body*, stresses that resurrection “was a mystery wrought in the living body of a man”.<sup>117</sup> Mead explains the three levels of being, which consist of the physical body (also called “hylic” or gross body), the spiritual body (the vehicle of the soul in its inferior form which enveloped the physical body), and finally the *augoeides*, which is the subtle body. The last phase can be attained through the initiatory palingenesis, in which the soul moves from a state of perfection to another state.<sup>118</sup>

It is significant that Pound starts his Canto XCI with two verses that refer to the French troubadours Bernart de Ventadorn and Guillaume de Poitier, thus setting his poetry within the tradition of the mystical cult of love. Therefore, as Demetres Tryphonopoulos rightly underlines, the lines of Canto XCI “need to be located within Pound’s understanding of the mystical cult of *amor*”.<sup>119</sup> Leon Surette has shown that Pound associates himself with this esoteric tradition of the cult of *amor*, which from Eleusis would extend from medieval Provence to Yeats, Mead and the author of *The Cantos* himself. Thus, Pound’s literary production, as well as much of nineteenth and twentieth century literature, is linked to the medieval concept of initiatory love, which was the basis of Rossetti’s contribution.<sup>120</sup>

Pound follows this tradition of the cult of love, which is continuously repeated not only in *The Cantos* but in his whole work. In 1910, during a brief stay in London before returning to America, Pound told D. H. Lawrence about his plan to write (as Lawrence informed Miss Crawford in a letter dated 24 June 1919) “an account of the mystic cult of love – the Dionysian rites and so on – from the earliest days to the present”.<sup>121</sup> Pound feared that no publisher in England would accept his work on the mystical cult of love, so when he returned to London (early in 1911), he met Mead and found a place for his plan in Mead’s theosophical journal *The Quest*, where in 1912 he started to publish his account of the history of the mystic cult of love.<sup>122</sup> He published the essay “Psychology and Troubadours” and, as Leon Surette remarks, “in this essay, written six years after his review of the Péladan books, Pound is fully committed to the esoteric reading of the troubadour poets”.<sup>123</sup> The esoteric dimension revealed by Pound in the French troubadour poetry is thus confirmed and corresponds to the same idea he had about

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705-724). It is interesting that Yeats refers to the three essays in his “Swedenborg, Mediums and Desolate Places”, written in 1914 and that this is the year Pound was at Stone Cottage with William Butler Yeats. See *The Celestial Tradition*, p. 185. In fact, Pound spent ten weeks at Stone Cottage, which was Yeats’ countryside residence in Sussex. See Roberta Capelli, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

<sup>117</sup> Robert Stow Mead, *The Doctrine of the Subtle Body in Western Tradition. An Outline of what the Philosophers Thought and Christians Taught on the Subject*, London, Watkins, 1919, p. 131.

<sup>118</sup> See Demetres P. Tryphonopoulos, *The Celestial Tradition*, p. 171-172.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173.

<sup>120</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence. Volume I. September 1901-May 1913*, ed. James T. Boulton, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1979, p. 165.

<sup>122</sup> See Leon Surette, *The Birth of Modernism*, p. 132-133.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

Italian medieval love poetry. Peter Liebrechts also confirms Surette's analysis of Pound's idea of an esoteric troubadourism: "Pound's depiction of the troubadours shows that he agreed with [the] esoteric version of the secret history of medieval Europe", which "also enabled him to make Dante, his favorite poet, part of a tradition heavily influenced by Neoplatonism".<sup>124</sup>

According to Pound, the nature of love (in a particular type of literature) is esoteric and represented (at least in the Middle Ages) a danger for the establishment of Power. In his essay "Lingua Toscana", Pound alludes to the "the dangers of the philosophical love song".<sup>125</sup> He does so by taking as example the verses of Dante ("Avegna ched el m'aggia più per tempo") and of Bonagiunta Orbicciani<sup>126</sup> ("Voi ch'avete mutata la maniera"), which evoke the nature of love. In Pound's view, love (and therefore the symbol of the rose which is linked to the doctrine of *amor*) implies two dimensions which influence each other: the esoteric and the political. An example is given in *A Visiting Card*, where Pound presents the formula of the *Fedeli d'Amore* which I have previously discussed, that is to say the palindrome "ROMA-AMOR":

ROMA  
O M  
M O  
AMOR<sup>127</sup>

In this essay, Pound interweaves the doctrine of love with the historical, political and economic context of his time,<sup>128</sup> even referring to certain protagonists of the secret history of Europe, as in the case of the Rothschild family, whom he mentions in order to expose hidden truths of history, specifically those concerning the Unification of Italy led by Camillo Benso,

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<sup>124</sup> Peter Liebrechts, *op. cit.*, p. 63. Another interesting aspect of Pound's approach to troubadour poetry is the relation between sex and the esoteric dimension of troubadour love poetry. Peter Liebrechts has rightly spoken of "esoteric esotericism" (*ibid.*, p. 67), which Pound associates with medieval love poetry by studying the work of Remy de Gourmont, *Physique de l'amour; essai sur l'instinct sexuel* (1903), translated by Pound himself in 1922. On the relations between Pound and the book *Physique de l'amour*, see Richard Sieburth, *Instigations. Ezra Pound and Remy de Gourmont*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, Harvard University Press, 1978, p. 24-27. With regard to the esoteric dimension of sex and love literature, it would be extremely interesting to link Pound's "esoteric eroticism" with three works that I have already mentioned in the first part of the thesis, due to their connections with Dante's esotericism and, more generally, to the *topos* of love: *The Metaphysics of Sex* by Julius Evola, *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance* by Ioan P. Couliano, *Dante, Eros and Kaballah* by Mark Jay Mirsky. In these three works, there is evidence of an esoteric approach to eroticism, the occult dimension of Eros, and a comparison with Pound's writings on this subject (as well as with Remy de Gourmont's contribution) would provide useful insights for studying the mystical and esoteric dimension of sex.

<sup>125</sup> Ezra Pound, "Lingua Toscana", in Ezra Pound, *The Spirit of Romance*, p. 108.

<sup>126</sup> I have hinted at Bonagiunta Orbicciani in chapter III.

<sup>127</sup> Ezra Pound, *Selected Prose, 1909-1965*, p. 327. See the text originally written in Italian, "Carta da visita", in Ezra Pound, *Dal naufragio di Europa. Scritti scelti 1909-1965*, introduction by Giorgio Agamben, Vicenza, Neri Pozza, 2016, p. 469.

<sup>128</sup> In particular, in relation to Pound's association "Love-Economy", Peter Liebrechts rightly affirms: "Pound connects Economy with Love and the Divine". Peter Liebrechts, *op. cit.*, p. 331. Moreover, on Pound's Neoplatonism mixed with politics and economics, Peter Liebrechts alludes to a "heterodox combination of Neoplatonism with politics and economics" that "would in the 1930s become the kernel of Pound's vision of life". *Ibid.*, p. 224.

Count of Cavour.<sup>129</sup> Pound refers to the Rothschild family in another essay, “What is money for?”, in which he reports that in the nineteenth century a member of the Rothschild family admitted that the bank system which governs nations is based on a logic that runs counter to the public interest,<sup>130</sup> a concept repeated in “Carta da Visita”, where Pound quotes directly from the letter in which a member of the Rothschild family confirms these hidden truths (letter to J. Sherman on 25 June 1836).<sup>131</sup> The Rothschild name is also mentioned on various occasions in *The Cantos*; in fact, the work aims to expose this secret history, by comparing two entities: economics and politics on the one hand, and esotericism on the other. Leon Surette aptly refers to this peculiarity of the work: “*The Cantos* explains historical event through its exposure of a malignancy blocking the creative forces that also are identified and celebrated in the poem. Pound calls the malignancy ‘Usura.’ The creative forces are called ‘amor’ and ‘Eleusis’”.<sup>132</sup> Here Pound shows a similarity with Gabriele Rossetti, the man who – as we have seen – was highly regarded by the American poet. They both share the idea of a history deeply influenced by esotericism. History, religion, politics, economics and esotericism were linked, for both Ezra Pound and Gabriele Rossetti, with literature as the thread connecting these apparently different realities. The cult of *amor* and the symbol of the rose lead to this knowledge.

As I have shown in this chapter, the study of the symbol of the rose and of the theme of love in Pound’s literary production leads to consider the esoteric dimension which characterizes his work. Leon Surette writes that “the evidence for Pound’s engagement with the occult is overwhelming”<sup>133</sup> and, with regard to *The Cantos*, he highlights “the occult nature of *The Cantos*”<sup>134</sup>, which is confirmed by Demetres Tryphonopoulos, who points out the “occult component of the poem”.<sup>135</sup> Surette remarks that “*The Cantos* were designed as an esoteric poem *lacking* an exoteric surface”, therefore “they can be understood only esoterically, only by initiates”.<sup>136</sup> The *topos* of love and the symbol of the rose present in *The Cantos* can be thus considered in esoteric and initiatory terms: an esoteric and initiatory love and rose. Moreover, this esoteric dimension of Pound’s work has been indirectly confirmed by Ezra Pound’s daughter, Mary de Rachewiltz who, after receiving a copy of *The Birth of Modernism*, wrote to Leon Surette to express her appreciation and suggest a correction to make. Beyond the correction she suggested, the most important point is that Surette’s entire rationale is accepted

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<sup>129</sup> See Ezra Pound, *Dal naufragio di Europa. Scritti scelti 1909-1965*, p. 460.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 415, 423.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 441.

<sup>132</sup> Leon Surette, *The Birth of Modernism*, p. 21-22. On the relationships between Usura and Eleusis, see *ibid.*, p. 223-250.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 231.

<sup>135</sup> Demetres P. Tryphonopoulos, *The Celestial Tradition*, p. XI.

<sup>136</sup> Leon Surette, *The Birth of Modernism*, p. 35-36.

and appreciated by Mary Rachewiltz, implicitly confirming that Surette's intuitions were correct, that is the presence of esoteric and occult traces in Pound's work.<sup>137</sup>

It is worth pointing out the importance of Surette's book *The Birth of Modernism*, which is a pioneering work in the field of literary studies, and one that would also deserve attention in the field of studies on the history of Western Esotericism. In fact, it was one of the first twentieth century studies to focus on the links between literature and esotericism, more precisely between modernism and esotericism. Another excellent work in this respect is *The Celestial Tradition* by Demetres Tryphonopoulos. Consequently, the studies by Surette and Tryphonopoulos show an unexpected interest in spiritualist, magic and, more generally, occult milieus by authors apparently detached from such contexts, for example, T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, Wallace Stevens, D. H. Lawrence or Ezra Pound. These authors drew on esoteric doctrines that were widespread in early twentieth century cultural milieus, especially in London. In fact, as Leon Surette writes in the Preface of his *Birth of Modernism*, "the project of this study is to reconstitute the intellectual context in which literary modernism was born by investigating the occult, mystical, and secret history literature that has been ignored by literary scholarship, even though it was known to Yeats, Pound, Hulme, Lawrence, Joyce, and Eliot to a greater or lesser degree".<sup>138</sup> Although Yeats' interest in the occult is evident and has been studied by literature experts, the same did not apply to Pound, whose esoteric inclinations only started to be recognised due to the pioneering contribution of Leon Surette, Demetres Tryphonopoulos, James Longenbach and Timothy Materer.<sup>139</sup> Among recent scholarship investigating the relationship between modernism and the occult is the work by Leigh Wilson *Modernism and Magic. Experiments with Spiritualism, Theosophy and the Occult*. To my knowledge, *Modernism and Magic* is one of the most complete studies on the relationship of modernism with the occult. Leigh Wilson rightly affirms that "the period encompassing the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century experienced an occult revival that is now well established",<sup>140</sup> and "such discourses inform the work of some of the central modernists, such as Ezra Pound and W. B. Yeats".<sup>141</sup>

Pound's interest in occultism began to manifest itself during his youth in the United States, before he came to Europe, but it was in London that he widened his knowledge of

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<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, p. XI.

<sup>138</sup> Leon Surette, *The Birth of Modernism*, p. 23-24.

<sup>139</sup> See *Literary Modernism and the Occult Tradition*, eds. Leon Surette and Demetres P. Tryphonopoulos, Orono, University of Maine Press, 1996; James Longenbach, *Stone Cottage: Pound, Yeats, and Modernism*, New York, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988; Timothy Materer, *Modernist Alchemy: Poetry and the Occult*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1995; Timothy Materer, "Ezra Pound and the Alchemy of the World", *Journal of Modern Literature*, 11, 1984.

<sup>140</sup> Leigh Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2. See the interesting study by Leigh Wilson on Pound's relationship with the occult: *ibid.*, p. 77-81, 135-140, 150-156.



esoteric matters due to his relationship with occultists and with Yeats in particular,<sup>142</sup> who introduced him to London's esoteric circles.<sup>143</sup> But whilst Yates was interested in occult practices, Pound turned to metaphysical occultism,<sup>144</sup> which, as Demetres Tryphonopoulos points out, "is different from the practice of theurgy or occult arts" referring, on the contrary, to "the whole body of speculative, heterodox religious thought which lies outside all religious orthodoxies and includes such movements as Gnosticism, Hermeticism, Neoplatonism, Cabalism, and Theosophy".<sup>145</sup> In his analysis of Poundian metaphysical occultism, Tryphonopoulos adds that "occultism always involves mysticism, a belief in the possibility of gnosis, or direct awareness of the Divine attained through *myesis*, or ritual initiation".<sup>146</sup> The occult, mysticism and initiation go hand in hand, and the three concepts highlighted by Demetres Tryphonopoulos are the source of the rose and love in Pound's work.

Reading Pound, understanding the meaning of his Love and of his rose, is an initiation for the reader. His esoteric and initiatory rose seeks to present the reader with a higher level of existence, of a metaphysical nature that produces a catharsis and reaction to the mechanical life of modern society. Pound's rose, the "Rosa Sempiterna", owes a lot to Dante who, according to Pound, is an "antidote" against those in power in each era, which exploits the weakness and ignorance of the masses subjugated by unjust rules. Ezra Pound highlights this feature of Dante's work in a review of Laurence Binyon's translation of the *Purgatorio* (*New English Weekly*, XIII, 25, 1938), in which he praises Binyon's translation, affirming that the Bank of England has no interest in promoting the study of Dante, since reading and understanding Dante is a danger for the establishment of the Power, whilst supporting his strongly held beliefs on fraud and falseness.<sup>147</sup> To Pound, Dante not only represents a danger for the powerful, as great literary works perform the same function and help to nourish the masses intellectually and spiritually.<sup>148</sup> According to Pound, literature (as well as the artistic and intellectual works) is

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<sup>142</sup> On the influence of Yeats on Pound in relation to occultism, see James Longenbach, *op. cit.*, p. 48-50, 226-236, 240-246. One of the most important figures with whom Pound came into contact during his London years was the occultist A. R. Orage, editor of the journal *New Age*, in which Pound published many of his essays from 1912 to 1920. See Leon Surette, *The Birth of Modernism*, p. 34. On relations between Pound and London's theosophist milieu at the beginning of the twentieth century, see Peter Liebrechts, *op. cit.*, p. 415.

<sup>143</sup> See Demetres P. Tryphonopoulos, *The Celestial Tradition*, p. 90-91.

<sup>144</sup> For Pound's knowledge of esoteric matters, another important concept that he develops is the difference between real symbolism and aesthetic symbolism. He explains this distinction in a letter to Dorothy Shakespeare on 14 January 1914, proposing that the real symbolism is the occult one (like that of the Kabbalah), while the aesthetic symbolism (that he calls "aesthetic < symbology > symbolism") is represented by Villiers de l'Isle d'Adam, Mallarmé, or Remy de Gourmont. See *Ezra Pound and Dorothy Shakespeare, Their Letters: 1909-1914*, p. 302.

<sup>145</sup> Demetres P. Tryphonopoulos, *The Celestial Tradition*, p. XII.

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

<sup>147</sup> See Ezra Pound, *Dante*, p. 175.

<sup>148</sup> See Ezra Pound, "History and Ignorance", *New English Weekly*, 25 July 1935, in Ezra Pound, *Selected Prose, 1909-1965*, p. 268-269. See also Ezra Pound, "History and Ignorance", in *Ezra Pound Papers*, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Series IV. Manuscripts, Box 140, Folder 6181; Ezra Pound, "Storia e ignoranza" and "La sapienza della poesia", in Ezra Pound, *Dal naufragio di Europa. Scritti scelti 1909-1965*, p. 380, 502.

opposed by those who want to obscure and erase history,<sup>149</sup> because it frees people from cultural and social ties and allows them to understand the nature of the social order and power. Pound calls this “Usura”, meaning the capitalist order which has firmly imposed its control since the nineteenth century. Riccardo Antonangeli convincingly explains what Pound meant by “Usura”:

In the central *Cantos* and even more so in his economic writings, Pound sees the history of death, exploitation and enslavement to money as a progressive and unstoppable extension of the dominion of the powerful, of the banks, over mankind. Usury (Usura), the Hierion created by the Bank of England, has become the only law that regulates human action, emptying it of being, rooting the will of entire civilisations on the nothingness of money. This is the root of the error from which modern degeneration springs: existence is created, like paper money by banks, *ex nihilo*.<sup>150</sup>

Pound affirmed that the Bank of England was a perversion of nature, since it creates money *ex nihilo* and profits from it,<sup>151</sup> and he clearly states this concept in Canto XLVI, where he quotes the words pronounced by Paterson, the founder of the Bank of England in 1694: “Hath benefit of interest on all / the moneys which it, the bank, creates out of nothing”.<sup>152</sup> Thus, according to Pound, the individual would have been perverted by modern economics.<sup>153</sup> He described the Bank system as Usury:

The Evil is Usury, *neschek*  
the serpent  
*neschek* whose name is known, the defiler,  
[...]  
The canker corrupting all things, Fafnir the worm,  
Syphilis of the State, of all kingdoms  
Wart of the common-weal  
Wenn-maker, corrupter of all things  
Darkness the defiler  
Twin evil of envy,  
Snake of the seven heads, Hydra, entering all things.<sup>154</sup>

As Leigh Wilson writes, *The Cantos* represent Pound’s “antidote to usury”,<sup>155</sup> and reading *The Cantos* means being in contact with such a reality: the esotericism of *The Cantos*

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<sup>149</sup> Ezra Pound, “Carta da visita”, in Ezra Pound, *Dal naufragio di Europa. Scritti scelti 1909-1965*, p. 437.

<sup>150</sup> “Nei *cantos* centrali e più ancora negli scritti economici, Pound vede la storia di morte, sfruttamento e schiavitù al denaro, come un progressivo inarrestabile ampliarsi del dominio dei potenti, delle banche, sugli uomini. Usura, Gerione creato dalla Bank of England, è diventata la legge unica che regola l’agire umano, svuotando d’essere, radicando al contrario la volontà d’interesse sulla nullità del denaro. Questa la radice dell’errore da cui la moderna degenerazione nasce: l’esistenza si crea, come la carta moneta dalle banche, *ex nihilo*”. Riccardo Antonangeli, *op. cit.*, p. 16. On Pound’s concept of Usura, see Giano Accame, *Ezra Pound Economista. Contro l’usura*, Rome, Settimo Sigillo, 1995.

<sup>151</sup> See Peter Liebrechts, *op. cit.*, p. 231.

<sup>152</sup> Ezra Pound, *The Cantos*, p. 233.

<sup>153</sup> See Peter Liebrechts, *op. cit.*, p. 231.

<sup>154</sup> Ezra Pound, *The Cantos*, p. 798.

<sup>155</sup> Leigh Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

leads to understanding the complexity of the economic system which governs the world order. In this respect, following Pound's ideas, literature becomes a danger for those who wield power. This is why, in Pound's opinion, capitalist society hates art and literature which can awaken people from intellectual and spiritual sterility;<sup>156</sup> it is also the reason why he stated that at the beginning of the twentieth century artists and writers were unemployed, especially those who treated "cold themes", such as economics.<sup>157</sup> It also explains why critical thinking and debate was replaced with what Pound calls "dilutions", and why at school, the teaching of literature was so poor: "the teaching of literature was so inefficient in my young days (and probably still is), that I have had to find out at 49 what I perfectly well have been told at 17".<sup>158</sup> Pound remarks that when he was young the teaching of literature was so mediocre that he had to learn when he was 49 what he could easily have learnt when he was 17 years old. Pound's cultural campaign against consigning history to oblivion is neatly summed up by Giorgio Agamben, who claims that "Pound is the poet who put himself most rigorously and almost with 'absolute boldness' in front of the catastrophe of Western culture".<sup>159</sup>

In conclusion to this chapter on Pound's rose, I should like to stress that the distinctive trait of the author of *The Cantos* is that his knowledge and ideas on history, politics, economics, culture and religion are linked with esotericism, since his works and essays are imbued with the wisdom of different esoteric currents. The Eleusinian and Dionysian traditions, Catharism, the Renaissance theory of Love, Confucianism, occultism, theosophy, the influence of the works by Swedenborg, by Péladan, the esotericism of Dante and of medieval love poetry: all these elements syncretically converge in Ezra Pound's literary production. As for Dante's esotericism, no author of the English literature (I would say also of French literature and other European literatures) was so fascinated by critical contributions on the *Fedeli d'Amore*, especially by Luigi Valli and Gabriele Rossetti. In particular, as we have seen in his relationship with T. S. Eliot, Pound asked for a new publication of *Il Mistero dell'Amor Platonico*. He admired and praised Rossetti's contribution, and it was thanks to Ezra Pound if the *Mistero* survived in the twentieth century. Pound always fought against the oblivion of history, and he did so against the oblivion into which Gabriele Rossetti and his book had fallen. The letters between Ezra Pound and Olivia Rossetti Agresti prove how the author of *The Cantos*

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<sup>156</sup> With regard to Pound's idea on literature as a means to "awaken" people, Roberta Capelli rightly affirms that "Pound's ethical neohumanism advocates the cultural "Awakening" of society by means of the poets" ("il neumanesimo etico poundiano auspica il 'Risvegliamento' culturale della società ad opera dei poeti"). Roberta Capelli, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>157</sup> Ezra Pound, "Murder by Capital", *The Criterion*, v. XII, n. 49, 1933, p. 585-592. See also Ezra Pound, *Dal naufragio di Europa. Scritti scelti 1909-1965*, p. 321.

<sup>158</sup> Ezra Pound, "History and Ignorance", in Ezra Pound, *Selected Prose, 1909-1965*, p. 268. See also Ezra Pound, "Storia e ignoranza", in Ezra Pound, *Dal naufragio di Europa. Scritti scelti 1909-1965*, p. 379.

<sup>159</sup> "Pound è il poeta che si è posto con più rigore e quasi con 'assoluta sfacciataggine' di fronte alla catastrofe della cultura occidentale". Giorgio Agamben, "Situazione di Ezra Pound", in *ibid.*, p. 12.

contributed to preserve the work of Gabriele Rossetti that risked being lost. For Pound, the esotericism of Dante and of medieval love poetry is not only the key to reinterpreting literature in a new light, namely in esoteric and initiatory terms, but it also represents one of the keys which enables us to reinterpret the whole history of ideas in addition to the cultural, political and religious context of modern times.

At the basis of Gabriele Rossetti's theories is the esoteric doctrine of love, and – as I have shown – this mysterious doctrine of love, together with a secret rose, links Dante with European authors of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as Pound, Joyce, Yeats, Péladan or Nerval. But what is the nature of this connection? Is this thread merely literary and aesthetic, or is it esoteric? When Nerval, Yeats, Joyce, Eliot or Pound express their debt to Dante, do they refer only to the literary influence or do they refer to the hidden and esoteric doctrine of Dante exposed by Gabriele Rossetti or Luigi Valli? It goes without saying that there is certainly an aesthetic influence, but consideration must also be given to an aspect of significant importance – the fact that many poets and writers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century belonged or had to do, directly or indirectly, with the esoteric and occult milieus of their era. In the case of Nerval, Péladan and Yeats the implication within these occult and initiatory circles is well known and attested, but other authors who were apparently detached from these milieus were, in reality, in contact with this world, like James Joyce or T. S. Eliot. Though the relations between literature and the occult remain an embarrassing and uncomfortable theme in academia, recent scholarship has demonstrated interest in the occult or at least participation, even belonging, in esoteric and initiatory circles by authors like James Joyce or Thomas Stearns Eliot. Their works are imbued with esoteric and initiatory wisdom and doctrines. They all admire Dante, who was considered in nineteenth and twentieth-century initiatory Orders as a pivotal figure in the chain of transmission of the *philosophia perennis*, namely that doctrine called “mystical theology” by Honoré de Balzac, “eternal truth” by George Sand or “celestial tradition” by Ezra Pound: the subterranean and occult continuity of philosophical and religious ideas theorised by Rossetti, who stressed its influence on the political and historical events of humanity. This is one of the reasons why Ezra Pound was interested in Gabriele Rossetti's book *Il Mistero dell'Amor Platonico*, and why the author of *The Cantos* asked Olivia Rossetti Agresti: “Want to know more of yr/ grand-dad?” And with Olivia's “grand-dad”, Ezra Pound shows many similarities. They were both “inconvenient” intellectual figures who had to fight during their lifetime against a political Power that disliked them. Rossetti was exiled and ostracized by academic literary circles. He was arrested by the FBI in 1945, incarcerated for thirteen years (without trial) in the criminal and psychiatric hospital of St. Elizabeth in Washington. The American secret services constantly spied on him

when he was in Italy.<sup>160</sup> Pound's association with Fascism<sup>161</sup> relegated him to the periphery of the academic debate for many decades – even today Pound's literary and cultural contribution is still, to some extent, ignored and underestimated. The last words of one of his essays, “PERGAMENA DEEST”, contained in *Guide to Kulchur* were: “PERGAMENA DEEST. I have come to the end of my paper. I can tell the neophyte no more in the number of pages allotted me. Contract calls for a guide TO not THROUGH human culture. Everyman must get the inside of it for himself”.<sup>162</sup> With Pound, as Roberta Cappelli aptly comments, “the neophyte is left on the threshold of knowledge with a minimum of essential information (and names) suggesting endless paths of personal development”.<sup>163</sup> Like Gabriele Rossetti, Ezra Pound opens up endless paths of knowledge (information as well as names), which enable the reader to understand the unknown history of humanity, secret truths about the political, religious and economic events that have forged modern society and which underpin it. Pound subscribes with Rossetti to the idea of a secret history of Europe, and to the idea of a “celestial tradition”, namely an esoteric knowledge hidden in literature under the veil of Love and the symbol of the rose – Dante's eternal rose, and Pound's “Rosa Sempiterna”.

In a passage from Canto XCIII, Ezra Pound writes that “the black panther lies under his rose-tree”,<sup>164</sup> and in another passage entirely written in Italian and dedicated to the Italian futurist poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876-1944), he writes: “Così puoi rinascere, così diventar pantera, così puoi conoscere la bi-nascita, e morir una seconda volta”<sup>165</sup> (“in such a way you can be reborn, in such a way you can become a panther, so you can know bi-birth, and die a second time”). Becoming a panther means dying and being born again. This panther, Pound says, lies under a rose bush; for Pound too, the rose is an initiatory flower that permits rebirth. “Unless a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God”,<sup>166</sup> according to St. John's *Gospel* (3:3): being born again means seeing God. Pound's mystical rose, like Dante's rose, leads to this spiritual rebirth. In his attempt to awaken people, Pound also transmitted a mystical message which can transform the reader who is able to understand it. He gives readers the opportunity to commune with the secret history that underpins society and provides them with the tools to transform the human soul, by presenting them with the mystery of the mystical

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<sup>160</sup> On the FBI's espionage investigations into Ezra Pound, see Alessandro De Felice, “L'intelligence USA spia il rinnegato Ezra Pound...alcuni documenti USA inediti”, *Letteratura Tradizione*, VI, n. 23, 2003, p. IX-X. The article is extremely interesting, in particular because the author also mentions the American Dante Societies with regard to the activities carried out by the FBI to spy on Ezra Pound.

<sup>161</sup> On Pound's fascism, see Luca Gallesi, *Le origini del Fascismo di Ezra Pound*, Milan, Edizioni Ares, 2005.

<sup>162</sup> Ezra Pound, *Guide to Kulchur*, p. 343.

<sup>163</sup> “Il neofita è lasciato sulla soglia della conoscenza con un bagaglio minimo di informazioni (e nomi) essenziali che suggeriscono infiniti percorsi di approfondimento personale”. Roberta Capelli, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

<sup>164</sup> Ezra Pound, *The Cantos*, p. 628.

<sup>165</sup> Ezra Pound, *I Cantos*, ed. Mary de Rachewiltz, Milan, Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 2002, p. 826.

<sup>166</sup> *The Gospel of St. John*, ed. Joseph MacRory, Dublin, Browne and Nolan, 1914, p. 49.

rose: the “Rosa sempiterna”. “Ideas are true as they go into action”,<sup>167</sup> writes Pound in *Guide to Kulchur*. Writing is already an act, which sows the seeds to awaken the minds of the future.

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<sup>167</sup> Ezra Pound, *Guide to Kulchur*, p. 188.



## CHAPTER XII

### THE ALCHEMICAL ROSE IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

*Le Mystère des Cathédrales and the revival of alchemy at the beginning of the twentieth century*

The early twentieth century rose is an alchemical rose.<sup>1</sup> The first two decades of the twentieth century were extremely important for the rise of esoteric currents, notably alchemy. In fact, it was in this period that the art of alchemy clearly emerged, as never before, especially due to a mysterious figure who remains anonymous to this day, known as Fulcanelli. It is in *Le Mystère des Cathédrales* (The Mystery of the Cathedrals, 1926) that Fulcanelli explains the art of alchemy, giving particular importance to the symbolism of the rose. Other figures who gravitated towards the mysterious French alchemist were, as we have seen, his disciple Eugène Léon Canseliet (1899-1982) and Pierre Dujols de Valois (1862-1926), a bookseller at the “Librairie du Merveilleux”.<sup>2</sup> However, even in alchemical circles of the first two decades of the twentieth century, Gabriele Rossetti plays an important role, as a source of inspiration for Pierre Dujols’ research on alchemy. In fact, Pierre Dujols dedicated his book *La Chevalerie amoureuse, troubadours, félibres et rose-croix* (Amorous chivalry, Troubadours, Félibres and Rosicrucians) to Gabriele Rossetti, as well as to Eugène Aroux, to express his gratitude to Rossetti for having revealed the true nature of love in literature as esoteric and initiatory. “À la mémoire de G. Rossetti et E. Aroux”,<sup>3</sup> (“To the memory of G. Rossetti and E. Aroux”) is Pierre Dujols’ dedication at the beginning of his book. Eugène Aroux was clearly someone who also inspired Pierre Dujols but, once again, to claim that Aroux was an inspiration is to implicitly assert that the real source was Gabriele Rossetti, for, as we have seen, Aroux only plagiarised Rossetti’s work. So, this is another case of Gabriele Rossetti’s indirect influence. His ideas and research also influenced the early twentieth century works on alchemy, which had a remarkable impact on the literary production and esoteric currents of the following decades.

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<sup>1</sup> On the alchemical value of the rose, see Christian Montésinos, *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'alchimie et des alchimistes. L'alphabet d'Hermès*, Bonneuil-en-Valois, Éditions de la Hutte, 2010, p. 376-378.

<sup>2</sup> See Pierre Dujols, *Les nobles écrits de Pierre Dujols et de son frère Antoine Dujols de Valois. Le Mutus Liber. La Chevalerie (inédit). Valois contre Bourbons. La régénération de la vigne* [2000], Grenoble, Le Mercure Dauphinois, 2007, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> “À la mémoire de G. Rossetti et E. Aroux”. Pierre Dujols, *La Chevalerie amoureuse, troubadours, félibres et rose-croix*, p. 18.



Pierre Dujols also acknowledges the importance of Gabriele Rossetti's work in a manuscript from the early collection of the Lyon municipal library (Ms 5491), *La Chevalerie* (Chivalry), where he claims that the Italian exile and other authors, such as Ugo Foscolo, Étienne-Jean Delécluze, Philarète Chasles, Eugène Aroux, Antony Rhéal and Grasset d'Orcet have shed light on the darkness of medieval literature, whilst pointing out that Rossetti was the first to do so with his *Mistero dell'Amor Platonico*.<sup>4</sup> The influence of Gabriele Rossetti also extends to twentieth-century France – one of the European countries where the interest in alchemy was strongly revived, thus influencing the literature, art and culture of that time. The word 'mystery' appears in the titles of the two pioneering works that expound esotericism in literature (Rossetti) and in art (Fulcanelli) – from the *Mystery of Platonic Love* in the nineteenth century to the *Mystery of the Cathedrals* in the twentieth century. The difference between Rossetti and Fulcanelli lies in the fact that the former was ignorant of occult science, since he considered himself a layman in this respect, whereas for the latter this secret knowledge represented the essence of his teaching – a reality, or rather an esoteric truth, unknown to the layman. Moreover, Fulcanelli's work is set in a very complex historical period, namely World War II, and the author of the *Mystères des Cathédrales* sees alchemy as an antidote to the evil of his century and those to come.

Fulcanelli had spoken of the terrible scenarios that the future would hold. He mentions future catastrophes in *Les Demeures Philosophales* (The Dwellings of the Philosophers, 1930), remarking that “each period of 1200 years begins and ends with a catastrophe; human evolution expands and grows in the space of two scourges”.<sup>5</sup> And in a book titled *Finis Gloriae Mundi* (which was to follow the two volumes of the *Dwellings*) and attributed to Fulcanelli, sets out an apocalyptic vision of the planet, destined for terrible upheavals that would occur every two thousand five hundred years.<sup>6</sup> These terrible upheavals would coincide with the moral and spiritual decadence of human society, which Paolo Lucarelli aptly summarised in the introduction to the Italian version of *Les Mystères des Cathédrales*. These occurrences would include religious disbelief and mystical credulity, the harmful effects of official teaching, abuse of pleasure in order to forget the fear of the future, uncertainty of the future, fetishism and fashion in the modern age, widespread discouragement and diffidence among the populace, and a world ruled by the initiates.<sup>7</sup> To counter this terrible scenario, Fulcanelli proposed alchemy

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<sup>4</sup> See Pierre Dujols, *Les nobles écrits de Pierre Dujols et de son frère Antoine Dujols de Valois*, p. 71-72.

<sup>5</sup> Fulcanelli, *The Dwellings of the Philosophers* [1930], Boulder, Archive Press, 1999, p. 258.

<sup>6</sup> Fulcanelli, *Finis Gloriae Mundi*, London, Liber Mirabilis, 1999. On *Finis Gloriae Mundi* by Fulcanelli, see also Mariano Bizzarri, “Presentazione”, in Fulcanelli, *Finis Gloriae Mundi*, Rome, Edizioni Mediterranee, 2007, p. 7-21. On the alleged attribution of the book *Finis Gloriae Mundi* to Fulcanelli, see Richard Caron, “Fulcanelli”, in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, p. 389-390.

<sup>7</sup> Paolo Lucarelli, “Prefazione”, in Fulcanelli, *Il Mistero delle Cattedrali e l'interpretazione esoterica dei simboli ermetici della Grande Opera*, ed. Paolo Lucarelli, Rome, Edizioni Mediterranee, 2005, p. 51.

as a way of improving people morally and spiritually, and to free them from the decadence of modern society through the transformation and perfection of the being.

At the end of his *Mystères des cathédrales*, referring to the Indian tradition, Fulcanelli explains the theory of the four ages (whose precursor was Joachim of Fiore) and focuses on the scenario of our age – the age of decadence, the Kali-Yuga of India’s Sacred Scriptures, the dark ages, or the iron age.<sup>8</sup> This dire scenario described by Fulcanelli (and confirmed by Eugène Canseliet) is evoked by another twentieth-century alchemist and poet, Élie Charles Flamand<sup>9</sup> (1928-2016) who, in his book *Érotique de l’alchimie* (prefaced by Canseliet) focuses on the alchemical value of Eros, confirming that the rose is the symbol of the alchemical secret, or philosophical fire.<sup>10</sup> He speaks of the modern era, the twentieth century, which “perverts eroticism” – an eroticism to do with the “subtle planes” where the modern individual is a being “tightly enclosed in a materialism blind to the subtle planes, [...] incapable of handling as he should the forces pertaining to these planes in which eroticism participates”.<sup>11</sup> Eroticism, explains Flamand, is “of sacred essence”;<sup>12</sup> this desacralisation of eroticism is linked to the traditional doctrine of the ages of the world, more precisely to the fourth age, our own, the age of decadence, thus confirming what Fulcanelli said about the Kali-Yuga, the dark ages or iron age.<sup>13</sup> This period of the dark ages was prophesied by Hesiod, Ovid and the Indian Vishnu-Purâna; it is the age, Flamand emphasises, during which “the darkest light guides men”, and “that is why eroticism, which is of a sacred essence, also undergoes the desecration inherent in the particular conditions of Kali-Yuga”.<sup>14</sup>

To combat this decadence, Fulcanelli advocates salvation through alchemy. Our era is an era of pain, but what can save us is the alchemical transformation of the being. The path is difficult, but it leads to immortality. This is not a vague word that expresses a vague mysticism, rather, immortality is the ability not to die in life, not to succumb to the afflictions of existence to which human beings are exposed – it is a death in life, where the mind of the initiate is no longer negatively influenced by everything that makes profane humanity suffer. In the preface

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<sup>8</sup> “In the age of iron, our own age, the cyclic cow or human virtue reaches the utmost degree of feebleness and senility: it is scarcely able to stand, balancing on only one leg. It is the fourth and last age, the *Kali Yuga*, the age of misery, misfortune and decrepitude”. Fulcanelli, *Le Mystère des Cathédrales. Esoteric interpretation of the Hermetic Symbols of the Great Work*, London, Neville Spearman, 1971, p. 170-171.

<sup>9</sup> Élie Charles Flamand was interested in esotericism and knew the alchemist Eugène Canseliet personally, thanks to André Breton and René Alleau. See Patrick Lepetit, *The Esoteric Secrets of Surrealism. Origins, Magic, and Secret Societies*, translated by Jon E. Graham, Rochester, Vermont, Toronto, Inner Traditions, 2014, p. 70-71. This book by Patrick Lepetit explores the relationship between esotericism and French Surrealism.

<sup>10</sup> See Élie-Charles Flamand, *Érotique de l’alchimie*, Paris, Le Courrier du Livre, 1989, p. 170.

<sup>11</sup> “Pervertit l’erotisme”; “plans subtils”; “étroitement enfermé dans un matérialisme aveugle aux plans subtils, [...] incapable de manier comme il le faudrait les forces afférentes à ces plans auxquels l’erotisme participe”. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>12</sup> “D’essence sacrée”. *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> “La lumière la plus ténébreuse guide les hommes”; “c’est pourquoi l’erotisme qui est d’essence sacrée subit lui aussi la profanisation inhérente aux conditions particulières du Kali-Yuga”. *Ibid.*

to the 1958 edition of *Les Demeures Philosophales*, Canseliet perfectly expresses this concept: “the Adept, that is to say, [...] the man who possesses the Philosopher’s Stone, can alone foresee everything that is capable of threatening his existence: illnesses, accidents and, above all, criminal violence”.<sup>15</sup> Fulcanelli writes that the initiate assures his existence of “an indefectible moral serenity, a calm amidst excitements, a contempt for mundane pleasures, a resolute stoicism” and, above all, the “powerful comfort granted him by the secret knowledge of his origins and destiny”.<sup>16</sup>

*The Mystery of the Cathedrals*, as well as *The Philosopher’s Dwellings*, appeared at a time of deep crisis for humanity, of world war, and the esotericism that the author expounds also aims to heal the wounds of a suffering world.

### *Fulcanelli and the Hermeticism of the Mystical Rose*

Fulcanelli had pointed out that the majority of French cathedrals hide an esoteric meaning under the appearance of an exoteric form. They were, in fact, “built by medieval Freemasons in order to ensure the transmission of hermetic symbols and doctrine”.<sup>17</sup> The same claim was made by Victor Hugo, who said that Notre Dame is the most satisfactory summary of hermetic science: “even the hermetics find in the symbolism of that great doorway a satisfying summary of their science, of which the church of Saint-Jacques-de-la-Boucherie was so complete a hieroglyph”.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, Victor Hugo believed that the Gothic monument of Notre Dame concealed, in artistic form, the secrets of hermetic science. Fulcanelli specified that in the Cathedral of Paris (dedicated to the Virgin Mary) alchemy is represented by the image of a woman who holds two books in her right hand, one of which is open and signifies the exoteric aspect, while the other is closed and symbolises the esoteric meaning. Between the legs of this female image is a ladder which, Fulcanelli informs us, symbolises the *scala philosophorum*, or the ladder representing the initiatory journey in stages, and which requires patience.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the woman symbolising the Virgin is the image that contains the esoteric secret of the Cathedral of Notre Dame de Paris, according to Fulcanelli, who adds that this Virgin is also called Rosa Mystica.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Eugène Canseliet, “Préface à la deuxième édition”, in Fulcanelli, *Les Demeures Philosophales et le symbolisme hermétique dans ses rapports avec l’art sacré et l’ésotérisme du Grand Œuvre*, third edition, Paris, Pauvert, t. I, 1979, p. 28.

<sup>16</sup> Fulcanelli, *The Dwellings of the Philosophers*, p. 170.

<sup>17</sup> Fulcanelli, *Le Mystère des Cathédrales. Esoteric interpretation of the Hermetic Symbols of the Great Work*, p. 118.

<sup>18</sup> Victor Hugo, *Notre-Dame de Paris*, translated with an introduction and notes by Alban Krailsheimer, Oxford, University of Oxford Press, 2009, p. 151.

<sup>19</sup> See Fulcanelli, *Le Mystère des Cathédrales. Esoteric interpretation of the Hermetic Symbols of the Great Work*, p. 69-70.

<sup>20</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 71-72.

The author of *The Mystery of the Cathedrals* repeatedly emphasises that the rose is an alchemical symbol of pivotal importance. It is no coincidence that the rose window (also called “rose”) is the circular stained glass window in the form of a rose that lights up with the sun’s rays: the sunlight shines through the rose window in the portal of the Cathedral and represents the fire of the great alchemical work, the darkness in the light.<sup>21</sup> Fulcanelli adds that “in the Middle Ages, the central rose window of the porches was called *Rota*, the wheel”, and that “*the wheel* is the alchemical hieroglyph of the time necessary for the coction of the philosophical matter”.<sup>22</sup> The rose (or rose window) thus represents the action of alchemical fire and its duration. “That is why the medieval decorators sought in their rose windows to translate the movements of matter, stirred up by the elementary fire”, writes Fulcanelli, who also started a debate on the esoteric meaning of the word “gothic”, affirming that “the preponderance of the fiery symbol in the architecture of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, which neatly characterizes the last period of medieval art, has given rise to the name *flamboyant* for the style of this period”.<sup>23</sup> The word “gothic” conceals a profound esoteric meaning because, as Fulcanelli writes, “gothic art (*art gothique*) is simply a corruption of the word *argothique* (cant), which sounds exactly the same. This is in conformity with the *phonetic law*, which governs the traditional cabala in every language and does not pay attention to spelling”.<sup>24</sup> Thus, “the cathedral is a work of *art goth* (gothic art) or of *argot*, i.e. cant or slang”, and slang is but a “*spoken cabal*”: “all the Initiates expressed themselves in cant; the vagrants of the *Court of Miracles* – headed by the poet Villon – as well as the Freemasons of the Middle Ages, ‘members of the lodge of God’, who built the *argothique* masterpieces, which we still admire today”.<sup>25</sup> Here Fulcanelli states that slang is the language of the initiates and refers to the Freemasons of the Middle Ages and the poet Villon. He mentions another French author who is said to have used this initiatory language that conceals esoteric science: Rabelais.<sup>26</sup> Thus, “*The Life of Gargantua and Pantagruel* by François Rabelais is an esoteric work, a novel in cant. The good curé of Meudon reveals himself in it a great initiate, as well as first-class cabalist”.<sup>27</sup> In particular, “Rabelais’ main book, entitled *Pantagruel*, is entirely devoted to the burlesque and cabalistic exposition of alchemical secrets, of which the pantagruelism embraces the totality

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<sup>21</sup> Notre Dame has three rose windows. The first is the northern rose window in the left transept, which is never illuminated. It is the emblem of darkness, followed by the light of the last rose window, the third, that of the portal. See *ibid.*, p. 49-51.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> On the esoteric dimension of Rabelais’ work, see Claude-Sosthène Grasset d’Orcet, Joséphin Péladan, *Le double langage de Rabelais*, Paris, Éditions Edite-ODS, 2015.

<sup>27</sup> Fulcanelli, *Le Mystère des Cathédrales. Esoteric interpretation of the Hermetic Symbols of the Great Work*, p. 44.

and constitutes the scientific doctrine”.<sup>28</sup> According to Fulcanelli, Villon and Rabelais would use a cryptic language that conveys a message of an esoteric nature, which is exactly what Gabriele Rossetti had tried to demonstrate with Dante and the love poets of the Middle Ages, but also of the Renaissance, up to the nineteenth century. Fulcanelli points out that “[cant] remains the language of a minority of individuals living outside the accepted laws, conventions, customs and etiquette”<sup>29</sup> as the *Fedeli d’Amore* did, according to Rossetti. This is what Wouter Hanegraaff has defined as “rejected knowledge”. Slang may fall into this category, if we follow Fulcanelli’s alchemical interpretation of literature, which emphasises that “*argot* (cant) is one of the forms derived from the *Language of the Birds*”, that is to say the language “which teaches the mystery of things and unveils the most hidden truths”.<sup>30</sup> It is also the language of Tiresias, the mythological figure mentioned by T. S. Eliot in his *The Waste Land*.<sup>31</sup> Tiresias, as Fulcanelli says, would have had “perfect knowledge of the *Language of Birds*, which Minerva, goddess of Wisdom, revealed to him”.<sup>32</sup> He would share this hermetic language with Thales of Miletus, Melampus and Apollonius of Tyana, and would lose his sight for revealing the secrets of Olympus to mortals.<sup>33</sup> Even in the case of the alchemy expounded by Fulcanelli and his disciples, secrecy becomes necessary, as Canseliet reminds us by speaking of the “need for preserving secrecy”<sup>34</sup> when one is initiated into the mystery of the alchemical art. Hence the obscurity of the alchemical writings, whose doctrine cannot be grasped by everyone, for it is necessary to be prepared and above all this knowledge must not be used by evil spirits: in fact, it becomes dangerous when used by bad people.

In the preface to the first edition of *Les Demeures Philosophales* in 1929, Eugène Canseliet perfectly captures the concept of obscure speech used to protect the secret doctrine, commenting: “we should not believe that traditional science, whose elements Fulcanelli assembled, has been adapted for the general public in the present work”.<sup>35</sup> Canseliet quotes an alchemical adage, “‘our books have not been written for all’, repeat the old masters, ‘though all are called upon to read them’”.<sup>36</sup> He further comments on this by confirming that “each one of

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<sup>28</sup> Fulcanelli, *The Dwellings of the Philosophers*, p. 225.

<sup>29</sup> Fulcanelli, *Le Mystère des Cathédrales. Esoteric interpretation of the Hermetic Symbols of the Great Work*, p. 43.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>31</sup> See Thomas Stearns Eliot, “The Fire Sermon” (*The Waste Land*), in Thomas Stearns Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays*, London-Boston, Faber and Faber, 1969, p. 68-69.

<sup>32</sup> Fulcanelli, *Le Mystère des Cathédrales. Esoteric interpretation of the Hermetic Symbols of the Great Work*, p. 44.

<sup>33</sup> Following Fulcanelli’s interpretation, the word “argonaut” acquires a new meaning, linked to the alchemical tradition: “the *argotiers*, those who use this language, are the hermetic descendants of the *argonauts*, who manned the ship *Argo*. They spoke the *langue argotique* – our *langue verte* (‘green language’ or slang) – while they were sailing towards the felicitous shores of Colchos to win the famous *Golden Fleece*”. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>34</sup> Eugène Canseliet, “Preface to the second edition”, in *ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>35</sup> Eugène Canseliet, “Preface to the first edition”, in Fulcanelli, *The Dwellings of the Philosophers*, p. 262.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

us must contribute his personal effort which is definitely essential if he wants to acquire the notions of a science which has never ceased to be esoteric. This is why the philosophers, aiming to hide its principles from the masses, have concealed the ancient knowledge in the mystery of words and the veil of allegories”.<sup>37</sup> Canseliet thus explains the need for allegory to conceal the secret doctrine, and we find this idea of esoteric knowledge associated with the concept of secrecy in *L’Obratge dels philosophes* (The Philosophers’ Work), one of the earliest testimonies of alchemy in southern France, which was probably compiled at the beginning of the fifteenth century.<sup>38</sup> Suzanne Thiolier-Méjean is credited with presenting this little-known work to the scientific community, offering an extremely valuable text (as yet unexplored) for research not only in literary studies but also for the history of esoteric currents. The anonymous author of *L’Obratge dels philosophes* makes Jesus speak, thus creating a bridge between the Christian tradition and alchemy. In his words we find the concept of an initiatory doctrine that must be guarded by the “learned” and hidden from the “ignorant”, because knowledge can only be offered to “intelligent children” (“fils intelligents”).<sup>39</sup> This knowledge is presented in the form of a secret encrypted in an apparently unintelligible language, with those who use it defined as “madmen” (“fous”), while the symbol that makes it possible to understand the hidden doctrine in *L’Obratge dels philosophes* is the rose, as can be read in the text:

Know that the learned have put into the miracle of the stone many ways and manners of operating, namely: dissolving, freezing, calcining and sublimating, and put many vessels and weights, and they have done so to blind the ignorant and to reveal the secret work to intelligent children. To these they have communicated the secret in a few words, although they have added many more so that the secret could only be understood by their children. And these children of theirs know how to extract the secret scattered in the words of fools, just as he who plucks the rose from among the thorns knows how to recognise it, for his knowledge makes him reason according to nature; but if reasoning is not sufficient for you to know this rose, insofar as it is impalpable and invisible, for this reason I will give you certain knowledge of it.<sup>40</sup>

In *L’Obratge dels philosophes*, the author continually refers to a secret – “our sovereign secret”,<sup>41</sup> underlining the fact that this secret is shared by a restricted circle, by a “we” that

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

<sup>38</sup> See *L’Alchimie médiévale. L’Obratge dels philosophes. La Soma et les manuscrits d’oïl*, ed. Suzanne Thiolier-Méjean, Paris, Presses de l’Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1999, p. 46.

<sup>39</sup> *L’Obratge des philosophes* dans *ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>40</sup> “Sache que les savants ont mis dans le miracle de la pierre nombre de façons et de manières d’opérer, à savoir: dissoudre, congeler, calciner et sublimer, et mis nombre de vases et poids, et ils l’ont fait pour aveugler les ignorants et afin d’éclairer le secret ouvrage aux fils intelligents. À ceux-là ils ont communiqué le secret en peu de paroles, quoiqu’ils en aient mis et ajouté de nombreuses autres afin que le secret ne soit compris que de leurs fils. Et ceux-là sont leurs fils qui savent extraire le secret dispersé dans les paroles des fous, tout comme celui qui cueille la rose d’entre les épines et sait la reconnaître, car sa connaissance le fait raisonner selon la nature; mais parce que, d’aventure, le raisonnement pourrait ne pas te suffire pour te faire connaître cette rose, dans la mesure où elle est impalpable et invisible, pour cette raison je t’en donnerai la connaissance assurée”. *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> “Notre souverain secret”. *Ibid.*, p. 269.

leaves out those who are not part of this group, based on a logic that consists of “leaving the ignorant in their ignorance”.<sup>42</sup> Hence, passages that speak of a “precious stone, hidden from the ignorant and known to us”,<sup>43</sup> of a “secret [which] is not to be made known to the ignorant, for when they think they are making water of life, they are making water of death”.<sup>44</sup> This alchemical dimension in which the rose is involved requires respect for the rule of secrecy: “these secrets you must not reveal to any man of the flesh, not one, for you would be cursed by the revelation of the secret”.<sup>45</sup> As Suzanne Thiolier-Méjean points out in *L’Obratge dels philosophes*, “knowledge is a gift from God and the work is a secret that can only be understood thanks to this gift and which must not be revealed to anyone, as it could fall into unworthy hands”.<sup>46</sup> This is the same danger mentioned earlier concerning what Fulcanelli and Canseliet wrote about esoteric knowledge being used by evil and malicious people, especially men of power. However, in *L’Obratge dels philosophes* we also find the same concept expounded by Canseliet and by his master Fulcanelli about obscurity, so that the doctrine can only be understood by those who are worthy to receive it.<sup>47</sup> And in the words of Eugène Canseliet even his master “owed obedience to the philosophers’ law which imposes upon initiates the necessity of inviolable secrecy”.<sup>48</sup>

This secret implies an elitist logic of knowledge, and the distinction between esoteric and exoteric knowledge, as Fulcanelli states: “the ancient sciences, transmitted under the veil of various emblems, are answerable to the science of Diplomats and are presented with a double meaning, one apparent and understandable by everyone (exoteric), the other, hidden, accessible only to initiates (esoteric)”.<sup>49</sup> One of the works that Fulcanelli mentions as an example of double talk is *The Romance of the Rose*,<sup>50</sup> which hides an esoteric knowledge

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<sup>42</sup> “Laisser l’ignorant dans son ignorance”. *Ibid.*, p. 255.

<sup>43</sup> “Pierre précieuse, cachée aux ignorants et connus de nous”. *Ibid.*, p. 165.

<sup>44</sup> “Secret [qui] n’est pas à faire connaître aux ignorants, car quand ils croient faire eau de vie, ils font eau de mort”. *Ibid.*, p. 163.

<sup>45</sup> “Ces secrets, tu ne dois les révéler à aucun homme de chair, pas à un seul, car tu serais maudit par la révélation du secret”. *Ibid.*, p. 177.

<sup>46</sup> “La connaissance est un don de Dieu et l’œuvre est un secret qui ne peut se comprendre que grâce à ce don et qui ne doit être révélé à personne, car il pourrait tomber entre des mains indignes”. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>47</sup> As in the case of *L’Obratge dels philosophes*, the figure of Jesus Christ plays a fundamental role for Fulcanelli. There is therefore no opposition with the central figure of the Christian Church, but perfect harmony. In this respect, Canseliet writes: “the Stone, on which Jesus built the Church, is included as the basis of all philosophical dwellings” (“la Pierre sur laquelle Jésus bâtit l’Église est incluse dans la base de toute demeure philosophale”). Eugène Canseliet, “Préface à la troisième édition”, in Fulcanelli, *Les Demeures Philosophales*, t. I, p. 54. Similarly, as I pointed out in Chapter I, Gabriele Rossetti had great respect for the figure of Christ: his aversion was to the abuses of the clergy and ecclesiastical Power. Christ’s message, on the contrary, represents the path to salvation for a humanity overwhelmed by pain and suffering.

<sup>48</sup> Eugène Canseliet, “Preface to the first edition”, in Fulcanelli, *The Dwellings of the Philosophers*, p. 262.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218.

<sup>50</sup> The alchemical value of *The Romance of the Rose* is also confirmed by Eugène Canseliet. See Eugène Canseliet, *Alchimie. Nouvelles études diverses sur les portraits alchimiques*, Paris, Guy Trédaniel, 2014, p. 41, 133; Eugène Canseliet, *Alchimie. Études diverses de Symbolisme hermétique et de pratique Philosophale*, Paris, Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1964, p. 165.

through a symbolic language, and which gave rise to an initiatory literature based on the theme of love over the centuries, as Rossetti stated. I quote an entire passage from *The Dwellings of the Philosophers* which perfectly sums up the filiation between various poets and writers who, over the centuries, have transmitted an initiatory knowledge based on what Fulcanelli calls the “Hermetic cabala”:

Conversely, to Jewish kabbala, created out of nothing so as to veil, doubtlessly, that which the sacred text showed too clearly, hermetic cabala is a precious key allowing whoever possesses it to open the doors of the sanctuaries, of these closed books which are the works of traditional science, to extract their spirit, to see their secret meaning. Known to Jesus and his apostles (it unfortunately caused St Peter’s first denial), the cabal was used in the Middle Ages by philosophers, scientists, men of letters, and diplomats. Knights belonging to Orders and knights-errant, troubadours, trouveres, and minstrels, traveling students of the famous school of magic at Salamanc, who we call Venusbergs because they were said to come from the mountain of Venus, discussed among themselves in the language of the gods, also called the gay science or gay knowledge, our hermetic cabala. Furthermore, it bears the name and the spirit of Chivalry, the true name of which was revealed to us by Dante’s mystical book. The Latin word *Caballus* and the Greek word (*kaballes*), both mean pack-horse; our cabala truly carries a considerable weight, the “pack” and sum total of ancient knowledge and of medieval chivalry or cabalery or cabala, the heavy baggage of esoteric truth transmitted by its intermediary throughout the ages. It was the secret language of “cabaliers”, horsemen, and cavaliers. The initiates and intellectuals of Antiquity knew it. The ones and the others, so as to reach fullness of knowledge, metaphorically rode the “cavale” (the mare), the horse, spiritual vehicle whose typical image is that of Pegasus, the winged horse of the Greek poets. It alone gave the chosen one access to unknown regions, and offered them the possibility to see all and know all throughout space and time, ether and life. Pegasus, in Greek (*pegasos*), takes its name from the word (*pege*), source, or spring, because it is said that it caused the fountain of Hippocrene to spring out with one kick; but the truth is of another nature. It is because the cabala provides the cause, gives the principle, reveals the source of sciences that its hieroglyphic animal received the special and characteristic name it now bears. To know the cabala is to speak the language of Pegasus, the language of the horse, of which Twist expressively indicates, in one of his allegorical Travels, the effective value and the esoteric power.

Mysterious language of the philosophers and disciples of Hermes, the cabala dominates the entire didactics of the Great Art, just as symbolism embraces all its iconography. Art and literature thus offer to the hidden science the added support of their own resources and their expressive faculties. Actually, and in spite of their specific characteristics and their separate techniques, the cabala and symbolism use different paths to reach the same goal and to merge into the same teaching. They are the two master pillars erected on the corner stones of the philosophical foundation, which support the alchemical fronton of the temple of wisdom.

All idioms can give refuge to the traditional meaning of the cabalistic words, because the cabala, deprived of texture and syntax, easily adapts itself to any language, without altering its special genius. It brings to the different natural languages the substances of its thought with the original meaning of the names and of the qualities. So that any language always remains likely to carry it, to incorporate it, and consequently to become cabalistic by the double meanings which it takes on as a result.



Apart from its pure alchemical role, the cabala was used in the elaboration of several literary masterpieces, which many dilettantes can appreciate, without however guessing what treasures they hide under the attractiveness, the charm, the nobleness of style. This is because the authors – whether they are named Homer, Virgil, Ovid, Plato, Dante, or Goethe – were all great initiates. They wrote their immortal works not so much to leave to posterity imperishable monuments of the human genius, but rather to instruct it in the sublime knowledge of which they were the depositories and which they had to transmit in their entirety. We should judge in that way, apart from the already quoted masters, the marvelous artisans of chivalrous poems, jests, etc. belonging to the cycle of the Round Table and of the Grail; the works of Francois Rabelais and the ones by De Cyrano Bergerac; *Don Quixote* by Miquel Cervantes; *Gulliver's Travels* by Swift; the Dream of Polyphilus by Francisco Colonna; the *Tales of Mother Goose* by Perrault; the *Songs of the King of Navarre* by Thibault de Champagne; *The Devil as a Predecessor*, a curious Spanish book of which we do not know the author, and many other books which, albeit less famous, are not lesser in interest nor in knowledge.<sup>51</sup>

Furthermore, Fulcanelli highlights the link between East and West in the transmission of esoteric knowledge throughout history, thus confirming what Gabriele Rossetti continually repeated in his works:

Born in the Orient, land of the mysterious and the marvelous, the alchemical science spread in the West through three great roads of penetration: Byzantine, Mediterranean, and Hispanic. It was above all the result of Arabic conquests. This curious, studious people, avidly interested in philosophy and culture, a civilizing people par excellence, forms the connecting link, the chain which connects oriental antiquity to the occidental Middle Ages. It plays in the history of human progress a role comparable to that exercised by the Phoenician merchants between Egypt and Assyria. The Arabs, educators of the Greeks and Persians, transmitted to Europe the science of Egypt and Babylon, augmented by their own acquisitions, throughout the European continent (the Byzantine Road) around the 8<sup>th</sup> century of our era. Furthermore, the Arab influence exercised its action in our countries upon the return of the expeditions to Palestine (Mediterranean Road) and it is the Crusaders of the 12th century who imported most of the ancient knowledge. Finally, closer to us, at the dawn of the 13th century, new elements of civilization, science, and art, coming around the 8th century from Northern Africa spread into Spain (the Hispanic Road) and increased the first contributions of the Greek-Byzantine center of learning.<sup>52</sup>

In this passage from *The Dwellings of the Philosophers*, Fulcanelli emphasises the importance of the Hispanic region for the transmission of hidden knowledge from the East to the West, and in relation to Spain, he highlights the esoteric value of the pilgrimage to Compostela, particularly in a section of his work where he speaks about the esoteric meaning of the rose.<sup>53</sup> In Chapter VI of my thesis, we saw the enigmatic sonnet of the medieval Italian poet Guido

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<sup>51</sup> Fulcanelli, *The Dwellings of the Philosophers*, p. 227-228.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>53</sup> On the esoteric value of the Compostela pilgrimage, see *ibid.*, p. 121. See also Paolo Lucarelli, "Prefazione", in Fulcanelli, *Il Mistero delle Cattedrali*, p. 50; Eugène Canseliet, "Quelques notes pour Flamel à Santiago", in Eugène Canseliet, *Alchimie. Nouvelles études diverses sur les portraits alchimiques*, p. 223-233.

Cavalcanti, who spoke of his beloved when mentioning his journey to Compostela, and I showed the esoteric significance that such a pilgrimage embodies. This symbolic dimension of the city of Compostela, which is strictly associated with the rose and alchemy, is thus also confirmed by Fulcanelli who explains what Saint James represents from an esoteric point of view: “St James, disciple of the Savior, [...] possesses the attributes necessary for the hidden teachings of the pilgrims of the Great Work. Here is the first secret, the one which the philosophers do not reveal and which they keep under the enigmatic expression of the Path of St James”.<sup>54</sup> Thus, the figure of St. James is directly linked to alchemy, likewise the way of the saint exalted in many literary works, for example in Chaucer, who was considered by Gabriele Rossetti to carry the same esoteric doctrine as Dante.<sup>55</sup> With regard to the Way of Saint James, Fulcanelli states that it corresponds to what is known as the Milky Way, and that “the Greek mythologists tell us that the gods walked this Way to go to the Palace of Zeus and that the heroes also used it to enter into Mount Olympus”.<sup>56</sup> According to Fulcanelli, “the path of St James is the starry road, accessible to the elect ones, to the brave, knowledgeable, and persevering mortals”.<sup>57</sup> For Fulcanelli, the Way of St. James, as well as the Milky Way, is a “symbolic journey”.<sup>58</sup> “this pilgrimage, all alchemists must undertake”.<sup>59</sup> Thus, Compostela is but a symbolic journey whose value is esoteric:

Compostella, emblematic city, is not on Spanish ground, but in the very earth of the philosophical subject. Difficult, painful road full of surprises and danger. Long and tiring road by which the potential becomes realized and the occult manifest! The sages have veiled this delicate preparation of the first matter or common mercury under the allegory of the pilgrimage to the city of Compostella.<sup>60</sup>

The pilgrimage to Compostela is therefore a journey of initiation. The pilgrim is merely the alchemical mercury (“our mercury [...] is this pilgrim [of the Compostela pilgrimage]”), and the “earthly road” followed by the pilgrim permits, as Fulcanelli says, to “progressively exalt the diffuse and latent virtue, transforming into activity that which was only potential”.<sup>61</sup> In other words, it is the alchemical and initiatory transformation of the being, the metamorphosis of the

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<sup>54</sup> Fulcanelli, *The Dwellings of the Philosophers*, p. 121.

<sup>55</sup> Gabriele Rossetti points out on various occasions the esoteric dimension of Geoffrey Chaucer, considering his work as linked to the esoteric tradition of the *Fedeli d'Amore* and the love poetry of the French Middle Ages. See in this regard, the letter from Gabriele Rossetti to Charles Lyell on 15 December 1828 [Gabriele Rossetti, *Gabriele Rossetti. Carteggi. Volume secondo (1826-1831)*, p. 296-297]; the letter from Gabriele Rossetti to Charles Lyell on 21 October 1831 (*ibid.*, p. 663); the letter from Gabriele Rossetti to Charles Lyell on 8 January 1839 [*Gabriele Rossetti. Carteggi. Volume quarto (1837-1840)*, p. 223]; and the letter from Gabriele Rossetti to John Hookham Frere on 1 January 1841 [*Gabriele Rossetti. Carteggi. Volume quinto (1841-1847)*, p. 5].

<sup>56</sup> Fulcanelli, *The Dwellings of the Philosophers*, p. 130.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

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

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

new life. “The operation is completed when, on the surface, appears a shining star”,<sup>62</sup> says Fulcanelli, who associates this star with the rose:

Pure matter whose hermetic star consecrates the perfection: it is now our compost, the holy water of Compostella (Latin *compos*, who has received, possesses – and *stella*, star) and the alabaster of the sages (*albastrum* contraction of *alabastrum*, white star). It is also the vase of perfumes, the vase of alabaster (Greek – *alabastron*, Latin *alabastrus*) and the newly blooming bud of the flower of wisdom, *rosa hermetica*, the hermetic rose.<sup>63</sup>

The hermetic rose described by Fulcanelli seems to refer to the same hermeticism of the *Fedeli d'Amore*, which share the same symbolic value of the pilgrimage to Compostela. As in the *Fedeli d'Amore*, the alchemy expounded by Fulcanelli has to do with the *topos* of love: the secret of the alchemical art and of this religion of love, lies in the flower of the rose. Fulcanelli writes about the importance of the rose in alchemy with these words:

It is the metallic and mineral flower (– *antheon*), the first rose, black in truth, which has remained down here as a part of the elementary chaos. From it, from this flower of flowers (*flos florum*) we first draw our frost (– *stibe*) which is the spirit moving on the surface of the waters and the white ornament of the angels; reduced to this bright whiteness, it is the mirror of the art, the torch (– *stilbe*), the lamp or lantern, the brightness of stars and splendor of the sun (*splendor solis*); still, united to philosophical gold, it becomes the metallic planet Mercury (– *stilbonaster*), the nest of the bird (– *stibas*), our Phoenix and its small stone (– *stia*); finally it is the root, subject, or pivot (Latin, *stipes*, *stirps*) of the Great Work and not common antimony.<sup>64</sup>

The rose is the flower of alchemy, as it was for the poetry of the *Fedeli d'Amore*, for Shakespeare and for nineteenth and twentieth century poets such as Nerval and Yeats. Alchemy, like love poetry summed up in the mystery of a rose, is expressed in literary works through a double language, an amphibological one, which hides and at the same time reveals, inviting the readers to make an effort to help them understand what appears to be incomprehensible but which, if understood, allows a spiritual palingenesis – a rebirth of the person to new life. This was highlighted by Eugène Canseliet, who affirms that as soon as “the former man is entirely consumed”, then “name, family, native land, all illusions, all the errors, all the vanities fall to dust. And, like the phoenix of the poets, a new personality is reborn from these ashes”.<sup>65</sup>

The rose is therefore the path to the completion of the great alchemical work (“the mystical rose, the flower of the Great Work, better known as the Philosophers’ Stone”<sup>66</sup>), but the divulgation of the processes of the “alchemical secret” is “forbidden, non-communicable in

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>65</sup> Eugène Canseliet, “Preface to the first edition”, in *ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221.

clear language, only permitted when veiled by parables, allegories, images or metaphors”.<sup>67</sup> The alchemical secret leads to what Fulcanelli calls “eternal wisdom”,<sup>68</sup> surrounded by the initiatory silence, since the true philosopher must follow the rule of silence, summed up by Fulcanelli as follows: “about the Great Work, say little, do much, and always be silent”.<sup>69</sup> And once the secret is obtained, one has to do and say “the least possible”.<sup>70</sup> This is necessary “if we do not want to break the oath, to attract envy from some, greed from the others, jealousy from all, and the risk of becoming the prey of the powerful”.<sup>71</sup> Beyond the initiatory and alchemical teachings, there is a lesson here that is very apt for everyday life: how to avoid arousing the envy and jealousy of others when we know we have abilities or gifts that others lack. This is an esotericism, that of alchemy, which has to do with the real life of people, and not just initiates.

With regard to the initiatory universe, Fulcanelli points out that the true esoteric secret of alchemy was pursued by the “Hermetic Fraternities”,<sup>72</sup> which include the Orders of the Illuminates, the Knights of the Black Eagle, the Two Eagles, the Initiated Brethren of Asia, of Palestine, the Zodiac, the Societies of the Black Brothers, of the Elected Coëns, the Mopses, the Seven Swords, the Invisibles Ones, the Princes of Death, the Knights of the Swan, the Knights of the Dog and the Cock, the Knights of the Round Table, the Genet, the Thistle, the Bath, the Dead Beast, and the Amaranth.<sup>73</sup> All these initiation centres “were hoping to find”<sup>74</sup> the secret of the Great Alchemical Work, but it must be stressed that Fulcanelli says “were hoping to find”, which means that the secret doctrine was not kept by all the esoteric Orders and that among them there were also many charlatans. Péladan, for example, was considered by Fulcanelli to be one.<sup>75</sup> However, I am not interested in whether the occult doctrine was true or false or if it was kept by this or that initiatory group. What *does* interest me is to show that

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<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 214.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> Fulcanelli, *Le Mystère des Cathédrales. Esoteric interpretation of the Hermetic Symbols of the Great Work*, p. 108.

<sup>73</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> Fulcanelli describes the charlatanism of certain initiatory organisations thus: “but it seemed necessary to us to clearly establish what is the true and traditional hermetic Order of the Rose Cross, to isolate it from other common groups placed under the same banner, and to allow to single out the rare initiates from the imposters who draw vanity from a title whose acquisition they could not justify”. Fulcanelli, *The Dwellings of the Philosophers*, p. 96. With regard to the lack of consciousness and initiatory knowledge of Péladan, in the corresponding endnote Fulcanelli comments: “In the 19th century, two Rosicrucian Orders were created and quickly fell into oblivion: (1) The Kabbalistic Order of the Rose Cross, founded by Stanislaus de Guaita; (2) The Order of the Rose Cross of the Temple and the Grail, founded in Toulous around 1850 by the Viscount of Lapasse, spagyric physician, student of Prince Balbiani of Palermo, supposedly a disciple of Cagliostro. Josephin Peladan, who gave himself the title of Sar, was one of the aesthetic animators. This idealistic movement, lacking enlightened initiatic direction and a solid philosophical basis, could only have a limited duration. The Rosicrucian Salon opened its doors from 1892 to 1897 and then ceased to exist”. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

in the nineteenth century, as in the Middle Ages, the initiatory brotherhoods were widespread, and professed to hold a hidden knowledge known only to the initiates.

Thus, art and literature carry an esoteric message. Gabriele Rossetti pioneered the study of the relationship between literature and esotericism; Fulcanelli was the pioneer (or one of the pioneers) in showing the relationship between art and esotericism (and, of course, alchemy). Both approaches lead to the same goal: the presence of esotericism in art and literature. Fulcanelli considers the cathedrals of the French Middle Ages as architectural monuments imbued with “esoteric principles”,<sup>76</sup> and when referring to literature, he mentions authors who were also at the basis of Rossetti’s reflection for their works steeped in esotericism, such as Victor Hugo or Francesco Colonna and his *Dream of Poliphilus*, in whom, as we have seen, esotericism is hidden in the form of love and roses. To these authors shared with Rossetti, Fulcanelli adds others, such as Jonathan Swift, Villon, Rabelais, Cyrano de Bergerac and Grasset d’Orcet.

#### *The meeting of literature with alchemy, and The Rose of Paracelsus*

Fulcanelli had led the way in the discovery of the alchemical hermeticism hidden in architectural monuments, but it was mainly his disciple Eugène Canseliet and the bookseller Pierre Dujols who developed the relationship between alchemy and literature. The latter, as I have already mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, was a learned bookseller and a great friend of the alchemist Fulcanelli.<sup>77</sup> He wrote a book, *La Chevalerie amoureuse, troubadours, félibres et rose-croix*, which proposes an alchemical reading of love literature from the troubadours to the Renaissance, showing the transmission of this esoteric knowledge up to the literature of the nineteenth century, in authors like Mistral.<sup>78</sup> Dujols’ treatise is particularly relevant to my research since floral symbolism, especially of the rose, occupies a fundamental place in his work, where he links alchemy to the tradition of the Troubadours, the Cathars and the Rosicrucians. In his *Mystère des Cathédrales*, Fulcanelli is more interested in the art of cathedrals, only making a passing reference to literature, whilst Dujols in his *Chevalerie amoureuse* focuses on literature and, in particular, on floral symbolism, notably of the rose. He repeatedly emphasises the important role played by the rose in love literature and stresses the sacred value of this symbol:

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<sup>76</sup> Fulcanelli, *Le Mystère des Cathédrales*, p. 120.

<sup>77</sup> Some believe that Pierre Dujols was, in fact, Fulcanelli himself. See on this subject Pierre Dujols de Valois, *La Chevalerie amoureuse, troubadours, félibres et rose-croix*, p. 11.

<sup>78</sup> On the Félibrige revival and the figure of Frédéric Mistral, see Jacques Gourc, “La Renaissance Félibréenne”, in *La Fabrique du Moyen Âge au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Représentation du Moyen Âge dans la culture et la littérature française du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, p. 981-985.

The Scriptures teach us that the struggle between light and dark, God and the Dragon, is eternal, with various alternatives. Thus, the Rose grows, fades, but always blooms again. It is only a matter of time. The Rose is the cunning one that knows how to hide and bide its time. The prophecy of Gemistos Plethon who according to Albert Castelnau was initiated by a Jew from Andrianople, is a *perpetual threat*: “*In a few years’ time, – he announced – all men will embrace, by common consent, one and the same religion, and this religion will be neither that of Christ nor that of Mohammed, but a third which will not differ from polytheism.*”<sup>79</sup>

According to the alchemical interpretation of literature proposed by Pierre Dujols, the rose helps us to understand the esoteric meaning of certain words used in hermetic texts. Indeed, the esoteric dimension of words is explained by Dujols through their etymologies. Thus, for example, Alexandria, the city of the lost knowledge (but actually a never lost knowledge), is linked to the lexicon of flowers and conceals an esoteric meaning:

Alexandria is *a-lex anthereia*, the “floral lexicon”, *a-lex enthereia* is the “word within”. The Alexandrian school must be understood in a broad sense, as a generalised system, and not limited to the city of Alexandria. [...] If Alexandria was the cradle of Gnosis, Provence in the Middle Ages became its ultimate flowering with the Floral Games linked to the Platonic Academy of Florence, governed by the noble caste of the Albizzi.<sup>80</sup>

Alexandria (a city so dear to Nerval)<sup>81</sup> would therefore be the Gnostic city, charged with a double meaning, both from a geographical and a symbolic point of view.<sup>82</sup> According to Dujols, it is linked to the Florentine Platonic Academy and the *Jeux Floraux* (Floral Games) of Provence. In particular, the *Jeux Floraux* was “the direct and legitimate offspring of the *Collège de la Gaie Science*, founded in Toulouse in 1324, Albigensian Catharism having been wiped out a hundred years earlier by the implacable crusade”.<sup>83</sup> Based on this alchemical interpretation, there would therefore be links between the Floral Games, the Cathar heresy, the eglantine (a flower praised by T. S. Eliot in the twentieth century) and the rose. The eglantine

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<sup>79</sup> “Les Écritures nous enseignent que la lutte entre la lumière et l’ombre, Dieu et le Dragon, est éternelle, avec des alternatives diverses. Ainsi, la Rose croît, décroît, mais reflorit toujours. Ce n’est qu’une question de temps. La Rose est la ruse qui sait se dissimuler et attendre son temps. La prophétie de Gémiste Pléthon, qui, suivant Albert Castelnau, fut initié par un juif d’Andrinople, est une menace perpétuelle: ‘*Dans peu d’années, annonçait-il, tous les hommes embrasseront, d’un commun accord, une seule et même religion, et cette religion ne sera ni celle du Christ, ni celle de Mahomet, mais une troisième qui ne différera point du polythéisme*’”. Pierre Dujols de Valois, *La Chevalerie amoureuse, troubadours, félibres et rose-croix*, p. 190.

<sup>80</sup> “Alexandrie est *a-lex anthereia*, le ‘lexique floral’, *a-lex enthereia* est la ‘parole en dedans’. L’école d’Alexandrie doit s’entendre de manière large, comme un système généralisé, et non localisé dans la ville d’Alexandrie. [...] Si Alexandrie fut le berceau de la gnose, la Provence, au Moyen Âge, en devint le complet épanouissement avec les Jeux Floraux reliés à l’Académie platonicienne de Florence, gouvernée par la caste noble des Albizzi”. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>81</sup> As Camille Aubaude points out, the Nervalian Library of Alexandria symbolises the cradle of a gnostic knowledge that has not yet disappeared. See Camille Aubaude, *op. cit.*, p. 56-58.

<sup>82</sup> The symbol associated with Alexandria is the rose, as Victor Fontoynt remarks: “Alexandria, the soft and learned, recognised itself in the rose. The flower of Athens was the violet” (“Alexandrie, la molle et savante, se reconnaissait dans la rose. La fleur d’Athènes était la violette”). Victor Fontoynt, *Vocabulaire grec* [1930], Paris, Picard, 1974, p. 104.

<sup>83</sup> Pierre Dujols de Valois, *La Chevalerie amoureuse, troubadours, félibres et rose-croix*, p. 148.

was the highest award in the *Jeux Floraux*. It was, as Dujols states, “called the Catherine, in Provençal the Catharino”,<sup>84</sup> and would therefore be linked, according to Dujols’ alchemical reading, to the Cathar movement and, once again, to the rose. The eglantine, writes the author of *La Chevalerie amoureuse*, “is [...] the Cathar flower”,<sup>85</sup> and adds that:

If someone objects to us, with an appearance of reason, that the name was given to this flower because it has four petals, from the Latin *quadrina*, we will reply that *quadrinus*, from *quadrare*, to draw the stone, is a mason and, consequently, the *quadrina* rose – the squared rose – is the masonic or felibrean flower, *fellebris* having the meaning of tailor. This is why the Philosophers (another name for Masons) have been assigned St. Catherine as their patron saint.<sup>86</sup>

Thus, according to Dujols the *Jeux Floraux* were not at all innocent games whose aim was simply the renewal of Provençal poetry, but rather represented something much more serious on a historical, and above all esoteric level. They probably represented a link between the Knights Templar and the Rosicrucians: “the Academy of the *Jeux Floraux* was the centre of the Rosicrucians or Knights Templar decorated with the red cross, the red-cross, later disguised as the Knights of Rhodes or the four-petalled or cruciform Rose, or Rosicrucians”.<sup>87</sup>

According to Dujols, the symbolism of the rose is the origin of the conventional jargon of love literature, characterised by its cryptic nature and passed down from Antiquity to the Middle Ages, thence from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century. Dujols adopts the same interpretation of love literature put forward by Gabriele Rossetti and Eugène Aroux, and it is the latter in particular that Dujols frequently mentions in his book *La Chevalerie amoureuse*.<sup>88</sup> Thus, like Rossetti and Aroux, medieval “courts of love” are, for Dujols, the “euphemism of heresy”,<sup>89</sup> embodying an esoteric doctrine which he linked to Dante, Boccaccio, Petrarch, Pierre Vidal, Sordello of Mantua, Rabelais, the representatives of the Medici and Valois,<sup>90</sup> and to nineteenth century authors such as Fabre d’Olivet, defined as “a Provençal troubadour” who “attempted a revival of the ancient Mysteries”.<sup>91</sup> Pierre Dujols also highlights one of the main arguments of Rossetti, and therefore of Aroux, namely the transmission of the primordial

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<sup>84</sup> “Appelée la catherine, en provençal la catharino”. *Ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>85</sup> “C’est [...] la fleur cathare”. *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> “Si l’on nous oppose, avec une apparence de raison, que le nom a été donné à cette fleur parce qu’elle a quatre pétales, du latin *quadrina*, nous répondrons encore que *quadrinus*, de *quadrare*, tailler la pierre, est un maçon et, par conséquent, la rose *quadrina*, la rose équare, est la fleur maçonnique ou félibréenne, *fellebris* ayant le sens de tailleur. C’est pourquoi on a donné aux Philosophes (autre nom des Maçons) sainte Catherine pour patronne”. *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> “L’Académie des Jeux Floraux fut le centre des Rose-Croix ou Templiers décorés de la croix rouge, la rouge-croix, camouflés plus tard en chevaliers de Rhodes ou de la Rose à quatre pétales ou cruciforme, ou Rose-Croix”. *Ibid.*, p. 190.

<sup>88</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 175, 180-181.

<sup>89</sup> “Les cours d’amour”; “euphémisme de l’hérésie”. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>90</sup> It is noteworthy that the Medici and Valois families were important in Gérard de Nerval’s works.

<sup>91</sup> “Un troubadour provençal”; “tentait une rénovation des Mystères antiques”. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

tradition from the East to the West, from Persia, Chaldea and Egypt to the medieval world, thence to nineteenth-century European literature. It is this esoteric tradition that, according to Dujols, the poet-initiates of all times conveyed in their texts, and it is this tradition that the men of Power (who were also initiates), both religious and political, perverted in order to dominate the masses.

The language of love, and therefore of the rose, is closely linked to religion and politics according to Dujols who, citing for example the *Praefat. D. Mart. Lutheri* (1570), quotes Martin Luther who – referring to the *Song of Songs* – remarks:

Solomon used the figurative style so that the common people would understand in his magnificent and double-meaning words anything but what is really meant there. This is indeed what princes are wont to do when they compose amorous verses, which the common people regard as addressed to a wife or their lover. This is also the case when they use images and terms borrowed from hunting.<sup>92</sup>

Moreover, the author of *La Chevalerie amoureuse* underlines a concept that we have already seen in Chapter IV, devoted to Dante and the *Fedeli d'Amore*, namely the opposition “AMOR-ROMA”, referencing an esoteric dimension linked to political and religious Power: “Love, in the language of the initiates, symbolised the struggle against Rome, because Love is the literal overthrow of the word Rome”.<sup>93</sup>

Yet according to Pierre Dujols’ alchemical reading, the language of love was proscribed by the Vatican not because of its obscenity, but because it represented a form of philosophical perversion that could subvert the dogma on which ecclesiastical Power was based: “the language of love proscribed by Rome was not, strictly speaking, vulgar Provençal, but the *fellebris*, sapphist or lesbian literary Provençal. It was anathema, not because of its obscenity, but for its philosophical perversity, deriving from *anathemas*, the subversion of discourse, for sapphist is only a variant of sophist”.<sup>94</sup> Thus, “fellebris”, “sapphist” or “lesbian”, affirms Dujols, are words associated with literary Provençal. Beyond the sexual innuendo of these terms (especially the last two), they highlight a hidden meaning, by subverting the meaning of discourse. According to Dujols “sapphist” is only a variant of “sophist”; Sappho, linked to the

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<sup>92</sup> “Salomon eut recours au style figuré afin que le commun peuple comprit dans ses paroles magnifiques et à double sens tout autre chose que ce s’y trouve traité réellement. C’est en effet ce que les princes ont coutume de faire lorsqu’ils composent des vers amoureux, que le vulgaire regarde comme adressés à une épouse ou à leur amante. Il en est de même lorsqu’ils servent d’images et de termes empruntés à la chasse”. *Ibid.*, p. 194. This passage is also quoted by Eugène Aroux in his work *Dante hérétique, révolutionnaire et socialiste, révélations d’un catholique sur le Moyen-Âge* (op. cit., p. 26).

<sup>93</sup> “L’Amour, dans la langue des initiés, caractérisait la lutte contre Rome, parce qu’Amour est le renversement littéral de Rome”. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>94</sup> “La langue d’amour proscribed par Rome n’était pas proprement le provençal vulgaire, mais le provençal littéraire fellebris, sapphist ou lesbien. Il était anathème, non à cause de son obscénité, mais pour sa perversité philosophique, de *anathemas*, la subversion du discours, car sapphist n’est qu’une variante de sophiste”. *Ibid.*, p. 25.



myth of lesbians, is merely a mask, a covered tongue,<sup>95</sup> a language that speaks in detours, obliquely, obscurely, while the verb “to lick”, as well as the noun “lick”, were just other words used in erotic language, which had to be read with the opposite meaning to the official language.<sup>96</sup> To lick, according to the alchemical interpretation proposed by Dujols, means “to deceive”, and the obscenity of licking the buttocks or the anus (which was one of the charges against the Cathars and the Templars) in fact alludes to the alternative version – the hidden, obscure part (the moon), as the author of *La Chevalerie amoureuse* remarks:

In our vocabulary, “lick” corresponds to “deceive”; a licker is a liar, a perfidious person, and an arse-licker is a deceiver. [...] The “bootlicking” was the slang, the goth art, gothic, the language of the boat, of the Argonauts, who had a flag or drapery as an attribute, called “beaucent”, from *buos-ain*, the “veiled word”, which later became the standard of the Templars called Beauséant, “the beautiful backside”, the beautiful reverse side of the truth: the Moon or the false light which hides it, Magali, Mistral’s beloved, who takes on all forms in order to hide, like Proteus, Prôktos, “the anus”.<sup>97</sup>

This concept was taken up and developed by a man of letters who can be defined as “heterodox”: Richard Khaitzine (1947-2013). Completely forgotten by academic critics,<sup>98</sup> he wrote a work (in three volumes) called *La Langue des oiseaux* (The Language of the Birds), in which he examined the relationship between literature and esotericism, and especially with alchemy.<sup>99</sup> Like Pierre Dujols, Khaitzine underlines and confirms the hidden meaning of the word “lick”, whose erotic nuances hide an esoteric message:

The “bootlicking” was no different from slang, the language of the boat, that of the Argonauts who had given their boat a flag or drapery called *beaucent* (the veiled word). It was this *beaucent* that became the standard of the Knights Templar, called *Beauséant* or literally the *beautiful behind*, the beautiful

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<sup>95</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 28-30. Dujols recalls that the poet Claudio Achillini (1570-1640), a disciple of Giovan Battista Marini, restored the word “lesbian” to its true literary meaning in the obscure lines of his madrigal *Je vois mon lesbin avec ses fleurs*, where the lesbian is clearly identified with the “amorous floralist”. See *ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>96</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>97</sup> “Lécher”, dans notre vocabulaire, correspond à ‘tromper’; un lécheur est un menteur, un perfide, et un lèche-cul est un fourbe. [...] La ‘lèche’ était l’argot, l’art goth, goétique, la langue du bateau, des Argonautes, qui lui avaient donné pour attribut un drapeau, ou draperie, dit ‘beaucent’, de *buos-ain*, la ‘parole voilée’, devenue par la suite l’étendard des Templiers appelé Beauséant, ‘le beau derrière’, le bel envers de la vérité: la Lune ou la fausse lumière la maquille, Magali, la tant-aimée de Mistral, qui prend toutes les formes pour se dérober, comme Protée, *Prôktos*, ‘l’anus’”. *Ibid.*, p. 28

<sup>98</sup> The few research works that mention Richard Khaitzine’s contribution are: Mauro Ruggiero, *op. cit.*, p. 220, 392; Sylvain Floc’h, *op. cit.*, p. 276; Pénélope Dechaufour, *Une Esthétique du drame figuratif. Le geste théâtral de Kossi Efoui: d’une dramaturgie du détour marionnettique aux territoires politiques de la figuration sur “les lieux de la scène”*, PhD Thesis defended on 15 November 2018 at the Université Sorbonne Paris Cité. Richard Khaitzine is also quoted in the *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, under the entry “Fulcanelli” written by Richard Caron, who does not mention *La Langue des oiseaux*, but another work by Khaitzine: *Fulcanelli et le cabaret du chat noir. Histoire artistique, politique et secrète de Montmartre* (Villeselve, Ramuel, 1997, republished by the Grenoble publishing house Le Mercure Dauphinois in 2018).

<sup>99</sup> Richard Khaitzine, *La Langue des oiseaux. Quand littérature et ésotérisme se rencontrent* [1996], Paris, Dervy, t. I, 2014; Richard Khaitzine, *La Langue des oiseaux. De l’alchimie du verbe à la permutation des mots*, Paris, Dervy, t. II, 2012; Richard Khaitzine, *La Langue des oiseaux. Raymond Roussel... La plus grande énigme littéraire du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, Dervy, t. III, 2019.

reverse of the truth, the *moon*. Now, we know that, in popular language, the moon refers to the background, more trivially: the *arse* [“cul” in French]. We should note in passing that *cul* is the anagram of *luc* (light), which refers to the moon as a star. Behind – no pun intended – the playful aspect of such language, hermetic preoccupations emerge [...].<sup>100</sup>

The latter passage is particularly significant because it shows that under the veneer of exoteric language lies a hermetic and esoteric sub-text. Therefore, this language opens up a completely new interpretative horizon, where some words, including vulgar ones such as “arse” or “back” actually convey a hidden meaning, the reverse of things, their hidden meaning, whilst the kiss placed on the back (at the base of the recipient’s spine) symbolises a ritual of access to the secrets of the initiatory Order.<sup>101</sup> This would explain why heretics in the Middle Ages were accused in trials of sodomy or the act of “cunnilingus” (Umberto Eco mentions this in his *Name of the Rose*, as we shall see in the chapter on the Eco’s Rose). The Cathars were accused of licking the cat’s “bottom”, and so were the Templars, accused of sodomy and the vice of “licking”. The “cunnilingus”, the obscene kiss, is one of the charges of medieval heresies, from the Order of the Temple to the Cathars. It was also for this reason that Philip the Fair condemned the Templars by accusing them of homosexuality and impure practices.<sup>102</sup> In reality, sodomy<sup>103</sup> was not to be understood literally, in the erotic sense, but in the hermetic sense. It was the reverse, the linguistic diversions capable of evading and masking. The same goes for the French word “lèche”, the “licking” (or the French word “laiche”), a name referring to the French “laïque” (meaning in English “secular”), the language of Venus, of love, of secrecy, a language opposed to the language of Rome:

the word “lèche” (licking), still spelt [in French] “laiche” (secular), was the “laywoman”, from *laikhas*, “prostitute”, the language of Venus, of the courtesans, of the courts of love, of pagan rites. It was the opposite, the

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<sup>100</sup> “La lèche n’était pas différente de l’argot, la langue du bateau, celle des Argonautes qui avaient donné à leur embarcation un drapeau ou draperie du nom de *beaucent* (la parole voilée). Ce fut ce beaucent qui devint l’étendard des Templiers, nommé Beauséant ou littéralement le *beau derrière*, le bel envers de la vérité, la *Lune*. Or, on sait que, dans le langage populaire, la lune désigne l’arrière-plan, plus trivialement: le *cul*. Observons au passage que *cul* est l’anagramme du *luc* (lumière) ce qui renvoie à la lune en tant qu’astre. Derrière – sans jeu de mots – l’aspect ludique d’un tel langage se profile des préoccupations d’ordre hermétique [...]”. *Ibid.*, p. t. I, 68-69.

<sup>101</sup> See Pierre Dujols de Valois, *La Chevalerie amoureuse, troubadours, félibres et rose-croix*, p. 22; Richard Khaïtzine, *op. cit.*, t. I, p. 68-69.

<sup>102</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 22; *Le Procès des Templiers*, Paris, Le Club du meilleur livre, 1955, p. 78.

<sup>103</sup> It should be noted that the word “sodomy”, a charge attributed to heretics in the Middle Ages, is built on the Hebrew radical *sod*, which means “secret”. See Pierre Dujols de Valois, *La Chevalerie amoureuse, troubadours, félibres et rose-croix*, p. 23. Sodom (“sod” – “Hedom”; Hedom is the enemy of Israel) would thus be the city of the reverse side of things, the city of secret knowledge. See *ibid.*, p. 110. On the meaning of the word “sod”, as Sandra Debenedetti Stow remarks, according to the Kabbalistic theory of the four meanings of Scripture, *pšat* is the literal meaning, *draš* corresponds to the interpretation according to the midrashic commentaries (the moral meaning), *remeš* is the allegorical interpretation, and *sod* represents the mystical reading of the text. *Sod* is the most important exegetical level; it is the secret, which is linked to trying to understand the mystical secret. See Sandra Debenedetti Stow, *op. cit.*, p. 21-22. Sandra Debenedetti Stow describes “sod” as a mystical meaning, a “mystical mystery” as “the conquest of *pardes*, paradise, is only open to those who know how to rise from matter and *pšat*, the literal sense, to *sod*, the mystical mystery” (“la conquista del *pardes*, il paradiso, è aperta solo a coloro che dalla materia e dalla *pšat*, il senso letterale, sanno sollevarsi fino a *sod*, il mistero mistico”). *Ibid.*, p. 30.

contradiction of the sacred or holy language of the Church. Her symbol was the shameless Venus or Anadyomene, which, for the initiated, never meant “coming out of the sea”, but, by a play on words, was read *ana-dinonem*, “which turns upside down”. It is Flora, of whom Lactantius speaks, *Fluara*, “the deceiver”, the queen-prostitute of apocalyptic Babylon, the Babylonian woman who holds the cup of iniquity, *iniquitas*, the equivocation of *ain-nuktas*, “the obscure word”, personified in Sappho, in Greek *Sapphô*, for *saprô*, “the corrupted word”, in the same way that Lesbos is for *les-buos*, “the closed word”.<sup>104</sup>

However, the exegetical perspective proposed by Pierre Dujols invites us to rethink literature, especially love literature, by making a clear distinction between the literary meaning of texts and the esoteric one. Thus, for example, words that refer to sexuality can be read as allusions to eroticism (exoteric meaning) or as hidden meanings of a hermetic-initiatory nature (esoteric meaning). This double interpretative approach, which depends on the reader’s level of knowledge of esoteric matters, concerns not only European literature, according to Dujols, but also and, more significantly, the East. In this regard, when speaking of Persian Sufism, he mentions the concept of chastity that dictates the conduct of medieval knights and, as we know, for monks and clergymen. If we consider the literary reading, “taking vows of chastity” means to abstain from sexual relations, but if we follow the interpretative approach proposed by Dujols, chastity corresponds to silence, as he comments: “the knights took vows of chastity, that is to say, of silence”.<sup>105</sup> Therefore, “taking vows of chastity” at the esoteric level means “keeping the secret”, the initiatory secret. With regard to the Order of Sufis, it is noteworthy that Dujols defines it as “the sect of the sofi or Sufists (the sophies or sapphists)”.<sup>106</sup> Importantly, Sophia means knowledge and sapphism is related to the matter of subverting discourse. Dujols emphasises that “the Sufists are [...] brothers of the Félibres, the satirists or satyrs, who, beneath the veneer of their erotic literature, conceal the secret doctrine”.<sup>107</sup> In other words, it is the doctrine of love, of Eros, that links the esoteric knowledge of Sufism with the love literature of the Middle Ages, associated in turn with alchemy, which Dujols believes is linked to the tradition of the Templars, the Cathars and the Rosicrucians.

However, as already mentioned in the preceding pages, the relationship between love literature and alchemy was highlighted by another figure closely linked to Fulcanelli, namely

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<sup>104</sup> “La ‘lèche’, qu’on écrivait encore ‘laiche’, était la ‘laïque’, de *laikhas*, ‘prostituée’, la langue de Vénus, des courtisanes, des cours d’amours, des rites païens. Elle était l’opposé, la contradiction de la langue sacrée ou sainte de l’Église. Son symbole était la Vénus impudique ou Anadyomène qui, pour les initiés, n’a jamais voulu dire ‘sortant de la mer’, mais, par un jeu de mots, se lisait *ana-dinonem*, ‘qui se tourne à l’envers’. C’est Flora, dont parle Lactance, *Fluara*, ‘la tromperie’, la reine-prostituée de la Babylone apocalyptique, la Babilonne qui tient la coupe d’iniquité, *iniquitas*, l’équivoque de *ain-nuktas*, ‘la parole obscure’, personnifiée dans Sappho, en grec *Sapphô*, pour *saprô*, ‘la parole corrompue’, de même que Lesbos est pour *les-buos*, ‘la parole fermée’”. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>105</sup> “Les chevaliers faisaient vœux de chasteté, c’est-à-dire de silence”. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>106</sup> “La secte des sofi ou soufistes (les sophies ou sapphistes)”. *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> “Les soufistes sont [...] les frères des Félibres, les satiriques ou satyres qui, sous leur littérature érotique, dérobent la doctrine secrète”. *Ibid.*

Eugène Canseliet, who focused on various authors from Dante to Huysmans.<sup>108</sup> He considered Dante to be an alchemical poet,<sup>109</sup> defining him as a “*Fidèle d’Amour* (a Faithful of Love) [who] is passionate about the Great Philosophical Work”,<sup>110</sup> and stressed the importance of the *topos* of love, the eternal feminine and “*the flower of flowers*”.<sup>111</sup> Regarding the symbolism of the rose in an alchemical perspective, another figure in the literary panorama mentioned by Canseliet is Philéas Lebesgue,<sup>112</sup> “a face usually ignored [...] in which the poet’s charm violated the philosopher’s esotericism”.<sup>113</sup> In Lebesgue, the rose plays a cardinal role at the level of esoteric meaning, and the poetry referred to by Canseliet in his article is “Il pleut. La nuit approche et le ciel est sans âge” (It is raining. Night is approaching and the sky is ageless), where the author speaks of a rose that “allume le feu” (lights the fire).<sup>114</sup>

<sup>108</sup> Eugène Canseliet wrote an article on Huysmans, “Un billet inédit de J.-K. Huysmans”, in Eugène Canseliet, *Alchimie. Nouvelles études diverses*, p. 139-141.

<sup>109</sup> See Eugène Canseliet, “Repères alchimiques chez Dante”, in *ibid.*, p. 153-160.

<sup>110</sup> “*Fidèle d’amour* [qui] se montre passionné du Grand Œuvre philosophal”. *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>111</sup> “*La fleur des fleurs*”. *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> See Eugène Canseliet, “Beaucoup plus près de Philéas Lebesgue”, in *ibid.*, p. 183-201.

<sup>113</sup> “Une face habituellement méconnue [...] chez qui le charme du poète violait l’ésotérisme du philosophe”. *Ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201. Another figure who deserves particular attention for links between literature and alchemy is François Jollivet Castelot (1874-1937). This little-known writer (who died in a car accident on 22 April 1937) was also an occultist and alchemist, and wrote a novel *Le Destin, ou les Fils d’Hermès, roman ésotérique* (The Destiny, or the Sons of Hermes, an esoteric romance, 1920), in which he linked alchemy to the Rosicrucian tradition. The rose (associated with the *topos* of love) is the main symbol of this initiatory filiation. A passage from François Jollivet Castelot’s novel is very significant in this respect:

“O Rose + Cross, Spes unica!

O Rose + Cross, Mysterious Church of boundless depths, Cathedral of Nature, Towers of Gold, Immaculate Tabernacle, Spotless Mirror, Diamond Cup, Crown of the Magi, Diadem of the Adepts!

Our admirable Mother, beautiful among the most beautiful, pure Virgin, Emerald Arch, Vessel of election, Refuge of Wisdom, limpid Source of eternal Life and immortal Love, Sun of glory and Moon of serenity!

O Rose + Cross, star of the stars, flower of flowers, fresher than dew, sweeter than honey, more fragrant than the aroma of a thousand perfumes, more subtle than a young girl’s breath!

Pivot of the worlds, Axis of the Heavens, Hair of the Comets, Womb of the visible and invisible universe, Mother, Daughter and Sister of the Gods, Spouse of the Lord, Queen of Olympus!

Transparent pearl set in the Amethyst Ring, divine milk from the breast of Juno, Aphrodite’s progenitor!

O marvellous and enchanting Rose, adorable Figure of Unity, ineffable flowering of the Sephiroth, impeccable Form clothed by the Essence of all things.

Reality of Appearances, Origin of the Meanders, Point of union of the Macrocosm and the Microcosm, Alpha and Omega revered in silence by the XXIV old men.

O Rose + Cross, august crossroads of the seven mystical Cities of the flaming Palace of God, azure Vault of the Luminaries, Sanctuaries of births and deaths, it is You who welcomes the Adept, it is You who makes him share in the harmony of the spheres, who pours for him the intoxication of the beverage of immortality, of Elysian nectars.

He has placed his trust in your august hands and you gird his brow with your own petals, you cover him with the purple of your satin mantle.

O Rose + Cross, what delicate embraces the daring lover who has conquered you savours between the coral tips of your round breasts!” (“Ô Rose + Croix, Spes unica!

Ô Rose + Croix, Église mystérieuse aux profondeurs sans limites, Cathédrale de la Nature, tours d’Or, Tabernacle immaculé, Miroir sans tache, Coupe de diamant, Couronne des Mages, Diadème des Adeptes!

Notre Mère admirable, belle entre les plus belles Vierge pure, Arche d’émeraude, Vase d’élection, Refuge de la Sagesse, Source limpide de la Vie éternelle et de l’Amour immortel, Soleil de gloire et Lune de sérénité!

Ô Rose + Croix, Astre des Astres, Fleur des fleurs, plus fraîche que la rosée, plus douce que le Miel, plus odorante que l’arôme des mille parfums, plus subtile que l’haleine de la jeune fille!

Pivot des mondes, Axe des Cieux, Chevelure des Comètes, Sein de l’univers visible et invisible, mère, Fille et sœur des dieux, Épouse du Seigneur, reine de l’Olympe!

Among other nineteenth century poets linked to alchemical hermeticism, Eugène Canseliet mentions Gérard de Nerval, Victor Hugo et Arthur Rimbaud.<sup>115</sup> Literature of all periods, from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century, is steeped in alchemy. Dante speaks about it in his *Divine Comedy (Inferno XXIX)*; *The Romance of the Rose* also mentions it, as does Chaucer in his *Canterbury Tales*, notably in *The Canon's Yeoman Tale* which, as Stanton J. Linden points out, “occupies a place of primary importance in the early tradition of literary alchemy”.<sup>116</sup> The relationship between literature and alchemy has been confirmed by recent studies, such as Irene Campanale’s *Alchimia e letteratura (Alchemy and literature)*, in which she detects traces of alchemical thought in authors such as Ariosto in the *Negramante* (1535), Giordano Bruno in *Il Candelaiio* (1582), Ben Johnson in *The Alchemist* (1610),<sup>117</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne (whom we encountered when I discussed Seymour Stocker Kirkup) in *Septimius Felton* (1872),<sup>118</sup> or Marguerite Yourcenar and her work full of alchemical traces, *L'Œuvre au noir* (1969).

Alexander Roob has confirmed the relationship between literature and alchemy, speaking of an alchemical literature whose traces and influence can be detected in Romantic poetry, in German idealist philosophy, and in modern literature. Blake, Novalis, Hegel, Schelling, Yeats, Joyce, Rimbaud, Breton and Artaud, all have in common the presence of elements belonging to alchemical literature in their works.<sup>119</sup> Blake is the author whom Alexander Roob mentions most in his book *Alchemy and Mysticism*, both from an artistic and literary point of view. Not only Blake, but also Yeats and Joyce (especially in *Finnegans Wake*)

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Perle transparente enchâssée sur l'Anneau d'Améthyste, Lait divin de la mamelle de Junon, Génitrice d'Aphrodite!

Ô Rose merveilleuse et enchanteresse, Figure adorable de l'Unité, épanouissement ineffable des Séphiroths, Forme impeccable revêtue par l'Essence de toutes choses.

Réalité des Apparences, Origine des Méandres, Point d'union du Macrocosme et du Microcosme, Alpha et Oméga que révèrent en silence les XXIV vieillards.

Ô Rose + Croix, carrefour auguste des sept Cités mystiques du Palais flamboyants de Dieu, Voûte azurée des Luminaires, Sanctuaires des naissances et des morts, c'est Toi qui accueille l'Adepte, c'est Toi qui le fait participer à l'harmonie des sphères, qui lui verses l'ivresse du breuvage de l'immortalité, des nectars élyséens.

Il a placé sa confiance entre tes mains augustes et tu ceins son front de tes propres pétales, tu le recouvres de la pourpre de ton manteau de satin.

O Rose + Croix, quels embrassements délicats savoure, entre les pointes de corail de tes rondes mamelles, l'amant audacieux qui t'a conquise!”). François Jollivet Castelot, *Le Destin ou les fils d'Hermès*, Paris, Bibliothèque Chacornac, 1920, p. 599-600.

<sup>115</sup> See Eugène Canseliet, *Alchimie. Études diverses de Symbolisme hermétique et de pratique philosophale*, p. 20-55.

<sup>116</sup> Stanton J. Linden, *Darke Hieroglyphicks. Alchemy in English Literature from Chaucer to the Restoration*, Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, 2008, p. 53.

<sup>117</sup> See Irene Campanale, *Alchimia e letteratura*, Bari, Progedit, 2016, p. 41-41, 60-64.

<sup>118</sup> On the alchemical dimension of Nathaniel Hawthorne's work, particularly the novel *Septimius Felton*, see *ibid.*, p. 87-104; Elémire Zolla, “*Septimius Felton* e la letteratura alchemica inglese e americana”, *Rivista di estetica*, XI, I, 1966, p. 17-55.

<sup>119</sup> Alexander Roob, *Alchemy & Mysticism. The Hermetic Museum* [1996], translated from German into English by Shaun Whiteside, Köln, Taschen, 2001, p. 8-11.

have a privileged place in Alexander Roob's study on alchemy and mysticism, which highlights the importance of the rose in alchemical art, especially from a pictorial point of view.<sup>120</sup>

All esoteric traditions, including alchemy, are based on the "disciple-master" relationship, and a literary work that perfectly sums up this logic of the master instructing the disciple is *The Rose of Paracelsus* by Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986).<sup>121</sup> It tells the story of a neophyte who initiates himself with his master's guidance in order to reach enlightenment and obtain the truth. More precisely, it is the story of a young man who wants to learn the secrets of magic, and for this reason goes in search of the alchemist Paracelsus, who had asked God (more precisely, "any God")<sup>122</sup> to send him a disciple to instruct, so the young disciple appears at his house. The young disciple has a special request for his new master: he asks him to revive a rose that has been thrown into the flames and turned into ashes. Paracelsus refuses, but when he is alone, he takes the ashes and, uttering words in a low voice, he makes the rose reappear and the ashes turn back into a rose.

Borges' rose is an eternal one ("the rose is eternal, and [...] only its appearances may change"),<sup>123</sup> and represents a meeting point between the Eastern and Western traditions ("I recall faces from the West and faces from the East",<sup>124</sup> said the master to his disciple), but above all it brings together the Kabbalistic tradition and alchemy: "I am speaking of the Word, which is taught to us by the science of the Kabbalah".<sup>125</sup> This dialogue between different esoteric traditions characterises Borges' literary output. Thus, for example, *The Golem* brings together the Jewish mythological tradition of the Golem and Platonic philosophy (as well as the Egyptian sapiential tradition through the reference to the Nile),<sup>126</sup> whilst *The Simurgh* evokes a symbol dear to the *Fedeli d'Amore*, to the Troubadours and above all to the Sufi mystical tradition, namely the nightingale which sings in his work of "love for the rose".<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> See, for example, *ibid.*, p. 690-691.

<sup>121</sup> See Irene Campanale, *op. cit.*, p. 19. On the initiatory dimension of *The Rose of Paracelsus* by Jorge Luis Borges, see Sylvain Flocc'h, *op. cit.*, p. 178-179; *Guida alla letteratura esoterica*, p. 236-240. On the esoteric dimension of Jorge Luis Borges' work, see Paolo Mariani, *Letteratura europea ed esoterismo. Novalis, Balzac, Nerval, Bulwer-Lytton, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Schuré, Yeats, Pessoa, Hesse, Breton, Borges, Daumal*, p. 169-177; *Guida alla letteratura esoterica*, p. 401-403, 497-498, 514-518; Luigi Pruneti, *Il sentiero del bosco incantato. Appunti sull'esoterico nella letteratura*, Bari, La Gaia Scienza Editrice, 2009, p. 174-175.

<sup>122</sup> The entire passage is the following one: "Paracelsus prayed to his God, his indeterminate God-any God-to send him a disciple". Jorge Luis Borges, *The Rose of Paracelsus*, in Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, translated by Andrew Hurley, London, Penguin Books, 1999, p. 504.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 506.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 504.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 506. On the relations between alchemy and the Kabbalah, see Arturo Schwarz, *Cabbalà e alchimia: saggio sugli archetipi comuni* [1999], Milan, Garzanti, 2004.

<sup>126</sup> See Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected poems 1923-1967*, London, Penguin Books, 1989, p. 122-127. On the alchemical dimension of *The Golem* by Jorge Luis Borges, see Irene Campanale, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

<sup>127</sup> The whole passage is as follows: "the nightingale pleads his love for the rose". Jorge Luis Borges, *The Book of Imaginary Beings* [1957], Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1974, p. 131. See also Irene Campanale, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

The Borges rose is an esoteric one, an alchemical, cabalistic and Platonic rose, which we frequently find in his work. *La Rosa Profunda* (The Deep Rose) is a collection of poems, the final one being *The Unending Rose*, where it is described as “endless rose, intimate, without limit”.<sup>128</sup> *Rose* is another poem in which the flower is revived, as in *The Rose of Paracelsus*, and acts as a filial link between alchemy, the Platonism of the Persian poets, and the poets of the Western tradition, such as Ariosto:

rose that's born again by the art of alchemy  
out of tenuous ash,  
rose of the Persians and Ariosto,  
rose that's always by itself,  
rose that's always the rose of roses,  
the young Platonic flower,  
the blind and burning rose beyond my verse,  
unattainable rose.<sup>129</sup>

Like the Persian *Fedeli d'Amore* and the European exponents of the Middle Ages, the alchemical rose of Borges was, in the twentieth century, a rose that acted as theophany, an *excessus mentis*, as Irene Campanale has noted,<sup>130</sup> who spoke of “the alchemical-cabalistic path of mystical vision”<sup>131</sup> in Borges. It is a dimension of the spirit that goes beyond human perception – a dimension that unites the medieval *Fedeli d'Amore* with the poets of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, from Nerval to Yeats and Borges, irrespective of whether these poets belonged to initiatory and esoteric Orders, since the theophanic path does not exclusively require membership of a brotherhood.

#### *Alchemy in Elémire Zolla: seraphic knowledge versus luciferic “emptying of the soul”*

“One day I received a phone call from L. He passed through Rome and offered to visit me. Since then, our conversation has lasted for years. He had approached Fulcanelli's secrets, he carried his heritage. He spoke like Fulcanelli, with a simplicity that brought complex plots to very sharp lines, but keeping certain key points secret”.<sup>132</sup> These words are written by Elémire

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<sup>128</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *The Unending Rose*, in Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Poems*, ed. Alexander Coleman, New York, Viking Penguin, 1999, p. 367.

<sup>129</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Poems 1923-1967*, London, Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1972, p. 272.

<sup>130</sup> See Irene Campanale, *op. cit.*, p. 197.

<sup>131</sup> “La via alchemico-cabalistica della visione mistica”. *Ibid.*, p. 201.

<sup>132</sup> “Una telefonata mi recò un dì la voce di L. Passava da Roma e offriva di venirmi a trovare. Da allora la nostra conversazione è durata per anni. Egli aveva accostato i segreti di Fulcanelli, ne portava l'eredità. Parlava come Fulcanelli, con una semplicità che riconduceva tratti di storia intricata a linee nitidissime, ma mantenendo in segreto alcuni punti chiave”. Elémire Zolla, *Le meraviglie della natura. Introduzione all'alchimia* [1991], ed. Grazia Marchianò, Venice, Marsilio, 2017, p. 575. It is interesting to read the following sentences of this passage as well, since it mentions a Swedish writer, August Strindberg, who – according to Zolla – was very familiar with the alchemical art. On the mysterious alchemist L., Zolla adds: “I went one day to his house on the Lake of Lugano. [...] What impressed me most from the start was his thorough knowledge of Strindberg's treatise” (“andai un giorno

Zolla, one of the most perceptive Italian intellectuals of the twentieth century.<sup>133</sup> In the same text, Zolla writes: “L. worked as a physicist in a laboratory at the University of Turin, but he had been devoting himself to alchemy for years”.<sup>134</sup> This shows that alchemy is not only an art to which men with a passion for esotericism devoted themselves, but also figures belonging to the intellectual elite. Zolla’s erudition, intellectual stature and reputation earned him unconditional respect from the academic world, despite the fact that he was openly devoted to esoteric themes, especially alchemy. Umberto Eco was one of the intellectuals most critical of Elémire Zolla, though he was highly thought of by important figures of the Italian and international cultural panorama such as Alberto Moravia, Elsa Morante, Giovanni Macchia and Mario Praz.<sup>135</sup>

The extensive exegetical contribution of Elémire Zolla is, to some extent, an exception in the field of literary criticism, because it is not limited to describing alchemy in the history of ideas but also explains the esoteric doctrine at the basis of alchemical doctrine. The rose and love are continually evoked by Zolla in his work on alchemy, and, in his presentation of the alchemical art, the tradition of the *Fedeli d’Amore* plays a cardinal role. According to Zolla, the Italian *Fedeli d’Amore*, the Provençal troubadours, cabalists, Neoplatonists of Iran, Arab poets of love and Sufis of Spain all share the same esoteric doctrine of the woman as “angelic perfection”, which leads to a “spiritual ennoblement” and a “mystical transport”,<sup>136</sup> whose outcome is symbolised by the rose. He stresses that the symbolism of the rose has a mystical meaning and is linked to the concept of initiation (the transition from one life to another), to alchemy, the mystery of the rosary,<sup>137</sup> the Christian tradition and, in particular, to the figure of Christ:

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a casa sua sul lago di Lugano. [...] Ciò che più mi impressionò sin dall’inizio fu la sua conoscenza meticolosa del trattato di Strindberg”). *Ibid.*, p. 575.

<sup>133</sup> Zolla was Professor of Anglo-American Literature at La Sapienza University in Rome (appointed thanks to Mario Praz), then at the University of Catania and Genoa. See *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, Rome, Istituto della enciclopedia italiana, 2020, p. 755-757.

<sup>134</sup> “L. fece il fisico in un laboratorio all’università di Torino, ma da anni si dedica all’alchimia”. Elémire Zolla, *Le meraviglie della natura. Introduzione all’alchimia*, p. 576.

<sup>135</sup> *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, p. 756.

<sup>136</sup> “Perfezione angelica”; “nobilitazione spirituale”; “trasporto mistico”. Elémire Zolla, *Le meraviglie della natura. Introduzione all’alchimia*, p. 40.

<sup>137</sup> In a letter to Charles Lyell dated 26 February 1828, Gabriele Rossetti alluded to the esoteric dimension of the rosary, linking it to Catholicism, the image of the Virgin Mary, the symbolism of the rose and the history of the Albigensians: “As far as I can remember, I have read in a big old book called the *Rosario* (the Rosary) that the Virgin Mary who takes her name from the word ‘Rosary’ [Our Lady of the Rosary] was introduced into Catholicism at the time of the Albigensian persecutions. The image of a virgin crowned with roses, alluding to the famous roses of Jericho (whence the virgin is called in the litany *Mystical Rose*), gave rise to that kind of special cult of the mother of Our Lord. I have seen an ancient image of it in that same book, in which Mary appears in the inner part of a rose, which has large leaves around it up to the number of fifteen; and in each leaf is lightly outlined one of the fifteen mysteries: five *joyful*, five *sorrowful* and five *glorious*. It is probable that the garland of roses and the name *Mystical Rose* in the litany (which is very ancient in the church) later gave rise to the name *Rosary*, which indicates that string of beads, divided into fifteen places corresponding to the fifteen mysteries. This *hyperdulia* or *dulia*, as theologians call it, arose in the midst of blood, where it is particularly promoted by the bloodthirsty Dominicans. And there is an Italian poem of about 30 cantos, entitled the *Rosary*, in which those



Flowers mark the passage to another life, wreaths accompany deceases and weddings. The rose was the flower of burials par excellence, and *sub rosa* means: secret of the tomb; but it is a philosophical flower and therefore its blood-red hides a heart of gold, just as the Passion hides Royalty, said Saint Bernard, and the triad of the red of gold and perfume responds to that of the body, the soul and the spirit. Rosaspina (“Briar-rose”) sleeps a stone sleep, the prince’s kiss wakes her up and she reveals all her secrets. Stone, rose, dew, sky, are metaphors for each other, they form a circle, a necklace, a rosary. God is born from a stone (in a rocky cave or a rock, Christ is born): from a rose (“Here is the rose in which the divine word / Was made flesh”,<sup>138</sup> *Paradise XXIII, 73-74*).<sup>139</sup>

For Zolla, the rose is a “philosopher’s flower”, and the stone to which the Christian tradition refers<sup>140</sup> is a philosopher’s stone, meaning an alchemical one, which acts as an initiation and detaches the initiate from the profane: “the philosopher’s stone, which is the contempt for things by which others are dominated, imbues the horror of existence, it petrifies”.<sup>141</sup> This fear leads to divine Wisdom: “Wisdom appears hard as a stone, it hides her heavenly life from man, who, by admiring and loving her, becomes, in relation to all other desires, of stone. The philosopher’s stone, Beatrice, strikes man with love right to his heart which is fortunately of stone, apathetic to all that is worldly”.<sup>142</sup> This apathy is not a feeling of indifference, insensitivity and indolence towards external reality. It has to do with ecstasy: “the

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inhuman slaughters are celebrated, confused with those holy mysteries; in fact, that poem is not completely bad; but as I read it in my youth, at a time when I devoured a great many books, I trust my judgement about that poem, whose author I do not remember” [“Per quanto io posso ricordarmi di aver letto in un grosso libriccio vecchio chiamato il *Rosario*, la Madonna che ne porta il nome fu introdotta nel cattolicesimo in tempo delle persecuzioni degli Albighesi. L’immagine di una vergine coronata di *rose*, allusive alle famose rose di Gerico (onde la vergine è appellata nella litania *Rosa mistica*), dié origine a quella specie di particolare culto alla madre di Nostro Signore. Ne ho veduta un’antica immagine in quel libro medesimo, nella quale apparisce Maria nella parte interna d’una rosa, che ha larghe foglie intorno sino al numero di quindici; ed in ogni foglia è leggermente delineato uno de’ quindici misteri, cinque *gaudiosi*, cinque *dolorosi* e cinque *gloriosi*. È probabile che quella corona di rose, e il nome di *Rosa mistica* nella litania (la quale è antichissima nella chiesa), abbia poi partorito il nome di *rosario*, con che vien distinta quella filza di grani, divisi in quindici poste corrispondenti ai quindici misteri. Questa *iperdulia* o *dulia*, come la chiamano i teologi, nacque in mezzo al sangue, ond’è promossa particolarmente dai sanguinari Domenicani. E vi è un poema italiano di circa 30 canti, intitolato il *Rosario*, in cui si celebrano qu’ macelli inumani, confusi con que’ santi misteri; né quel poema è totalmente cattivo; ma siccome l’ho letto nella mia prima gioventù, tempo in cui ho divorato una gran catasta di libri, così mi fido del mio giudizio riguardo al quel poema, di cui non mi rammento l’autore”]. *Gabriele Rossetti. Carteggi. Volume secondo (1826-1831)*, p. 189.

<sup>138</sup> Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, p. 452.

<sup>139</sup> “Fiori segnano il passaggio a un’altra vita, corone accompagnano trapassi e matrimoni. La rosa fu il fiore dei tumuli per eccellenza, e *sub rosa* vale: segreto di tomba; ma è un fiore filosofale e perciò il suo rosso sanguigno cela un cuore aureo, come la Passione cela la Regalità, diceva san Bernardo, e la triade del rosso dell’oro e del profumo risponde a quella di corpo, anima e spirito. Rosaspina dorme un sonno di pietra, il bacio del principe la ridesta ed ella gli svela ogni segreto. Pietra, rosa, rugiada, cielo, sono metafore l’una dell’altra, compongono un circolo, una collana, un rosario.

Dio nasce da una pietra (in un antro rupestre o pietrascissa è partorito il Cristo): da una rosa (‘la Rosa in che il Verbo divino / carne si fece’, *Par. XXIII, 73-74*)”. Elémire Zolla, *Le meraviglie della natura. Introduzione all’alchimia*, p. 125.

<sup>140</sup> On the stone, under the name of Peter (Peter means stone), the Christian church is founded.

<sup>141</sup> “La pietra filosofale, che è il disprezzo delle cose da cui gli altri si fanno signoreggiare, infonde orrore dell’esistenza, impietra”. *Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>142</sup> “La Sapienza appare dura come una pietra, cela la sua vita celeste all’uomo, che nell’ammirarla e amarla diventa, rispetto a ogni altro desiderio, di pietra. La Pietra filosofale, beatrice, colpisce d’amore l’uomo fino al suo cuore che è felicemente di pietra, apatico dinanzi a tutto ciò che sia mondano”. *Ibid.*, p. 128.

Kingdom is the state of ecstatic apathy”.<sup>143</sup> The stone thus leads to initiatory impassibility<sup>144</sup> and, as Zolla argues, this alchemical metamorphosis of the stone was an esoteric doctrine well known by Wolfram von Eschenbach (who spoke of this truth in *Parzifal* through the metaphor of the “frost” disease), by Avicenna in his *Epistle of the Birds* or by Dante in his *Comedy*.<sup>145</sup> With regard to the latter, Zolla defines “the *Comedy*, a work of stone, that is, of the Rose”.<sup>146</sup> The Philosopher’s Stone corresponds to the rose, and leads to what Zolla calls “sapiential detachment”, more precisely the “sapiential detachment and knowledge of the *unus mundus*, the one where the metallic seed is found: the fourth dimension”.<sup>147</sup> It is the fourth dimension of which, as we have seen, Pound speaks in his *Cantos*, and the fourth dimension on which the teaching of one of the most important Russian mystics of the beginning of the twentieth century is based: Piotr Demianovitch Ouspensky.<sup>148</sup>

The love of Wisdom is a love which, Zolla remarks, causes suffering. Quoting the Persian Ibn ’Arabi, he speaks of a savage Wisdom, since “the contemplation of the divine is an extinction of all sensitive features”.<sup>149</sup> Hence the initiatory aloofness of the alchemist: “his links with the world are loosened, and even when he is very emotional, he becomes icy, he separates himself from humanity. He enters a dark phase of controlled terror. He is anxious. He receives information that unnerves him”.<sup>150</sup> Zolla asserts that there are ways, or more precisely techniques, to disarticulate common perception and embrace a higher reality, that of the

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<sup>143</sup> “Regno è lo stato di estatica apatia”. *Ibid.*, p. 465.

<sup>144</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 539-540.

<sup>145</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>146</sup> “La *Commedia*, opera della pietra, cioè della Rosa”. *Ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>147</sup> “Il distacco sapienziale e la conoscenza dell’*unus mundus*, quello dove si trova il seme metallico: la quarta dimensione”. *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>148</sup> Love, the rose and mystical flowers appear in Ouspensky’s work on Tarot symbolism, *The Symbolism of the Tarot* (1911), where the author links tarot symbolism to the esoteric traditions of the Kabbalah, magic, alchemy and astrology. Ouspensky speaks of the rose in his discussion on Card 11, “Strength”, which represents a woman girdled with roses. He emphasises that these roses are linked to magic, and deal with mystical flowers (card 19, the card entitled “The Sun”), the mystery of death and rebirth (card 13: “Death”; card 20: “Judgement”), associated in particular with flowers, spring (as in medieval love poetry) and love (card 3: “The Empress”; card 6: “the lover”), highlighting also the Image of the woman associated with the Temple of Initiations (card 2: “The Papess”). I refer here to the Italian version of Ouspensky’s book. See P. D. (Piotr Demianovich) Ouspensky, *Il simbolismo dei Tarocchi. Filosofia dell’occultismo nelle figure e nei numeri*, trad. Nicola Bonimelli, Rome, Edizioni Tlon, 2017, p. 85-87, 91-95, 99-100, 129-131. The English version is as follows: P. D. Ouspensky, *The Symbolism of the Tarot, Philosophy of Occultism in Pictures and Numbers, Pen-pictures of the Twenty-two Tarot Cards*, St. Petersburg, Trood Printing and Publishing Co, 1913. On the teachings of the esoteric doctrine expounded by Ouspensky, see P. D. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous. Fragments of an unknown teaching. The record of Ouspensky’s eight years of work as Gurdjieff’s pupil*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950; P. D. Ouspensky, *The Fourth Way*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972; P. D. Ouspensky, *La quarta via. Discorsi e dialoghi secondo gli insegnamenti di G. I. Gurdjieff*, translation by Paolo Valli, Rome, Astrolabio, 1974; P. D. Ouspensky, *Frammenti di un insegnamento sconosciuto. La testimonianza degli otto anni di lavoro di Ouspensky come discepolo di Gurdjieff*, Rome, Astrolabio, 1976; P. D. Ouspensky, *Tertium organum. Una chiave per gli enigmi del mondo*, translation by Pietro Negri, Rome, Astrolabio, 1983.

<sup>149</sup> “La contemplazione del divino è una estinzione di ogni tratto sensibile”. Elémire Zolla, *Le meraviglie della natura. Introduzione all’alchimia*, p. 45.

<sup>150</sup> “Gli si allentano i legami col mondo e quand’anche lui fosse molto emotivo, diviene gelido, si separa dall’umanità. Entra in una fase tenebrosa, di terrore controllato. Sta in ansia. Riceve informazioni che lo impressionano”. *Ibid.*, p. 578.

knowledge of the invisible: “in order to propitiate in us the experiential knowledge of the *unus mundus*, there are exercises of disarticulation of common perceptions”.<sup>151</sup> In particular, Zolla points out that these techniques leading to mystical ecstasy have always been known both in the East and in the West.<sup>152</sup> For example, the Mahâyâna meditation of the Buddhist tradition and, in Europe, the exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, or the Christian ascetic practice of hesychasm.<sup>153</sup> However, he also says that it is the *Fedeli d’Amore* in particular (as well as the alchemists) who possess this esoteric knowledge.<sup>154</sup> This knowledge of divine things to which the rose leads is the mystery of eternity. As Zolla says, “eternity is a child”,<sup>155</sup> and the mystery of eternity is directly linked to the figure of Jesus Christ: “a virgin identified herself with eternal Wisdom; her son, eternity, worshipped by the magicians, sacrificed himself to time, the domain of evil, in order to teach people not to worry about the future or the past, to be free of all concerns and human respect, thus winning the world, the tripartite time”.<sup>156</sup> Time, therefore, is the dimension of this world, where evil dominates; true time is not of this world, it is the time of eternity. Jesus Christ said he was not of this world. This world is a world of pain, of the cross; the other world is that of the everlasting rose.

This sempiternal and alchemical rose presented by Zolla leads to knowledge of the archetypes, and as he writes, using Dante as an example, “knowledge of the archetypes is an ecstatic experience”<sup>157</sup> that “Dante [...] compares to a beautiful woman”.<sup>158</sup> Understanding the mystery of the rose means understanding the threads that “the fabric of time combines with the warp of the cosmos, of the perennial archetypes”.<sup>159</sup> This esoteric truth of the archetypes is not only linked to the Western tradition, but rather, as Zolla points out, to any tradition, such as the Indian mystical tradition of the Yoga Upanishad.<sup>160</sup>

In all traditions, the story of progressive purification is repeated in equal measure: repentance dissolves into lunar water and cools into a Saturnian melancholy that detaches itself from the worldly spectacle. But the intuition of archetypes, of angelic forms operating behind the scenes of the great theatre

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<sup>151</sup> “Per propiziare in noi la conoscenza sperimentale dell’*unus mundus*, esistono esercizi di disarticolazione delle comuni percezioni”. *Ibid.*, p. 135

<sup>152</sup> On the concept of ecstasy, studied from a psychological and neurophysiological point of view, see Marco Margnelli, *L’estasi*, Rome, Sensibili alle Foglie, 1996.

<sup>153</sup> Hesychasm is a Christian contemplative practice based on unceasing prayer and breath control, and can be considered a kind of Christian meditation, similar to the Buddhist tradition. See *Lessico Universale Italiano. VII. ELF-FIN*, Rome, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana fondata da Giovanni Treccani, 1971, p. 243.

<sup>154</sup> See Elémire Zolla, *Le meraviglie della natura. Introduzione all’alchimia*, p. 536-537.

<sup>155</sup> “Eternità è un bambino”. *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>156</sup> “Una vergine si immedesimò nella Sapienza eterna; il suo figlio, l’eternità, adorato dai maghi, si sacrificò al tempo, dominio del male, per insegnare a non essere solleciti né del futuro né del passato, a essere esenti da preoccupazione e da rispetto umano, vincendo così il mondo, il tempo tripartito”. *Ibid.*

<sup>157</sup> “La conoscenza degli archetipi è un’esperienza estatica”. *Ibid.*, p. 322.

<sup>158</sup> “Dante la paragona a una donna bella”. *Ibid.*

<sup>159</sup> “La trama del tempo combina con l’ordito del cosmo, degli archetipi perenni”. *Ibid.*

<sup>160</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 387.

of the world, loosens the stranglehold of melancholy, showing the subtle energies that shape events [...].<sup>161</sup>

Understanding the archetypes means glimpsing “the subtle energies that shape events”, and this means evolving at the level of knowledge: the individual who has this experience “learns things that are almost incommunicable, lives a distinct and secret existence”.<sup>162</sup> It is a question of entering a higher dimension, a “leap out of oneself”, which makes the profane become an initiate: “with this leap out of oneself, one enters a new land, under a new sky, where it is not easy to orient oneself at first, where one stumbles and stammers. [...] Know thyself, urged the Greeks. Become the spectator, the witness, explain the Hindus”.<sup>163</sup> This self-knowledge highlights that “an impracticable barrier stands between the ordinary individual (who does not even imagine that they are shaped not by themselves but by alien powers) and those who allow their profile to be shaped by the witnessing spirit”.<sup>164</sup>

Zolla merits a separate study, because his contribution is not only a scholarly presentation of the alchemical art, but one which also sheds light on real esoteric knowledge. We could call this Zolian mysticism, the teaching of which consists of ‘coming out of oneself’ in order to achieve a transformation of the soul; and floral mysticism, in particular of the rose, the mystical rose, represents the culmination of this initiatory journey. According to Zolla, this can be found in Balzac’s floral mysticism of *Séraphîta*,<sup>165</sup> in the Tahitian treatise *The Golden Flower*<sup>166</sup> (which would be the focus of Jung’s interest in alchemy), in Strindberg’s mystical rose, Dante’s “candida rosa”, or the rose of Apuleius. Zolla’s contribution relates to European literature, including Goethe, Balzac, Nerval, Baudelaire, Huysmans, Hawthorne and Strindberg.<sup>167</sup> With regard to the latter, defined as an “assiduous alchemist”,<sup>168</sup> Zolla highlights a poem by the Swedish writer with the symbol of the rose as its subject, which is full of references to alchemy: *Rosa Mystica*.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> “In ogni tradizione si ripete uguale la storia della purificazione progressiva: il pentimento discioglie in acqua lunare e raggela in una saturniana malinconia che stacca dallo spettacolo del mondo. Ma l’intuizione degli archetipi, delle forme angeliche operanti dietro le quinte del gran teatro del mondo, scioglie dalla stretta della malinconia, mostrando le energie sottili che plasmano gli eventi”. *Ibid.*, p. 388.

<sup>162</sup> “Impara cose quasi incommunicabili, vive un’esistenza distinta e segreta”. *Ibid.*, p. 391.

<sup>163</sup> “Con quel balzo fuor di se stessi, si entra in una nuova terra, sotto un cielo nuovi, dove a tutta prima non è facile orientarsi, dove s’incespica e si balbetta. [...] Conosci te stesso, esortavano i Greci. Diventa lo spettatore, il testimone, spiegano gl’Indù”. *Ibid.*, p. 394.

<sup>164</sup> “Una barriera impraticabile si stende fra l’uomo comune (che non immagina nemmeno di essere plasmabile e plasmato non da sé ma da potenze estranee) e colui che permetta soltanto lo spirito testimone di modellargli il profilo”. *Ibid.*, p. 392.

<sup>165</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 421.

<sup>166</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 401.

<sup>167</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 172-233.

<sup>168</sup> “Assiduo alchimista”. *Ibid.*, p. 559.

<sup>169</sup> On the alchemical rose in Strindberg, see *ibid.*, p. 161, 562-565.

Through Strindberg's mystic rose, Zolla describes the nature of the rose which contains both the principle of good and evil: "cruel and sensitive is the rose",<sup>170</sup> of Strindberg, and a "hermetic rose".<sup>171</sup> Fulcanelli had previously referred to a black rose, offered to Satan and an evil rose opposed to the mystical rose.<sup>172</sup> Thus, the principle of evil also applies to alchemy since there is a "sinister alchemy",<sup>173</sup> a satanic and inverse alchemy. Like the rose, which is not only the flower of Venus but also of Mars, where "the thorns of the rose are governed by Mars",<sup>174</sup> there is a perilous alchemy that Zolla calls "sinister alchemy, despising the humble earth",<sup>175</sup> which leads to the "destruction of the being",<sup>176</sup> whilst one of the main means for creating this reverse alchemy is money. The "sinister alchemy" uses "the abyss of money, the curse of gold"<sup>177</sup> to consume humanity by the "fire-worshipper".<sup>178</sup> It is, as Zolla says, "a devouring, acrid, astringent centripetal force: Saturn or Primordial Hunger":<sup>179</sup> Saturn is the primordial hunger, the eternal need that drives human beings to subordinate their lives.

Zolla's idea goes beyond the single individual, affecting the entire history of humanity, especially the recent history of a West dominated by the "perverse Luciferian doctrine":<sup>180</sup> "in the West (and the West has now polluted every people) there is almost no thought that is not pervaded by the fire of Lucifer".<sup>181</sup> Referring to this Luciferian alchemy, Zolla mentions certain poets and writers who, through their works, warned humanity (back in the nineteenth century) about the sinister and satanic alchemy, such as Goethe and Baudelaire,<sup>182</sup> who described the truth about evil. However, as Zolla points out, "few know the ultimate truth of evil, even among fire worshippers".<sup>183</sup>

The peculiarity of Elémire Zolla's contribution is that it goes beyond mentioning a vague mysticism linked to alchemy and its symbolism, where the rose has a pivotal importance. He also argues that access to esoteric knowledge, represented by symbols, is used by those in power to directly influence people. This is the same concept that Gabriele Rossetti (and Luigi Valli) described in the *Mistero*, namely the use of the "occult science" (whether true or false)

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<sup>170</sup> "Crudele e sensibile è la rosa". *Ibid.*, p. 162.

<sup>171</sup> "Rosa ermetica". *Ibid.*, p. 566.

<sup>172</sup> See Fulcanelli, *Le Mystère des Cathédrales. Esoteric interpretation of the Hermetic Symbols of the Great Work*, p. 85.

<sup>173</sup> "Alchimia sinistra". Elémire Zolla, *Le meraviglie della natura. Introduzione all'alchimia*, p. 238.

<sup>174</sup> "Le spine della rosa sono rette da Marte". *Ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>175</sup> "Quest'alchimia sinistra, spregiatrice dell'umile terra". *Ibid.*, p. 238.

<sup>176</sup> "Distruzione dell'essere". *Ibid.*

<sup>177</sup> "L'abisso del denaro, la maledizione dell'oro". *Ibid.* True alchemy is based on the transformation of base metal into gold. Satanic alchemy uses gold to destroy the human soul.

<sup>178</sup> "Adoratore del fuoco". *Ibid.*

<sup>179</sup> "Una forza centripeta divorante, acre, astringente: Saturno o Fame primordiale". *Ibid.*, p. 238-239.

<sup>180</sup> "Perversa dottrina luciferica". *Ibid.*, p. 240.

<sup>181</sup> "In Occidente (e l'Occidente ha ormai inquinato ogni popolo) non c'è quasi pensiero che non sia pervaso del fuoco di Lucifero". *Ibid.*

<sup>182</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 242.

<sup>183</sup> "Pochi conoscono la suprema verità del male, anche fra gli adoratori del fuoco". *Ibid.*, p. 247.

on the part of Power (through the invisible action of secret and initiatory Orders and societies) to manipulate the masses. Similarly, Zolla speaks of a political and religious Power (held by a minority of enlightened minds) whose aim is the domination of people's souls:

A few magical ideas and words, of fire, are at the origin of all society: empire, church, communality, freedom, chosen people, father of the people. They are distinct visions of seraphic peace and light, sparks which, having lost the purity of ecstatic visions, diverted downwards, unleash the winds of glory and shape social matter. Who will handle with cold resolve the symbols that evoke these archetypes, capable of unleashing storms in the frail collective soul? Only those who know the archetypal plan, for love or hate. Some wicked and satanically enlightened rulers, knowing all this, take care to extinguish all spiritual fire, repeating the archetypal action of slaughtering the innocent as a condition of peaceful tyranny. They take care that he cannot grow who draws such magnetic words from pure contemplation to upset the known balances of the political climate. As satanism is a knowledge as profound as it is perverse, it will be able to use the sublime illumination of Lao Tsû to this end, by perverting them: "If the wise are not honoured, there is no quarrel among the people. [...] If nothing is shown that arouses envy, hearts are not stirred. The wise men in power empty the hearts and fill the bellies, they debilitate the wills and strengthen the bones, they take care that the people are without knowledge or impulse and that those who have knowledge do not dare to operate"; XX, "When wisdom is destroyed, there will be no more worries"; LXV, "It is difficult to govern the people if one has too much knowledge". The naive editor of the Soviet *Tao-tê-King* published in Moscow in 1950, Yang Ching Shun, cannot explain himself why the word "wise" in these passages teaching persecution is the same as in the passages praising wisdom, and proposes to translate it as "scholar" or "erudite" in the former case: no, it is and must be the same thing, and behind the astonishment of the naïve person, one bends the ear, one will perceive the laughter of those who satanically know how things are.

Paracelsus wrote in *De matrice* (in the *Opus paramiram*) that the mouth of the preacher is a heaven that inclines people to good or evil, both man and woman, and recalls a great key to the discernment of spirits: "The wicked have more goodness on their lips than the good".<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> "Poche idee e parole magiche, di fuoco, sono all'origine di ogni società: impero, chiesa, comunanza, libertà, popolo di eletti, padre del popolo. Sono visioni distinte di serafica pace e luce, faville che, smarrita la loro purezza di visioni estatiche, deviate in basso, scatenano i venti della fama e modellano la materia sociale. Chi manipolerà con fredda risolutezza i simboli che evocano quegli archetipi, capaci di scatenare bufere nella gracile anima collettiva? Soltanto chi conosca il piano degli archetipi, per amore o per odio. Certi dominatori biechi e satanicamente illuminati, sapendo tutto ciò, curano di spegnere ogni fuoco spirituale, ripetendo l'azione archetipica della strage degli innocenti, come condizione di pacifica tirannide. Essi curano che non possa crescere colui che dalla pura contemplazione tragga parole così magnetiche da sconvolgere gli equilibri noti della temperie politica. Poiché la satanicità è profonda quanto perversa conoscenza, essa saprà adoperare a questa sua bisogna, pervertendole, le sublimi illuminazioni di Lao Tsû: III, 'Se non si onorano i sapienti, nel popolo non c'è lite. [...] Se non si mostra niente che susciti invidia, i cuori non sono sobillati. I sapienti al potere svuotano i cuori e riempiono le pance, debilitano le volontà e rafforzano le ossa, badano a che il popolo sia senza conoscenza né impulsi e che coloro i quali abbiano conoscenza non osino operare'; XX, 'Quando la sapienza sarà distrutta, non ci saranno più preoccupazioni'; LXV, 'È difficile governare il popolo se si possiede troppe conoscenze'. L'ingenuo curatore del *Tao-tê-King* sovietico uscito a Mosca nel 1950, Yang Ching Shun, non si sa spiegare come mai la parola 'sapienti' in questi passi che insegnano la persecuzione, sia la stessa dei passi che lodano la sapienza e propone di tradurla 'dotti' o 'eruditi' nel primo caso: no, è e dev'essere la stessa, e dietro lo stupore dell'ingenuo, si tenda l'orecchio, si percepirà la risata di chi satanicamente sa come stanno le cose. Scriveva Paracelso nel libro *De matrice* (nell'*Opus paramiram*) che la bocca del predicatore è un cielo che inclina al bene o al male il popolo come l'uomo la donna, e rammenta una gran chiave per il discernimento degli spiriti: 'I malvagi hanno la bontà sulle labbra più dei buoni'". *Ibid.*, p. 38.

Elémire Zolla's reflection on alchemy is one of the most important landmarks in the history of ideas. It is a curious coincidence that the year of Zolla's birth is the same year in which *Le Mystère des Cathédrales* was published: 1926.<sup>185</sup> The alchemy expounded by Fulcanelli at the beginning of the twentieth century finds its continuation and completion in Elémire Zolla, who does not provide a scientific, remote and objective description of the esoteric doctrines, but one that provides a sapiential teaching, whose aim is the evolution of the human race. The rose, once again, is the basis of this secret knowledge that leads to knowledge of the invisible. Zolla teaches that wisdom "is a knowledge that can turn to the seraphic or to the luciferic",<sup>186</sup> and one of the dangers of this perilous journey to which the populace is exposed is the "emptying of the soul".<sup>187</sup> The heritage that Zolla has left to future generations is a spiritual message that aims to awaken a suffering humanity: "in ordinary life, the pains and pleasures of the body are mixed with the pains and joys of the psyche, with the wrong or right calculations of reason, and very few know that existence is not just this more or less comic or atrocious dance".<sup>188</sup> In fact, as Elémire Zolla teaches, "beyond the vibration of the nerves, the waves of feelings, the incessant buzzing of thoughts, very few know that another and different life pulses".<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> *Le Mystère des Cathédrales* was published in 1926, but written in 1922, a year of pivotal importance for twentieth-century culture because it was in this year that masterpieces of world literature like Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Joyce's *Ulysses* appeared.

<sup>186</sup> "È una conoscenza che può volgersi al serafico o al luciferico". *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>187</sup> "Svuotamento dell'anima". *Ibid.*, p. 551.

<sup>188</sup> "Nella vita comune i dolori e i piaceri del corpo si intrecciano alle tristezze e alle gioie della psiche, ai calcoli sbagliati o azzeccati della ragione, e ben pochi sanno che l'esistenza non è soltanto questo balletto più o meno comico o atroce". *Ibid.*, p. 393.

<sup>189</sup> "Oltre, di là da esso, dal vibrare dei nervi, dalle ondate dei sentimenti, dall'incessante ronzio dei pensieri, ben pochi sanno che pulsa un'altra e diversa vita". *Ibid.*

## CHAPITRE XIII

### THE ALCHEMICAL ROSE OF *THE RED* BOOK BY CARL GUSTAV JUNG

#### *Dantean echoes and the symbolism of the rose in Jung's work*

The alchemical rose of the twentieth century leads inevitably to one of the most important figures of that time: Carl Gustav Jung. As Antoine Faivre remarks, “Jung [...] transported alchemy and hermeticism into the spheres of depth psychology”.<sup>1</sup> Irene Campanale has aptly rendered the idea of Jung's approach by speaking in terms of the “psychologisation of alchemy”.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Jungian psychoanalysis owes a great deal to the esoteric tradition.<sup>3</sup> He divulged his esoteric knowledge (the result of his personal inner experience) through his works, becoming part of the spiritual tradition of the West, as recalled by Jung's disciple Marie-Louise von Franz (1915-1998),<sup>4</sup> who wrote a book, *The Feminine in the Fairy Tales*, in which she studies the female archetypes present in fairy tales and highlights the initiatory dimension of the rose, notably in *The Sleeping Beauty, or Briar Rose* and *Snow White and Rose Red*.<sup>5</sup> In this work von Franz also refers to the *Fedeli d'Amore*, confirming the connection between the medieval tradition of Germanic love poetry and France.<sup>6</sup> The *Fedeli d'Amore* are also mentioned by Marie Louise von Franz in *The Golden Ass of Apuleius. The Liberation of the*

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<sup>1</sup> “Jung [...] a transporté dans les sphères de la psychologie des profondeurs l'alchimie et l'hermétisme”. Antoine Faivre, *Accès de l'ésotérisme occidental*, t. II, p. 295.

<sup>2</sup> “Psicologizzazione dell'alchimia”. Irene Campanale, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

<sup>3</sup> On the esoteric dimension of Jung's thought, see Carl Gustav Jung, *Psychology and the Occult* [1982], London and New York, Routledge, 2008; Françoise Bonardel, *Jung et la gnose*, Paris, Pierre-Guillaume de Roux, 2017; Gary Lachman, *Jung the Mystic. The Esoteric Dimensions of Carl Jung's Life and Teaching. A New Biography*, New York, Penguin Group, 2010; Paolo Crimaldi, “Prefazione”, in Gary Lachman, *Jung il mistico. Dimensioni esoteriche della vita e degli insegnamenti di Carl G. Jung*, Rome, Edizioni Mediterranee, 2012, p. 11-12; Gilles Quispel, “Jung et la gnose”, in *Carl Gustav Jung*, ed. Michel Cazenave, Paris, Éditions de L'Herne, 1984, p. 131-148; Françoise Bonardel, “Jung et l'alchimie”, in *Carl Gustav Jung*, p. 164-182; David L. Miller, “Jung et les dieux”, in *Carl Gustav Jung*, p. 309-315.

<sup>4</sup> “He [Jung] was able to make a connection with the spiritual tradition of the West”. Marie-Louise Von Franz, *C. G. Jung: His Myth in Our Time* [1972], translated by William H. Kennedy, New York, G. P. Putman's Sons, 1975, p. 121.

<sup>5</sup> Marie-Louise Von Franz, *The Feminine in the Fairy Tale* [1972], Boulder, Colorado, Shambhala, 1993, p. 12-76. This work is based on the contents of a seminar by von Franz given at the C. G. Jung Institute in Zurich in 1959.

<sup>6</sup> The *Fedeli d'Amore* are mentioned in the French and Italian version, but not in the English one. The French version mentions: “in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the countries of Germanic culture saw Christian knights put themselves at the service of their ladies, while in the Occitan regions, troubadours and *fedeli d'amore* developed the cult of women and eros” (“au douzième et treizième siècles, les pays de culture germanique virent les chevaliers chrétiens se mettre au service de leurs dames, tandis que dans les régions occitanes, troubadours et *fedeli d'amore* développaient le culte de la femme et de l'éros”). Marie-Louise Von Franz, *La Femme dans les contes de fées*, Paris, Renard, 1991, p. 208.



*Feminine in Man*,<sup>7</sup> where she speaks of “the secret societies of the *fedeli d’amore*”, and in *The Grail Legend*, written with Jung’s wife Emma, where the authors discuss “the Fedeli d’Amore and the Hermetic tradition”.<sup>8</sup>

In Chapter II, I pointed to Jung’s links with Dantean esotericism, in particular Jung’s interest in Luigi Valli and the symbolism of the rose linked to alchemy, as brilliantly shown by Stefano Salzani in his *Luigi Valli e l’esoterismo di Dante* and by Tommaso Priviero in his article “Jung legge Dante” (Jung reads Dante”).<sup>9</sup> In this article, Priviero also discusses the “highly esoteric character”<sup>10</sup> of Jung’s work, noting the influence of Valli’s *Linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d’Amore* and the symbolic importance of the mystical rose. In a letter to the historiographer Werner Kaegi (1901-1979), Jung expresses his esteem for Luigi Valli, by writing as follows:

It is strange that the broad, shining surface of things always interests me much less than those dark, labyrinthine, subterranean passages they come out of. Civilizations seem to me like those plants whose real and continuous life is found in the rhizome and not in the quickly fading flowers and withering leaves which appear on the surface and which we regard as the essential manifestation of life. Burckhardt mentions Colonna’s work but for understandable reasons he sees nothing in it. Of the more recent writers, it seems to be chiefly Luigi Valli who has ventured into the background. I almost believe that the real history of the human mind is a rhizome phenomenon.<sup>11</sup>

Affirming that Jung admires Valli’s contribution shows that he subscribes, albeit indirectly, to the research by Gabriele Rossetti, which the Swiss psychoanalyst does not mention. This is another example of the indirect influence of Gabriele Rossetti’s work that reached other central figures of European culture through those who pursued his “heterodox” research on the esotericism of Dante and the literature of love. I have already mentioned that *Psychology and Alchemy* draws heavily on the work of Luigi Valli, especially when Jung deals with the alchemical meaning of the rose symbol. But the influence of Dantean esotericism also seems to be present in Jung’s masterpiece *The Red Book*, which can be seen, to put it in Sonu Shamdasani’s words, as “a work of psychology in a literary form”.<sup>12</sup> This is the only literary

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<sup>7</sup> Marie-Louise Von Franz, *The Golden Ass of Apuleius. The Liberation of the Feminine in Man* [1970], Boulder, Colorado, Shambhala, 1992, p. 225.

<sup>8</sup> Emma Jung, Marie-Louise Von Franz, *The Grail Legend* [1960], translated by Andrea Dykes, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1998, p. 17.

<sup>9</sup> Tommaso Priviero, “Jung legge Dante”, *Phanês*, v. 2, 2019, p. 28-58.

<sup>10</sup> “Carattere fortemente esoterico”. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>11</sup> Letter from Carl Gustav Jung to Werner Kaegi on 7 November 1937, in *C. G. Jung Letters. Volume I. 1906-1950* [1973], London and New York, Routledge, 2015, p. 102. On the relations between Jung and Luigi Valli (and Dantean esotericism), see Stefano Salzani, *op. cit.*, p. 364-367; Tommaso Priviero, *art. cit.*, p. 28-58.

<sup>12</sup> Carl Gustav Jung, *The Red Book. Liber Novus*, ed. Sonu Shamdasani, New York and London, W. W. Norton & Company, 2009, p. 202. *The Red Book* (also known as the *Liber Novus*) contains Jung’s observations on the unconscious that he had already partially set out in *The Black Book*. Jung did not publish his masterpiece, *The Red Book*, during his lifetime, and the book might never have seen the light of day if the expert on Jung’s work, Sonu

work by the Swiss psychoanalyst, and it is here that he speaks of a concept dear to Dantean esotericism and the medieval *Fedeli d'Amore*: the fidelity to love – a concept that is present in the second part of the *Red Book*.

Therefore, in Jung's work too, the *Divine Comedy* plays a fundamental role. This influence is confirmed by Sonu Shamdasani, who points out that the author of *Psychology and Alchemy* read *The Divine Comedy* while writing his *Red Book* and copied the German translation of certain passages from Dante's *Purgatorio* which deals with the nature of love.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, *The Red Book* can be considered the Jungian descent into hell, and in the initiatory journey that the author undertakes the rose is the symbol of ultimate achievement. The rose that Jung presents has to do with the spiritual dimension of humanity, and although he also draws on the studies of Luigi Valli, his approach is not based on secret sects and initiatory Orders, rather on his interest in man. Jung's rose has to do with the contents of the unconscious, whose activation can have different implications, and which can be basically summarised from two perspectives. In the first case, the unconscious takes over the individual, who is overwhelmed by this uncontrollable and upsetting force; in the second one, the individual encounters the unconscious, experiences the disorientation caused by this encounter with the latent and obscure part of the mind, but emerges victorious, without any harmful consequences at the psychic and physical level.<sup>14</sup> These are, in fact, the same perils of the initiation process, during which individuals are confronted with their dark side. The emerging latency and the struggle someone makes with the unknown part of the self is represented by the initiatory trials, which can be considered from a Jungian (and therefore psychological) perspective, as the thorns of the rose. It was Jung himself who spoke of the encounter with the unconscious in terms of initiation, as he wrote in a letter to Dr. Bernhard Bauer-Celio on 30 January 1934: "the exploration of the unconscious has in fact and in truth discovered the age-old, timeless way of initiation".<sup>15</sup>

At the root of this initiatory path is the concept of initiatory death. It is death that allows us to understand life: "I behold death, since it teaches me how to live",<sup>16</sup> writes Jung in his *Red Book*. The concept of initiatory death developed by Jung in *The Red Book* is associated with a descent into Hell, of Dantean memory. "I am walking alone in a dark forest and I notice that I have lost my way",<sup>17</sup> says Jung, just as Dante gets lost in the dark forest. The whole *Red Book*

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Shamdasani, had not proposed publishing it to Jung's descendants. The manuscript was kept in the vault of a Swiss bank until 1977.

<sup>13</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 202, 252.

<sup>14</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 202

<sup>15</sup> *C. G. Jung Letters. Volume I. 1906-1950*, p. 141. My thanks to Françoise Bonardel for bringing this phrase by Jung to my attention.

<sup>16</sup> Carl Gustav Jung, *The Red Book*, p. 275.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 261.

is based on the descent into Hell, and this perilous path is described in detail by Jung through the dialogue of his soul with the characters in the work. Hell is described as a journey in a world composed of invisible entities that attack us, in which Jung advises the reader how to cope with these monstrous beings.<sup>18</sup> This implies a difference between common people and the initiate, who has experiences outside everyday life – experiences immersed in another dimension. However, Jung found it difficult to communicate his experiences since the initiate and the profane do not speak the same language, thus it is the initiate who must adapt to the profane by using parables to simplify the content of their message and make it understandable, as Jung explains in the draft of his masterpiece (*The Draft*):

My friends, I know that I speak in riddles. But the spirit of the depths has granted me a view of many things in order to help my weak comprehension. I want to tell you more about my visions so that you better understand which things the spirit of the depths would like you to see. May those be well who can see these things! Those who cannot must live them as blind fate, in images.<sup>19</sup>

These words by Jung explain one of the fundamental reasons for literary obscurity, due to the difficulty of expression using clear language as the content is impossible to explain using common vernacula. Here Jung clearly speaks of visions, as did Swedenborg, Nerval<sup>20</sup> and Yeats, who described their visionary states in their works. For Jung, the visions represent a personally experienced concrete reality: how can visions be explained to those who have never seen them? Literary hermeticism can also be explained this way, by the need to express the inexpressible, the divine. The rose and love in Jung's work lead to the discovery of the mystery of divinity and the invisible world, whilst his doctrine of love is closely linked to divine things, where the rose is the symbol that acts as a bridge between the earthly reality and the invisible reality of the divinity.

### *The fidelity to love in The Red Book*

In a story in *The Red Book* the author claims to have been lost in a forest, just as Dante gets lost in a forest,<sup>21</sup> and whose wandering leads him to a castle where there is an old man who keeps his daughter locked up, owing to his love for her.<sup>22</sup> With this girl, the self of *The Red Book* begins a discussion that has to do with the invisible reality of divine things, where the girl

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 240.

<sup>19</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 239.

<sup>20</sup> On Gérard Nerval there is an extremely interesting article by Andrea Schellino, "Jung, *Aurélia* et l'art visionnaire", *ALKEMIE*, 1 (23), 2019, p. 105-118. In this article, Schellino explores the relations between Jung and Nerval, focusing on the mystical and visionary dimension in the French poet and in the Swiss psychoanalyst.

<sup>21</sup> See Carl Gustav Jung, *The Red Book*, p. 261.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

is associated with the symbol of the rose. When she leaves the scene, greeting her interlocutor, the narrating self says: “where she stood something shadowy lies – it is a profusion of red roses”.<sup>23</sup>

Rose, love, and divine truths are inseparable in Jung’s work, and in *The Red Book* these three elements are associated with the most important subject of Dantean esotericism: the concept of fidelity to love, which connects with the expression *Fedeli d’Amore* (Faithful of Love) and denotes the poets who expressed esoteric love in the Middle Ages. As I have mentioned, the *topos* of fidelity to love is developed by Jung in the second part of his work, where he describes the initiatory tests that the narrating self undergoes on encountering the soul and the invisible reality. It is by no means certain that the Jungian concept of fidelity to love derives from his readings on Dantean esotericism and the *Fedeli d’Amore* expounded by Luigi Valli in his *Linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d’Amore*, but it is undeniable that Jung was influenced by Valli’s work and that in this novel he evokes one of the *topoi* that underpin the reflection on Dante’s esotericism, namely fidelity to love associated with the theme of initiation.

Fidelity to love is explained by the narrating self in *The Red Book* when the latter encounters ΦΙΛΗΜΩΝ, who makes him understand why one must remain faithful to love: “I gathered from ΦΙΛΗΜΩΝ’s words that I must remain true to love”.<sup>24</sup> It is ΦΙΛΗΜΩΝ that teaches him the importance of “scattering or dismembering”<sup>25</sup> in order to “remain true to love”<sup>26</sup> and obtain the “stellar nature”,<sup>27</sup> that is to say the “liberation from bondage to men and things”.<sup>28</sup> Jung explains the esoteric doctrine of what he calls “fidelity to love”<sup>29</sup> from a practical, psychological point of view, accessible to everyone. It is not a veiled doctrine, as in the case of medieval love poetry, which alluded to this mysterious love without ever explaining it clearly. In Jung, the mystery of love is manifested using a language accessible to any reader who has the sensitivity to understand the message contained in the words of *The Red Book*.

The initiatory journey described by Jung through the theme of love and the symbol of the rose has as its final outcome the union of opposites, the integration of the darkest part of the spirit, as well as the integration of the feminine and masculine parts, corresponding to the return to unity, the alchemical transformation of lead into gold, the obtaining of the rose, of oneself. It is, in fact, in the overcoming and unification of oppositions that affect humanity. According to Jung, every man and woman has a masculine and a feminine part: an “anima” and an

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 263.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 355.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 356.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

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

“animus”. The man has in himself an “anima”, namely a feminine soul, while the woman has a masculine soul, that is to say an “animus”.<sup>30</sup>

The concept of the union of opposites is developed by Jung, particularly in his work *Mysterium coniunctionis* (1955), whose title perfectly sums up the scope of the book: *Mysterium coniunctionis. An Inquiry into the Separation and Synthesis of Psychic Opposites in Alchemy*.<sup>31</sup> Even in *Mysterium coniunctionis* the rose plays a pivotal role, as it is the symbol of the conjunction of opposites in alchemy, which Luigi Valli highlighted in his *Linguaggio segreto*.<sup>32</sup> In this work, he shows the analogies between alchemy and the doctrine of the *Fedeli d'Amore*, in particular, the importance of the symbolism of the rose as the final stage of the initiation process. In *Mysterium coniunctionis*, as well as in *Psychology and Alchemy*, Jung also draws on a medieval work referred to in the early chapters of my thesis: the *Rosarium Philosophorum*. Jung uses this medieval work to build his argument on the “masculine-feminine” opposition, personified in alchemy by the king and the queen, and in the *Rosarium Philosophorum* by the emperor and empress.<sup>33</sup> The king and the queen of the alchemical texts in Jung become the ego and the unconscious, leading to the Self.<sup>34</sup> Thus, Jungian psychology uses esotericism to explain the recesses of the human spirit, through alchemy.

Jung drew on many sources of the esoteric tradition, from Apuleius to Dante and Goethe, whilst it is in literature that the author of *The Red Book* finds the answer to his truths that are impossible to explain to those who cannot understand. In an interview with Carl Gustav Jung by the Chilean writer and diplomat Miguel Serrano on 5 May 1959, the author of *Psychology and Alchemy* remarked that love is “the Mystic Flower of the Soul”<sup>35</sup> and added

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<sup>30</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 234-263. See also Sonu Shamdasani, “Liber Novus: The ‘Red book’ of C. G. Jung. Introduction”, in *ibid.*, p. 211-217-218.

<sup>31</sup> In the *Mysterium coniunctionis*, we find a subject dear to Gabriele Rossetti’s research, namely the concept of “widowhood” within Freemasonry. As Jung remarks, “the terms ‘son of the widow’ and ‘children of the widow’ appear to be of Manichaeic origin”, since “the Manichaeans themselves were called ‘children of the widow’” (Carl Gustav Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis. An Inquiry Into the Separation and Synthesis of Psychic Opposites in Alchemy*, p. 18); moreover, the Manichean origin of the expression “son of the widow” had just been highlighted by Gabriele Rossetti, who had shown the links between Manichaeism and modern Freemasonry (Gabriele Rossetti, *Il mistero dell'Amor platonico del Medio Evo*, t. I, p. 139-140, 582-583). This point is also examined by Jung, who remarks that “Freemasons are also considered to be among the ‘children of the widow’” and that “‘Widow’ in the Cabala is a designation for Malchuth” (Carl Gustav Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis. An Inquiry Into the Separation and Synthesis of Psychic Opposites in Alchemy*, p. 18). On the concept of “widowhood” within Freemasonry, see also Sylvain Floca, *Initiation & littérature*, préface de Jean Verdun, Paris, Éditions Detrad aVs, 2015, p. 260-261.

<sup>32</sup> Luigi Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d'Amore*, p. 671-677.

<sup>33</sup> Carl Gustav Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis. An Inquiry Into the Separation and Synthesis of Psychic Opposites in Alchemy*, p. 3-4.

<sup>34</sup> In *Mysterium coniunctionis*, Jung affirms that the psychological union of the contraries [...] “transcends our powers of conception”, as “when we say that conscious and unconscious unite, we are saying in effect that this process is inconceivable”. In fact, Jung continues, “the unconscious is [...] unconscious and therefore can neither be grasped nor conceived”, thus “the union of opposites is a transconscious process and, in principle, not amenable to scientific explanation”. *Ibid.*, p. 381.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Carl Gustav Jung by Chilean writer and diplomat Miguel Serrano on 5 May 1959, in Miguel Serrano, *C. G. Jung and Hermann Hesse. A record of two friends*, trans. Frank MacShane, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966, p. 60. This interview is also present in *C. G. Jung speaking. Interviews and Encounters* [1977], ed. William McGuire and R. F. C. Hull, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993, p. 405.

that this mystical flower called love “is the Centre, the Self”, emphasising the initiatory and elitist nature of this knowledge: “nobody understands what I mean; [...] only a poet could begin to understand”.<sup>36</sup> It is poetry that is not only literature but also a means of expressing the invisible unknown to the profane, to the common people. As Marie-Louise von Franz comments, “through all the ages poets and artists have often been prophets, because their work, or the material for it, comes to them from the same depths of the collective unconscious in which the major transformations of a particular era are in process of creation”.<sup>37</sup> This implies a kind of mystical filiation which, beyond reflecting the esoteric and initiatory Orders, links poets of all periods, from Dante to Shakespeare, from Goethe to Nerval or Yeats. All these periods share a common *topos* and symbol, love and the rose, which Jung develops and represents in his works, especially in his literary masterpiece *The Red Book*. So, for example, in *The Red Book*, the self converses with Salomé, who speaks to him about love by referring to the roses. The self thanks Salomé because she speaks to him about love and he asks her for roses.<sup>38</sup>

The mystery of Love described by Jung in his literary masterpiece is reminiscent of the *Fedeli d'Amore* studied by Luigi Valli or by Henry Corbin, in the case of the Persian tradition. In fact, the author of *The Red Book* specifies that the real lover is, like ΦΙΛΗΜΩΝ, “a lover of one’s own soul”,<sup>39</sup> just as the Jungian self affirms: “you are a lover of your soul, who anxiously and jealously guards its treasure. There are those who love men, and those who love the souls of men, and those who love their own soul. Such a one is ΦΙΛΗΜΩΝ, the host of the Gods”.<sup>40</sup> Elsewhere, the self of *The Red Book* says to his shadow “You are I”.<sup>41</sup> It is the same identification evoked by Cecco d’Ascoli, “Io son ella” (“I am she”), by the poets of Persian poetry (“I am Layla”), and by all the nineteenth-century poets who associate their “I” with the figure of the woman: “I am thine, thou’rt one with me!”, writes Dante Gabriel Rossetti. All these examples, as seen in previous chapters, correspond to the Jungian identification with the own soul:

S: “Do you recognize me?”  
 I: “How strangely familiar you are! Who are you?”  
 S: “I am your soul.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Miguel Serrano, *C. G. Jung and Hermann Hesse. A record of two friends*, p. 60. See also Marie-Louise Von Franz, *C. G. Jung: His Myth in Our Time*, p. 286.

<sup>37</sup> Marie-Louise Von Franz, *C. G. Jung: His Myth in Our Time*, p. 269.

<sup>38</sup> See Carl Gustav Jung, *The Red Book*, p. 324.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 315.

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

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 314.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 290.

Here is the meeting of the Jungian self with the soul, meaning the union which allows someone to reach God.<sup>43</sup> The scenario that Jung presents to the reader is that of an occult world where God exists, a world populated by invisible entities and deities that surround people, influencing their lives. But is this reality described by Jung only literary fiction or is it knowledge possessed by the author and disclosed to the readers? Is it literary fiction, esoteric knowledge or personal experience? Sonu Shamdasani writes that in his *Red Book* “Jung maintained a ‘fidelity to the event’”, and that “what he was writing was not to be mistaken for a fiction”.<sup>44</sup> It is not, therefore, an exclusively literary work, rather the literary transposition of an experience actually lived – the reality of someone who communicates with their soul and experiences the invisible world. For Carl Gustav Jung, the visionary content of his work is true. Jung sets himself up as a guide for his readers, without forcing them to follow his teaching. However, he stresses that what he writes is not literary fiction or a personal point of view because, as he states in *The Red Book* through the character of ΦΙΛΗΜΩΝ, “it is what I know how to say; not because I believe it, but because I know it”.<sup>45</sup> Elsewhere, in an interview with Fredrick Sands in 1955, Jung said: “all that I have learned has led me step by step to an unshakable conviction of the existence of God. I only believe in what I know. And that eliminates believing. Therefore I do not take His existence on belief – I know that He exists”.<sup>46</sup> The same concept was repeated in March 1959, when John Freeman asked the Swiss psychoanalyst: “did you believe in God?”.<sup>47</sup> The reply was: “Oh, yes”.<sup>48</sup> The next question was: “do you now believe in God?”, Jung replied: “now? [Pause.] Difficult to answer. I know. I don’t need to believe. I know”.<sup>49</sup> Elsewhere the author of *Psychology and Alchemy* remarked, “I know things and must hint at things which other people do not know, and usually do not even want to know”.<sup>50</sup> This sentence perfectly captures Jung’s impossibility of clearly saying what he knows about a reality unknown to the majority of people. Jung speaks about the Gods not because he thinks or believes in something about the nature of divinity, but because he knows about these invisible realities: “I speak of many Gods as I speak of many things, since I know them”.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> The encounter of the self with God is scientifically explained by Jung in the essay “Transformation symbolism in the mass” as follows: “the self then functions as a unio oppositorum and thus constitutes the most immediate experience of the divine which is at all psychologically comprehensible”. In *ibid.*, p. 338.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 202.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 348.

<sup>46</sup> *C. G. Jung Speaking. Interviews and Encounters*, p. 251. This interview with Jung by John Freeman for the BBC television programme “Face to Face” took place in March 1959 at Jung’s home in Küsnacht but was broadcast on 22 October 1959 in England.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 427.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 428.

<sup>50</sup> *Memories, Dreams, Reflections by C.G. Jung*, ed. Aniela Jaffé, New York, Vintage Books, 1989, p. 42.

<sup>51</sup> Carl Gustav Jung, *The Red Book*, p. 352

It goes without saying that understanding the esoteric message communicated through *The Red Book* is based on the reader's level of knowledge, as "there are no mistakes in these things", related by Jung in his novel through the words of ΦΙΛΗΜΩΝ, "there are only different levels of knowledge".<sup>52</sup> This was another fundamental teaching of Dante and the *Fedeli d'Amore*, whose love poetry could not be grasped by everyone – only those who could understand the hidden message. There are certainly striking analogies between Dante and Jung, as Marie-Louise von Franz has clearly shown: "Jung's journey to the beyond is an anticipation of a rebirth of our world, just as Dante's journey anticipated the spirit of the Renaissance. Jung's journey, however, led him deeper and farther than Dante's, into a still more profound rebirth of our *Zeitgeist*".<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 348.

<sup>53</sup> Marie-Louise Von Franz, *C. G. Jung: His Myth in Our Time*, p. 110-111.





## CHAPTER XIV

### THE NEAPOLITAN SCHOOL OF GIULIANO KREMMERZ

#### *The rose of Myriam*

At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it was not only the French and English cultural contexts that gave rise to esoteric currents in Europe – Italy also played a major role in this respect. Naples, in particular, was the source of one of the most important esoteric movements of the Italian peninsula at that time, namely the Parthenopean hermeticism which was linked to the Egyptian tradition.<sup>1</sup> The main figure of this movement, created in 1896 and called the Confraternity of Miriam (or Myriam: Schola Philosophica Hermetica Classica Italica Fr+Tm+ di Miriam), was the Neapolitan journalist, man of letters and esotericist Ciro Formisano (1861-1930), alias Giuliano Kremmerz.<sup>2</sup> But the figure of Kremmerz is indirectly linked to another exponent of Italian esotericism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Leone Caetani<sup>3</sup> (1868-1935) who, in turn, is associated with an author who is instrumental to my research: Honoré de Balzac. In fact, as we have seen in Chapter VI, Balzac was a friend and admirer of Michelangelo Caetani, the grandfather of Leone Caetani and a pivotal figure in the Italian cultural milieu. Leone Caetani was an erudite Islamist and orientalist, a member of the Italian Parliament, and one of the leading figures in Roman occultism at the turn of the twentieth century. Before retiring to Canada (where he died in 1935), Leone Caetani was in direct contact with Giuliano Kremmerz. The Confraternity of Miriam was initially born under the protection of the “Grande Oriente Egiziano” (Great Egyptian Orient), an emanation of the Egyptian Order of Leone Caetani.<sup>4</sup> This latter gravitated towards the Roman and Neapolitan initiatory circles, thus representing a link between the esoteric circles of Naples and those of Rome in the early twentieth century. So, starting from Balzac, one can

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<sup>1</sup> On the esoteric traditions and milieux of Naples from the eighteenth to the beginning of the nineteenth century, see Gian Mario Cazzaniga, “Ermetismo ed eginanesimo a Napoli dai Lumi alla Fratellanza di Miriam”, in *Storia d'Italia. Annali 25. Esoterismo*, p. 547-566.

<sup>2</sup> The figure of Giuliano Kremmerz and his esoteric school, Myriam, have not yet been studied in great detail. On the figure of Kremmerz and his relationship with Neapolitan esoteric circles, see Piero Di Vona, *Giuliano Kremmerz*, Padova, Edizioni di Ar, 2005; Massimo Introvigne, *op. cit.*, p. 301-308; Massimo Introvigne, “De l’hypertrophie de la filiation: le milieu kremmerzien en Italie”, in *Symboles et Mythes dans les mouvements initiatiques et ésotériques (XVII<sup>e</sup>-XX<sup>e</sup> siècles). Filiations et emprunts. Actes du colloque international d’A.R.I.E.S. (Association pour la Recherche et l’Information sur l’Ésotérisme), Sorbonne, octobre 1996*, eds. Antoine Faivre, Pierre Deghaye and Roland Edighoffer, Paris, Archè - La Table d’Emeraude, 1999, p. 148-156; Massimo Introvigne, “Kremmerz, Giuliano”, in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, p. 671-672; Ugo Cisaria, *L’Ordine Egizio e la Miriam di Giuliano Kremmerz*, Viareggio, Rebis, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> On the figure of Leone Caetani, see Massimo Introvigne, *op. cit.*, p. 300-306, 345.

<sup>4</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 302; Massimo Introvigne, “Kremmerz, Giuliano”, in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, p. 671.

explore the panorama of Italian esotericism in this period (which was closely linked and indebted to the French esoteric movements of the late nineteenth century, especially as regards the influence of major figures of occultism such as Papus and the disciples of Éliphas Lévi).<sup>5</sup> Therefore, from Balzac and Michelangelo Caetani we arrive at Leone Caetani and Giuliano Kremmerz.

The major contribution of Kremmerz is summarised in *La scienza dei Magi* (The Science of the Magi), which can be defined as his *opera omnia*. Giuliano Kremmerz also edited the journal on occultism *Il mondo segreto* (The Secret World, 1897-1898), and two other esoteric journals, *La Medicina Ermetica*<sup>6</sup> (The Hermetic Medicine, 1899-1900) and the *Commentarium* (1910-1911). He proposed a teaching of spiritual perfection aimed at the discovery of the latent potentialities of human beings and divine entities through magic, at the centre of which is the law of esoteric Love: “if you want to initiate yourself into the Arcanum of the great Magic of miracles in the law of nature, one of the majestic doors of the Ark is Love”.<sup>7</sup> Kremmerz’s magical doctrine was explained through love and the rose is evoked as the cardinal symbol of this esoteric knowledge. Even Miriam (or Myriam), the name given to the esoteric Brotherhood created by Kremmerz, has to do with the symbolism of the rose, for it means Rose. In fact, as one can read in *La scienza dei Magi*:

Myriam is the mystical rose of the Rosicrucians, the eternal manifestation of love that draws us to the unified centre in God, the universal Centre and unchanging Law.

In order for the vulgar to understand this name, without having sweated over the old bits of the Jewish Kabbalah, a philosophy that has fallen into disfavour with modern philosophers, because it is a bone of contention for the mouths best hardened to the outdated language of the ancient schools of wisdom, one must imagine Myriam as a type of the most beneficent divinity, of the most pulchritudinous Diana, of the most enchanting miraculous Isis, or as the symbol of a special state of purification of the human spirit, source of all the most marvellous prodigies.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See Massimo Introvigne, *op. cit.*, p. 229.

<sup>6</sup> The journal *Medicina Ermetica* focused mainly on occult medicine, in particular, on the therapeutic application of occult science.

<sup>7</sup> “Se vuoi iniziarti agli Arcani della grande Magia dei miracoli nella legge della natura, una delle maestose porte dell’Arca è l’Amore”. Giuliano Kremmerz, *La scienza dei Magi* [1975], 4 v. Rome, Edizioni Mediterranee, v. 2, 2007, p. 326.

<sup>8</sup> “Myriam è la mistica rosa dei Rosa-Croce, l’eterna manifestazione dell’amore che ci attira al centro unitario nel Dio, Centro Universale e Legge immutabile; [...] è una Dea, cioè la parte muliebre del classico tipo ideale del Dio Androgino [...]. Perché il volgare intenda questo nome, senza aver sudato sui vecchi scartafacci della Cabala ebraica, filosofia caduta in disgrazia dei moderni filosofi perché è osso duro alle bocche meglio indurite ai vetusti parlari delle scuole sapienti antiche, s’immagini Myriam come tipo della più benefica divinità, pulcrissima Diana, incantevole Iside miracolosa, o come il simbolo di uno stato speciale di purificazione dello spirito umano che è sorgente di tutti i più meravigliosi portenti”. Giuliano Kremmerz, *La scienza dei magi*, v. 3, 2006, p. 260. With regard to the Androgynous God, Kremmerz points out that “the Androgynous God, or simply the Androgyne, is the masculine and feminine God in one person; this symbol of the Kabbalists is intended to indicate the creative centre of the universe which is, at the same time, the mother and father of created things” (“il Dio androgino o semplicemente l’Androgino, è il Dio maschio e femmina in una sola persona; questo simbolo dei cabalisti vuole indicare il centro creatore dell’universo che è, contemporaneamente, madre e padre delle cose create”). *Ibid.*

This passage highlights that the Rose of the Order of Myriam is also the Mystic Rose of the Rosicrucians, as well as the Rose of “Miraculous Isis”, the Rose that Kremmerz calls “the Rose of Isis”<sup>9</sup> in his “Kabbalistic letter”<sup>10</sup> to Oswald Düsselndorf. But the rose of Myriam is also the mystical rose of Dante, for “the secret of Myriam”<sup>11</sup> corresponds to the secret of Love, which, according to Kremmerz, is the love praised by Dante in the Middle Ages and in the nineteenth century by poets such as Giacomo Leopardi – a love that is an initiation, a love linked to death, as the author of the *Scienza dei Magi* says, addressing the reader: “Love and death are the two factors of life. By loving, you will repel the pain of death. [...] Dante repeats it in mysterious accents here and there and Leopardi praises it as if in an aura of transaction and desire”.<sup>12</sup> Not only does Leopardi share, according to Kremmerz, an esoteric knowledge in the form of love, but also other poets of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, whom he calls “mystical poets”, such as Giosuè Carducci and Gabriele D’Annunzio: “Carducci and D’Annunzio are mystical poets, just like Dante. Dante belonged to the school of love poetry”.<sup>13</sup> The Kremmerzian school claims to be the bearer, or rather the holder, of this occult knowledge, which is said to have linked figures from different periods such as Homer, Aristotle, Plato, Virgil, Horace, Tibullus, Propertius, Catullus, Statius, Ovid, Cicero, Avicenna, Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Tasso and Giordano Bruno.

The book *La Chiave della Sapienza Ermetica* (The Key to Hermetic Wisdom) by Riccardo Donato (published in Italy by Rebis, specialised in the field of esotericism) outlines and provides details of the teaching of Pythagorean wisdom of the Esoteric School of Naples, whose chief exponent was Giuliano Kremmerz. The author expounds and quotes directly from the teachings of the Masters of the Neapolitan esoteric school, in particular Domenico Bocchini, Giuliano Lebano, Pasquale De Servis (alias Izar Bne Escur), Ottaviano and Giuliano Kremmerz. The contents of the works of these authors are brought together in Riccardo Donato’s book.<sup>14</sup> What is relevant is that *La Chiave della Sapienza Ermetica* links the esoteric School of Naples with the protagonists central to my research on the initiatory symbolism of the rose – from ancient mythology to Dantean esotericism, the French troubadours, the alchemy

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<sup>9</sup> “La Rosa d’Iside”. *Ibid.*, p. 627.

<sup>10</sup> “Lettera cabalistica”. *Ibid.*, p. 625.

<sup>11</sup> “Il secreto della Myriam”. Giuliano Kremmerz, *La scienza dei Magi*, v. 1, 2008, p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> “Amore e Morte sono i due fattori della Vita. Amando allontanerete il dolore della Morte. [...] Dante ve lo ripete con accenti misteriosi qui e là e Leopardi lo cantò come in un’aura di transazione e di desiderio”. *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> “Sono mistici poeticamente il Carducci e il D’Annunzio; lo fu pure Dante. Dante appartenne alla scuola della poesia dell’amore”. Giuliano Kremmerz, *La scienza dei Magi*, v. 3, p. 251.

<sup>14</sup> In the introduction to *La scienza dei Magi*, Giuliano Kremmerz is presented as the heir of “a solitary initiate, known by the hermeticists as Izar, depositary and continuer of an esoteric centre of Egyptian tradition” (“un solitario iniziato, conosciuto dagli ermetisti con il nome di Izar, depositario e continuatore di un centro esoterico di tradizione egizia”). Giuliano Kremmerz, *La scienza dei Magi*, v. 1, p. V.

of Pierre Dujols and Fulcanelli, passing through nineteenth-century literature.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, Gabriele Rossetti is seen as one of the main models for understanding the hermetic wisdom. An allusion to the link between Rossetti's theories and Kremmerz's esoteric doctrine can be found in the "Introduction" to the edition of *Il Mistero dell'Amor Platonico* published in 2013 by the Milanese publishing house *Luni*, where Paolo Peluffo acknowledges that, like Rossetti, "Giuliano Kremmerz [...] traces the function of transmitting the secret messages of the sects back to medieval initiations, while condemning the 'negatively poetic' readings of Dante".<sup>16</sup> The allusion made by Paolo Peluffo is confirmed in *La Chiave della Sapienza Ermetica*, where the *Mistero dell'Amor Platonico* is mentioned several times (entire passages are quoted),<sup>17</sup> as well as sources used by Rossetti, such as Carlo Vecchione.<sup>18</sup> The entire esoteric doctrine expounded in this work, which summarises the teaching of the Neapolitan school, is centred on the *topos* of love and on the symbol of the rose. It is a "Mystical Rose"<sup>19</sup> linked to initiation and magic, because, according to the teaching of the Parthenopean school, the initiation is a magical act.

Kremmerz uses the metaphor of the rose to show the difficulty of unlocking the mysteries of the occult knowledge: "mysteries are found in sacred words like roses in the thorn-bushes".<sup>20</sup> But beyond this metaphor featuring the rose, what is relevant is that the rose represents the symbol that Kremmerz believed hides the esoteric doctrine of love – a doctrine of Dante and the Neoplatonic school, as we note in *La scienza dei Magi*:

The Neoplatonic initiation or known as such, from which Dante drew the concept of his writings, still wanted to make use of some ruins of the sacred language; thus many things in the *Vita Nova*, the *Banquet* and the *Comedy* bear the signs of it, even where the meaning of the words appears clearer, as in the name of Beatrice, where there are – for those who know what I mean – the indications of the Rose.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See Piero Fenili, "Nota introduttiva", in Riccardo Donato, *La Chiave della Sapienza Ermetica secondo Giuliano Kremmerz, Domenico Bocchini, Giustiniano Lebano*, 2 v. Viareggio, Rebis, 2012-2015, v. 1, 2012, p. 8.

<sup>16</sup> "Giuliano Kremmerz [...] fa risalire alle iniziazioni medievali la funzione di veicolare i messaggi segreti delle sette, condannando intanto le letture 'negativamente poetiche' di Dante". Paolo Peluffo, "Introduzione", in Gabriele Rossetti, *Il mistero dell'Amor platonico del Medio Evo*, v. I, p. XXXI.

<sup>17</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 45-46, 137-138; Riccardo Donato, *La Chiave della Sapienza Ermetica secondo Giuliano Kremmerz, Domenico Bocchini, Giustiniano Lebano*, v. 2, p. 45, 194, 214-215, 241.

<sup>18</sup> See, for instance, *ibid.*, v. 1, p. 33, 86; v. 2, p. 202, 214. Vecchione is quoted in the "Poetry" entry of *La Chiave della Sapienza Ermetica* (v. 2), where Vecchione considers Dante as an esoteric poet who shares an esoteric doctrine with Homer, Virgil, Horace, Ovid and Lucan. See *ibid.*, p. 202-203.

<sup>19</sup> "Rosa Mistica". *Ibid.*, v. 2, p. 91.

<sup>20</sup> "I misteri si trovano nelle parole sacre come le rose negli spineti". Giuliano Kremmerz, *La scienza dei Magi*, v. 2, p. 261.

<sup>21</sup> "L'iniziazione neo-platonica o conosciuta per tale, in cui Dante vi trasse il concetto dei suoi scritti, voleva ancora servirsi di qualche rudero della lingua sacra; così molte cose di Vita Nuova, del Convito e della Commedia ne portano i segni, anche dove appare più chiaro il senso delle parole, come nel nome di Beatrice, in cui vi è – per chi sa di che voglio parlare – le indicazioni della Rosa". *Ibid.*, p. 314.

The last few words are particularly interesting, since Kremmerz states that the rose corresponds to Beatrice, adding that this correspondence is understandable only by those who can grasp what he means. There is clear evidence here of the elitist and secret character of the esoteric knowledge evoked by Kremmerz, who stresses the importance of the figure of Dante, considered as a poet who knows the secrets of magical initiation: “Dante [...] wrote the most complete ritual of magical initiation”.<sup>22</sup> This is also confirmed elsewhere:

Dante, like his Neoplatonist predecessors and contemporaries, was an initiate into the high truths of divine magic, an occultist, as one would say today, but one of those who could be called poets in the ancient manner, when the Orphic initiation had perpetuated in the Western world the secret of singing to the vulgar world, under allegorical features and flat forms, the most secret truths of the initiatory sanctuary.<sup>23</sup>

According to Kremmerz, in the Middle Ages, Dante and the love poets possessed the secret truths of the initiatory sanctuary, and during the Renaissance this hidden knowledge was held by the Platonic academies. Thus, “the academies were initiatory schools” that transmitted an occult doctrine, “under the opulent pontifical reign of Leone dei Medici, in the sumptuous luxury and magnificence of the Roman court”.<sup>24</sup> It is the same filiation that can be found in the syncretism of Nerval or Péladan, and the same initiatory lineage that was the source of Gabriele Rossetti’s research. On this subject, Kremmerz specifies the literary works in which the occult doctrine can be found, confirming what Gabriele Rossetti and the Dantean heterodox school theorised: “*The Roman de la Rose*, the courts of love, the knights errant, [...] the Knights of France... delve into these things [...] and you will find the occult medlar”.<sup>25</sup>

Kremmerz confirms a concept that was central to the question of the esotericism of the *Fedeli d’Amore* in the Middle Ages, namely the importance of the medieval Courts of Love

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<sup>22</sup> “Dante che ha scritto il più completo rituale d’iniziazione magica”. Giuliano Kremmerz, *Il mondo segreto. Il mondo segreto. Anno 1896. Spiritismo, magia, arte ermetica* [1896], v. 1, Verona, Edizioni CdL, 2015, p. 16.

<sup>23</sup> “Dante, come i neoplatonici suoi precursori e contemporanei, era un iniziato alle alte verità della magia divina, un occultista, come si direbbe oggi, ma di quelli che potevano essere salutati poeti alla maniera antica, quando l’iniziazione orfica aveva perpetuato nel mondo occidentale il segreto di cantare pel volgo, sotto sembianze allegoriche e forme piane, le verità più segrete del santuario iniziatico”. Giuliano Kremmerz, *La scienza dei Magi*, v. 2, p. 275. This passage, contained in *La scienza dei Magi*, is taken from Giuliano Kremmerz’s *Angeli e Demoni dell’Amore* (Angels and Demons of Love, 1898). This work attracted the attention of Hans Thomas Hakl, who has highlighted the relationship between magic, eros and “transcendent states”, pointing out that these states are “reminiscent of the so-called *Fedeli d’Amore* of the Middle Ages, although women seem to be more strongly involved in Kremmerz’s case”. Hans Thomas Hakl, “The Theory and Practice of Sexual Magic, Exemplified by Four Magical Groups in the Early Twentieth Century”, in *Hidden Intercourse. Eros and Sexuality in the History of Western Esotericism*, p. 451.

<sup>24</sup> “Le accademie furono scuole iniziatiche, [...] sotto il fastoso regno pontificale di Leone dei Medici, nel lusso opulento e nella magnificenza della corte romana”. Giuliano Kremmerz, *Il mondo segreto. Il mondo segreto. Anno 1896. Spiritismo, magia, arte ermetica* [1896], v. 1, p. 16.

<sup>25</sup> “Il romanzo della rosa, le corti di amore, i cavalieri erranti, [...] i Cavalieri di Francia...scava dentro a queste cose [...] e vi troverai il nespolo occulto”. Giuliano Kremmerz, *La scienza dei Magi*, v. 2, p. 330.

which, Kremmerz believed, passed on “the key to the hermetic Wisdom”<sup>26</sup> that entered contemporary literature and influenced future literature. Thus, “*The Romance of the Rose* and the medieval courts of love, the cantatas of the trouvères and troubadours, poems such as those of Alighieri and the minor ones of Brunetto Latini and others”,<sup>27</sup> all these poetic examples represent the keys to the Hermetic wisdom, which is based on the concept of love: “no one was a poet without love; poetry is painted like love; but in love there is truth”.<sup>28</sup> And, according to Kremmerz, Love means the rose: “the Mystic Rose is a Rose of Love”.<sup>29</sup>

### *The Secret World according to Kremmerz*

As we have seen so far, the occult knowledge expounded by Kremmerz and his school is based on the doctrine of love and the mystery of the rose, fitting into an initiatory tradition linking antiquity from Virgil to Dante and the Renaissance of Giordano Bruno to the time of Kremmerz. The arcane wisdom must be concealed, as Kremmerz is at pains to stress, by initiatory silence so as not to divulge this initiatory knowledge to unworthy minds and especially to the populace, the so-called “*cave canem*”, or the masses, “the chorus of the great comedy of social life”,<sup>30</sup> the Cerberus attacked by Hercules.<sup>31</sup> Knowledge of the hermetic secret requires, in fact, an adequate mental and physical preparation, without which the individual suffers harmful consequences, leading to madness. The symbol used by Kremmerz to indicate the initiatory perils is the serpent, the astral serpent, which is not dangerous when it sleeps in man but becomes deadly when awakened: “as long as you live the common life, the Serpent protects you and sleeps, but as soon as you try to violate its bounds, it awakens and hisses loudly, squeezes and oppresses you”.<sup>32</sup> For this reason, Kremmerz’s advice is to stay away from occult realities, which have to do with the invisible, astral dimension, and do nothing but destroy people’s health: “I exhort you to stay away from the great astral intoxications, because your

<sup>26</sup> “La chiave della Sapienza ermetica”. Giuliano Kremmerz, *Il mondo segreto. Il mondo secreto. Anno 1896. Spiritismo, magia, arte ermetica*, v. 1, p. 16.

<sup>27</sup> “Il *Romanzo della Rosa* e le Corti di Amore dell’Evo Medio, le cantate dei trovieri e dei trovatori, i poemi come quelli dell’Alighieri e i minori di Brunetto Latini e di altri.” Giuliano Kremmerz, *La scienza dei Magi*, v. 1, p. 370.

<sup>28</sup> “Nessuno fu poeta senza amore; la poesia è dipinta come l’amore; ma nell’amore vi è la verità”. *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> “La Rosa Mistica è Rosa di Amore”. *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> “*Cave canem*”; “il coro della grande commedia della vita sociale”. Giuliano Kremmerz, *Il mondo segreto. Il mondo secreto. Anno 1896. Spiritismo, magia, arte ermetica*, v. 1, p. 9.

<sup>31</sup> According to the teaching of the Neapolitan School, Cerberus represents the people and the chain around his neck is but the law necessary to domesticate him, while Hercules represents the initiate who overcomes the initiatory tests. Hence the efforts of Hercules, which were simply the stages of initiation, as we read in *La Chiave della Sapienza Ermetica*: “the extraordinary powers of Hercules were all the degrees of initiation one had to go through until one reached Wisdom” (“le favolose forze di Ercole erano tutti i gradi dell’iniziazione che si dovevano percorrere fino a che si perveniva alla Sapienza”). Riccardo Donato, *La Chiave della Sapienza Ermetica*, v. 2, p. 8. The common people, on the other hand, need the fable that consists of honey and the mystical poppy, meaning the drug that makes people sleepy and docile. See *ibid.*, v. 1, p. 149.

<sup>32</sup> “Finché si vive la vita comune, il Serpente vi protegge e dorme, ma appena tentate di violarne i limiti, egli si sveglia e sibila forte, vi stringe e vi opprime”. Giuliano Kremmerz, *La scienza dei Magi*, v. 1, p. 237.

health will suffer”.<sup>33</sup> Even the initiated aspirant can be completely struck down by this power which leads to the physical and psychic destruction of the individual. The Guardian of the Threshold is the figure who opposes novices unworthy of receiving full initiation, and, speaking of the Guardian of the Threshold, Kremmerz advises the reader to “read carefully”<sup>34</sup> a work that I have dealt with extensively in the previous chapters: *Zanoni* by Edward Bulwer Lytton. It is in this novel that we can find, as Kremmerz writes, the esoteric truths that allow us to “understand all the dangers of non-preparation”<sup>35</sup> when one experiences initiation, and especially in the encounter with the Guardian of the Threshold, corresponding to Dante’s Minos and Cerberus, as Emma Cusani remarks in her theosophical interpretation of *The Divine Comedy*.<sup>36</sup> However, if for an aspiring initiate it is very difficult to overcome this crucial initiatory test, for the common man it is impossible since the final result is madness and the destruction of health. From this derives the need to hide the secret doctrine from the profane: *procul este profani*.

The secret doctrine is related to what Kremmerz calls “Hermetic philosophy”, namely “the science that studies the hidden and ignored powers of man”,<sup>37</sup> and the initiation gives birth to this occult man, “the real man”.<sup>38</sup> In order to achieve this new persona, it is necessary to eliminate the passions because, as Ugo Danilo Cisaria writes in his *Dizionario dei Termini Ermetici dall’Opera Omnia di Giuliano Kremmerz* (Dictionary of Hermetic Terms in the Opera Omnia by Giuliano Kremmerz),<sup>39</sup> “hermetic philosophy wants us to be free of passionate impulses”.<sup>40</sup> Summarising Kremmerz’s esoteric doctrine, Cisaria comments that “when the human mind is under the hurricane of unguided passions, the larvae of desire, the partially

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<sup>33</sup> “Vi esorto a non darvi in balia alle grandi ubriacature astrali, perché ne risentirebbe la vostra salute”. *Ibid.*, v. 3, p. 651.

<sup>34</sup> “Leggere attentamente”. *Ibid.*, v. 1, p. 238.

<sup>35</sup> “Per comprendere tutto il pericolo delle impreparazioni”. *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> See Emma Cusani, *op. cit.*, p. 123-128.

<sup>37</sup> “La filosofia ermetica è la scienza che investiga i poteri nascosti e ignorati dell’uomo”. *La scienza dei Magi. Dizionario dei Termini Ermetici dall’Opera Omnia di Giuliano Kremmerz a cura di Ugo Danilo Cisaria* [1976], ed. Ugo Danilo Cisaria, Rome, Edizioni Mediterranee, v. 4., 2009, p. 162.

<sup>38</sup> I quote the entire passage: “the initiation begins in reality and not in words, as soon as the inner voice, the Christ, the Nebo, the Angel, the Genius, has arisen in vulgar man. In other words, the Vita Nova [the New Life] in the path of the solitudes unexplored by the vulgar begins as soon as the mercurial separand is obtained subjectively or objectively. As soon as the occult body impregnated by the sun and physical actions gives birth to the meaningful Christ, that is the separate Christ, or rather the occult man different in power and virtue from the physical man, initiation begins, that is to say the real man speaks in the visible man” (“l’iniziazione comincia realmente e non a parole, appena nell’uomo volgare è spuntata la voce interna, il Cristo, il Nebo, l’Angelo, il Genio. In altri termini la Vita Nova nel cammino delle solitudini inesplorate dai volgari. Comincia appena il separando mercuriale si è ottenuto soggettivamente o oggettivamente. Appena il corpo occulto impregnato dal sole e dalle azioni fisiche partorisce il Cristo loquente, cioè il Cristo separato, o meglio l’uomo occulto differente in potenza e virtù dall’uomo fisico, l’iniziazione comincia, cioè l’uomo vero parla nell’uomo visibile”). Manuscript by Kremmerz, in Riccardo Donato, *La Chiave della Sapienza Ermetica*, v. 2, p. 100.

<sup>39</sup> The *Dizionario dei Termini Ermetici dall’Opera Omnia di Giuliano Kremmerz* is the fourth volume of *La scienza dei Magi*.

<sup>40</sup> “La filosofia ermetica ci vuole senza stimoli passionali”. *La scienza dei Magi. Dizionario dei Termini Ermetici dall’Opera Omnia di Giuliano Kremmerz a cura di Ugo Danilo Cisaria*, p. 301.



emitted fluids, do not spare those who gave birth to them, whoever they may be, and prepare them for psychic disorders”.<sup>41</sup> More precisely, “larvae are [...] the abortions of the operations of desire in which the will of man in its healthy state is absorbed by the undisciplined greed”.<sup>42</sup>

This discourse on the passions, on desire, and therefore on thought is fundamental for Kremmerz and directly linked to Power, to the domination of the masses, notably through religion, as the founder of the Order of Myriam says: “mine is not a criticism but an indignation when I think of the mystical lies inoculated and distilled over so many centuries by religions that had goals of human domination over the psyche of billions of souls who understood redemption as slavery to a cycle of pain and spasms”.<sup>43</sup> According to Kremmerz, “the theocracies aimed at nothing more than the domination of man by his soul; then the church absorbed, without the science of the human soul, the powers of the old theocracies and prevented the spiritual problem from being discussed and investigated”.<sup>44</sup> It is thus a work on the human soul, on the psyche of human beings, and this domination is, according to Kremmerz, a magical act carried out by religious Power. In fact, he claims that it is “only through a work of magic” that “religion has acquired [the] predominance over consciences”.<sup>45</sup> For Kremmerz, magic is the Arcane Wisdom, which is divided into two forms of magic: natural magic and divine magic. Natural magic “studies all phenomena due to the occult qualities of the human organism”,<sup>46</sup> while divine magic “makes possible the relations of man with the higher natures invisible to the vulgar eye”.<sup>47</sup> The latter form of magic “is all based on the familiarity of extraterrestrial powers that all priestly societies have concealed with symbols, characters, strange figures or even in fables and myths”.<sup>48</sup> Kremmerz stated that there were secrets held by theocracies, priestly societies, and more generally by religious Power in order to dominate the masses – secrets that have to do with magic, the soul and the thoughts of human beings:

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<sup>41</sup> “Quando la mente umana è sotto l’uragano delle passioni senza guida, le larve del desiderio, fluidi emessi parzialmente, non risparmiano chi le ha partorite, chiunque esso sia, e lo preparano a disordini mentali”. *Ibid.*, p. 216.

<sup>42</sup> “Le larve sono [...] gli aborti delle operazioni del desiderio in cui la volontà dell’uomo allo stato sano è assorbita dalla sregolatezza della cupidigia”. *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> “La mia non è critica ma è sdegno quando penso alle menzogne mistiche inoculate e distillate per tanti secoli da religioni che ebbero mire di dominio umano sulla psiche di miliardi di anime che intendono la redenzione come la schiavitù ad un ciclo di dolori e di spasmi”. Giuliano Kremmerz, “Lettera di Giuliano Kremmerz a una madre che ha perduto la figlia”, in Riccardo Donato, *La Chiave della Sapienza Ermetica*, v. 2, p. 206.

<sup>44</sup> “Le teocrazie non ebbero di mira che il dominio dell’uomo per mezzo della sua anima; poi la chiesa assorbì, senza la scienza dell’anima umana, i poteri delle antiche teocrazie e impedì che il problema spirituale fosse discusso e investigato”. Giuliano Kremmerz, *I Tarocchi dal punto di vista filosofico*, Montevarchi (Ar), Harmakis Edizioni, 2016, p. 33.

<sup>45</sup> “Per sola opera di magia la religione acquistò [la] predominanza sulle coscienze”. Giuliano Kremmerz, *La scienza dei Magi*, v. 1, p. 330.

<sup>46</sup> “Studia tutti i fenomeni dovuti alle qualità occulte dell’organismo umano”. *Ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>47</sup> “Rend[e] possibili le relazioni dell’uomo con la nature superiori invisibili all’occhio volgare”. *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> “È tutta fondata sulla familiarità di potenze extraterrene che tutte le società sacerdotali hanno nascosto con simboli, con caratteri, con figure strane o addirittura in favole e miti”. *Ibid.*

There is, and always has been, an initiatory secret which can give man the key to his essence, pierce the veil of his occult being and reveal to him the science of his true evolution. In possession of this secret, man [...] can appear as a demigod.

This secret has always been jealously guarded by the ancient Theocracies [...].<sup>49</sup>

There is a passage in *La scienza dei Magi* which perfectly sums up this relationship between a profane and submissive humanity and an elite authority that uses the ignorance of human beings to manipulate them:

Humanity, that is to say, all the human races of all the historical or forgotten centuries, constantly presents the aspect of two great classes: of a PEOPLE and of an INTELLECTUAL ARISTOCRACY which either governs it by fear of the unknown, or simply educates it by exploiting its advantages for its own benefit. The VOLGO, in relation to the INTELLECTUAL ARISTOCRACY, asserts itself as the ignorance of all the laws of nature and the fruit of the passions of which it is the victim, in front of a group of few people who, knowing the laws that the others ignore, assume the patronage, the government, the destiny of the inferiors. This spectacle, uniform in substance in every century, takes on different aspects according to the state of development of the factors, and when the PEOPLE acquire a gradual consciousness and science for their own research and experience, they aim at the destruction of the old tutelage. In this general, synthetic picture, the novice must not see in the ruling aristocracies the only element of the physical and combative forces of political societies, but above all the great collector of mental energies and spiritual knowledge, which depend on religions, and therefore on PRIESTHOODS. The mystical, traditional, figurative TEMPLE is erected on two columns which symbolise the whole architecture of society in terms of these two forces which balance the arc of the building. The PEOPLE are characterised by their great fear not of the known visible, but of the unknown; the priests have made of this Unknown a weapon of tyranny, assuring themselves of a monopoly on it and passing off as miracles (that is to say facts and events outside the laws of nature) facts and events which obey Laws ignored by the people.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> “Esiste ed è sempre esistito un segreto iniziatico, che può conferire all’uomo la chiave della sua essenza, squarciare il velo del suo essere occulto e svelargli la scienza della sua vera evoluzione. In possesso di tale segreto l’uomo [...] può apparire un semideo.

Cotesto segreto è stato sempre gelosamente custodito dalle antiche Teocrazie”. Giuliano Kremmerz, *La scienza dei Magi*, v. 2, p. V.

<sup>50</sup> “L’umanità, cioè tutte le razze umane prese insieme in tutti i secoli storici o dimenticati, presenta costantemente l’aspetto di due grandi classi: di un VOLGO e di una ARISTOCRAZIA INTELLETTUALE che o lo governa con la paura dell’ignoto o semplicemente lo educa sfruttandone al suo beneficio i vantaggi. Il VOLGO rispetto alla ARISTOCRAZIA INTELLETTUALE si afferma come l’ignoranza di tutte le leggi della natura e il frutto delle passioni di cui è vittima, di fronte ad un gruppo di pochi che, conoscendo le leggi che gli altri ignorano, si assume il patronato, il governo, il destino degli inferiori. Questo spettacolo, uniforme nella sostanza in ogni secolo, assume aspetti differenti secondo lo stato di sviluppo dei fattori, e quando il VOLGO acquista coscienza e scienza gradualmente per la propria ricerca ed esperienza mira alla distruzione della vecchia tutela. In questo quadro generale, sintetico, il novizio non deve vedere nelle aristocrazie dominatrici il solo elemento di forze fisiche e combattive delle società politiche, ma soprattutto il grande collettore delle energie mentali e delle conoscenze spirituali, che fanno capo alle religioni, quindi ai SACERDOZI. Il TEMPIO mistico, tradizionale, figurativo, è eretto su due colonne che simboleggiano tutta l’architettura della società in base a queste due forze equilibranti l’arcata dell’edificio. Il VOLGO si afferma caratteristicamente con la grande paura non del visibile noto, ma dell’ignoto; i sacerdoti di questo Ignoto hanno fatto un’arma di tirannia, assicurandosene il monopolio e facendo passare per miracoli (cioè fatti e avvenimenti fuori le leggi della natura) fatti e avvenimenti che obbediscono a leggi ignorate dal volgo”. Giuliano Kremmerz, *Fasc. B., i prelim. di Pace*, in Riccardo Donato, *La Chiave della Sapienza Ermetica* v. 2, p. 208.

These words of Giuliano Kremmerz find confirmation in Leone Caetani, who underlines the tyrannical character of religious Power: “the free man wants a free religion without the tyranny of churches. Religion based on authority is the spiritual death of man and makes all evolution impossible. Man becomes a parasite and his religion becomes parasitic”.<sup>51</sup> This statement by Leone Caetani is extremely important because it is pronounced by a figure who was closely linked to the Vatican milieu, since, as I have mentioned, he belonged to a family that produced two pontiffs, namely Gelasius II (1119) and Boniface VIII (1235-1303). The harsh assertions against papal Power did not, however, come from someone we would call today a conspirator or conspiracy theorist, but were expressed by a person who, more than any other, was closely linked to the papal milieu, as was his grandfather Michelangelo Caetani, whom we arrive at through Balzac’s and Dante’s esotericism.

Once again, Dantean esotericism is involved in an initiatory tradition that seems to go beyond literature and touches the boundaries of politics, religion and modern esoteric currents, one of the most influential of which is the Neapolitan school of Giuliano Kremmerz in the early twentieth century. It is no coincidence that the historian Giorgio Galli, in his book *La magia e il potere*, devotes a chapter to Giuliano Kremmerz, linking him to Dantean esotericism. The chapter is entitled “Dante e l’esoterismo fascista”<sup>52</sup> (“Dante and Fascist Esotericism”) in which Giorgio Galli, in his analysis of right-wing culture, speaks of Dantean esotericism (mentioning Gabriele Rossetti)<sup>53</sup> and Giuliano Kremmerz. On the latter, quoting Massimo Introvigne, Galli highlights the links between Kremmerzian esoteric circles and Italian politics, showing that the magic expounded by Kremmerz had to do not only with literature and a vague bookish mysticism, but also with politics, since politicians, ambassadors and diplomats are reputed to have attended meetings of the Italian Kremmerzian school groups in the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>54</sup> Esotericism, politics, religion and magic are intertwined in Kremmerz and in the protagonists of the School of Myriam. We have seen that Myriam means rose, and the rose and love are, according to Kremmerz, the keys to understanding the secret doctrine hidden in the literature of every era, from Virgil to Dante, from Boccaccio to D’Annunzio. But the rose also appears in the name of a mysterious character mentioned by Kremmerz, Mamo-Rosar-Amor, who predicts the future. In letters signed by Formisano, alias Kremmerz, Maro-Rosar-

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<sup>51</sup> “L’uomo libero vuole libera religione senza tirannie di chiese. La Religione fondata sulla autorità è la morte spirituale dell’uomo e rende impossibile ogni evoluzione. L’uomo diviene un parassita e parassitaria diventa la sua religione”. Leone Caetani, *Il Cattolicesimo anti clericale e la ribellione contro il Papato* [1910], ed. Fulvio Tessitore, Rome, Scienze e lettere, Editore commerciale, 2015, p. 10.

<sup>52</sup> Giorgio Galli, *La magia e il potere. L’esoterismo nella politica occidentale*, p. 215-245.

<sup>53</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 222, 227.

<sup>54</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 236-237.

Amru is presented as “the initiator of a seeding mission”<sup>55</sup> (28 February 1929), and in a letter dated 26 February 1929 the words refer to a future that awaits a revelation: “when Mamo-Rosar-Amru returns, everything will be possible because out of the ashes and lapilli the seed of a new philosophy will germinate”.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> “L’iniziatore di una missione di semina”. In *ibid.*, p. 237

<sup>56</sup> “Quando Mamo-Rosar-Amru ritornerà, tutto sarà possibile perché sulle ceneri e lapilli sboccherà il germoglio di una nuova filosofia”. In *ibid.*



## CHAPTER XV

### THE ENCOUNTER BETWEEN ESOTERICISM AND EUROPEAN LITERATURE THROUGH THE ROSE

#### *Insights into floral mysticism in European literature*

This chapter aims to study the symbolism of the rose in various poets or writers of French, English, Italian and, more generally, European literature, focusing also on little known authors, at least beyond the national confines of the respective literatures. However, the breadth of the subject prevents a thorough treatment of the symbolism of the rose in European literature. If we consider, for example, French literature, the literary production of Charles Baudelaire would merit a separate study. He devoted an entire work to flowers, *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857), where the “sickly flowers”<sup>1</sup> represent the central theme of Baudelaire’s poetry, and in which we find, for example, the “rosy bower”<sup>2</sup> or the “pale roses”.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, in Baudelaire floral mysticism goes hand in hand with the *topos* of love, of a love that “sits on the skull / of Humanity”,<sup>4</sup> a love that, in *Les Bienfaits de la lune* (in which the author addresses his ideal woman) acts as a religion, an unknown religion of love:

You will love what I love, and whatever loves me [...]; the lover you do not know; monstrous flowers [...].  
And you will be loved by my lovers, courted by those who court me. You will be the queen of green-eyed men [...]; of those who love [...] the women they do not know, the sinister flowers like the censers of an unknown religion.<sup>5</sup>

As Marc Eigeldinger remarks, “love is for him [Baudelaire] an esoteric religion, a myth elaborated by the mind and preserved from contingencies by the halo of a sacred mystery”.<sup>6</sup> One can thus speak of an esotericism of Baudelaire, which has been studied by Paul Arnauld in his *L’Ésotérisme de Baudelaire*,<sup>7</sup> and potentially a relationship with Dante, as Léon Cellier has shown.<sup>8</sup> There are also other poets whose esoteric dimension has not yet been studied, in whom the rose transmits a mystical message linked to love as, for example, in the case of Catulle

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *A Voyage to Cythera*, in *ibid.*, p. 257.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *The Ideal*, in *ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *Passion and the Skull*, in *ibid.*, p. 259.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen and La Fanfarlo*, translated, with Introduction and Notes, by Raymond N. MacKenzie, Indianapolis/Cambridge, Hackett Publishing Company, 2008, p. 78.

<sup>6</sup> “L’amour est pour lui [Baudelaire] une religion ésotérique, un mythe élaboré par l’esprit et préservé des contingences par le halo d’un mystère sacré”. Marc Eigeldinger, *Le Platonisme de Baudelaire*, Neuchâtel, La Baconnière, 1952, p. 53.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Arnauld, *L’Ésotérisme de Baudelaire*, Paris, Vrin, 1972.

<sup>8</sup> See Léon Cellier, “Baudelaire et les Limbes”, *Studi Francesi*, 24, September-December 1964, p. 432-441.

Mendès (1841-1909) who speaks of “a rose of an April month”,<sup>9</sup> or Paul Verlaine (1844-1896) who, in his *Dialogue mystique* (Mystical Dialogue) evokes “the rose / immense pure winds of Love”.<sup>10</sup> However, I shall begin this chapter by talking about the mystical rose of Arthur Rimbaud and Paul Valéry and finish with Fernando Pessoa and Reiner Maria Rilke. In these authors there is no apparent relationship with the tradition of the *Fedeli d'Amore*, but an imperceptible thread does seem to link them, even if indirectly, with the esoteric tradition of love mentioned so far, as we will see in the following pages.

### *The Rosa mystica of Rimbaud*

As far as the symbolism of the rose is concerned, a poet of particular interest is Arthur Rimbaud<sup>11</sup> for whom this flower plays a cardinal role, in poems such as *L'étoile à pleuré rose* (The star wept rose-colored...), *Soleil et chair* (Sun and Flesh), *Mémoire* (Memory), and *Fleurs* (Flowers).<sup>12</sup> The rose is also present in Rimbaud's poem to Banville, *Ce qu'on dit au Poète à propos de fleurs* (What is Said to the Poet Concerning Flowers), where mystery permeates this poetic composition, as confirmed by the penultimate stanza which evokes “the composition / of Poems full of mystery”.<sup>13</sup> More specifically, Rimbaud suggests to Banville what he should read “for the composition / of Poems full of mystery”:

for the composition  
Of Poems full of mystery

That are to be read from Tréguier  
To Paramaribo, buy  
Some Volumes of Monsieur Figuiet,  
Illustrated! – at Monsieur Hachette's!<sup>14</sup>

As Olivier Bivort remarks, “Louis Figuiet, whose works Rimbaud recommended to Banville in ‘What the Poet is Told on the Subject of Flowers’, is the author of the main popular work on alchemy in the nineteenth century: *L'Alchimie et les alchimistes. Essai historique et critique sur la philosophie hermétique* (Alchemy and the alchemists. Historical and critical essay on

<sup>9</sup> “Une rose d'un mois d'avril”. Catulle Mendès, *Le poète se souvient d'une fleur cueillie au printemps*, in *Anthologie des poètes français contemporains (1866-1914). Le Parnasse et les écoles postérieures au Parnasse (1866-1915). Morceaux choisis, accompagnés de notices bio- et bibliographiques et de nombreux autobiographes par G. Walch*, ed. G. Walch, Paris, Delagrave, Leyde, A.-W. Sijthoff, t. I, 1919, p. 260.

<sup>10</sup> “La Rose/ immense des purs vents de l'Amour”. Paul Verlaine, “Seigneur, c'est trop! Vraiment je n'ose. Aimer qui? Vous?”, *Sagesse*, II (IV, IV), in Paul Verlaine, *Œuvres poétiques complètes*, eds. Y.-G. Le Dantec and Jacques Borel, Paris, Gallimard, 1989, p. 269.

<sup>11</sup> I wish to thank André Guyaux for his precious teaching and advice on the literary production of Arthur Rimbaud, as well as of other poets and writers of nineteenth-century French literature.

<sup>12</sup> Arthur Rimbaud, *Complete Works, Selected Letters: a Bilingual Edition*, translated with an Introduction and Notes by Wallace Fowlie Updated, revised, and with a Foreword by Seth Whidden, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 2005, p. 134-136, 20-28, 164-166, 288-289.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

Hermetic philosophy)".<sup>15</sup> Thus, alchemy seems to play some role in the composition of “poems full of mystery”, and the rose is part of this mystery, along with the other Rimbaudian flowers that appear in *What is Said to the Poet Concerning Flowers*:

O Poets, if you had  
Roses, blown Roses,  
Red on laurel stems,  
And swollen with a thousand octaves!  
[...]  
– Pile of fried eggs in old hats,  
Lilies, Asokas, Lilacs and Roses! . . .<sup>16</sup>

Whilst we can probably link Rimbaud’s poetry to alchemy (at least the “Alchemy of the Word”), we cannot link his rose to that of Dante and the *Fedeli d’Amore*, nor to the esoteric tradition presented by Gabriele Rossetti in his *Mistero dell’Amor Platonico* or by Luigi Valli in his *Linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d’Amore*. However, links between the author of the *Illuminations* and *The Divine Comedy* have been proposed by scholars such as Jacqueline Risset,<sup>17</sup> who has highlighted the Dantean echoes present in Rimbaud, saying that “even if he [Rimbaud] never names Dante, [...] the vision that leads to the ‘dérèglement’ (derangement) finds its model in the Dantean vision, and precisely in the limit of the experience that the crossing of Paradise presupposes and induces”.<sup>18</sup> Whilst Jacqueline Risset has pointed out the analogies between Dante and Rimbaud, Margherita Frankel has not only shown the parallels between the two poets (what she calls “the close link between Dante and Rimbaud”)<sup>19</sup> but she has also considered *The Divine Comedy* as a fundamental key to Rimbaud’s work. The title of Margherita Frankel’s book is significant: *Le Code dantesque dans l’œuvre de Rimbaud* (Dante’s code in Rimbaud’s works, 1975). Moreover, what is even more significant is that this study is the only one, to my knowledge, that addresses the question of the relationship between Dante and Rimbaud by taking into consideration the esoteric interpretation of the heterodox school of Dantean studies. The only source linked to Dantean esotericism cited by the specialist in her bibliography is that of Eugène Aroux, *Dante, hérétique, révolutionnaire et socialiste*; therefore, once again there appears to be an indirect influence of Gabriele Rossetti, even though she

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<sup>15</sup> “Louis Figuier, dont Rimbaud recommandait la lecture à Banville dans ‘Ce qu’on dit au Poète à propos de fleurs’, est l’auteur du principal ouvrage de vulgarisation sur l’alchimie au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle: *L’Alchimie et les alchimistes. Essai historique et critique sur la philosophie hermétique*”. Olivier Bivort, “Remarques sur l’alchimie du verbe”, *Littératures*, n. 54, 2006, p. 139.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111-113.

<sup>17</sup> Jacqueline Risset is the author of the French translation of *The Divine Divine*, published by Flammarion in 2010 in the “Bibliothèque de la Pléiade” collection by Gallimard in 2021.

<sup>18</sup> “Même s’il [Rimbaud] ne nomme jamais Dante, [...] la vision sur laquelle débouche le ‘dérèglement’ trouve son modèle dans la vision dantesque, et précisément dans la limite de l’expérience que suppose et induit la traversée du Paradis”. Jacqueline Risset, “Une saison au Paradis. Rimbaud lecteur de Dante”, in *Rimbaud. Strategie verbali e forme della visione*, ed. S. Agosti, Pisa, ETS, 1993, p. 120.

<sup>19</sup> “La liaison étroite qui existe entre Dante et Rimbaud”. Margherita Frankel, *Le Code dantesque dans l’œuvre de Rimbaud*, Paris, Nizet, 1975, p. 54.



mentions the author of the *Mistero dell'Amor Platonico* several times. She states that “what will be called ‘Dante’s esotericism’ will become – from Aroux onwards and for a few years at least – the favourite subject of many Dante scholars and the favourite perspective from which his work will be considered, despite the attacks of more serious critics and scholars”, adding that “Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism, the Cabala, the Gnostic doctrines, those of the Templars, Albigenian Catharism, all these mysterious and initiatory cults, will be found in more or less forced interpretations of Dante’s works, both *The Divine Comedy* and the *Vita Nova*”.<sup>20</sup> Margherita Frankel speaks of “the path opened by Aroux”,<sup>21</sup> saying that “Aroux was probably influenced by the English-Italian Gabriele Rossetti”:<sup>22</sup> we have seen that Rossetti’s influence on Aroux was no probability rather, actual plagiarism. The translation of *The Divine Comedy* that she uses to show the analogies between Dante and Rimbaud is by Félicité Robert de Lamennais,<sup>23</sup> and, as she points out, “Lamennais sided with critics such as Foscolo, Rossetti and others who saw in *The Divine Comedy* an esoteric language charged with occult significance”.<sup>24</sup> In fact, Lamennais (whom Rimbaud mentions in his letter to Demeny on 15 May 1871 thus: “too many Belmontets and Lamennais, Jehovahs and columns, old broken enormities”),<sup>25</sup> considers *The Divine Comedy* to be a work containing “symbols of a secret religious and political doctrine”, whose language is based on “new meanings, obscure to the vulgar, known only to the adepts”, adding that it is “a kind of cipher that is unintelligible today, and probably always will be, especially as regards the political side”.<sup>26</sup> For her part, Margherita Frankel speaks of *The Divine Comedy* in terms of a work that describes the stages “of Dante’s initiation into the mysteries of an esoteric doctrine, an initiation that culminates in the final act of purification”<sup>27</sup> and, in her “reading of Rimbaud as a Dantean key”,<sup>28</sup> she explores “the parallels between Dante and Rimbaud”<sup>29</sup> devoting a section to the analogies between the

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<sup>20</sup> “Ce qu’on appellera ‘ésotérisme de Dante’ deviendra – à partir d’Aroux et pendant quelques années au moins – le sujet préféré de beaucoup de dantistes et l’angle favori sous lequel on considérera son œuvre, malgré les attaques de critiques et savants plus sérieux”; “Franc-maçonnerie, Rose-Croix, Cabale, les doctrines gnostiques, celles des Templiers, le catharisme albigeois, tous ces cultes mystérieux et initiatiques, on les retrouvera dans des interprétations plus ou moins forcées des œuvres de Dante, tant de *La Divine Comédie* que de *La Vie Nouvelle*”. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>21</sup> “Voie ouverte par Aroux”. *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> “Aroux avait probablement été influencé par l’italo-anglais Gabriele Rossetti”. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>23</sup> Dante, *La Divine Comédie*, translation by Félicité Robert de Lamennais, Paris, Paulin et Le Chevalier, 3 v., 1855.

<sup>24</sup> “Lamennais se range du côté de critiques tels que Foscolo, Rossetti et autres qui voyaient dans la *Divine Comédie* un langage ésotérique chargé de signification occulte”. Margherita Frankel, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

<sup>25</sup> Arthur Rimbaud, *op. cit.*, p. 379.

<sup>26</sup> “Symboles d’une doctrine secrète, religieuse et politique”; “des acceptions nouvelles, obscures pour le vulgaire, connues des seuls adeptes”; “une sorte de chiffre inintelligible aujourd’hui, et qui le sera probablement toujours, spécialement en ce qui concerne le côté politique”. Félicité Robert de Lamennais in Dante, *La Divine Comédie*, translation by Félicité Robert de Lamennais, v. 1, p. II-V.

<sup>27</sup> “De l’initiation de Dante aux mystères d’une doctrine ésotérique, initiation qui culmine dans l’acte final de purification”. Margherita Frankel, *op. cit.*, 56.

<sup>28</sup> “Lecture de Rimbaud en clef dantesque”. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>29</sup> “Les parallélismes entre Dante et Rimbaud”. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

Dantean rose and the Rimbaudian one, especially the rose in the poems *Mystic* and *Flowers*.<sup>30</sup> In particular, according to Margherita Frankel, the latter is “a transposition of the vision of the Empyrean where the blessed, in the form of a rose with a thousand steps, surround, together with the angels, that other rose which is the Virgin Mary and, finally, surround God himself”.<sup>31</sup>

As I have already said, Margherita Frankel’s contribution on the parallels between Dante and Rimbaud is, to my knowledge, the only one that also uses the exegetical criteria adopted by the “heterodox” current of Dantean studies. If we want to see a link between Rimbaud and the esoteric traditions of the *Fedeli d’Amore* and the troubadours, we must look for it in the works on alchemy of the early twentieth century, such as the writings of Pierre Dujols. In fact, in his book *La Chevalerie amoureuse*, the French bookseller and alchemist Pierre Dujols mentions Arthur Rimbaud as a poet summarising the doctrine of Love which he believes is the basis for the esoteric teachings of alchemy, the troubadours and the Rosicrucians. Thus, in his treatise on Joachim of Fiore’s “eternal gospel” prophesying the golden age, that of the Spirit, Pierre Dujols quotes a poem by Rimbaud which “sings of Venus liberator of the Cross with accents inspired by the Minnesänger”.<sup>32</sup> For Dujols, the love doctrine of the medieval love singers and the Rosicrucians of the Renaissance is perfectly summed up in Rimbaud, specifically in the poem *Sun and Flesh*. He cites two passages, from verse 45 to verse 50 and from verse 64 to 80, where the poet addresses the “Aphrodite of the sea”, the “Divine mother”:<sup>33</sup>

I believe in you! I believe in you! Divine mother,  
Aphrodite of the sea! – Oh! the way is bitter  
Since the other God harnessed us to his cross;  
Flesh, Marble, Flower, Venus, I believe in you!  
– Yes, Man is sad and ugly, sad under the vast sky.<sup>34</sup>

It is this marine Aphrodite who will arise to “give [...] holy Redemption”,<sup>35</sup> and this redemptive and mystical action has love as its subject:

You will rise up, casting over the wide Universe  
Infinite Love in its infinite smile!  
The World will vibrate like an immense lyre  
In the trembling of an immense kiss:

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<sup>30</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 151-162.

<sup>31</sup> “Une transposition de la vision de l’Empyrée où les bienheureux, en forme de rose aux mille gradins, entourent, ensemble avec les anges, cette autre rose qui est la Vierge Marie et, entourent, finalement, Dieu lui-même”. *Ibid.*, p. 161-162.

<sup>32</sup> “Il [Rimbaud] chante Vénus libératrice de la Croix avec des accents inspirés de minnesinger”. Pierre Dujols de Valois, *La Chevalerie amoureuse, troubadours, félibres et rose-croix*, p. 199.

<sup>33</sup> Arthur Rimbaud, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

But *Sun and Flesh* does not only praise love, it also evokes mystical flowers, notably the rose. Roses haunt Rimbaud's poetic imagination, and their mystical value has been well expressed by Michel Arouimi in his book *Écrire selon la rose*. In fact, in his study devoted to the rose of Victor Hugo, Michel Arouimi underlines the mystical meaning of flowers, particularly the rose, in Arthur Rimbaud.<sup>37</sup>

But can we speak of an esoteric Rimbaudian rose? Or rather, can we speak about an esoteric Rimbaud? Studies aimed at demonstrating Rimbaud's esotericism are very limited, but they do exist, and to start with we should mention the works of Rolland de Reneville and René Étiemble. *Rimbaud le voyant* by de Reneville and *Le Mythe de Rimbaud* by Étiemble are pioneer studies about the esotericism of the author of *Illuminations*, but other scholars devoted themselves to this dimension of the work of Rimbaud, such as Enid Starkie, Jacques Genoux, Georges Cattai and Jean Paul Corsetti, who showed the influence of esoteric ideas on Rimbaud.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, the author of *A Season in Hell* is included by Robert Amadou and Robert Kanters in their *Anthologie littéraire de l'occultisme* (Literary Anthology of the Occult, 1950), where Rimbaud is considered to be part of a series of writers and poets whose works are imbued with elements belonging to the esoteric tradition: Apuleius, Chrétien de Troyes, Leonardo da Vinci, Goethe, William Blake, Fabre d'Olivet, Novalis, Balzac, Hugo, Nerval, Poe, Baudelaire and Huysmans.<sup>39</sup> A scholar who recently highlighted the esoteric dimension of Rimbaud is Tessel Bauduin. In her study *Surrealism and the Occult* (2014), she highlights the influence that Rimbaud (and Nerval) had on Surrealism, a movement closely linked to occultism.<sup>40</sup>

However, whilst there are not many studies on the esoteric dimension of Rimbaud's work, some authoritative scholars have emphasised this aspect, which is present in his literary

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> See Michel Arouimi, *op. cit.*, p. 12, 429.

<sup>38</sup> On the the esoteric dimension of Rimbaud's work, see Isabelle Rimbaud, "Rimbaud mystique: *Les Illuminations* et *La Chasse spirituelle*", *Mercur de France*, n. 408, 16 June 1914; André Rolland de Renéville, *Rimbaud le voyant*, Paris, Au Sans pareil, 1929; Jacques Gengoux, *La Pensée poétique de Rimbaud*, Paris, Nizet, 1950; Antoine Adam, "L'énigme des *Illuminations*", *Revue des sciences humaines*, October-December 1950; René Étiemble, *Le Mythe de Rimbaud. Genèse du mythe. 1869-1949. Bibliographie analytique et critique suivie d'un supplément aux iconographies*, Paris, Gallimard, 1952; Enid Starkie, *Arthur Rimbaud*, London, Faber and Faber, 1961, p. 95-213; Georges Cattai, *op. cit.*, p. 135-151; Jean Richer, *L'Alchimie du verbe de Rimbaud ou les Jeux de Jean-Arthur. Essai sur l'imagination du langage*, Paris, Didier, 1972; Maria Luisa Premuda Perosa, *Une écriture de l'énigme: H de Rimbaud*, Naples, Edizioni scientifiche italiane, 1988; Yves Vadé, *L'Enchantement littéraire. Écriture et magie de Chateaubriand à Rimbaud*, Paris, Gallimard, 1990; Jean-Paul Corsetti, *Essais sur Rimbaud*, Charleville-Mézières, Musée-bibliothèque Arthur Rimbaud, 1994, p. 5-22; Dana Wilde, "Arthur Rimbaud and the Mystic Way", *Cauda Pavonis: Studies in Hermeticism*, v. 14, n. 2, 1995, p. 1-10; Pierre Brunel, *Rimbaud sans occultisme*, Fasano-Paris, Schena-Didier Érudition, 2000; Olivier Bivort, *art. cit.*, p. 133-146.

<sup>39</sup> Robert Amadou, Robert Kanters, *Anthologie littéraire de l'occultisme* [1950], Paris, Seghers, 1975, p. 270-274.

<sup>40</sup> Tessel M. Bauduin, *Surrealism and the Occult. Occultism and Western Esotericism in the Work and Movement of André Breton*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2014. In her book *Surrealism and the Occult*, Tessel Bauduin highlights not only the esoteric dimension of French authors such as Nerval and Rimbaud, but also authors like Victor Hugo, Baudelaire or Lautréamont, underlining their influence on the Surrealist movement.

production. In quoting Yves Bonnefoy, Georges Cattai had already indicated the central role of individuals who frequented the French *fin-de-siècle* occultist milieu, such as Pierre-Simon Ballanche and Éliphas Lévi, in order to understand the initiatory character of Rimbaud's poetry.<sup>41</sup> Antoine Faivre considers Rimbaud as a theosophist who speaks his own language, a poetic language,<sup>42</sup> and even Gershom Scholem points out that Arthur Rimbaud, like William Blake, represents a separate profile of mysticism, detached from any tradition, giving rise to a personal mysticism that he expresses through poetic language.<sup>43</sup> The enigma of Rimbaud's language has been highlighted by the Rimbaud expert André Guyaux in his book *Duplicités de Rimbaud* (Duplicities of Rimbaud), where there is an extremely interesting chapter devoted to the hermeticism of the author of *Illuminations*. The chapter is entitled “*H*, comme hermétisme” (*H* for Hermeticism),<sup>44</sup> where André Guyaux focuses on Rimbaud's prose poem *H*, thus focusing on Rimbaudian hermeticism, and what he calls “poetics of the enigma”.<sup>45</sup> The reflection on Rimbaud's hermetic language is addressed by André Guyaux in another chapter of his book, “Avatars du Trobar Clus” (Avatars of the Trobar Clus).<sup>46</sup> The title refers to the “trobar clus”, namely the closed speech of the troubadours and the chapter is devoted to the legibility (or rather the illegibility) of Arthur Rimbaud's work, notably *Illuminations*. André Guyaux speaks in terms of “radical hermeticism, characterising the author of the *Illuminations*”,<sup>47</sup> referring to the idea shared by various scholars who have spoken about Rimbaudian obscurity, such as André Beaunier,<sup>48</sup> Victor Segalen,<sup>49</sup> Giuseppe Antonio Borgese,<sup>50</sup> or Walter Benjamin, who considered Rimbaud “an esotericist, who systematically keeps the public away from his work”.<sup>51</sup>

Although the contribution by André Guyaux “Avatars du Trobar Clus” focuses exclusively on the question of legibility and illegibility in Rimbaud's work, it is undeniable that

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<sup>41</sup> See Georges Cattai, *op. cit.*, p. 139. Lévi's influence on Rimbaud was also detected by Enid Starkie (*Arthur Rimbaud*), Jacques Gengoux (*La pensée poétique de Rimbaud*) and by Anna Balakian (*André Breton. Magus of Surrealism*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1971). In particular, Balakian postulates the existence of a magical tradition kept in the nineteenth-century occultism, whose origins lie in past centuries. Thus, according to Balakian, figures such as Nicolas Flamel in the fourteenth century or Paracelsus in the fifteenth century, are part of a genealogy that extends into the twentieth century of the alchemist Fulcanelli. See also Tessel M. Bauduin, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

<sup>42</sup> See Antoine Faivre, *L'Ésotérisme au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle en France et en Allemagne*, p. 19.

<sup>43</sup> See Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, translated by Ralph Manheim, New York, Schocken Books, 1969, p. 16.

<sup>44</sup> André Guyaux, *Duplicités de Rimbaud*, Paris-Genève, Champion-Slatkine, 1991, p. 107-142.

<sup>45</sup> “Poétique de l'énigme”. *Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195-211.

<sup>47</sup> “Hermétisme radical, caractérisant l'auteur des *Illuminations*”. *Ibid.*, p. 197.

<sup>48</sup> André Beaunier, *La Poésie nouvelle: Arthur Rimbaud, Jules Laforgue, Gustave Kahn, Jean Moréas, Emile Verhaeren, Henri de Régnier, Francis Vielé-Griffin, Maurice Maeterlinck, Stuart Merrill, Francis Jammes, Paul Fort, Max Elskamp, etc.*, Paris, Société du Mercure de France, 1902, p. 63-64.

<sup>49</sup> Victor Segalen, *Le double Rimbaud* [1906], Montpellier, Éditions Fata Morgana, 1979, p. 20-23.

<sup>50</sup> Giuseppe Antonio Borgese, *Studi di letteratura moderna*, Milan, Fratelli Treves, 1915, p. 140.

<sup>51</sup> “Un ésotériste, qui d'office écart[e] le public de son œuvre”. Walter Benjamin, *Œuvres*, 2 v., Paris, Denoël, v. II, 1971, p. 226.

the title evokes an allusion to the tradition of troubadour hermeticism, which in turn refers to the Cathar tradition. Incidentally, in a work by Jean Blum, *Les Cathares* (1985), there is a passage which deserves particular attention, and which concerns the vowels AEIOU, evoked by Rimbaud in his poem *Voyelles* (Vowels): “A black, E white, I red, U green, O blue: vowels”.<sup>52</sup> The author states that these vowels symbolise the creative voices of the sentient world according to an esoteric doctrine shared by the Gnostics and the Cathars, and he cites in this regard a Cathar poem that contains this hidden knowledge, namely the *Chant du Bouvier* (Song of the Cattleman). This Cathar poem is based on the vowels AEIOU, which are repeated in each stanza. This is how Jean Blum describes “the vowels AEIOU, repeated from verse to verse”<sup>53</sup> in the *Chant du Bouvier*:

They [the vowels AEIOU] symbolise, for the Gnostics, the creative voices of the sentient world. Their repetition, according to a rite well known in Antiquity and in Asian religions, tends to bring human souls into symbiosis with cosmic forces. The Montségurien poet André Maynard sees the first four vowels as the superimposed floors of an incantatory pyramid whose purpose is to address the fifth one to the sidereal world. As we can see, the song of the Cattleman, which has passed through the ages, contains a completely different symbolism than the “simple” song that is offered as a first approach. Written for an oppressed people, it is a reminder of simple and essential truths, the truths that the Languedocians of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries needed to keep hope and knowledge. The message has crossed the ocean of centuries; its need remains as imperative and present; it is addressed to the suffering humanity and the gentle troubadours have brought it to us.<sup>54</sup>

Adriano Lanza, a scholar interested in Dantean esotericism, has highlighted the possible relationship between this passage by Jean Blum on the *Chant du Bouvier* and Rimbaud’s sonnet *Vowels*, whose esoteric meaning has been emphasised above all by Enid Starkie, and who sees in this poetic composition the phases of the Great Alchemical Work.<sup>55</sup> Based on solid and reliable studies, Tessel Bauduin confirms in her work on the relationship between Surrealism and Occultism the presence of alchemical references in Rimbaud’s poem *Vowels*,<sup>56</sup> and underlines not only the influence that this dimension of Rimbaud’s work had on Breton and

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<sup>52</sup> Arthur Rimbaud, *Complete Works, Selected Letters: a Bilingual Edition*, p. 141.

<sup>53</sup> “Voyelles AEIOU, répétées de couplet en couplet”. Jean Blum, *Les Cathares*, Paris, Léopard d’Or, 1985, p. 132.

<sup>54</sup> “Elles [the vowels AEIOU] symbolisent, chez les gnostiques, les voix créatrices du monde sensible. Leur répétition, suivant un rite bien connu dans l’Antiquité et dans les religions asiatiques, tend à mettre les âmes humaines en symbiose avec les forces cosmiques. Le poète montségurien André Maynard voit dans les quatre premières les étages superposés d’une pyramide incantatoire dont la destination est d’adresser la cinquième au monde sidéral. On le voit, le chant du Bouvier, qui a passé les âges, renferme un tout autre symbolisme que la chanson ‘à boire et à manger’ qui s’offre en une première approche. Écrit à l’intention d’un peuple opprimé, il se veut le rappel de vérités simples et essentielles, les vérités dont les Languedociens des XIII<sup>e</sup> et XIV<sup>e</sup> siècles avaient besoin pour conserver espérance et connaissance. Le message a franchi l’océan des siècles; son besoin demeure aussi impératif et présent; il s’adresse à l’humanité en souffrance et les gentils troubadours nous l’ont apporté”. *Ibid.*, p. 132-133.

<sup>55</sup> See Enid Starkie, *op. cit.*, p. 165-167.

<sup>56</sup> Tessel M. Bauduin, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

Surrealism, but also and above all its main goal – the transformation of individuals (through poetry) and, consequently, the transformation of the world.<sup>57</sup>

We have already mentioned that Rimbaud was frequently referenced by three figures who, in the early twentieth century (partially) revealed the secret language of the alchemical art, namely the disciple of Fulcanelli, Eugène Canseliet, and the erudite bookseller Pierre Dujols. These exponents of alchemy highlighted two fundamental concepts dear to the hermetic language, namely the language of the birds and the phonetic cabala, which were studied by a forgotten “heterodox” man of letters whom I have already mentioned in previous chapters: Richard Khaitzine. The latter reconstructed an esoteric lineage from the love poetry of the troubadours and the *Fedeli d’Amore* to the literature of the twentieth century, in authors such as Georges Perec and especially Raymond Roussel.<sup>58</sup> Khaitzine states that “the Gay Science did not disappear with the troubadours and the trouvères, but was perpetuated in a subterranean, occult way, crossing the centuries, and had its propagators in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries”, and that “the great cantor was an author unknown to the general public: Raymond Roussel”.<sup>59</sup> Thus, one of Richard Khaitzine’s merits is to have focused attention on the figure of Roussel, considered by the author of *La Langue des oiseaux* to be one of the most important interpreters of twentieth-century literature – one that transmits esoteric knowledge through fiction. Khaitzine affirms that Roussel was a pupil of Fulcanelli,<sup>60</sup> and that his literary production represented a hitherto unexplored horizon of research, as he points out in a very significant passage from *La Langue des oiseaux*, where the exegetical potential offered to the field of literary studies by Roussel is highlighted: “wrongly considered to be a family boy who relieved his boredom by writing an absurd and incomprehensible work that caused a scandal, he was – and this will be confirmed in the near future – without doubt the greatest contemporary literary genius”.<sup>61</sup>

To return to Tessel Bauduin’s study of the relationship between occultism and Surrealism, it is worth noting that she devotes a paragraph to the language of birds, as well as

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73. The idea of the transformation of the world through poetry is also shared by André Breton, as Tessel Bauduin has shown. See *ibid.*, p. 73, 178, 193.

<sup>58</sup> Discussing the secret language widely used by the troubadours and trouvères, Richard Khaitzine highlights the importance of the rose symbol as a means of transmitting an esoteric message; he also explains the meaning of the Latin expression “sub-rosa” (under the rose), which is said to have originated in the initiatory world of secret societies. Indeed, the author of *La Langue des oiseaux* states that “this expression seems to have originated because members of secret societies used to meet in rooms where the ceilings were decorated with a rose window” (“cette expression semble trouver son origine dans le fait que les membres de sociétés secrètes se réunissaient, autrefois, dans des pièces dont le plafond était décoré d’une rosace”). Richard Khaitzine, *La Langue des oiseaux*, t. I, p. 16.

<sup>59</sup> “La Gaie Science ne disparut pas avec les troubadours et les trouvères, elle se perpétua d’une façon souterraine, occulte, et franchissant les siècles, eut ses propagateurs au XIX<sup>e</sup> et au XX<sup>e</sup> siècles”; “le grand chanteur en fut un auteur inconnu du grand public: Raymond Roussel”. *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>60</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> “Considéré, à tort, comme un fils de famille trompant son ennui en écrivant une œuvre absurde et incompréhensible qui suscita le scandale, il [Raymond Roussel] fut – et cela se verra confirmé dans un futur proche – sans doute le plus grand génie littéraire contemporain”. *Ibid.*

to the phonetic cabala, mentioning both Fulcanelli and Canseliet as linked to André Breton, but also to Rimbaud, who was a source for the Surrealist poet (as was Gérard de Nerval).<sup>62</sup> As Tessel Bauduin writes, “the concept of the ‘language of the birds’ has a long and complex history, originating, in part, in a secretive language developed by medieval troubadours, but having been applied, since then, to many secretive languages, alchemical, magical and divinatory”.<sup>63</sup> Bauduin points out that this language of birds “was embraced by the artistic and literary avant-gardes”,<sup>64</sup> particularly by the Surrealists. In fact, she speaks of “the Surrealist interest for alchemy’s language of the birds”,<sup>65</sup> and highlights the importance of Raymond Roussel on this subject, the links between André Breton and the occultist milieu of the alchemist Canseliet, and the centrality of Rimbaud following a rereading of his work as an alchemical key by the Surrealist movement of the early twentieth century.<sup>66</sup>

Given these premises, we can posit an esoteric Rimbaud. As I hinted at the beginning of this chapter, Jean-Paul Corsetti has studied this esoteric dimension of Rimbaud’s work, emphasising above all its initiatory scope: “his poetic quest [which] remains initiatory”.<sup>67</sup> In fact, Corsetti remarks that “the writing of Rimbaud reveals an initiatory journey”.<sup>68</sup> It is a solitary path that Rimbaud undertakes in his work, and this “poetic vocation has a sacred character that goes far beyond the simple mastery of an art”.<sup>69</sup> Rimbaud’s poetry is therefore, according to Jean-Paul Corsetti, the outer shell of an esoteric truth of another kind that the author wants to share with the reader. In this respect, Corsetti suggests reading *Une saison en enfer* (A Season in Hell), which can be seen as a kind of initiation, where the poet shows that in order to see paradise, one has to encounter hell. It is an initiatory journey leading to the ontological transformation of the being. The metamorphosis that leads to spiritual rebirth is evident in a passage of the poem *Being Beauteous*: “our bones are re clothed with a new and amorous body”.<sup>70</sup> Rebirth is represented here by this new body which is characterised by being “amorous”. Once again, we find the *topos* of love, which is a concept that from ancient literature, from Dante to the nineteenth century, has been imbued with esoteric values and becomes a doctrine hiding an initiatory knowledge: the discovery of oneself. It is a love that acts as theophany, bringing opposites together in a timeless unity. Love is an omnipresent theme

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<sup>62</sup> See Tessel Bauduin, *op. cit.*, p. 186-188. André Breton quotes Fulcanelli’s *Les Demeures Philosophales* in *Fronton Virage*. See in this respect *ibid.*, p. 186. *Fronton virage* was published in *Les Cahiers de la Pléiade* in 1948, and in 1953 in *Une étude sur Raymond Roussel* by Jean Ferry: André Breton, *Fronton virage*, Paris, Gallimard, 1948; Jean Ferry, *Une étude sur Raymond Roussel*, Paris, Arcanes, 1953.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 186-188.

<sup>67</sup> “Sa quête poétique demeure initiatique”. Jean-Paul Corsetti, *Essais sur Rimbaud*, p. 14.

<sup>68</sup> “L’écriture de Rimbaud relève bien d’un voyage initiatique”. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>69</sup> “Vocation poétique a un caractère sacré qui dépasse de loin la simple maîtrise d’un art”. *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Arthur Rimbaud, *Complete Works, Selected Letters: a Bilingual Edition*, p. 317.

in Rimbaud, and appears linked to the symbol of the rose, for example, in *Credo in Unam* (To love in the rose),<sup>71</sup> or in *Un cœur sous une soutane* (A Heart under a Cassock), where the mystical rose linked to the *topos* of love is featured: “it was the Rose of David, the Rose of Jesse, the mystic Rose of scripture, it was love!”.<sup>72</sup> We also find Rimbaud’s mystical rose in another passage of the same poem:

May 16 Thimothina, I worship you, you and your father, you and your cat: . . . .

Thimothina :	{	<p>Vas devotions,</p> <p>Rosa mystica,</p> <p>Turris davidica, ora pro nobis !<sup>73</sup></p> <p>Coeli porta,</p> <p>Stella maris,</p>
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The rose clearly expresses Rimbaud’s mysticism. Flowers, in general, have a mystical value for Rimbaud as Jean-Paul Corsetti has shown, focusing in particular on the importance of the poem *Fleurs* (Flowers), where the poet-demiurge confronts the mystery of God and the enigma of creation in the form of a vision.<sup>74</sup> Edward J. Ahearn confirmed this visionary dimension in the poem *Flowers*<sup>75</sup> which, according to Jean-Pierre Richard, “constitutes Rimbaud’s *floral apotheosis*”,<sup>76</sup> the “floral mystery” preserved in the lines of this “strange poem”,<sup>77</sup> where the poet after evoking “the water-rose” ends with “the swarm of young, strong roses”.<sup>78</sup>

The rose, this mystical flower, is the symbol that embodies the mystery of love for medieval poets from Guillaume de Lorris to Dante, and for Rimbaud as well the rose continues to be, in the nineteenth century, a flower linked to the mystery of love. This flower has, for Rimbaud, a double nature, both purely literary and esoteric: “ma rose” (my rose), he writes, in *Un cœur sous une soutane* is, in fact, a “poetic rose”,<sup>79</sup> whilst it is also a rose that holds the secrets of mysticism: it is a “Rosa mystica”.<sup>80</sup> In other words, it is a mystical rose in literary

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19. In *Credo in Unam*, Rimbaud speaks of the mystery of man’s existence: “We cannot know! – We are weighed down / under a cloak of ignorance and narrow chimeras! / apes of men, fallen from our mothers’ wombs, / our pale reason hides the infinite from us!”. *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 241.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243.

<sup>74</sup> Jean-Paul Corsetti, *Essais sur Rimbaud*, p. 11.

<sup>75</sup> Edward J. Ahearn, *Rimbaud. Visions and Habitations*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983, p. 246.

<sup>76</sup> “Constitue l’*apothéose florale* de Rimbaud”. Jean-Pierre Richard, *Poésie et profondeurs*, Paris, Seuil, 1955, p. 205.

<sup>77</sup> “Mystère floral”; “étrange poème”. *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> Arthur Rimbaud, *Complete Works, Selected Letters: a Bilingual Edition*, p. 337.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 233.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243.



form that cannot be understood by those who do not have access to the invisible world. This is what Rimbaud says:

. . . May 4 . . . . Now, yesterday, I couldn't stand it! Like Angel Gabriel,  
I spread the wings of my heart. The breath of the Holy Spirit flooded my  
being! I took my lyre and sang:

Come close,  
Great Mary!  
Dear Mother  
Of sweet Jesus!  
Sanctus Christus!  
O Virgin with child  
O holy mother,  
Hear our prayer!

Oh! if you knew the mysterious effluvia which shook my soul while I plucked  
the petals of this poetic rose!<sup>81</sup>

### *The Mystical Rose by Paul Valéry*

Beyond the fascinating connection between Rimbaud and Dante, while we cannot affirm with any certainty that Rimbaud's rose is linked to the rose of Dante and of the *Fedeli d'Amore*, we can say that Dante's rose influenced one of the greatest writers of French literature: Paul Valéry, who wrote a poem entitled *Fleur mystique* (Mystical Flower), originally entitled *Rose mystique* (Mystical Rose). As Erica Durante points out, it recalls "an undeniably Dantean title, as does the rest of the poem, which unfolds a situation modelled on the epilogue of the *Comedy*".<sup>82</sup> Erica Durante wrote a book on the relations between Dante and Paul Valéry, as well as Jorge Luis Borges, whose literary production – as we have seen in the previous chapters – is strongly linked to the symbolism of the rose and to the esotericism of Dante.<sup>83</sup> Moreover, Borges' work is imbued with esotericism: this aspect of his work is associated with other writers whose work is deeply imbued with esotericism, such as Umberto Eco, who owes a great deal to Borges for the influence he exerted with *The Name of the Rose*. Erica Durante's book contains an appendix with the original poem *Rose mystique* (1889), which later became *Fleur mystique* (1891):

January 1891

*Mystic Flower*

Mystic lily! She had the fervor of the Blessed!

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<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 233.

<sup>82</sup> "Un titre incontestablement dantesque, comme d'ailleurs la suite du poème, qui déploie une situation calquée sur l'épilogue de la *Comédie*". Erica Durante, *Poétique et écriture: Dante au miroir de Valéry et de Borges*, Paris, Honoré Champion, 2008, p. 50.

<sup>83</sup> Erica Durante devotes part of her study to the rose in Borges. See *ibid.*, p. 188-191.

And Virgin she worshiped the calm free of the Virgins;  
Amid the glittering of metals and candles,  
Her sweet voice would ring like the Angelus.

A tint of moonlight wavered beneath her veil.  
And the mother-of-pearl gleam of first light seemed  
To vanish in her flesh, shining on the sacred vessels,  
At morning mass, when the final star sets.

Her eyes were clearer than astral dawns!  
Inexpressible perfume of waxes and incense,  
Her robe was redolent of the ancient sacristy!

And it was on seeing her that I felt sadness  
At not being the Christ of that divine dream,  
For my face in its pallor was like the Host!<sup>84</sup>

23 August 1889

*Rose mystique*<sup>85</sup>

~~Sous les lampes d'argent où l'huile parfumée  
Brûle éternellement près du Christ de vermeil,  
Sous la voûte où l'encens, montant vers le soleil  
Mêle à l'or des rayons, l'azur de sa fumée,~~

mystique  
~~de chair~~  
Lys ~~vivait~~ elle avait

~~Elle priait avec~~ la ferveur des Élus;  
Et vierge, elle rêvait <sup>priait sans fin</sup> ~~rêvant~~ <sup>sa vie</sup> aux pieds des <sup>des</sup> Vierges!  
Sous l'étincellement des ~~des~~ métaux

~~Et [?] devant les autels et sous les feux~~ des cierges  
La voix douce tintait comme un doux Angélu!

Une couleur de Lyne ondo[*i* +]yait sur son voile ; x  
Et <sup>sous</sup> dans sa chair semblaient [ill.] finis les reflets éclats nacrés m.  
~~Et sa chair rappelait par ses reflets nacrés~~ ===== m.  
[*Le* +] *Du* petit jour luisant sur les vases sacrés,  
Aux messes du matin, vers la dernière étoile.

Les yeux étaient plus clairs que des astres naissants,  
Car son visage avait une blancheur d'hostie 6.

~~Et son visage avait la blancheur des hosties:~~  
Et son <sup>vêtement</sup> ~~habit traînait~~ l' sentait la vieille sacristie 3.

~~Tout son habit traînant l'odeur des sacristies~~ =  
Indicible parfum de cires et d'encens!

<sup>84</sup> Paul Valéry, *Collected Works of Paul Valéry. Volume 1. Poems*, translation by David Paul, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1971, p. 355.

<sup>85</sup> I have reproduced the original version of the draft of the poem “Mystic Rose”, with all the erasures made by Paul Valéry. Because of the many erasures, I have included the original French version not in the footnote but within the text, together with the translation into English that I made.

Dans son Âme, splendide ainsi qu'un pur calice  
Brillait le diamant de la Virginité  
Et l'Infini de la Divinité  
Pour une Éternité de mystique délice!<sup>86</sup>

23 August 1889

*Mystical Rose*

~~Under the silver lamps where perfumed oil  
Burns eternally near the Christ of vermeil,  
Under the vault where the incense, rising towards the sun  
Mixes with the gold of the rays, the azure of its smoke,~~

mystic  
of flesh  
Lilies ~~lived~~ she had

~~She prayed with~~ the fervour of the Elect;  
And virgin, she dreamed ~~prayed without end~~ ~~dreaming~~ her life at the feet of the ~~of~~  
Virgins!

Under the sparkle of of the metals

~~And [?] before the altars and under the lights of the candles  
The soft voice tinkled like a sweet Angelus!~~

A colour from Lyne wa[v+]ed on her veil; x  
And ~~under~~ in his flesh seemed to [ill.] no more pearly sheen m.  
~~And its flesh was reminiscent of the pearly sheen~~ = m.  
[The +] Of the little day shining on the sacred vessels,  
At morning masses, towards the last star.

The eyes were brighter than budding stars,  
For her face was as white as a wafer 6.

~~And her face was as white as a wafer:~~  
And her ~~the suit was dragging the~~ she smelled like an old vestry 3.  
garment

~~All his clothes carry the smell of the sacristy~~ =  
The unmistakable scent of wax and incense!

In her Soul, splendid as a pure chalice  
shone the diamond of virginity  
And the Infinity of Divinity  
For an Eternity of mystical delight!

The mystical rose is found in other poems by Paul Valéry. For example, the rose appears in *La fileuse* (The Spinner: “the great rose with the smell of a saint”),<sup>87</sup> in *Narcisse parle* (Narcissus Speaks), where the rose is associated with death and kissing (“the funereal rose”, “the rose shedding a kiss’s petals”),<sup>88</sup> or in *La Jeune Parque* (The Young Fate), where the rose is

<sup>86</sup> “Annexes”, in Erica Durante, *op. cit.*, p. 443-444.

<sup>87</sup> Paul Valéry, *Collected Works of Paul Valéry. Volume 1. Poems*, p. 5.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

characterised by its mystical dimension linked to the divinity (“Hail! Deities in virtue of rose and salt”).<sup>89</sup> This mystical dimension was already present in Valéry’s early work, as demonstrated by the poetic collection of the project (still in draft form and unpublished today) of *Chorus mysticus*, “which announces”, as Erica Durante writes, “a metaphysical tension peculiar to Valéry’s future production” and “which takes shape under the auspices of Dante”.<sup>90</sup> Thus, the Dantean ancestry – brilliantly studied by Erica Durante – is one of the main characteristics of Paul Valéry’s literary production, in which the mystical dimension is always present, both in his youth and in his maturity. This mystical dimension is linked to the rose, the *topos* of love and the figure of the woman. There are many examples of this, including the *Fleur mystique*, *La Fileuse*, *La Jeune Parque* (The Young Fate), *Charmes* (Charms), *La Jeune fille* (The Girl) and *Béatrice*.

But can we really see an esoteric dimension in Paul Valéry? Does his mystical rose, as well as the *topos* of love and the image of the beloved woman,<sup>91</sup> suggest esotericism in his work? One of the first contributions on Paul Valéry’s esotericism was by Georges Cattai who, in his *Orphisme et Prophétie*, devoted a chapter to the esoteric dimension of the author: “Valéry, illuministe néo-pythagoricien” (Valéry, neo-Pythagorean illuminist).<sup>92</sup> The esoteric dimension of Valéry’s work has been explored more recently by Valerio Magrelli who, in an article (“De quelques possibles résonances gnostiques chez Paul Valéry” – tr. “On some possible Gnostic resonances in Paul Valéry’s work”) published in *Cahiers de littérature française*, detected Gnostic traces in the author of *Monsieur Teste*.<sup>93</sup> One of the most comprehensive works on esotericism in Valéry is Massimo Scotti’s *Invito in una stanza vuota. Paul Valéry e la tradizione esoterica* (Invitation to an empty room. Paul Valéry and the esoteric tradition).<sup>94</sup> Scotti studies the esoteric component of Valéry’s thought, pointing out “the subtler implications of his metaphors, built throughout his life, and not only in his youth, on the ancient and suggestive heritage of alchemy, Gnosis, Plotinian Neo-Platonism, hermetic philosophies, the Kabbalah”.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>90</sup> “Qui annonce une tension métaphysique propre à la production valérienne future”, “prend corps sous les auspices de Dante”. Erica Durante, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

<sup>91</sup> On the *topos* of love and the image of woman in Valéry, in the wake of Dante, particularly in the *Vita Nova*, see *ibid.*, p. 60-69, 115-136.

<sup>92</sup> Georges Cattai, *op. cit.*, p. 153-177.

<sup>93</sup> Valerio Magrelli, “De quelques possibles résonances gnostiques chez Paul Valéry”, in *Cahiers de littérature française. Echos des doctrines gnostiques aux XIX<sup>e</sup> et XX<sup>e</sup> siècles*, ed. Valerio Magrelli, n. 15, Paris, Garnier, 2016, p. 117-129.

<sup>94</sup> Massimo Scotti, *Invito in una stanza vuota. Paul Valéry e la tradizione esoterica*, Florence, Le Cárity Editore, 2018.

<sup>95</sup> “Le implicazioni più sottili delle sue metafore, costruite per tutta la vita, e non nella giovinezza soltanto, sul retaggio antico e suggestivo dell’alchimia, della Gnosi, del neoplatonismo plotiniano, delle filosofie ermetiche, della Cabala”. *Ibid.*, p. 17. Incidentally, Paul Valéry accepted the invitation of the Italian esotericist Julius Evola to collaborate in the review *Diorama filosofico*, thus showing a certain proximity to esoteric culture, as well as a political position close to right-wing culture. Julius Evola’s right-wing stance is widely recognised, as is his adherence to fascism and his research interest in the history of esoteric currents. See Giorgio Galli, *La magia e il potere. L’esoterismo nella politica occidentale*, p. 106.

This esoteric aspect of Valéry is confirmed by Mariolina Bongiovanni Bertini, who wrote the preface to Scotti's book and stressed the "widespread dissemination, in Valéry's work, of myths, metaphors, symbols traceable to Gnosis", specifying that "whatever the routes by which Gnostic thought reached Valéry – reading Plotinus, contact with the esotericism of the Symbolist cenacles, mediation of Romantic culture – the poet recognised himself in that thought".<sup>96</sup> Thus, as in Baudelaire or in Rimbaud, there is also an esoteric dimension in the work of Paul Valéry, even if the critics have not paid much attention to it. This aspect is confirmed by Massimo Scotti, who states that until a few decades ago, "the question of his [Valéry's] relationship with 'the divine things', as Paul Gifford calls them, that is to say his interests in linguistic, occult, hermetic, in a word, 'esoteric' themes, was fairly neglected".<sup>97</sup> In fact, "there was a tendency to privilege the more enlightened rationalist aspects of thought in order to frame them in the general (sometimes generic) vision of a Cartesian intellectual, lucid, inflexibly anchored to reason", and it was only "in the late 1980s that were published books such as Paul Gifford's *Paul Valéry: Le Dialogue des choses divines* and other texts that were not afraid to put the concepts of mathematics and mysticism side by side, integrating them into a more complex vision of the author".<sup>98</sup>

Massimo Scotti's work represents a fundamental point of reference for future research on the esoteric dimension of Valéry, in whom we find "the mystical and alchemical, Gnostic and Cathar component",<sup>99</sup> as Mariolina Bongiovanni Bertini remarks in the Preface to Scotti's book. In fact, Scotti also highlights the presence of traces of Catharism in Paul Valéry's work.<sup>100</sup> Roger Bodart had already written a significant article in this respect: "Valéry est-il cathare?" (Is Valéry a Cathar?).<sup>101</sup> A few years earlier, in 1966, Jean Guitton had stated that the Cathar heresy had resurfaced in the twentieth century, and Bodart's contribution on Valéry's Catharism relates to this context.<sup>102</sup> In his youth, Valéry called his friends "mes cathares" (my Cathars),<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> "Capillare diffusione, nell'opera di Valéry, di miti, metafore, simboli riconducibili alla Gnosi. [...] Quali che siano i percorsi attraverso i quali il pensiero gnostico è giunto a Valéry – lettura di Plotino, contatti con l'esoterismo dei cenacoli simbolisti, mediazione della cultura romantica –, il poeta in quel pensiero si è riconosciuto". Mariolina Bongiovanni Bertini, "Prefazione", in *ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>97</sup> "Trent'anni fa, quando cominciamo a studiare Valéry, la questione del suo rapporto con le *choses divines*, come le chiama Paul Gifford, cioè dei suoi interessi per i temi linguistici, occulti, ermetici, in una parola 'esoterici', era abbastanza sottaciuta". *Ibid.*, p. 47-48.

<sup>98</sup> "Si tendeva a privilegiare gli aspetti più razionalistici illuminati del pensiero per inquadrarli nella visione generale (talvolta generica) di un intellettuale cartesiano, lucido, inflessibilmente ancorato al razocinio. [...] Alla fine degli anni Ottanta del Novecento uscirono libri come quello di Paul Gifford, *Paul Valéry: Le Dialogue des choses divines*, e altri testi che non temevano di affiancare i concetti della matematica e della mistica, integrandoli in una visione più complessa dell'autore". *Ibid.*, p. 47-48.

<sup>99</sup> "La componente mistica e alchemica, gnostica e Catara". Mariolina Bongiovanni Bertini, "Prefazione", in *ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>100</sup> On Catharism in Paul Valéry, see *ibid.*, p. 73-74.

<sup>101</sup> Roger Bodart, "Valéry est-il cathare?", *Bulletin de l'Académie Royale de Langue et de Littérature Française*, XLIX, Bruxelles, 1971, p. 215-230.

<sup>102</sup> Jean Guitton, "L'eresia catara domina il secolo XX", *Vita*, 13-19 October 1966, p. 35-38.

<sup>103</sup> See Massimo Scotti, *op. cit.*, p. 74; Roger Bodart, art. cit., p. 225.

thus implying a proximity to the Cathar tradition. But to link the Cathar tradition to the work of Valéry means linking him to the literary tradition of esoteric love which, as we have seen in my research, is associated with the poetry of the troubadours and the history of Cathar heresy, that is to say, my main theme of Gabriele Rossetti.

Paul Valéry is linked not so much to the father, Gabriele Rossetti, but to his son, Dante Gabriel Rossetti. In her study, Erica Durante mentions Gabriele Rossetti, but purely from the biographical point of view as an exile in London during the *Risorgimento* and as the father of the author of *The Blessed Damozel*.<sup>104</sup> Durante focuses on the figure of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who was one of the main sources of Paul Valéry. In a letter to André Gide in August 1891, Valéry wrote: “on my table here is Plato’s *Banquet*, at ease between a treatise on heraldry and perspective plates. Rossetti, whom I am slowly quibbling about, and his life, which makes me dream for a long time”.<sup>105</sup>

Valéry was fascinated by the figure of Dante Gabriel Rossetti who, as Erica Durante points out, “matched the young tastes of Valéry through his eclecticism, his mysticism and his cult of the Middle Ages”.<sup>106</sup> These common features link Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Paul Valéry, who also translated several sonnets by Dante Gabriel.<sup>107</sup> These translations by Valéry, as well as the relationship between him and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, has not yet been studied in depth. One of the most comprehensive contributions in this regard is by Erica Durante in her article “Le Moyen Âge de Dante selon Rossetti et Valéry” (The Middle Ages of Dante according to Rossetti and Valéry),<sup>108</sup> where she stresses the links between Valéry and Rossetti, who share the medieval imagination and the love themes of Stilnovist poetry and Dante, in particular, in addition to a strong interest in mysticism. Erica Durante recalls that in his youth Valéry “devoted himself to esoteric reading and was immersed in a certain aesthetic mysticism”.<sup>109</sup>

Among his mystical readings and translations, Valéry emphasises the importance of Rossetti, as can be seen in the following draft note he wrote:

#### Translating a bit of Petrarch \_ Dante

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<sup>104</sup> See Erica Durante, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

<sup>105</sup> “Sur ma table voici d’abord le *Banquet* de Platon, à l’aise entre un traité d’héraldique et des planches de perspectives. Rossetti que je chipote lentement et sa vie qui me fait rêver longuement”. André Gide, Paul Valéry, *Correspondance 1890-1942*, ed. Robert Mallet, Paris, Gallimard, 1955, p. 116.

<sup>106</sup> “[Dante Gabriel Rossetti] répondait aux goûts du jeune Valéry par son éclectisme, son mysticisme et par son culte du Moyen Âge”. Erica Durante, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

<sup>107</sup> Valéry translated Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s *The House of Life*, as well as the *Willow-Wood* sonnets 49-50-51-52, sonnet 79 of *Body’s Beauty*, part of the poem *Eden Bower*, and provided a translation of *Lilith*, which is unsigned. See *ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>108</sup> Erica Durante, “Le Moyen Âge de Dante selon Rossetti”, in *Images du Moyen âge. Actes du colloque, Lorient, 31 mars-2 avril 2005 organisé par les Laboratoires SOLITO et ADICORE de l’Université de Bretagne-Sud*, ed. Isabelle Durand-Le Guern, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2006, p. 217-229.

<sup>109</sup> “[Paul Valéry] se consacrait à des lectures ésotériques et était plongé dans un certain mysticisme esthétique”. *Ibid.*, p. 218.

and especially Rossetti's life.  
Id. [?] Poems by Poe, [ill.]  
Rysbroeck [sic.]. Swedenborg.  
Parallel ornament: Owen Jones  
S. Antoine. - V.[iollet] the Duke [sic], Ronsard  
The synthesis  
The window  
corresp[ondance] of Flaubert.<sup>110</sup>

Rossetti is inserted in a series of names, including Dante, Petrarch, and the mystics Ruysbroek and Emmanuel Swedenborg. Valéry writes “translation a bit of Petrarch \_ Dante / and especially Rossetti his life”: the importance given to Rossetti and to his life is fundamental for him. We can therefore speak of an indirect influence of Gabriele Rossetti – yet another example of influence on nineteenth and twentieth century authors through the poetry and art of the Pre-Raphaelite Dante Gabriel Rossetti,<sup>111</sup> whose debt to his father is enormous. Dante Gabriel Rossetti's mystical love reached Paul Valéry, but this transmission was deeply influenced by the esoteric love expounded by Gabriele Rossetti in his heterodox studies on the esotericism of Dante and medieval love poetry. Dante Gabriel Rossetti had inherited esoteric knowledge from his father. While dismissing and ignoring the political and heretical implications, he had deepened the mystical dimension of medieval love poetry, transposing this mysticism into his artistic and literary works. The mysticism in the form of love of the Pre-Raphaelite Dante Gabriel Rossetti profoundly influenced future generations of artists and poets, among them Paul Valéry who, as Erica Durante remarks, had turned to the love material of the Stilnovist poets, mainly due to the author of *Beata Beatrix* (in addition to the Pre-Raphaelite poets and painters).<sup>112</sup> With them, and in particular with Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Valéry shared a view of life completely imbued with mysticism, to such an extent that in a letter to Pierre Louÿs on 6 August 1981, he speaks in terms of a “mystical abyss”: “I have been so immersed for three months in the mystical abyss, reading nothing but the *Apocalypse* and the *Fourth Gospel*, Ruysbroek, Plato, Swedenborg, and always Poe as well, that I don't know if I would enter literature and by which door. I drink perfection and get drunk”.<sup>113</sup>

“I don't know if I would enter literature and by which door”: this passage perfectly sums up the centrality of mysticism for Paul Valéry in his life, whilst the *Fleur mystique*, originally

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<sup>110</sup> “Traduire un peu de Pétrarque \_ Dante / et surtout Rossetti sa vie. / Id. [?] Poems Poe, [ill.] / Rysbroeck [sic.]. Swedenborg. / Parallèlement ornement: Owen Jones / S. Antoine. – V.[iollet] le Duc [sic], Ronsard / La synthèse / La fenêtre / corresp[ondance] de Flaubert”. In Erica Durante, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

<sup>111</sup> On the influence of Pre-Raphaelitism on nineteenth-century French literature, and specifically on Symbolism, see Laurence Brogniez, *Préraphaélisme et symbolisme: peinture littéraire et image poétique*, Paris, Honoré Champion, 2003.

<sup>112</sup> See Erica Durante, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

<sup>113</sup> “Je suis tellement depuis trois mois plongé dans l'abîme mystique, ne lisant plus que l'Apocalypse et le IV Évangile, Ruysbroek, Platon, Swedenborg, et toujours aussi Poe que je ne sais si je rentrerais dans la littérature et par quelle porte. Je bois la perfection et je m'enivre”. André Gide, Pierre Louÿs, Paul Valéry, *Correspondance à trois voix: 1888-1920*, eds. Peter Fawcett and Pascal Mercier, Paris, Gallimard, 2004, p. 490.

the *Rose mystique*, sums up his existential anxiety. Dante is the model for the mystical rose of Valéry, and as Erica Durante writes about the relationship between him and Dante, particularly on his debt to Dante, “borrowings, like reading, are never trivial”.<sup>114</sup> The reference to an author or to a certain tradition implies, directly or indirectly, a kind of filiation between these authors. This is the situation with Paul Valéry and Dante, and the same applies to authors such as Yeats, Pound, Joyce or Nerval, whom I have already discussed. For Valéry, the same question arises: when he is inspired by Dante, is he only inspired by the literary dimension of Dante’s work or is he also inspired by its esoteric and initiatory dimension? The inspiration from a purely aesthetic dimension is certain, whilst inspiration relating to the esoteric dimension is more difficult to demonstrate, though there are traces of this filiation (whether through reading or a personal knowledge of initiatory circles) in Paul Valéry. In either case, the shadow of Gabriele Rossetti is also present in the author of *Rose mystique*, through Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s esoteric love and a mystical rose.

*The symbolism of the rose in European literature: from Milosz to Schuré, from Charles Williams to D’Annunzio, from Pessoa to Rilke*

The symbolism of the rose is a recurrent theme in many French poets who are little known beyond the confines of France, and in whom many of the *topoi* that have been the subject of this study can be found. I will limit myself here to mentioning authors from the second half of the nineteenth century to the first half of the twentieth century, in whom the symbolism of the rose – imbued with mysticism and linked to the *topoi* characterising the love of medieval poetry – is evoked. A good example is Maurice Boukay (1866-1931), who devotes to love his *Chansons d’Amour*<sup>115</sup> (the preface to which was written by Paul Verlaine) and the rose seems to recall Dantean echoes with its allusions to Paris, to the white colour, to the kiss and to the *topos* of love, which is found in the poem *La Rose et Pierrot* (The Rose and Pierrot).<sup>116</sup> Another author is Héléne Picard (1873-1945) who, in the wake of Roland and the medieval love tradition evokes the “Knights of the Rose”<sup>117</sup> in the poem *Ceux qui restent* (Those who remain). Further examples include Tristan Klingsor (1874-1966), who speaks of the “love-crazed minstrel” and

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<sup>114</sup> “Les emprunts, comme très souvent la lecture, ne sont jamais anodins”. Erica Durante, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

<sup>115</sup> Maurice Boukay, *Chansons d’Amour*, preface by Paul Verlaine, Paris, E. Dentu, 1893.

<sup>116</sup> Maurice Boukay, *La Rose et Pierrot*, in *Anthologie des poètes français contemporains. Le Parnasse et les écoles postérieures au parnasse (1861-1914). Morceaux choisis, accompagnés de notices bio- et bibliographiques et de nombreux autographes par G. Walch*, ed. G. Walch, Paris, Delagrave Éditeurs, Leyde, A.-W. Sijthoff Éditeurs, t. III, 1919, p. 114-115.

<sup>117</sup> “Chevaliers de la Rose”. Héléne Picard, *Ceux qui restent*, in *Poètes d’Hier et d’Aujourd’hui. Morceaux choisis, accompagnés de notices bio- et bibliographiques et de nombreux autographes par G. Walch. Supplément à l’Anthologie des Poètes français contemporains*, ed. G. Walch, Paris, Librairie Delagrave, 1919, p. 316. Héléne Picard uses the rose in two other poetic compositions, *Philosophie* (Philosophy) and *À une religieuse* (To a Nun), where she speaks of “a biblical rose” (“une rose biblique”). *Ibid.*, p. 318-320.



the “Rose of Timur”;<sup>118</sup> Edmond Rostand (1868-1918), who sings of love from afar, like the poetry of the troubadours (“I love the Distant Princess”);<sup>119</sup> and Robert de Bonnières (1850-1905), who writes of the “faithful lover”<sup>120</sup> in *Un rosier enchanté* (An Enchanted Rosebush), a poem that describes the love of a fairy, whilst Dante appears in *À Beethoven sourd* (To Deaf Beethoven).<sup>121</sup> Other interesting figures include the poet from Toulouse and winner of the *Jeux Floraux* (Floral Games), Armand Praviel (1875-1944), who speaks of the “Toulouse rosary” (“rosaire toulousain”)<sup>122</sup> in *The Rosary*; the author of *La Rose de Macé* (The Rose of Macé), André Berry (1902-1986), who was a distant descendant of Pico della Mirandola and was interested in the poetry of the Troubadours, writing the anthology *Florilège des Troubadours* (Troubadour Miscellany);<sup>123</sup> the translator of the *Song of Songs* and the tales of Scheherazade, Charles Van Lerberghe (1861-1907), who wrote an interesting poem titled *L’Amour* (Love)].<sup>124</sup> Particular attention should be devoted to Édouard Schuré (1841-1929) and Oscar Wladyslaw de Lubicz Milosz (1877-1939), who respectively wrote *L’aubépine et l’étoile* (The Hawthorn and the Star) and *L’amoureuse initiation* (The loving initiation).<sup>125</sup>

<sup>118</sup> “Ménéstrel fou d’amour”; “Rose de Timour”. Tristan Klingsor, *Dame Kundry*, in *ibid.*, p. 161. On the symbolism of the rose in Tristan Klingsor, see also the poems *Orientine* and *Rêverie d’Automne* (Autumn reverie). In *ibid.*, p. 161-163.

<sup>119</sup> “Moi, j’aime la Princesse Lointaine”. Edmond Rostand, *Chanson de Joffroy Rudel*, in *Anthologie des poètes français contemporains. Le Parnasse et les écoles postérieures au parnasse (1861-1914)*, t. III, p. 17.

<sup>120</sup> “Fidèle amant”. Robert de Bonnières, *Un rosier enchanté*, in *Anthologie des poètes français contemporains. Le Parnasse et les écoles postérieures au parnasse (1861-1914). Morceaux choisis, accompagnés de notices bio- et bibliographiques et de nombreux autographes par G. Walch*, ed. G. Walch, Paris, Delagrave Éditeurs, Leyde, A.-W. Sijthoff Éditeurs, t. II, 1919, p. 425.

<sup>121</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 427.

<sup>122</sup> Armand Praviel, *Le Rosaire*, in *Anthologie des poètes français contemporains. Morceaux choisis, accompagnés de notices bio- et bibliographiques et de nombreux autographes par G. Walch. Nouvelle édition entièrement refondue par André Dumas*, ed. G. Walch, Paris, Librairie Delagrave, t. IV, 1932, p. 364-365.

<sup>123</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 442-443. André Berry was honoured by the *Académie Française* in 1930.

<sup>124</sup> Charles Van Lerberghe, *L’Amour*, in *Anthologie des poètes français contemporains. Le Parnasse et les écoles postérieures au parnasse (1861-1914)*, t. III, p. 422.

<sup>125</sup> The list of French poets and poetesses who have written poetic works based on the symbol of the rose is very extensive, and includes figures as such Joséphin Soulayr [1815-1891, *Les deux roses* (The Two Roses)]; Auguste Angellier [1848-1911, *Les Chrysanthèmes* (The Chrysanthemums)]; Louis Tiercelin [1849-1915, *Les roses effeuillées* (Roses with leaves removed)]; Paul Bourget [1852-1935, *Chanson de Bretagne* (Song from Brittany)]; George Rodenbach [1855-1898, *Béguinage Flamand* (Flemish Beguinage)]; Robert de la Villehervé [1849-1919, *Mythology* (Mythology), included in the collection *La chanson des roses* (The song of the roses), 1882]; Laurent Tailhade [1854-1919, *Les Fleurs d’Ophélie* (Ophelia’s Flowers)]; Laurent Émile Van Arenbergh (1854-1934, *Germinal*); Robert De Montesquiou-Fezensac (1855-1921, *Enfleurage, Marie-Antoinette*); Auguste Gaud [1857-1924, *La Cantilène de la pluie* (Cantilena of the Rain); *Mon âme* (My Soul)]; Charles-Théophile Féret [1858-1928, *Le Salaire du poète normand* (The Wages of the Norman Poet)]; Baronne de Baye [1859-1928, *Silence*]; Gustave Khan (1859-1936, *Lied*); John-Antoine Nau [1860-1918, *D’après Longus* (According to Longus); *Démence* (Dementia)]; Madame Marie Dauguet [1860-1942, *Printemps* (Spring); *Sotto Voce*]; Pierre de Bouchaud [1862-1925, *Senteurs des nuits d’été doux parfum de rosée* (Scents of summer nights, sweet perfume of dew); *Italiam...Italiam...; La Syrinx* (The Syrinx)]; Henri de Régnier [1864-1936, *Le Secret* (The Secret)]; Albert Boissière (1866-1939, *Dédicace* (Dedication)]; Raymond de la Tailhède [1867-1938, *Douleur* (Sorrow)]; Valère Gille [1867-1950, *Réveil* (Awakening)]; Fernand Sarnette [1868-1914, *Printemps* (Spring); *Les Marguerites*” (Daisies)]; Hugues Lapaire [1869-1967, *Le berger* (The shepherd)]; Henri Bataille [1872-1922, *Mon enfance, adieu mon enfance...* (My childhood, farewell my childhood...); *Les souvenirs* (Memories)]; Georges Marlow [1872-1947, *Pour une méconnue* (For an unknown girl); *Chanson* (Song)]; Paul Fort [1872-1960, *Morphée* (Morpheus)]; Charles Guérin [1873-1939, *Baigner au point du jour...* (Bathing at daybreak...); Daniel de Venancourt (1873-1950, *Telle une église prête à recevoir son Dieu...* (Like a church ready to receive its God...));

But for all these poets, we should ask whether their work is the result of purely literary and aesthetic creation, or whether they are, in some way, influenced by thoughts that could be described as esoteric. Did these poets belong to initiatory circles or were they completely remote from these esoteric contexts? Did membership of initiatory Orders have a greater or lesser influence on their work, or is there no connection? Where there is an esoteric influence, is it an inherited tradition, esoteric knowledge, or is it mysticism experienced in a purely personal way by the poet? Is it a rose and an esoteric love or simply a poetic and literary device? A vast amount of research remains to be done in this field, in particular because the poets mentioned are not well known outside France. Consequently, there are not many studies on the subject nor, more importantly, on possible connections with esotericism. Among the poets I have mentioned, Oscar Wladyslaw de Lubicz Milosz and Édouard Schuré are very interesting figures to study in depth, because of their relationship with esoteric culture. Milosz was born in Lithuania but became French by adoption and frequently uses esoteric themes and motifs in his works. Robert Amadou and Robert Kanters include Milosz in their literary *Anthology of Occultism*, defining his work *Cantique de la connaissance* (Canticle of Knowledge) as “a manual of initiation”,<sup>126</sup> whilst in the *Dictionnaire critique de l'ésotérisme* edited by Jean Servier, a section is devoted to Milosz, written by Françoise Bonardel, who pointed out that he was a “fervent admirer of Dante”.<sup>127</sup> Alain Mercier wrote his doctoral thesis at the University of Lille: *Edouard Schuré et le renouveau idéaliste en Europe*.<sup>128</sup> The name of Schuré is generally associated with his work *Les grands initiés* (The Great Initiates, 1889), but he is not only a historian – he is also a poet and writer, even if this aspect has not received the attention it deserves. Particular attention should also be paid to the work of Germain Nouveau (1851-1920), whose esoteric dimension has not yet been studied. Nouveau dedicated a collection of poems to love, *La doctrine de l'amour* (1881), in which the rose is evoked. It brings to mind the poem *Chasteté* (Chastity) and in particular *L'amour de l'amour* (The love of love), where

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Fernand Gregh [1873-1960, *Renouveau* (Renewal); *Je vis* (I live)]; Emmanuel Delbousquet [1874-1909, *Chant au bord du fleuve* (Song on the riverbank)]; Edmond Pilon [1874-1945, *Les Roses trémières* (The Hollyhocks)]; Georges Rency [1875-1951, *Sommeil d'enfant* (Sleeping child)]; Edmond Blanguernon [1876-1928, *Le Printemps* (Spring)]; Gabriel Nigond [1877-1937, *Les Cygnes* (The Swans); *La Grand-Mère* (The Grandmother); *Sur la tombe de George Sand* (On George Sand's tomb)]; Touny-Lerys [1881-1976, *Si tu ne me dis rien et que ce soir tu chantes...* (If you tell me nothing and tonight you sing...); *Chanson* (Song); *Tu viendras avec moi...* (“You will come with me”, part of the collection *La Pâques des Roses* (The Easter of Roses) – 1909)]; Charles Derennes [1882-1930, *Persephone*; *Devant la maison de Glycines* (In front of the Wisteria House)]; Édouard Grenier [1891-1901, *Sérénade*; *Le Rosier au Lintea* (The Lintel Rose Tree)]. All these authors and their poetic compositions are contained in the five volumes of *L'Anthologie des Poètes Français Contemporains*, published by Delagrave (Paris) and Sijthoff (Leiden), 1919-1932.

<sup>126</sup> “Un manuel d'initiation”. Robert Amadou, Robert Kanters, *op. cit.*, p. 294.

<sup>127</sup> “Fervent admirateur de Dante”. Françoise Bonardel, “MILOSZ Oscar-Vladislas de Lubicz-, 1877-1939. OCCIDENT MODERNE”, in *Dictionnaire critique de l'ésotérisme*, p. 858. See also the section on Milosz in the *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, written by Pierre Laurant (p. 792-793).

<sup>128</sup> Alain Mercier, *Edouard Schuré et le renouveau idéaliste en Europe*, Lille, Atelier Reproduction des thèses Université de Lille 3, Paris, diffusion H. Champion, 1980. Alain Mercier wrote the section devoted to Edouard Schuré in the *Dictionnaire critique de l'ésotérisme*, ed. Jean Servier (see p. 1163-1164).

the symbol of the rose and the *topos* of love are imbued with a mystical and initiatory dimension.<sup>129</sup>

However, French literature in the second half of the nineteenth century, typified by what the philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch (1903-1985) called “*fin-de-siècle* eleusinism”,<sup>130</sup> and early twentieth century French literature, are peppered with symbolism of the rose, often reflecting an esoteric and initiatory dimension. But it is not only in French literature that we find frequent references to the rose associated with love: English literature also features many examples of the rose symbol, as does Italian literature and, more generally, European literature.

Barbara Seward has written a book called *The Symbolic Rose* (as mentioned earlier) on the symbolism of the rose in nineteenth and twentieth century English literature. Whilst Seward did not focus on the esoteric dimension of the rose in her research (though she did touch on it), she produced a comprehensive overview of the presence of the rose in English, or rather Anglophone, literature. With particular attention to Dante’s rose in his *Divine Comedy*, she studied the rose in Romanticism, as well as Modernism, focusing on particular poets, such as Yeats, T. S. Eliot and Joyce.<sup>131</sup> These three authors are particularly important for Barbara Seward, with a chapter for each of them, but she also discusses other poets and writers in English literature in terms of the rose: Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909, *Dolores*); Arthur Symons<sup>132</sup> (1845-1965, *Rosa Flammae, Rosa Mundi*); Oscar Wilde (1854-1900, *The Nightingale and the Rose; The Picture of Dorian Gray*); Edward Morgan Forster (1879-1970, *The Longest Journey*); Virginia Woolf (1882-1941, *To the Lighthouse; Mrs Dalloway*); David Herbert Lawrence (1885-1930, *Sons and Lovers; The Man Who Died; The Shadow in the Rose Garden, in The Prussian Officer*); Charles Williams (1886-1945, *All Hallows’ Eve; The Figure of Beatrice: A Study in Dante*); Edith Sitwell (1887-1964, *A Hymn to Venus, in The Canticle of the Rose*);<sup>133</sup> Robert Graves (1895-1985, *The Floris Rose*); Elizabeth Bowen (1899-1973, *Look*

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<sup>129</sup> See Germain Nouveau, *La doctrine de l’amour. Valentines. Dixains réalistes. Sonnets du Liban*, ed. Louis Forestier, Paris, Gallimard, 1981, p. 82, 96. On the initiatory dimension of Germain Nouveau’s work, see François Proïa, *Les Routes initiatiques de Germain Nouveau*, Naples, Ed. scientifica italiana, 2001.

<sup>130</sup> “Éleusinisme fin-de-siècle”. Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Debussy et le mystère*, Neuchâtel, Éditions de la Baconnière, 1949, p. 11.

<sup>131</sup> It is especially in the chapter on Joyce that Barbara Seward deals, albeit superficially, with the esoteric dimension of the rose. See Barbara Seward, *op. cit.*, p. 197-221.

<sup>132</sup> It was Arthur Symons who introduced French Symbolism to English-speaking readers with his book *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (London, W. Heinemann, 1899).

<sup>133</sup> In her *A Hymn to Venus*, Edith Sitwell speaks of the “great Rose of the world”. I recall that Edward Waite in his book *The Secret Doctrine in Israel* identifies the “rose of the world” with the Shekinah of the Hebrew tradition, whilst Charles A. Huttar highlights this aspect of the Rose of the World. Huttar also mentions this aspect in relation to the name “Rosamond”, which can be found, for example, in Charles Williams. See Edward Waite, *The Secret Doctrine in Israel. A Study of the Zohar and its Connection*, New York, Occult Research Press, 1913, p. 72; Charles A. Huttar, “Arms and the Man: The Place of Beatrice in Charles Williams’s Romantic Theology”, in *Charles Williams: A Celebration*, ed. Brian Horne, Leominster, Herefordshire, Gracewing, 1995, p. 81.

*All Those Roses*); Henry Green (1905-1973, *Back*) and Lawrence Durrell (1912-1990, *In Crisis*).<sup>134</sup>

We should ask the same question of these poets and writers that we asked of their French colleagues: to what extent is their rose a specifically literary concept? Is there an esoteric dimension in their work? If so, what type is it: personal mysticism, bookish knowledge or esoteric knowledge acquired through membership of initiatory and esoteric Orders? As Barbara Seward has shown, Virginia Woolf's rose, for example, is closely related to the concept of ecstasy in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927),<sup>135</sup> whilst the mystical dimension is also evident in authors like Edward Morgan Forster or David Herbert Lawrence. The mystical rose is of great importance to the latter, not only in his novels but also in his poems such as *Rose of All the World*, *River Rose* and *Grapes*. Dante is the focus of Barbara Seward's study, which demonstrates the strong influence of the Middle Ages on Romantic and modern literature, especially of Dante and his mystical rose.<sup>136</sup> She speaks in terms of "a revival of traditional religion that would bring back the manner and matter of Dante as a powerful influence on modern writing",<sup>137</sup> whilst it is Charles Williams who deserves special attention, as the "Dantesque rose of Charles Williams"<sup>138</sup> has much to do with the esoteric dimension of its author.

Charles Williams' work is imbued with elements of the esoteric tradition – an aspect that has not been studied in depth. To my knowledge, the only study devoted to this aspect of Charles Williams is *Esotericism and Narrative. The Occult Fiction of Charles Williams* by Aren Roukema.<sup>139</sup> In this book, Aren Roukema brilliantly and thoroughly demonstrates the traces of the occult in Charles Williams' work, also underlining the importance of Dante in the work of the English writer, whose syncretism includes, as Roukema remarks, Christian mysticism, Dantean metaphysics, the ethics of the Romantics, the Kabbalah and alchemy.<sup>140</sup> The figure of Charles Williams is therefore particularly interesting in terms of the relationship between literature and esotericism, approaching it from the perspective of the esoteric symbolism of the rose following the influence exerted by Dante. In addition, Charles Williams was actively involved in the esoteric and initiatory circles of his time. He had, in fact, been initiated to the

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<sup>134</sup> The rose of Lawrence Durrell is a "prophetic rose", as Barbara Seward has defined it. See Barbara Seward, *op. cit.*, p. 144. In fact, in his poem *Letter to Seferis the Greek*. "Ego dormio sed cor meum vigilat", Durrell evokes "Nostradamus' rose". In *The Poetry of Lawrence Durrell*, New York, Dutton, 1962, p. 122.

<sup>135</sup> See Barbara Seward, *op. cit.*, p. 127-131.

<sup>136</sup> On the Dantean mystical rose in Henry Green, see *ibid.*, p. 136. On the Dantean mystical rose in Charles Williams, see *ibid.*, p. 152-154.

<sup>137</sup> Barbara Seward, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>139</sup> Aren Roukema, *Esotericism and Narrative. The Occult Fiction of Charles Williams*, Leiden, Boston, Brill, 2018.

<sup>140</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 40.

grade of “Adeptus Major” on 5 June 1923 in the Ordo Sanctissimus Rosae et Aureae Crucis, established by Edward Waite.<sup>141</sup> Thus, Charles Williams was also linked to the Rosicrucian tradition, as well as to the Golden Dawn. This makes the author interesting, and there is plenty of scope for further investigation. Aren Roukema’s research work in this respect represents a fundamental starting point for all future studies.

I have only considered a few of the poets and authors studied by Barbara Seward in her work on the rose symbolism in English literature, but the number of writers or poets who used the rose in their literary productions, imbued with esoteric knowledge, is much greater. Before concluding this parenthesis on English literature, I would like to mention the rose in the work of Lewis Carroll, who was a regular visitor to the Rossetti family and no stranger to the initiatory (and masonic) circles of the second half of the nineteenth century, as his writings attest.<sup>142</sup> For Lewis Carroll as well, there are no specific studies on the esoteric dimension of his literary works. Therefore, the rose in *Alice in Wonderland* deserves particular attention.<sup>143</sup>

And Italian literature? What can be said about Italian literature in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? As in the case of English and French literature, Italian literature has many literary compositions in verse or prose focusing on the rose, which is often tinged with esoteric nuances. A book by Thomas E. Peterson, *The Rose in Contemporary Italian Poetry* (2000), studies the rose in Italian literature, in authors such as Ugo Foscolo, Alessandro Manzoni, Giacomo Leopardi, Giosué Carducci, Giovanni Pascoli and Gabriele D’Annunzio.<sup>144</sup> Amongst these writers are two representatives of the heterodox school of Dantean studies, namely Ugo Foscolo and Giovanni Pascoli, who were no strangers to esoteric culture and thought, and were also affiliated with Freemasonry.<sup>145</sup> In particular, Giovanni Pascoli (initiated into the Rizzoli Masonic Lodge of Bologna in 1882 at the age of 27), had not only embraced the Masonic creed, but had also shown a certain affinity with the *Carboneria* – the secret society to which Gabriele Rossetti belonged. In fact, in his *Poemi del Risorgimento* (Poems of the Risorgimento), Pascoli had dedicated verses to the *Carboneria*. *Il re dei carbonari* (The King of the Carbonari, composed between 1907 and 1912) is clear proof of Pascoli’s interest in the *Carboneria*, and

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<sup>141</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>142</sup> See, for example, Lewis Carroll, “Journal. Avril-juin 1866. 13 juin (Me.). Commemoration” and “Journal. Mai-juillet 1867. 26 juin (Me.)”, in Lewis Carroll, *Œuvres*, ed. Jean Gattégno, Paris, Gallimard, 1990, p. 1057, 1071.

<sup>143</sup> See Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland & Through the Looking-Glass*, illustrated by John Tenniel, with an Introduction by Anna South, London, Macmillan Collector’s Library, 2016, p. 90-91, 93-94, 165-168.

<sup>144</sup> Thomas Erling Peterson, *The Rose in Contemporary Italian Poetry*, Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 2000. A good example is Manzoni’s rose in *Il nome di Maria (Inni sacri)*, Leopardi’s rose in *Il nome di Maria (Canti)*, Carducci’s in *Commentando il Petrarca*, Pascoli’s rose in *Rosa di macchia* or *Il mago*, and especially the rose of D’Annunzio in *Sonetto all’antica, Le armonie* or *L’oleandro*, just to mention a few examples, because the presence of the rose in the latter is extensive. See *ibid.*, p. 7-13.

<sup>145</sup> On Ugo Foscolo’s affiliation to Freemasonry, see Mauro Ruggiero, *op. cit.*, p. 99; Aldo A. Mola, *op. cit.*, p. 64, 116. On Giovanni Pascoli’s affiliation to Freemasonry, see Mauro Ruggiero, *op. cit.*, p. 195, 221, 340; Aldo A. Mola, *op. cit.*, p. 19, 168, 353, 467, 597, 619, 633; Pier Luigi Vercesi, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

in the initiatory world in general.<sup>146</sup> Pascoli was interested not only in the initiatory world of his time, but also in that of the past, as demonstrated by the project (never accomplished) to write a poem on the initiatory Order of the Knights Templar.<sup>147</sup> The esoteric dimension of Giovanni Pascoli's work has been stressed by Mauro Ruggiero, who has shown the presence of elements referring to esoteric and initiatory thought in Pascoli's work, especially in the collection *Myricae* (1891-1903), and specifically in the poem *Il mago* (The magician),<sup>148</sup> a poem which was analysed by Thomas E. Peterson in his study on the rose symbolism in Italian literature. The majority of authors I mentioned earlier in connection with Thomas E. Peterson's work are at the basis of Mauro Ruggiero's book *Le muse ermetiche. Esoterismo e occultismo nella letteratura italiana tra fin de siècle e avanguardia* (The hermetic muses. Esoterism and occultism in Italian literature between the *fin de siècle* and the avant-garde), which is one of the most complete and thorough studies on the relationship between esotericism and Italian literature – more specifically, Italian *fin de siècle* and twentieth century avant-garde literature. Mauro Ruggiero has deftly shown the “penetration of esoteric knowledge into Italian culture”,<sup>149</sup> and therefore the influence that esotericism had on authors such as Carlo Collodi (1826-1890), Giosuè Carducci (1835-1907), Luigi Capuana (1839-1915), Antonio Fogazzaro (1842-1911), Edmondo De Amicis (1846-1908), Matilde Serao (1856-1927), Gabriele D'Annunzio (1863-1938), Luigi Pirandello (1867-1936), Guido Gozzano (1883-1916), Salvatore Quasimodo (1901-1968), but also authors less known outside Italy, such as Gian Pietro Lucini (1867-1914), Raoul Dal Molin Ferenzona (1879-1946), Enrico Cardile (1884-1951), Arturo Onofri (1885-1928), Sergio Corazzini (1886-1907), Girolamo Comi (1890-1968) and Nicola Moscardelli (1894-1943). In all these authors we can find tangible evidence of the presence of esoteric thought. One aspect that should not be overlooked is the fact that a good number of them belonged to initiatory Orders, particularly Freemasonry. The initiation into Freemasonry of authors such as Giosuè Carducci, Giovanni Pascoli, or Salvatore Quasimodo is documented, while in other authors, although their membership in Freemasonry is not proven, one can nevertheless detect in their works traces that clearly refer to the Masonic culture. This is the case of Gabriele D'Annunzio, Carlo Collodi, Edmondo De Amicis, Carlo Alberto Salustri, alias Trilussa.<sup>150</sup> Thus, by mentioning authors directly or indirectly linked to Freemasonry, Mauro Ruggiero makes a very interesting point regarding the relations between literary creation and membership of initiatory Orders, more specifically in Freemasonry:

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<sup>146</sup> See Mauro Ruggiero, *op. cit.*, p. 224-225. On the *Carboneria*, see Gian Mario Cazzaniga, *Per una storia della carboneria dopo l'unità d'Italia (1861-1975)*, Rome, Gaffi Editore, 2014; Gian Carlo Fusco, *La carboneria e le altre società occulte*, Milan, Mursia, 2010.

<sup>147</sup> See Mauro Ruggiero, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

<sup>148</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 223.

<sup>149</sup> “Penetrazione del sapere esoterico nella cultura italiana”. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>150</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 20.

It is interesting to note how literature textbooks almost always neglect to mention that these authors were Freemasons, considering this aspect of little importance, and this is also the case of the two Italian Freemasons who won the Nobel Prize for Literature: Giosuè Carducci<sup>151</sup> and Salvatore Quasimodo. On the other hand, a similar phenomenon can also be found in another discipline: that of historical research where, just to give an example, the membership of Giuseppe Garibaldi (and many other historical figures) in Freemasonry and the leading role he played within this organisation is almost always kept silent. Yet better clarifying certain links would certainly contribute to further understanding historical events and apparently “dark” sides of many personalities of our recent past. It would, however, be a grave mistake if, given the large number of Freemason writers, one felt entitled to interpret all their work in a Masonic and/or esoteric key. Such an attitude would be reductive and would not do justice to the complexity of a literary text, to the genesis of which various and multiple factors, not only purely formal, but also sociological, cultural and ideological, always contribute. [...] The analysis of the relations between literature and Freemasonry could provide a further tool to better understand a Freemason author and his work.

But why did so many intellectuals in the course of their existence decide to join this controversial institution and share its ideals?<sup>152</sup>

In this passage, Mauro Ruggiero perfectly sums up all the problems that emerge when dealing with the thorny subject of the relationship between the literary production of poets and writers and their initiatory Masonic membership, stressing that the latter aspect does not mean a direct influence on the initiated poets; however, it is a factor of some relevance if we are to understand certain novels or poems with initiatory meanings of a Masonic nature.

One author whose membership of the initiatory Orders and esoteric thought played a cardinal role in his literary production is undoubtedly Gabriele D’Annunzio,<sup>153</sup> who was

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<sup>151</sup> Giosuè Carducci (1835-1907) was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1906, and reached the highest Masonic degrees, up to the 33<sup>rd</sup> degree of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite. He himself created a Masonic order, the Falsinea, within the Grand Orient of Italy (GOI). On the affiliation of Giosuè Carducci to Freemasonry, see *ibid.*, p. 222, 320, 329-330; Aldo A. Mola, *op. cit.*, p. 19, 21, 116, 150, 168-169, 172, 175, 177, 193, 206-208, 227, 231, 235, 242, 244-245, 265, 268, 311, 317-319, 327, 334, 338, 353, 360, 397, 467, 550, 561, 604, 619, 635, 672.

<sup>152</sup> “È interessante notare come quasi sempre i manuali di letteratura passino sotto silenzio l’appartenenza di questi autori alla massoneria, considerando la cosa di scarsa importanza, e questo anche nel caso dei due massoni italiani Premi Nobel per la letteratura: Giosuè Carducci e Salvatore Quasimodo. D’altra parte un fenomeno analogo si riscontra anche in un’altra disciplina: quella dell’indagine storica dove, tanto per fare un esempio, si tace quasi sempre l’appartenenza di Giuseppe Garibaldi (e di molti altri personaggi storici), alla massoneria e il ruolo di primo piano che egli ricoprì all’interno di questa organizzazione. Eppure il chiarire meglio certi legami contribuirebbe certamente a comprendere ulteriormente eventi storici e lati apparentemente ‘oscuri’ di molte personalità del nostro passato recente. Si commetterebbe però un grave errore se, visto il grande numero di scrittori massoni, ci si sentisse legittimati ad interpretare in chiave massonica e/o esoterica tutta l’opera di questi. Un atteggiamento del genere sarebbe riduttivo e non renderebbe giustizia alla complessità di un testo letterario alla cui genesi concorrono sempre diversi e molteplici fattori, oltre che puramente formali, anche di carattere sociologico, culturale e ideologico. Ma [...] l’analisi della relazione tra letteratura e massoneria potrebbe fornire uno strumento di analisi ulteriore per meglio comprendere un autore massone e la sua opera.

Ma per quale motivo molti intellettuali nel corso della loro esistenza hanno deciso di entrare a far parte di questa controversa istituzione e di condividerne gli ideali?” Mauro Ruggiero, *op. cit.*, p. 321-322.

<sup>153</sup> On the relations between Gabriele D’Annunzio and esotericism, see Carlo Gentile, *Gabriele D’Annunzio iniziato. I geni del tempio e le vie del sole*, Naples, Ardenza, 1948; Carlo Gentile, *L’altro D’Annunzio*, Foggia, Edizioni Bastogi, 1982; Attilio Mazza, *D’Annunzio e l’occulto*, Rome, Mediterranee, 1995; Attilio Mazza, *D’Annunzio Sciamano*, Milan, Bietti, 2001; Attilio Mazza, Antonio Bortolotti, *Gli amuleti di D’Annunzio*, Pescara,

initiated into a Martinist Order, and adopted the initiatory name of “Ariel”.<sup>154</sup> Moreover, D’Annunzio was interested in spiritualism and occult phenomena.<sup>155</sup> Moreover, D’Annunzio is extremely interesting as he is closely linked to Dantean esotericism and the symbolism of the rose.<sup>156</sup> Dante, love and the rose are major motifs in D’Annunzio’s poetry, and among D’Annunzio’s poetic compositions charged with esoteric suggestions, Mauro Ruggiero recalls the long poem *Maia* and the books of poems *L’Isotteo*, *Isaotta Guttadauro*, *Idilli*, *Alcione*.<sup>157</sup> Significantly, in all these works the rose is present. It is impossible to analyse D’Annunzio’s extensive poetic production here, with the rose as its central motif, but his poetry is undeniably a hymn to the rose.<sup>158</sup> The sheer number of references to the rose in D’Annunzio is, in fact, is so vast that it would merit a separate study. I will limit myself here to stressing its esoteric dimension, often linked to Dante, to the love poetry of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, or to other sapiential traditions such as the Oriental one. This aspect can be found in the poem *Seyda [Fantasia orientale]* (Seyda [Oriental Fantasy]), and *A Furio ed Aurelio [da Catullo]* (To Furius and Aurelius [by Catullus]), whilst with regard to the tradition of medieval and Renaissance love in D’Annunzio we find poems such as *Cantata di calen d’aprile composta in onor di Isaotta*, *Trionfo di Isaotta alla maniera di Lorenzo De’ Medici*, or *Due Beatrici*, where the poet weaves a filiation that links the medieval love poets to Botticelli and to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, by mentioning “beata Beatrice”,<sup>159</sup> a clear reference to the *Beata Beatrix* of the Pre-Raphaelite painter.

The rose of Gabriele D’Annunzio is an esoteric one, a hermetic rose, to which Thomas E. Peterson devotes a chapter (“The votive and hermetic rose”)<sup>160</sup> in his study of the rose in contemporary Italian literature. In this chapter, Peterson studies the rose in poets such as

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Ianieri Editore, 2010; Attilio Mazza, “Gabriele d’Annunzio, Vate e sciamano”, in *Esoterismo e fascismo*, p. 293-307; Mauro Ruggiero, *op. cit.*, p. 233-241, 343; Simona Cigliana, *op. cit.*, p. 38, 68, 73, 94, 102, 170.

<sup>154</sup> See Giorgio Galli, *La magia e il potere. L’esoterismo nella politica occidentale*, p. 107; Mauro Ruggiero, *op. cit.*, p. 86, 343.

<sup>155</sup> See Mauro Ruggiero, *op. cit.*, p. 234-235.

<sup>156</sup> On the relations between Dante and Gabriele D’Annunzio, see Paolo Valesio, “D’Annunzio versus Dante”, in Paolo Valesio, *Gabriele d’Annunzio. The Dark Flame*, New Heaven and London, Yale University Press, 1992, p. 87-114.

<sup>157</sup> Mauro Ruggiero, *op. cit.*, p. 240-345.

<sup>158</sup> The rose is the title of a poem by D’Annunzio, *Rosa*, and is found in many other his poems: *A Firenze* (In Florence), *Libro secondo* (Second Book) and *Libro quarto* (Fourth Book) of the *Canto Novo*, *Villa Medici*, *Febbre* (Fever), *A la strofe alcaica* (To the alcaic strophe), *Suavia*, *Su’l Nil* (On the Nile), *Reverie*, *Messaggi* (Messages), *Lontananza* (Distance), *Ottobrata*, *Preludio [in Intermezzo]*, *Invocazione*, *Qualis artifex pereo*, *Ennia Giunia*, *Godoleva*, *La casta veglia* (The chaste vigil), *Venere d’acqua dolce* (Freshwater Venus), *Peccato di Maggio* (Maytime Sin), *Il Dolce Grappolo* (Sweet Grapes), *Ballata ottava* (Eighth Ballad), *Cantata di calen d’aprile composta in onor di Isaotta* (April Cantata composed in honour of Isaotta), *Sestina*, *Trionfo di Isaotta alla maniera di Lorenzo De’ Medici* (Triumph of Isaotta in the manner of Lorenzo De’ Medici), *Le belle* (The beautiful), *Due Beatrici* (Two Beatrices), *Donna Francesca*, *Romanza*, *Grasinda*, *Similitudine*, *Climene*, *Aprile* (April), *Invito alla Fedeltà* (Invitation to Fidelity). All these poems are contained in Gabriele D’Annunzio, *Versi d’amore e di gloria*, Milan, Mondadori, 2013.

<sup>159</sup> “Beata Beatrice” is the title of a poem by Gabriele D’Annunzio, contained in *La Chimera*. See *ibid.*, p. 550.

<sup>160</sup> See Peter E. Paterson, *op. cit.*, p. 87-108.



Girolamo Comi or Arturo Onofri, whose esoteric dimension has been shown by Mauro Ruggiero in his work on the presence of esoteric culture in Italian literature.

So far in this chapter we have spoken about French, English and Italian literature, but the rose can be found throughout European literature. Among the various European literatures, I shall focus on two authors for whom the rose is a dominant motif and imbued with esoteric meanings: Fernando Pessoa and Rainer Maria Rilke.

Pessoa's esotericism has been studied by various scholars, including Ana Maria Binet, José Augusto Seabra, Robert Brechon, Yvette K. Centeno, Stephen Reckert and António Pina Coelho.<sup>161</sup> In his *La magia e il potere*, Giorgio Galli devotes a chapter to the relations between Pessoa and occultism, "Pessoa: occultismo etno-lusitano" (Pessoa: Ethno-Lusitanian Occultism),<sup>162</sup> highlighting the Portuguese poet's relationship with the esoteric culture,<sup>163</sup> as well as with the right-wing political culture of Europe in the early twentieth century, in particular his relationship with Aleister Crowley.<sup>164</sup> This aspect was explored in detail by Marco Pasi, who revealed the influence of the occultist Aleister Crowley on the poet Fernando Pessoa. In fact, as Marco Pasi comments, "it would be impossible to understand some passages of his esoteric writings without the background of Crowley's".<sup>165</sup> Paraphrasing one of the Portuguese poet's sentences, Pasi points out that "Pessoa was a poet animated by esotericism, not an

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<sup>161</sup> On Pessoa's esotericism, see José Augusto Seabra, *Fernando Pessoa: pour une poétique de l'ésotérisme*, Paris, À l'Orient, 2004; Ana Maria Binet, *L'Ésotérisme dans l'œuvre de Fernando Pessoa*, PhD Thesis – Université Michel de Montaigne Bordeaux III, 1996; Ana Maria Binet, "Loin au-delà des mers ou la Mer Absolue de Fernando Pessoa", in *Voies / Voix Océaniques*, Lisbon, Lidel, 2000; Ana Maria Binet, "La poétique du secret chez Fernando Pessoa", in *Dire le secret*, ed. Dominique Rabaté, Bordeaux, Presses universitaires de Bordeaux, 2001, p. 261-275; Ana Maria Binet, "Sébastienisme et Cinquième Empire: reflets d'un mythe eschatologique dans la littérature portugaise", in *La fin des temps II*, ed. Gérard Peylet, Bordeaux, Presses universitaires de Bordeaux, 2001, p. 83-97; Yvette K. Centeno, *Fernando Pessoa: O Amor, A Morte, A Iniciação*, Lisbon, A Regra do Jogo, 1985; Yvette K. Centeno, *Hermetismo e Utopia*, Lisbon, Edições Salamandra, 1995; Yvette K. Centeno, Stephen Reckert, *Fernando Pessoa. Tempo, Solidão, Hermetismo*, Lisbon, Moraes, 1978; Yvette K. Centeno, *O Pensamento Esotérico de Fernando Pessoa*, Lisbon, Publ. Culturais Engrenagem, 1990; Marco Pasi, "The Influence of Aleister Crowley on Fernando Pessoa's Esoteric Writings", in *Ésotérisme, gnosés & imaginaire symbolique. Mélanges offerts à Antoine Faivre*, eds. Richard Caron, Joscelyn Godwin, Wouter J. Hanegraaff and Jean-Louis Vieillard-Baron, Louvain, Peeters, 2001, p. 693-711; Georg Rudolf Lind, "A iniciação do Poeta e o Caminho Alquímico", in *Estudos sobre Fernando Pessoa*, Lisbon, INCM, 1981, p. 257-304; Dalila Pereira da Costa, *O Esoterismo de Fernando Pessoa*, Porto, Lello & Irmão, 1971.

<sup>162</sup> See Giorgio Galli, *La magia e il potere. L'esoterismo nella politica occidentale*, p. 159-181.

<sup>163</sup> Concerning Pessoa's membership of initiatory Orders: whilst in a letter to Casais Monteiro on 14 January 1935 he affirmed that he did not belong to "any initiatory Order" – which he confirmed in an article on 4 February 1935 on secret societies ("I am not a mason, nor do I belong to any Order, similar or different", in José Augusto Seabra, *op. cit.*, p. 51) – in his autobiographical note of 30 March 1935 he confessed, on the contrary, to being "initiated, by direct communication from Master to Disciple, in the three minor grades of the Templar Order of Portugal (apparently extinct)". *Ibid.* On Pessoa's initiatory position within the initiatory Orders, see *ibid.*, p. 50-51, 73-75.

<sup>164</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 160-161. In their correspondence, Crowley addresses Pessoa, calling him "Care Frater", and as Giorgio Galli remarks with regard to the relationship between Pessoa and Crowley, the members of the Golden Dawn (to which Crowley belonged) defined themselves as "fratres" or "sorores". See Giorgio Galli, *La magia e il potere. L'esoterismo nella politica occidentale*, p. 168. On the relationship between Pessoa and Crowley, see Marco Pasi, *La bocca dell'inferno*, Saluzzo, Federico Tozzi Editore, 2018.

<sup>165</sup> Marco Pasi, "The Influence of Aleister Crowley on Fernando Pessoa's Esoteric Writings", in *Ésotérisme, gnosés & imaginaire symbolique. Mélanges offerts à Antoine Faivre*, p. 711.

esotericist with poetic faculties”,<sup>166</sup> as was, on the contrary, Aleister Crowley, who was “an occultist (and poet)”, whilst Pessoa can be defined as a “poet (and occultist)”.<sup>167</sup> The Portuguese poet was interested in different aspects of the esoteric currents, such as alchemy, magic, astrology, Tarot, Neo-Templarism, Kabbalah, Rosicrucianism, and Masonic symbolism.<sup>168</sup> According to Pessoa, “the hidden wisdom of the Gnostics had been secretly transmitted through a line including the Templars, the Rosicrucians, and the Freemasons, until our days”,<sup>169</sup> as recalled by Marco Pasi, who highlights a very interesting aspect – namely that “Pessoa thought the transmission had taken place not directly through the apparent side of these historical manifestations, but rather through some inner groups acting inside them”.<sup>170</sup> More precisely, “just as reality is not as it shows itself, but always hides an occult dimension (which is the actual, real one), so the initiatic Orders have always had inner, invisible groups, which were the repository of real initiation”.<sup>171</sup> Thus, according to Pessoa, “Freemasonry, for instance, is only the lower level of more secret Orders, as in a pyramid, and only the Order which is at the top, and is ruled by the Secret Chiefs, holds the occult wisdom in its purest form”.<sup>172</sup> This aspect is mentioned several times in Pessoa’s writings, and can be summarized in the words of Marco Pasi: “according to him, the secret of initiation is preserved through a pyramidal system of Orders” and “as in a pyramid, levels become smaller the closer they are to the top, where the secret of real initiation is supposedly preserved”.<sup>173</sup> More precisely, “at the lowest level we find ‘exoteric’ institutions, such as Craft Freemasonry and the Catholic Church; and only above them ‘real’ esoteric Orders, on which they ultimately depend”.<sup>174</sup>

Pessoa evidently attaches great importance to the concept of initiation – an aspect that concerns not only his view of the initiatory Orders, as he believed initiation has to do with literature: thus, the poetic act is an act of initiation. On Pessoa’s view of initiation, Marco Pasi emphasises the “important parallel (not just a comparison) between initiation and literary creation”<sup>175</sup> in the Portuguese poet, because “the literary genius – and he often hints at his awareness of being one – is a special kind of initiate, whose attainment is a direct gift of

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<sup>166</sup> Pessoa’s sentence paraphrased by Marco Pasi is: “I was a poet driven by philosophy, not a philosopher with poetic faculties” (“eu era um poeta impulsionado pela filosofia, não um filósofo dotado de faculdades poéticas”). In Fernando Pessoa, *Páginas íntimas e de auto-interpretação*, Lisbon, Edições Atica, 1966, p. 14.

<sup>167</sup> Marco Pasi, “The Influence of Aleister Crowley on Fernando Pessoa’s Esoteric Writings”, in *Ésotérisme, gnoses & imaginaire symbolique. Mélanges offerts à Antoine Faivre*, p. 693.

<sup>168</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 694.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 697.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.* On the structure of the initiatory Orders according to Pessoa see, for example, the document written by him and contained in *Fernando Pessoa e a filosofia hermética: fragmentos do espólio*, ed. Yvette K. Centeno, Lisbon, Presença, 1985, p. 41.

<sup>172</sup> Marco Pasi, “The Influence of Aleister Crowley on Fernando Pessoa’s Esoteric Writings”, in *Ésotérisme, gnoses & imaginaire symbolique. Mélanges offerts à Antoine Faivre*, p. 697.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*

God”,<sup>176</sup> and, “in this respect, Pessoa takes the example of Shakespeare as an initiate who didn’t need to go through the difficult steps of ‘normal’ initiation”.<sup>177</sup> Thus, as Marco Pasi confirms, “some passages in his writings give the impression that Pessoa saw his poetic work as an actual way to attain the aim of initiation”.<sup>178</sup> His poetry is an initiatory poetry. Pessoa dedicates a poem to initiation, entitled *Initiation*, which is part of the collection *Esoteric and Metaphysical Poems*,<sup>179</sup> whose title leaves no doubt as to the esoteric nature of its verses, and the rose that appears in these esoteric poems is also an esoteric rose.

A mystical dimension characterises the roses in Pessoa’s poems, as in the case of “the roses of the gardens of Adonis” (“the roses of the gardens of Adonis / are what I love ”)<sup>180</sup> or the “garland of roses”<sup>181</sup>, and in another poem he suggests pursuing one’s own destiny and loving the roses: “follow your destiny, / water your plants, / love your roses”.<sup>182</sup> The collection *Concioneiro* contains a poem dedicated to these flowers (“the roses you find, pick them all!”),

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<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 696.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.* According to Pessoa, initiation is substantially distinguished into three categories, namely exoteric, esoteric and divine initiation: “The exoteric initiate is, for example, any Mason, or any minor disciple of a theosophical or anthroposophical society. The esoteric initiate is, for example, a Rosicrucian, a Francis Bacon [...]. The divine initiate is, for example, a Shakespeare. This type of initiation is commonly called genius” (“iniciado exotérico é, por exemplo, qualquer maçã, ou qualquer discípulo menor de uma sociedade teosófica ou antroposófica. Iniciado esotérico é, por exemplo, um Rosa-Cruz, um Francis Bacon, seja. Iniciado Divino é, por exemplo, um Shakespeare. A este tipo de iniciação vulgarmente se chama génio”). Fernando Pessoa, *A Procura da Verdade Oculta. Prefácio, organização e notas de António Quadros*, Lisbon, Publicações, Europa-América, 1989, p. 168.

<sup>178</sup> Marco Pasi, “The Influence of Aleister Crowley on Fernando Pessoa’s Esoteric Writings”, in *Ésotérisme, gnosés & imaginaire symbolique. Mélanges offerts à Antoine Faivre*, p. 696.

<sup>179</sup> A very important event in the influence that esotericism had on Pessoa (and especially on the writing of the *Esoteric Poems*) was the reading of a series of books sent to the Portuguese poet by the Livraria Clássica Editora, which entrusted him with the translation of these books on esotericism and intended to constitute a “theosophical and esoteric series”. Thus, in a letter on 6 December 1915 to Sá-Cardesarroi, Pessoa explains the impact that these readings had on his vision of reality: “I am in a state of intellectual disarray and anguish that you can imagine. [...] The way it happened, as you know, is very banal. I had to translate theosophical books. This is an issue I knew nothing about, absolutely nothing. Now, of course, I know the essence of the system. I was shaken by it more than I thought possible, as it was a religious system. The extraordinarily broad character of this religion-philosophy, the notion of power, of domination, of superior and extra-human knowledge which emanates from theosophical works, disturbed me greatly. [...] I am haunted by the idea that perhaps the truth is really there in Theosophy. [...] So if you reflect that Theosophy is an ultra-Christian system [...] and if you think of what is fundamentally incompatible with my essential paganism, you will have the first serious element that has been added to my crisis. If you then observe that Theosophy, because it accepts all religions, resembles in all respects paganism, which welcomes into its pantheon all the gods, you will have the second element of the grave crisis of my soul”. *Pessoa en personne*, ed. José Blanco, translation from Portuguese to French by Simone Biberfeld, Paris, La Différence, 1986, p. 168-169. Another reading that deeply influenced him was, as he says, “the reading of an English book on *The Rites and Mysteries of the Rosicrucians*”. *Ibid.*, p. 169. These passages are also quoted in Fernando Pessoa, *Œuvres poétiques*, ed. Patrick Quillier, Paris, Gallimard, 2001, p. 1935-1936. Thus, concerning the relations between Pessoa and the esoteric culture, in addition to his personal experiences (such as his friendship with occultists like Aleister Crowley, or his frequentation of initiatory circles), one must add the influence of bookish erudition.

<sup>180</sup> Fernando Pessoa, *The Roses of the Gardens of Adonis*, in Fernando Pessoa, *Selected Poems*, translated by Jonathan Griffin, second edition with new Supplement, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1982, p. 95.

<sup>181</sup> Fernando Pessoa, *Œuvres poétiques*, p. 170. This passage is taken from the French version of the “Bibliothèque de la Pléiade” collection published by Gallimard (Fernando Pessoa, *Œuvres poétiques*, ed. Patrick Quillier). I have translated the following passages taken from this French version into English.

<sup>182</sup> Fernando Pessoa, *Selected Poems*, edited and translated by Peter Rickard, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1971, p. 153.

where Pessoa speaks of roses “that are outside of existence”.<sup>183</sup> Yet again, in the *Quatrains*, we find the green rose covered in mystery (“a green rose, yes green...”),<sup>184</sup> the “Rosary without roses”,<sup>185</sup> “the whole rosebush [which] bloomed / with all its hollyhocks...”<sup>186</sup> or the “Lady Rosine”<sup>187</sup> to whom the poet asks the question: “tell me, tell me, Lady Rosine, / when you were a flower bud / did you hear the nursery rhyme / about the flower that has no heart?”<sup>188</sup> In “The Hidden King” (from the *Message* collection), the rose appears linked to the cross (“on the World’s Dead Cross / life, which is the Rose [...] / on the Cross, which is Destiny, / the Rose that is Christ [...] / on the dead, deadly Cross / the Rose of the Hidden King”).<sup>189</sup> This rose intertwined with the Cross foreshadows the Rosicrucian tradition, which is found, in fact, in a poem by Pessoa dedicated to the Rosicrucian tradition: *At the Tomb of Christian Rosencreuz* (which belong to the *Esoteric Poems*), where “the Book lying closed” is mentioned, as well as “our Father Rosaeacruz [who] knows and is silent”,<sup>190</sup> and the rose is called “Perfect Rose that in God is crucified”.<sup>191</sup>

Pessoa’s Rosicrucian rose features in his poems, but it is also the focus of a work (written in Portuguese and partly in English) by him dedicated to the Rosicrucian tradition: *Rosea Cruz*.<sup>192</sup> In this work, Pessoa talks about the Rosicrucian brotherhood, highlighting its initiatory and secret character, and explains the esoteric significance of the rose within the Rosicrucian doctrine. As far as the first point is concerned, Pessoa stresses that the Rosicrucian brotherhood was widespread in Europe, through a hierarchy of initiatory degrees based on the law of secrecy. This description of Pessoa’s has much in common with Gabriele Rossetti’s on the Orders of Love that spread throughout Europe in the Middle Ages and the Rosicrucians from the Renaissance onwards.<sup>193</sup> With regard to the Rosicrucian Brotherhood, Pessoa writes that:

The possibility is that the Rosicrucian was really a triple sodality: above, in the hiddenness, and communicating with the middle part by a method perhaps not visible or tangible, the Secret Chiefs or Unknown Superiors, the Inner Circle in more senses than one; then, as Second Circle, the emitters, under

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<sup>183</sup> Fernando Pessoa, *Œuvres poétiques*, p. 935.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1055.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1074.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1087.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1047.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1048.

<sup>189</sup> Fernando Pessoa, *Message*, translated by Jonathan Griffin, London, Menard Press, 1992, p. 87.

<sup>190</sup> Fernando Pessoa, *At the Tomb of Christian Rosencreuz*, in Fernando Pessoa, *Selected Poems*, translated by Jonathan Griffin, p. 72. On Rosicrucianism in Pessoa, see José Augusto Seabra, *op. cit.*, p. 63-61.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>192</sup> Fernando Pessoa, *Rosea Cruz*, Lisbon, Edições Manuel Lencastre, 1989.

<sup>193</sup> I recall that Gabriele Rossetti’s *Sullo Spirito antipapale* states in its subtitle that his theories on esoteric love concerned not only Italian literature, but European literature as well, as can be seen from the title: *Disquisitions on the Antipapal Spirit which Produced the Reformation; its Secret Influence on the Literature of Europe in General, and of Italy in Particular*.

secret influence or inspiration, of the strange texts or documents on which the suggestion of the Fraternity was carried through Europe; lastly, those who, like Flood, at least in his first stage, studied the documents, took their beckoning and lesson to study others, and thus became the philosophers (rather than the suggestors or “poets”) of the movement, the Outer Circle thereof. When, later, Rosicrucianism appeared as an Order, the threefold natural division was reflected, both naturally and artificially in it – for, after all, a distinct degree, and a definite ritual are artifices. It is curious to note the designations of the degrees in the three stages of the Order, from Philosophus, in which the Lower Stage culminates, through Adeptus, common to the three Middle Grades, to such transcendent degrees as those named Master of the Temple, or Magus, or the unattainable degree beyond them.

The very name Philosophus, highest in the Lower Stage, contains something of the meaning of what has just been said as to the character of the *natural* Lower Branch of the sodality. The Philosophus Superiors (through the Vault or Subgrade) to contact with the Unknown Superiors and it is then that, like the human founders of the Rosicrucian Fraternity or Flood in his later period, in which became like them, he became an Adept.<sup>194</sup>

In addition to explaining the initiatory structure of the Rosicrucian Order, Pessoa devotes particular attention to the esoteric meaning of the rose as a Rosicrucian symbol. It is a rose that has to do with the world “as is seen in the name *Rosa-mund*, *Rosa mundi*, ‘the Rose of the World’”,<sup>195</sup> and it is also a mystical flower (“Rose – astral, mental, spiritual, monadic, divine”),<sup>196</sup> it is the mystery of this world, a mystery inscribed in the rose and the cross, “Segredo da Rosa crucificada” (Secret of the Crucified Rose): “Rosa crucificada, Misterio e Nome do Mundo” (Crucified Rose, Mystery and Name of the World).<sup>197</sup> The Rose and the Cross go hand in hand with Love in Pessoa: “Na Cruz da Vida a Rosa do Amor”,<sup>198</sup> “In the Cross of Life, the Rose of Love”.

In *Rosea Cruz*, there is a very significant passage, where Pessoa writes that the rose is the occult symbol of a subterranean filiation linking the tradition of ancient Egypt, Sufism, Catharism, the poetry of the troubadours, the Knights Templar, the Rosicrucians and Dante’s love poetry, defined as “fiel do Amor”, namely “Faithful of Love”, *Fedele d’Amore*:

Rosa, Rosa, you are a mystery. And a beauty.

You always have been. Immortalised in Isis and Nefertiti, or, like the lilies of Solomon, rose of the valley, rose of Sharom.

The Arabs healed you by the gentle hands of the Sufis of Isfahan and sang to you in Rumi or Hafiz; the zealous Gnostics dyed you purple in Alexandria. The Templars and Cathars brought you from the East and the troubadours sang to you hidden, occult, while Dante, faithful of Love, saw you open in the sky of divinity. Finally, entangled in the Cross, like an upright snake, it shines like the symbol of the *Rosea Cruz*, the Rose-Cross.

<sup>194</sup> Fernando Pessoa, *Rosea Cruz*, p. 108-109.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 233. This passage is also quoted in Fernando Pessoa, *Poesia Mágica, Profética e Espiritual*, Lisbon, M. Lencastre, 1989, p. 75.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 261.

Petal of the Tradition, petal of the Brotherhood, petal of the Spirit, petal of Love, be within us, O Divine Rose, O Rose of the Cross.<sup>199</sup>

In this passage, Pessoa considers Dante as one of the cardinal figures of an initiatory chain linking different esoteric traditions from East to West, and calls him “fiel do Amor”, “faithful of Love”, thus including faithfulness to Dantean love in an occult filiation linked to the Rosicrucian doctrine, as well as to the troubadours, the Sufis or the Kabbalistic tradition. In Pessoa, in addition to the esotericism of the Rosicrucian, Kabbalistic, Masonic and Templar traditions, we also find traces of the influence of esoteric medievalism, particularly Dantean esotericism, typical of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. In her article, “Dois Dantes e Pessoa: Uma leitura do medievalismo pessoano [Two Dantes and Pessoa: A reading on Pessoa’s medievalism]”, Cristina Zhou stresses that in order to understand the nature of Pessoa’s medievalism we should consider the reading of Dantean esotericism in the nineteenth century, which can be found in one of the most important of Pessoa’s sources: Dante Gabriel Rossetti.<sup>200</sup> Pessoa’s esoteric medievalism, influenced by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, can be seen particularly in the *Mensagem*, in the *Esoteric Poems* and in the *Livro do Desassossego*. Thus, Cristina Zhou has studied “the points of contact between Dante, Rossetti and Pessoa, discerning the threads that ensure communication between the three poets”, and “these threads can be perceived in the light of the creative continuation of an esoteric lineage from remote antiquity”.<sup>201</sup>

Zhou refers to “the double influence, in Pessoa, of Dante and Rossetti”,<sup>202</sup> and recalls the importance of Gabriele Rossetti’s contribution to an esoteric reading of *The Divine Comedy*, defining his work as a “monumental study”.<sup>203</sup> Without going into detail about the main aspects of Gabriele Rossetti’s interpretation – or the repercussions of this reading in England and, more generally, in Europe – she examines how, in the light of Gabriele Rossetti’s interpretation, certain aspects of Dante’s esotericism are reflected in the works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and

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<sup>199</sup> “Rosa, Rosa, és un mistério. E uma beleza.

Foste-o desde sempre. Imortalizada em Isís e Nefertiti, ou, como lírios de Salomão, rosa do vale, Rosa de Sharom.

Os árabes te cuidaram pelas mãos doces dos Sufis de Isfaham e te cantaram em Rumi ou Hafiz; os zelosos gnósticos te tingiram de púrpura em Alexandria. Os templários e os cátaros trouxeram-te do Oriente e os trovadores cantaram-te occulta, enquanto Dante, fiel do Amor, te viu aberta no sidéreo céu da divindade. Por fim, enlaçada na Cruz, qual serpente erguida, brilhas como o símbolo dos Rosa Cruz.

Pétala da Tradição, pétala da Iniciação, pétala da Fraternidade, pétala do Espírito, pétala do Amor, sê em nós, ó Rosa Divina, ó Rosea Cruz”. *Ibid.*, p. 264.

<sup>200</sup> See Cristina Zhou, “Dois Dantes e Pessoa: Uma leitura do medievalismo pessoano [Two Dantes and Pessoa: A reading on Pessoa’s medievalism]”, *Pessoa Plural – A Journal of Fernando Pessoa Studies*, n. 19, 2021, p. 148. In his private library, Pessoa kept Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s book *Poems & Translations*, containing *Dante’s Vita Nuova & The Early Italian Poets*. See *ibid.*, p. 149.

<sup>201</sup> “Neste contributo, procurámos estudar os pontos de contacto entre Dante, Rossetti e Pessoa, discernindo os fios que asseguram a comunicação entre os três poetas. Esses fios podem ser percebidos à luz da continuação criativa de uma linhagem esotérica desde a antiguidade remota”. Cristina Zhou, “Dois Dantes et Pessoa: Uma leitura do medievalismo pessoano”. *Ibid.*, p. 190.

<sup>202</sup> “Dupla influência, em Pessoa, de Dante e de Rossetti”. *Ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>203</sup> “Estudo monumental”. *Ibid.*, p. 156.

Fernando Pessoa. She states that “under the influence of his father, Rossetti [Dante Gabriel Rossetti] associates the love of Dante with the initiation”.<sup>204</sup> It is therefore, from this perspective, “a love [...] of an initiatory nature”<sup>205</sup> in Dante, transposed to Dante Gabriel Rossetti first (through his father), then to Pessoa.

One of the paragraphs in the article by Zhou is extremely significant, given its title: “‘Fedeli d’amore’ e a fraternidade dos génios literários” (Fedeli d’amore and the brotherhood of literary geniuses).<sup>206</sup> In it, she evokes the *Fedeli d’Amore* linked to the work of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. As she mentions, “by continuing the tradition of the ‘Fedeli d’Amore’ of cultivating and elevating the amorous and individual experience to a visionary and mystical level”, Dante Gabriel Rossetti produces both literary and artistic works in which the initiatory love of Dantean memory is mixed “with a typically decadent morbid touch”, as, for example, in the case of Sonnet XXIII (‘Death-In-Love’) of the collection of poems ‘The House of Life’, in which Love and Death take on human or semi-angelic/semi-demonic figures”.<sup>207</sup> Christine Zhou evidences the “identification of Rossetti with the secret and potentially esoteric doctrine of the ‘Fedeli d’Amore’, which highlights the initiatory dimension of love [...], blending Platonic wisdom with the chivalric ideal codified in Provençal poetry and in the poetry of the *dolce stil nuovo*”.<sup>208</sup>

To my knowledge, Zhou’s contribution is the only one that deals with Pessoa’s esotericism by linking it to the medieval esotericism of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Dantean esotericism of Gabriele Rossetti. Therefore, this contribution has the merit of highlighting this neglected aspect of Pessoa’s work, which is imbued with the “mystical and secret character of [an] esoteric-literary tradition” and whose “historical continuity”<sup>209</sup> ranges from Dante to the nineteenth century of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, thence to Pessoa.

It can be said that Fernando Pessoa’s literary production reveals a creative originality mixing different esoteric traditions,<sup>210</sup> such as the Hermetic tradition of Christianity,

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<sup>204</sup> “Sob a influência do pai, Rossetti associou o amor de Dante à iniciação”. *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>205</sup> “Numa leitura mais apoiada no esoterismo, o amor de Dante tem sido entendido como um de índole iniciática”. *Ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158-169.

<sup>207</sup> “Continuando a tradição dos ‘Fedeli d’amore’ de cultivar e elevar a experiência amorosa e individual a um nível visionário e místico, mas com um twist mórbido tipicamente decadentista, temos, por exemplo, o soneto XXIII (‘Death-In-Love’) do conjunto de poemas ‘The House of Life’, em que o Amor e a Morte assumem figuras humanas ou semi-angélicas / semi-demoníacas”. *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>208</sup> “Identificação de Rossetti com a doutrina secreta e potencialmente esotérica dos ‘Fedeli d’amore’, que enfatiza a dimensão iniciática do amor / desejo que a beleza acorda, misturando a sabedoria platónica e o ideal cavaleiresco codificados na poesia provençal e na poesia de *dolce stil nuovo*”. *Ibid.*, p. 162.

<sup>209</sup> “O carácter místico e secreto desta tradição esotérica-literária”; “a continuidade histórica”. *Ibid.*

<sup>210</sup> In a poem in the *Esoteric Poems*, Pessoa evokes many of the esoteric traditions and currents, implying that he had direct experiences with these initiatory contexts, at the same time understanding that this encounter led him to a kind of spiritual perdition, and that peace of mind resides in the “Mother Church”, that is, the Catholic Church: “The Maternal Church has covered my serene days like a shrine / today I rightly call it the Church of Rome. [...] Kabbalahs, gnosés, mysteries, masonry, / I found it all, in vain, / in this anxious quest filling my days and nights. / I never found my heart. / What did the truth disinherit me from? / The diabolical apple, / I ate it, I am other, but to what extent?! Oh the *saudade* / of the Catholic Church!”. Fernando Pessoa, *Œuvres poétiques*, p. 1227. Pessoa

Kabbalistic mysticism, Templarism or Rosicrucian doctrine, as José Augusto Seabra has shown effectively in his study on the esoteric dimension in the Portuguese author: *Fernando Pessoa: pour une poétique de l'ésotérisme*. But Pessoa's syncretism includes other sapiential traditions, such as the Indian or Sufi ones, as Jonardon Ganeri has shown with regard to the influence of the Indian tradition (especially in the sacred texts of the Upanishads) and Fabrizio Boscaglia on the relationship between Pessoa's work and the Islamic tradition, in particular Sufism.<sup>211</sup>

His work also enables us to establish interesting links and parallels with other poets and writers, both those who preceded and influenced him (such as Dante or Shakespeare) and those who were more or less his contemporaries. This is the case, for example, of William Butler Yeats, whose relationship with the Portuguese poet has been studied by Patricia Silva McNeill, who highlights the esoteric influences shared by both authors, such as Hermeticism, magic, alchemy, astrology, theosophy, cabbalism and Rosicrucianism, derived in particular from the teachings of the Golden Dawn.<sup>212</sup> Beyond the knowledge of this occult wisdom, the two authors shared two further aspects, namely a common influence of the work of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the importance attached to the symbolism of the rose, charged with an esoteric and initiatory nuance. Significantly, the symbolism of the rose, in terms of the esoteric and initiatory dimension, links Pessoa with one of the most important writers of European literature: Reiner Maria Rilke (1875-1926).

The parallels between Pessoa and Rilke have been studied by Hugo Hengl in his book *Pessoa et Rilke: modernisme et poétiques acroamatiques*.<sup>213</sup> In Rilke, the rose is central to his literary production. In his study of the rose in contemporary Italian literature, Thomas E. Peterson begins his chapter on the hermetic rose by referring to the rose of Reiner Maria Rilke, pointing out "its spiritual value".<sup>214</sup> Rilke devotes a poem entitled *The Roses* to the symbol of the rose, and Beatrice Susanne Bullock-Kimball has devoted a study to the symbolism of the rose in the Austrian poet (of Bohemian origin), *The European Heritage of Rose Symbolism and*

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uses the Portuguese word "saudade", which means a feeling of nostalgic regret, of melancholy, which he addresses to the "serene days" experienced only thanks to the Mother Church, the Catholic Church. However, on 30 March 1931, Pessoa expressed his position on religion as follows: "A Gnostic Christian, and therefore entirely opposed to all organised churches, especially the Church of Rome. Faithful to the Secret Tradition of Christianity, which has intimate relations with the Secret Tradition in Israel (the Holy Kabbalah) and with the occult essence of Masonry". Fernando Pessoa, "Note autobiographique", in José Augusto Seabra, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

<sup>211</sup> Jonardon Ganeri, "Pessoa's Imaginary India", in *Fernando Pessoa and Philosophy. Countless Lives Inhabit Us*, eds. Bartholomew Ryanb, Giovanbattista Tusa and Antonio Cardiello, Lanham – Boulder – New York – London, Rowman & Littlefield, 2021, p. 49-62; Fabrizio Boscaglia, "Fernando Pessoa and Islamic Philosophy", in *Fernando Pessoa and Philosophy. Countless Lives Inhabit Us*, p. 63-85.

<sup>212</sup> On the relationship between Pessoa and Yeats, see Patricia Silva McNeill, *Yeats and Pessoa. Parallel Poetic Styles*, Oxford, London, Legenda, Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing, 2010. On the relations between the esoteric dimension of Pessoa's work and that of Yeats', see Patricia Silva McNeill, "The Alchemical Path: Esoteric Influence in the Works of Fernando Pessoa and W. B. Yeats", in *Fernando Pessoa's Modernity without Frontiers: Influences, Dialogues and Responses*, ed. Mariana Gray de Castro, Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK, Rochester, NY, Tamesis, 2013, p. 157-168.

<sup>213</sup> Hugo Hengl, *Pessoa et Rilke: modernisme et poétiques acroamatiques*, Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2018.

<sup>214</sup> Thomas E. Peterson, *op. cit.*, p. 88.



*Rose Metaphors in View of Rilke's Epitaph Rose*,<sup>215</sup> where particular attention is paid to the relationship with Dante's rose and that of the *Roman de la Rose*, as well as to medieval courtly love. Rilke's symbolic rose is part of a poetics deeply imbued with esoteric motifs.<sup>216</sup> The esoteric dimension of the Rilke's literary production has been studied by Gísli Magnússon in *Esotericism and Occultism in the Works of the Austrian Poet Rainer Maria Rilke*.<sup>217</sup> Magnússon acutely observes that elements of Rilke's work considered enigmatic become clear through an understanding of the cultural code of esotericism,<sup>218</sup> and points out that his literary production was influenced by various esoteric traditions and expressions of alternative spirituality, such as psychological monism, spiritualism, Jungian psychology, alchemy, hermeticism, Gnosticism, magic, occultism, theosophy, Kabbalah, Buddhism, religiosity and Russian mysticism.<sup>219</sup> Before Gísli Magnússon's research, Rilke's esotericism had been explored by Furio Jesi in *Esoterismo e linguaggio mitologico*.<sup>220</sup> Unfortunately, Jesi died prematurely in 1980 at the age of 39, but notwithstanding his short life he left us works of undeniable scholarly value, not only on Rilke, but on literature in general (especially Germanic literature), as well as on history and mythology.

One of his last works, before his death, was on vampirism and its links with political culture during the historical period of World War Two, in particular the relationship between vampirism and Hitler's Nazism. In two essays, collected under the title *L'accusa del sangue. Mitologia dell'antisemitismo* (The accusation of blood. Mythologies of antisemitism), and in a novel, *L'ultima notte* (The Last Night), Jesi studied vampirism associated with the work of Bram Stoker, and therefore with Dracula.<sup>221</sup> He also suggests a relationship between vampires and the knightly Orders, as well as the initiatory Persian Order of Assassins, which had a relationship with the Knights Templar, as Giorgio Galli recalls in summarising Furio Jesi's contribution on vampirism and its relationship with Nazism, in the wake of what the latter calls

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<sup>215</sup> See Beatrice Susanne Bullock-Kimball, *The European Heritage of Rose Symbolism and Rose Metaphors in View of Rilke's Epitaph Rose*, New York, Bern, Frankfurt am Main, Paris, Peter Lang, 1987, p. 49-56, 66, 73-81, 119-129.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49-56, 66, 73-81, 119-129.

<sup>217</sup> Gísli Magnússon, *Esotericism and Occultism in the Works of the Austrian Poet Rainer Maria Rilke*, Lewiston, New York, The Edwin Mellen Press, 2014.

<sup>218</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>219</sup> Russian literature deserves special attention as far as the symbolism of the rose is concerned, as well as for its relationship to esoteric culture. A very interesting study is by Lance Gharavi on the rose in the Russian author Aleksandr Blok: Lance Gharavi, *The Rose and the Cross: Western Esotericism in Russian Silver Age Drama and Aleksandr Blok's The Rose and the Cross*, Minnesota, New Grail Publishing, 2008. On the relations between Russian literature and esotericism, see Laurence G. Leighton, *The Esoteric Tradition in Russian Romantic Literature. Decembrism and Freemasonry*, Pennsylvania, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994.

<sup>220</sup> Furio Jesi, *Esoterismo e linguaggio mitologico. Studi su Rainer Maria Rilke* [2003], Macerata, Quodlibet, 2020. Furio Jesi's book contains, as an appendix, an essay on Hoffman's esotericism, "L'identità del 'Wechselbalg' in *Klein Zaches genannat Zibboner* di E. T. A. Hoffmann", in which the esoteric dimension of the rose is seen in the character of Rosenschön, associated with magic. See *ibid.*, p. 219-245.

<sup>221</sup> Furio Jesi, *L'accusa del sangue. Mitologie dell'antisemitismo*, Brescia, Morcelliana, 1993; Furio Jesi, *L'ultima notte*, Genoa, Marietti, 1987.

the “mystique of blood”,<sup>222</sup> which emerged in the esoteric nationalist and racist *fin de siècle* circles, and was then developed by Nazi writers, such as Erwin Guido Kolbenheuer in his *Die Bauhütte* (1925).<sup>223</sup> Furio Jesi speaks of a Nazi literature that privileges “the esotericism of blood”,<sup>224</sup> but recalls that this logic based on blood and vampirism goes back to ancient Egypt: “the oldest vampires had lived in Egypt, when the blood of human sacrifices flowed for them to feed on”.<sup>225</sup> Giorgio Galli points out that “Jesi seems to have stopped his studies on vampires when he realised the extreme ambiguity of their meaning”,<sup>226</sup> whose most dangerous drift leads to the revival of human sacrifice; thus, the horrors of Nazism would fit into this sinister perspective. But beyond this aspect – which merits particular attention as it shows that literature has to do not only with an aesthetic and purely literary dimension, but sometimes also enables us to discover hidden and secret knowledge of history – Furio Jesi’s contribution is particularly significant because it approaches the esoteric dimension of literature by linking it to history and to systems of power, which is similar (even if with completely different exegetical criteria) to Gabriele Rossetti, who saw literature (a certain type of literature) as a sanctuary hiding secret knowledge used by political and religious Power. In his study of Rilke’s esotericism, Jesi speaks of “religion of power”,<sup>227</sup> which exploits a “religion of death”,<sup>228</sup> that is to say, “the death that power exploits”<sup>229</sup> to subjugate the masses through the fear of death, resulting in a “consecrated power”.<sup>230</sup>

Based on this exegetical approach, Furio Jesi focuses on the esotericism of Rilke, on “that sort of doctrine of esoteric poetry or esotericism in poetry, which can be derived without too much arbitrariness from numerous statements by Rilke”.<sup>231</sup> It is by studying Rilke’s

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<sup>222</sup> “Mistica del sangue”. Furio Jesi, *L'accusa del sangue. Mitologie dell'antisemitismo*, p. 90. See Giorgio Galli, *La magia e il potere. L'esoterismo nella politica occidentale*, p. 320-324.

<sup>223</sup> See Furio Jesi, *Esoterismo e linguaggio mitologico. Studi su Reiner Maria Rilke*, p. 86-90.

<sup>224</sup> “L'esoterismo del sangue”. *L'accusa del sangue. Mitologie dell'antisemitismo*, p. 90.

<sup>225</sup> “I più antichi vampiri avevano abitato in Egitto, quando il sangue dei sacrifici umani scorreva perché essi se ne nutrivano”. Furio Jesi, *L'ultima notte*, p. 8. An Egyptian origin of vampirism based on blood rites was transposed into literary form in the novels by Anne Rice (1941-2021), such as *Interview with the Vampire* (1976), *The Vampire Lestat* (1985) or *The Queen of the Damned* (2002), in which the vampirism of ancient cults is transmitted to modern society through rock music, which carries subliminal Satanic messages in order to transform society following a deviant Satanist counter-religion aimed at the destruction of spirituality in mass society. See in this respect, Giorgio Galli, *La magia e il potere. L'esoterismo nella politica occidentale*, p. 323-324. On the subliminal message of a satanic nature in twentieth century music, see the works of Corrado Balducci: Corrado Balducci, *Gli indemoniati*, Rome, Colletti, 1959; Corrado Balducci, *La possessione diabolica*, Rome, Edizioni Mediterranee, 1976; Corrado Balducci, *Il diavolo:... esiste e lo si può riconoscere*, Casale Monferrato, Piemme, 1988; Corrado Balducci, *Adoratori del diavolo e rock satanico*, Casale Monferrato, Piemme, 1991.

<sup>226</sup> “Jesi sembra aver interrotto i suoi studi sui vampiri quando ha intuito l'estrema ambiguità del loro significato”. Giorgio Galli, *La magia e il potere. L'esoterismo nella politica occidentale*, p. 324.

<sup>227</sup> “Religione del potere”. Furio Jesi, *Esoterismo e linguaggio mitologico. Studi su Reiner Maria Rilke*, p. 25.

<sup>228</sup> “Religione della morte”. *Ibid.*

<sup>229</sup> “La morte di cui si serve il potere”. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>230</sup> “Potere consacrato”. *Ibid.*

<sup>231</sup> “Quella sorta di dottrina della poesia esoterica o dell'esoterismo in poesia, che può essere ricavata senza troppo arbitrio da numerose affermazioni di Rilke”. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

“esoteric poetic phenomenon”<sup>232</sup> that Jesi deals with the thorny question of the esoteric interpretation of literature (so dear to Umberto Eco), often rejected by the critics, and touches on the esotericism of authors such as Arthur Conan Doyle or Lewis Carroll, right up to the *Fedeli d’Amore* studied by Gabriele Rossetti. On the first point, in his analysis of alchemical traces in Rilke, Furio Jesi specifies that “to recognise symbols of alchemical operations beyond the images of a literary text is to set oneself on an extremely easy and dangerous path”.<sup>233</sup> In fact, “the symbolic apparatus of alchemy is so vast and can refer to such a quantity of figurations, concepts, ideological and poetological systems, as to permit the most amusing exegetical arbitrariness”.<sup>234</sup> In this regard, Jesi cites an article by Giulio Visconti, published in 1842 in the magazine “Teatro Universale”, which pointed out back in the nineteenth century that lovers of alchemy tend to recognise the occult traces of their magisterium in literary texts, as in the case of Tasso, who in the article is ironically considered to be an Adept of alchemy. It goes without saying that the author of the article does not accept the idea of Tasso as an alchemist,<sup>235</sup> and that this tendency to see esoteric traces in literary texts is reminiscent of Umberto Eco’s concept of “meaning shift”.

Alluding to the “esoteric novel”<sup>236</sup> *Malte* by Rilke, Furio Jesi continues his discussion of the alchemical interpretation of literary texts by referring to the work of Lewis Carroll, whose literary production is, as mentioned earlier, still unexplored. Jesi states that:

An exegesis in the alchemical sense is all the easier when one is faced with novels with an apparently disjointed plot, novels “that are not novels” (as has been said several times about *Malte*), or narratives in which *nonsense* predominates. It might be fun to imagine an alchemical reading of Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* [...] and *Through the Looking-Glass* [...] by Carroll. There is no lack of lion and unicorn, the *white* king and *red* one, not to mention that famous “golden afternoon” in which Rev. Dodgson’s narration begins (question to historians of occultism: did he belong to the secret society *Golden Dawn*?), or the introductory verses of *Through the Looking-Glass*:

I have not seen by thy *sunny* face,  
Nor heard thy *silver* laughter [...]

about which one could compete with the author in false etymologies and oddities: *sunny* would be the adjective for the sun’s gold (*sun*) and *silver* the designation for the moon’s silver, poles of the alchemical cosmology...<sup>237</sup>

<sup>232</sup> “Fenomeno poetico esoterico”. *Ibid.*

<sup>233</sup> “Riconoscere simboli di operazioni alchemiche di là dalle immagini di un testo letterario significa mettersi su una strada estremamente facile e pericolosa”. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>234</sup> “L’apparato simbolico dell’alchimia è così vasto e può riferirsi a una tale quantità di figurazioni, concetti, sistemi ideologici e poetologici, da permettere gli arbitrii esegetici più ameni”. *Ibid.*

<sup>235</sup> Giulio Visconti, “Dell’Alchimia”, *Teatro Universale. Raccolta enciclopedica e scenografica*, n. 433, 29 October 1842, p. 338.

<sup>236</sup> “Romanzo esoterico”. Furio Jesi, *Esoterismo e linguaggio mitologico. Studi su Reiner Maria Rilke*, p. 131.

<sup>237</sup> “Un’esegesi in senso alchemico è tanto più agevole quando ci si trova di fronte a romanzi dalla trama apparentemente disgregata, romanzi ‘che non sono romanzi’ (come si è detto più volte del *Malte*), o narrazioni in cui predomina il *nonsense*. Può essere divertente immaginare una lettura in chiave alchemica di *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* [...] e *Through the Looking-Glass* [...] di Carroll. Non mancano il leone e l’unicorno, il re *bianco* e

Continuing his reflection on the alchemical reading of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Jesi even touches on Arthur Conan Doyle in order to show that sometimes, even in apparently anodyne or realistic works, “devoid of *nonsense*, with a well-defined plot”,<sup>238</sup> hidden messages of an esoteric nature can be found. This is the case, for example, of the chapter entitled “Darkness” in Conan Doyle’s novel *The Valley of Fear*, whose main protagonist is Sherlock Holmes, analysed by Jesi as follows:

[in the chapter entitled “Darkness”] there appears a character called White Mason: *white*, the alchemical phase of *albedo*, that is opposed to the darkness of *nigredo*; mason, freemason? (esoteric tradition), and the *white mason* fights against a “black” adversary. At the centre of the story, the passive subject of it, is a man who passes through an apparent death and is reborn, like matter in the *atanòr*; the man wears a singular ring on his finger, with a *gold nugget*; his (apparent) death and resurrection take place in the house-*atanòr*, surrounded by the ditch “of mercury”, “lit by the *flames*” of the sunset. The one who reveals the apparent death and resurrection of the man with the golden nugget is the “chemical” hero. Over it all hovers the looming, and then very concrete, presence of a secret brotherhood.<sup>239</sup>

In this passage, Furio Jesi mixes what he calls the “alchemical pages”<sup>240</sup> of Arthur Conan Doyle with a treatise on secret societies, and in another passage he develops an extremely interesting argument linking Rilke, Conan Doyle, Edward Bulwer Lytton, Bram Stoker, Lewis Carroll and the *Fedeli d'Amore*:

It will be objected that an alchemical reading can be justified if, at the very least, there is clear evidence of the author’s interest in alchemy and esotericism. Similar evidence exists, irrefutably, for Rilke. But the trouble is that they also exist for Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (and even for the author of *Alice*, a devotee not only of mathematics, but also of parapsychology and automatic writing phenomena): the creator of Sherlock Holmes belonged to self-styled Rosicrucian brotherhoods, the same as those of Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton, the author of the esoteric novel *Zanoni*, and of Bram Stoker, the father

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il *rosso*, per non parlare di quel celeberrimo ‘golden afternoon’ in cui principiò la narrazione del rev. Dodgson (domanda agli storici dell’occultismo: faceva egli parte della società segreta *Golden Dawn*?), o dei versi introduttivi di *Through the Looking-Glass*:

I have not seen by thy *sunny* face,  
Nor heard thy *silver* laughter [...]

a proposito dei quali si potrebbe gareggiare con l’autore in false etimologie e in bizzarrie: *sunny* sarà l’aggettivo dell’oro del sole (*sun*) e *silver* la designazione dell’argento della luna, poli della cosmologia alchemica...”. *Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>238</sup> “Privo di *nonsense*, con una trama ben delineata”. *Ibid.*

<sup>239</sup> “Un capitolo si intitola ‘Tenebre’; ma in esso compare un personaggio che si chiama White Mason: *white*, ‘bianco’, la fase alchemica dell’*albedo*, contrapposta alle tenebre della *nigredo*; *mason*, ‘muratore’, massone? (tradizione esoterica), e lo *white mason* lotta contro un avversario ‘nero’. Al centro della vicenda, soggetto *passivo* di essa, un uomo che passa attraverso una morte apparente e rinasce, come la materia nell’*atanòr*; l’uomo porta al dito un anello singolare, con una *pepita d’oro*; la sua morte (apparente) e resurrezione hanno luogo nella casa-*atanòr*, circondata dal fossato ‘di mercurio’, ‘illuminata dalle *fiamme*’ del tramonto. Chi svela la morte apparente e la resurrezione dell’uomo con la pepita d’oro è l’eroe ‘chimico’. Sul tutto aleggia la presenza incombente, e poi molto concreta, di una confraternita segreta”. *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>240</sup> “Pagine alchemiche”. *Ibid.*

of *Dracula*. If we then add that Rev. Dodgson was familiar with the Rossettis, we end up closing the circle of mystery and almost declare that it ideally encompasses both the *Fedeli d'Amore* and Victorian fiction.<sup>241</sup>

The resemblance on which the potential similarity between Rainer Maria Rilke, Lewis Carroll and the Rossetti family is based is one of the most fascinating research domains that Furio Jesi has proposed, which still has to deliver results.

I shall conclude this parenthesis on Rilke's esotericism and its relationship with other exponents of European literature with a passage by Furio Jesi that perfectly sums up the real problem of any esoteric interpretation of literary texts, and which features a substantial impasse, namely the distance between the point of view of the specialist who does not know the initiatory world and judges it, and that of someone who does know this world and speaks of it in his writings:

According to the meaning of the word in its technical, historical-religious meaning, an artistic experience that is truly *esoteric* is, on the one hand, perfectly unproblematic for those who belong to the closed circle of secrecy from which it derives its meaning and articulation; on the other hand, for those who do not belong to that circle, it is so absolutely problematic as to exclude a priori the possibility of a flagrant investigation. For those outside the secret, this artistic experience only allows the pursuit of the terms of a non-knowing that tends to be reduced to a pure "I do not know". For those who participate in the secret, it makes no sense to speak of critical intervention. For those who belong to the same closed circle as the poet, the poem of the poet is and derives its meaning and mode of being from the fact that the initiator of such a poem is in relation to the secret. To be in relationship with the secret means, in this sense, to undergo the epiphany of a reality that constrains existence to itself and elects it as a space for self-justifying phenomena.<sup>242</sup>

This passage by Furio Jesi is a response to the problems concerning the esoteric interpretation of literature, which will be dealt with in the next chapter, on Umberto Eco's rose.

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<sup>241</sup> "Si obietterà che una lettura in chiave alchemica può essere giustificata se, per lo meno, vi sono chiare prove dell'interesse dell'autore per l'alchimia e l'esoterismo. Prove simili esistono, inconfutabilmente, per Rilke. Ma il guaio è che esistono anche per Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (se non addirittura per l'autore di *Alice*, cultore non solo di matematica, ma di parapsicologia e di fenomeni di scrittura automatica): il creatore di Sherlock Holmes faceva parte di confraternite sedicenti rosacruciane, quelle stesse di Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton, l'autore del romanzo esoterico *Zanoni*, e di Bram Stoker, il padre di *Dracula*. Se poi aggiungiamo che il rev. Dodgson era familiare dei Rossetti, finiamo per chiudere il cerchio del mistero e quasi dichiarare che esso racchiude idealmente tanto i Fedeli d'Amore quanto la narrativa vittoriana". *Ibid.*

<sup>242</sup> "Stando al significato della parola nella sua accezione tecnica, storico-religiosa, un'esperienza artistica che sia davvero *esoterica* è, da un lato, perfettamente non problematica per chi appartiene al cerchio chiuso del segreto da cui essa trae senso e articolazione; d'altro lato, per chi non appartiene a tale cerchio, è così assolutamente problematica da escludere a priori l'eventualità di un'indagine in flagranti. Per chi è estraneo al segreto, questa esperienza artistica consente soltanto l'inseguimento dei termini di un non-conoscere che tende a ridursi ad un puro 'non so'. Per chi è partecipe al segreto, non ha senso parlare di intervento critico. Per coloro che appartengono allo stesso cerchio chiuso del poeta, la poesia di questo è e trae senso e modo di essere dal fatto che il promotore di tale poesia sia in rapporto con il segreto. Essere in rapporto con il segreto significa, in quest'accezione, subire l'epifania di una realtà che costringe a sé l'esistenza e la elegge a spazio di fenomeni autogiustificanti". *Ibid.*, p. 51.

## CHAPTER XVI

### *THE ABSENT ROSE IN THE NAME OF THE ROSE AND THE “LIMITS OF INTERPRETATION”*

*Umberto Eco: the eminent Professor of Semiotics and his interest in esotericism*

The figure of Umberto Eco is particularly interesting for my thesis since the Italian scholar embodies the role of the literary critic and, at the same time, of the writer – more specifically, an author who writes a novel about the rose: *The Name of the Rose* (1980). Moreover, as I mentioned in Chapter II, Eco wrote the introduction to *L'idea deforme* (1989) in which he criticised the esoteric interpretation of those in the book he calls “gli adepti del velame” (“the followers of the veil”), such as Gabriele Rossetti, René Guénon, Eugène Aroux and Luigi Valli. Eco was interested in the subject of the *Fedeli d'Amore*, but also in the history of the Rosicrucians. He even wrote the introduction to the Italian version of Paul Arnold's *History of the Rosicrucians*, commenting that: “not only are there no historical proofs of the existence of the Rosicrucians, but by definition they cannot exist”.<sup>1</sup>

Whilst it is true that Eco criticises the esoteric reading, it is also true that he writes novels based on esotericism. Almost all his literary production focuses on esoteric subjects, or even conspiratorial ones, as in the case of Umberto Eco's seventh and last novel, *Numero Zero* (2015).<sup>2</sup> *The Name of the Rose* is also based on the conspiracy theme, as Roberto de Mattei points out: “at the heart of this novel, as of the other five novels that followed, is the theme of conspiracies, which Eco claims to mystify in the name of an enlightened rationalism. Conspiracy – which Eco claims to mock – is, however, the main ingredient of the success of his books, based on mysterious and absurd plots”.<sup>3</sup> But what is even more relevant to my research is Eco's importance in the critical debate around the esoteric interpretation of medieval love literature proposed by followers of Gabriele Rossetti, which developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. As we have seen, this is one of the most neglected cultural phenomena in the history of ideas, and beyond Eco's rejection of the esoteric interpretation of this school of thought, it is undeniable that he has drawn attention to this subject through his critical essays. Pier Luigi Vercesi rightly remarks that “*L'idea deforme* was

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<sup>1</sup> “Non solo non esistono prove storiche dell'esistenza dei Rosa-Croce, ma per definizione non possono esistere”. Umberto Eco, “Prefazione”, in Paul Arnold, *Storia dei Rosa-Croce*, Milan, Bompiani, 1989, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Umberto Eco, *Numero Zero*, Milan, Bompiani, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> “Al centro di questo romanzo [*The Name of the Rose*], come degli altri cinque che seguirono, c'è il tema dei complotti, che Eco pretende di mistificare in nome di un razionalismo illuminato. Il complottismo, di cui Eco afferma volersi fare beffe, è però il principale ingrediente del successo dei suoi libri, basati su intrecci misteriosi e assurdi”. Roberto de Mattei, *op. cit.*, p. 113-114.

published when we had already read *The Name of the Rose* and *Foucault's Pendulum*, two novels in which all the material dealt with by the followers of the veil was at the centre of Eco's inspiration: the spiritual Church in the first and the tragedies of the Albigensians and Templars in the second".<sup>4</sup> Umberto Eco's interest in esoteric culture, and especially in the esotericism of the so-called "followers of the veil", is therefore undeniable.

What is distinctive about Umberto Eco's work is that it summarises almost all the instances and themes that we have encountered so far: the esotericism of Dante and of the *Fedeli d'Amore*, the literature of the Middle Ages, the history of the Rosicrucians, the work of authors more or less imbued with esotericism such as Nerval, Joyce and Borges, and the esotericism and conspiracy theories that flourished in the last decades of the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first. In doing so, he devises an extremely original and complex style, in which different literary genres (historical novels, roman à clef, allegorical novels, crime novels, horror novels) and different authors are interwoven. Indeed, intertextuality is one of the fundamental characteristics of Umberto Eco's work, and more particularly of *The Name of the Rose* which, as Renato Giovannoli notes, is "a book of books".<sup>5</sup> Eco himself makes this clear in his novel: "books always speak of other books, and every story tells a story that has already been told. Homer knew this, and Ariosto knew this, not to mention Rabelais and Cervantes".<sup>6</sup>

Renato Giovannoli has defined *The Name of the Rose* as the "Bible of our time".<sup>7</sup> In fact, the impact that this work has had on twentieth-century culture is undeniable, as is the interest that *The Name of the Rose* has aroused in esotericism. Gianfranco de Turrís writes that in the 1980s Umberto Eco, with his *Name of the Rose* (and with *Foucault's Pendulum*),<sup>8</sup> tried to criticise, in narrative form, the negative and erroneous images, falsehoods and absurdities produced by esotericism (linked to the Middle Ages). However, "instead of discouraging

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<sup>4</sup> "L'idea deforme venne pubblicata quando già avevamo letto *Il nome della Rosa* e *Il pendolo di Foucault*, due romanzi nei quali tutta la materia trattata dagli adepti del velame era al centro dell'ispirazione di Eco: la Chiesa spirituale nel primo e le tragedie degli albigesi e dei templari nel secondo". Pier Luigi Vercesi, *op. cit.*, p. 157. On the esoteric dimension of *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco, see James Dauphiné, "L'ésotérisme comme rénovation du texte: Calvino, Manganelli, Eco", in James Dauphiné, *op. cit.*, p. 317-330; James Dauphiné, "Il Nome della rosa d'Umberto Eco ou du labyrinthe culturel", in *ibid.*, p. 331-341. On the esoteric dimension of *Foucault's Pendulum*, see Frank Grenier, "Le Projet Hermès: fiction et ésotérisme dans *Le Pendule de Foucault*", *Revue de littérature moderne*, n. 7, March 1999, p. 231-251.

<sup>5</sup> "Un libro di libri". Renato Giovannoli, "Introduzione", in *Saggi su "Il nome della rosa"*, ed. Renato Giovannoli, Milan, Bompiani, 1999, p. 10. On the intertextuality of *The Name of Rose*, see Rocco Capozzi, "Intertestualità e semiosi: l'éducation sémiotique di Eco", in *ibid.*, p. 156-173; Ursula Schick, "Le fonti letterarie", in Klaus Ickert, Ursula Schick, *Il segreto della rosa decifrato*, Florence, Salani Editore, 1987, p. 71-117.

<sup>6</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose* [1980], translated from the Italian by William Weaver, including the Author's *Postscript*, translations for the 2014 edition by Richard Dixon, Boston, New York, Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014, p. 499.

<sup>7</sup> "Bibbia dei nostri tempi". Renato Giovannoli, "Introduzione", in *Saggi su "Il nome della rosa"*, p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> Frank Grenier has defined *Foucault's Pendulum* as "the instrument of a literary game referring to esoteric culture" ["l'instrument d'un jeu littéraire se référant à la culture ésotérique" (Frank Grenier, "Le Projet Hermès: fiction et ésotérisme dans *Le Pendule de Foucault*", *Revue de littérature moderne*, n. 7, March 1999, p. 231)], whose project is that of "writing [...] an encyclopaedia of esotericism" ("écrire [...] une encyclopédie de l'ésotérisme"). *Ibid.*, p. 233.

readers by his ‘denunciations’ from approaching certain subjects, he actually achieved the opposite effect: the number of readers soared, and never before had books on the Middle Ages, esotericism, the Knights Templar, magic, occult societies and so on, become bestsellers, whether cheap versions or serious ones”.<sup>9</sup> Gianfranco de Turrís also recalls that in recent decades the most successful best seller (with millions of copies sold worldwide) was Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*. Beyond its popularity in the globalized media market, Gianfranco de Turrís believes it has distorted esoteric truths, through “a popularization of esoteric truths”.<sup>10</sup> *The Name of the Rose* anticipates, by some twenty years, this diffusion of esoteric doctrines, making them accessible to a mass market through a story set in the Middle Ages.

The temporal framework of *The Name of the Rose* covers a period from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century, linking specific moments: 1327, the end of the fourteenth century, the seventeenth century, the nineteenth century, 1968 and 1980. In 1980, Eco wrote that in 1968 he had begun to translate an eighteenth-century French text (based on a nineteenth-century French edition), which was a reproduction of a fourteenth-century Latin manuscript. Towards the end of the sixteenth century, the monk Adso of the Austrian monastery of Melk, recounts events that take place in an unspecified abbey in northern Italy during the last week of the year 1327 (the timeframe of the novel is seven days). Adso is close to death and recounts the “wondrous and terrible events”<sup>11</sup> that he witnessed in this abbey, where he stayed in March 1327 as assistant to the Franciscan William of Baskerville. The latter had been charged with a mission related to heresy, and he ends up investigating the origin of the mysterious crimes that have taken place in the abbey.

Le Roman de la Rose, *The Name of the Rose* and *the common thread of love*

The title *The Name of the Rose* inevitably recalls the masterpiece of medieval French literature *The Romance of the Rose*. In fact, there are analogies between Umberto Eco’s work and *The Romance of the Rose*. Sandra Debenedetti Stow noted this aspect in her article “La teoria della (cor)relatività, ovvero la crociata di Sherlock Eco”<sup>12</sup> [“The theory of (cor)relativity,

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<sup>9</sup> “Invece di scoraggiare con le sue ‘denunce’ i lettori a frequentare certi argomenti, ottenne l’effetto esattamente opposto: i lettori si moltiplicarono e mai come in quel periodo le opere dedicate al Medioevo, all’esoterismo, ai templari, alla magia, alle società occulte e così via divennero *best-sellers*, sia quelle dozzinali sia quelle serie”. Gianfranco de Turrís, “Introduzione”, in Mariano Bizzarri, *op. cit.*, p. 9-10.

<sup>10</sup> “Una volgarizzazione di verità esoteriche”. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, p. 17.

<sup>12</sup> Sandra Debenedetti Stow, “La teoria della (cor)relatività, ovvero la crociata di Sherlock Eco. Proposte per l’analisi del testo de *Il Nome della Rosa* e *Il Pendolo di Foucault* di Umberto Eco”, *Rivista di Studi Italiani*, XIII, n. 1, 1995, p. 118-150. The article by Sandra Debenedetti Stow was included by Eco himself in the list of critical works on his books. In this contribution, Sandra Debenedetti Stow highlights the different connections between *The Roman de la Rose*, *The Name of the Rose* and *Foucault’s Pendulum*.



namely the crusade of Sherlock Eco”] and during a conference in Jerusalem she gave the article to Umberto Eco to read, who replied in a letter dated 31 May 1994:

I was struck by the parallel you draw with *The Romance of the Rose*. If I had to react on the basis of what I was aware of, in writing my novel I was not thinking of *The Romance of the Rose* at all. The title itself was chosen almost at the last moment, based on the final verse, which has another origin and – incredibile dictu – it had not occurred to me that there might be an analogy. However, it is absolutely true that in my early medieval studies I was quoting *The Romance* and dwelling on Jean de Meung’s pages on mirrors. Certainly when I invented my mirror in the library I was also thinking of those pages. That said, I was working on so many and such medieval memories that all influences were more or less unconscious and indirect. Anyway, thank you for bringing them to light.<sup>13</sup>

Eco admits that although he did not use the text of *The Romance of the Rose* as a source for his *Name of the Rose*, this filiation is an indirect influence in his work. Thus, there is a link, even if an unconscious one, with *The Romance of the Rose*, with the esotericism of the work by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meung, and so also with the esotericism of medieval literature.<sup>14</sup> Eco brings together different sapiential traditions dear to esotericism: the *Apocalypse*, the *Song of Songs*, millenarianism, Joachim of Fiore’s Order of the Florians (*Ordo Florensis*), the Arab culture, Averroism, the Persian tradition with its reference to Avicenna, and the Cathar heresy<sup>15</sup>. We thus find, in *The Name of the Rose*, the concept of “ecstasy in which lover and beloved want the same thing”,<sup>16</sup> or the reference to love sickness associated, in Eco, with the figure of Ibn Hazm,<sup>17</sup> and thus to the Islamic esoteric tradition. The *topos* of

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<sup>13</sup> “Sono stato colpito dal parallelo che lei fa col *Roman de la Rose*. Se dovessi reagire in base a ciò di cui ero cosciente, nello scrivere il mio romanzo non pensavo affatto al *Roman de la Rose*. Lo stesso titolo è stato scelto quasi all’ultimo momento, in base al verso finale, che ha un’altra origine e – incredibile dictu – non mi era passato per la testa che ci potesse essere una analogia. Però è assolutamente vero che nei miei primi studi medievali io citavo il *Roman* e mi ero intrattenuto sulle pagine sugli specchi di Jean de Meun. Certamente quando ho inventato il mio specchio nella biblioteca io pensavo anche a quelle pagine. Detto questo, lavoravo su tanti e tale ricordi medioevali che tutte le influenze erano più o meno inconse e indirette. Comunque La ringrazio per averle portate alla luce”. Letter from Umberto Eco to Sandra Debenedetti Stow on 31 May 1994. The original letter sent by Umberto Eco to Sandra Debenedetti Stow on 31 May 1994 can be found at the end of this chapter (p. 501). The letter was given to me personally by Stow. It has not been published to date. I am very grateful to her for kindly giving me this personal and unpublished letter from Eco, and I am also grateful for the information she gave me about her exchanges with Eco, as well as the invaluable advice she gave me for my research.

<sup>14</sup> In another of Umberto Eco’s novels, *Baudolino* (2000), we find traces of the troubadour tradition, with echoes of courtly love. See Sandra Debenedetti Stow, “Umberto Eco, metafisico di Tlön”, in *Umberto Eco. L’uomo che sapeva troppo*, ed. Sandro Montalto, Pisa, Edizioni ETS, 2007, p. 62-63. Stow shows that, as in *The Divine Comedy*, the novel *Baudolino* describes an initiatory journey towards knowledge through love, as evoked by the eponymous protagonist: “at that moment I realized that I loved as I had never loved, but again loving the one woman who could not be mine”. Umberto Eco, *Baudolino*, translated from the Italian by William Weaver, Florida, Harcourt, 2000, p. 377. It is a spiritual love, the sickness of love, as Stow reminds us about love in *Baudolino*: “from Sappho to Catullus, from courtly lyricism to the Dolce Stil Nuovo, all the loci of love and the illness of love are visited” (“da Saffo a Catullo, dalla lirica cortese al Dolce Stil Nuovo, tutti i loci dell’amore e della malattia d’amore vengono visitati”). Sandra Debenedetti Stow, “Umberto Eco, metafisico di Tlön”, in *Umberto Eco. L’uomo che sapeva troppo*, p. 77.

<sup>15</sup> On the cultural background of *The Name of the Rose*, see Klaus Ickert, Ursula Schick, *op. cit.*, p. 118-158.

<sup>16</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, p. 271

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 313.

love sickness is also associated by Eco with the figure of Massimo of Bologna, an imaginary character in the book *Speculum amoris*.<sup>18</sup> But what is interesting is that Massimo of Bologna is, in fact, a character inspired by Massimo Ciavolella, Professor at UCLA (University of Los Angeles), whom I mentioned in chapter II for his article on Dantean esotericism: “Il testo moltiplicato: interpretazioni esoteriche della *Divina Commedia*”.<sup>19</sup>

In the 1980s, Massimo Ciavolella was Professor of Italian literature at Carleton University in Ottawa, when Umberto Eco visited Canada for a few days.<sup>20</sup> On that occasion, Ciavolella met Eco and gave him a copy of his book *La malattia d'amore dall'antichità al Medioevo* (The Disease of Love from Antiquity to the Middle Ages, 1976), already mentioned in Chapter VII. This work inspired Eco to include in *The Name of the Rose* the love story between Adso, the narrator of the novel, and a young woman. Adso is warned by a monk about the danger of falling in love and about the sickness of love. The monk is called Massimo of Bologna (namely, Massimo Ciavolella). This unknown aspect of Umberto Eco's work is confirmed by Ciavolella himself in an interview with Olivia Mazzucato published in the *Daily Bruin* on 26 January 2017. In response to the journalist's question “what was your reaction when you found out that you had been made a character in the book?”,<sup>21</sup> Massimo Ciavolella replies as follows, explaining how it happened:

I met (Eco) a few years before. I gave him a copy of this book ... and then he never said anything about the book to me ... So I thought, if he didn't say anything, obviously, he didn't think much of it. He was a man who had an incredible library – he had something like 30 to 40,000 books – so I thought probably he put it there in his bookcase and never looked at it.

So when he phoned me one day and said, “Oh by the way, I put you down as a character in the book, and I've taken a few pages from your book,” I was totally surprised. And then I read an article that came out in a literary academic journal that said ... that my book was, after the Bible, the most quoted book in the novel.

So I was surprised and at the same time, I was quite pleased. First, because I had a great admiration for Eco, and secondly because a little bit of vanity never hurts.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 313.

<sup>19</sup> I should like to thank Massimo Ciavolella for giving me this information about the character of Massimo da Bologna in *The Name of the Rose*.

<sup>20</sup> Massimo Ciavolella has been Professor of Italian and Comparative Literature at Carleton University in Ottawa, the University of Toronto and UCLA.

<sup>21</sup> Olivia Mazzucato, “UCLA professor talks inspiring a character in a 1980 Italian novel”, in *Daily Bruin*, 26 January 2017, p. 6. It is worth pointing out that Massimo Ciavolella invited Umberto Eco to give lectures at the University of Toronto, as well as at UCLA, where he was Director of the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, see *ibid.* I am grateful to the Daily Bruin for kindly providing me with the 26 January 2017 edition, in which Olivia Mazzucato's interview with Ciavolella appeared. I am particularly grateful to Victoria Li of the *Daily Bruin* for her help.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* This passage is also quoted in Christian Kaiser, “Speculum amoris – Speculum amoris: Liebeskrankheit und medizinische Wissenschaft in Umberto Ecos Mittelalter”, *Medizinhistorisches Journal*, v. 56, n. 4, 2021, p. 266.

The article Ciavolella refers to is by Donald McGrady, “Fra Massimo da Bologna and His *Speculum amoris* in *Il nome della rosa*”.<sup>23</sup> This is, to my knowledge, the only article that shows this unknown aspect of Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*, namely the influence on Eco of Massimo Ciavolella and his work on the disease of love. Donald McGrady confirms that “the real fra Massimo da Bologna is Professor Massimo Ciavolella, of the University of Toronto, and *Speculum amoris* is a supposititious title for his *La ‘malattia d’amore’ dall’Antichità al Medioevo*”.<sup>24</sup> He also confirms that “Eco found in Massimo Ciavolella’s *La ‘malattia d’amore’* ample material to illustrate the love sickness which afflicts Adso”, and that “the author’s unusually extensive quotations from this treatise, plus the name and title of fra Massimo da Bologna and *Speculum amoris*, demonstrate that Eco also intended to pay tribute to Ciavolella’s scholarship”.<sup>25</sup> Donald McGrady points out that “this extensive use of quoted material in the novel went unnoticed for over a decade”,<sup>26</sup> and adds that “the case of fra Massimo da Bologna and his *Speculum amoris* is quite exceptional in *Il nome*”<sup>27</sup> because “although *La ‘malattia d’amore’* is, as Adso notes, ‘un libro non grande’ (it contains but 147 pages, and measures only about 11 x 18 cms.), the quotations from it reproduced above outnumber by far those taken by Eco from any other text”.<sup>28</sup> He continues, “the other book most cited in the novel is – appropriately enough, given the monastic narrator and setting – the Bible, but the sum of its numerous citations does not approach the length of the quotes from Ciavolella”.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the role of Massimo Ciavolella is by no means secondary, in fact it is a primary source of inspiration, although this aspect has gone unnoticed. Donald McGrady’s article and Olivia Mazzucato’s interview with Massimo Ciavolella are the only documents that prove Eco’s debt to the UCLA Professor.<sup>30</sup> It is in the interview with Olivia Mazzucato that Massimo Ciavolella explains Eco’s idea of the Middle Ages: “Umberto Eco believed that the Middle Ages, the philosophy of the Middle Ages, the life of the Middle Ages, what happened in the Middle Ages could teach much about us because of a continuity”.<sup>31</sup> Ciavolella speaks of “continuity”, according to Eco, between the Middle Ages and the modern era. This continuity concerns several aspects of culture and the history of ideas, and esoteric currents represent a fundamental aspect of the Middle Ages. It is no coincidence that *The Name of the Rose* contains many references to

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<sup>23</sup> Donald McGrady, “Fra Massimo da Bologna and His *Speculum amoris* in *Il nome della rosa*”, *Quaderni d’Italianistica*, v. 13, 2, 1992.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 266.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 271.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 270.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

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

<sup>30</sup> It is worth noting that in 1986 *The Name of the Rose* was adapted into a film, starring Sean Connery and Christian Slater. The film was screened at an event organised by the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies at UCLA, directed by Massimo Ciavolella.

<sup>31</sup> Olivia Mazzucato, art. cit., p. 6.

medieval esoteric currents. In particular, in Eco's *Name of the Rose*, we find most of the themes that we encountered in the previous chapters, such as the association of the kissing of the anus with Satan and the Cathars, which, as we saw in Chapter XII, was a subject treated by Pierre Dujols in his work on the links between medieval love poetry, Rosicrucianism and alchemy. Dujols explains the hidden meaning of the kiss given by the Cathars or the Templars to the cat's anus, and this same theme is touched upon (without going into detail), in narrative form, by Umberto Eco in his *Name of the Rose*:

that anus which many devotees of Satan, not least the Knights Templar, have always been accustomed to kiss in the course of their meetings. And after moving about the women for an hour, the cat sprang on the bell rope and climbed up it, leaving his stinking waste behind. And is not the cat the animal beloved by the Catharists, who according to Alanus de Insulis are so called from 'catus,' because of this beast whose posterior they kiss, considering it the incarnation of Lucifer?<sup>32</sup>

It goes without saying that another major influence on *The Name of the Rose* is Dante. Among Eco's characters is Bertrando del Poggetto, whom we encountered in chapter II, in connection with the cardinal who called for Dante's death sentence, and even contemplated burning his bones. But the influences of *The Name of the Rose* are not only medieval: Eco also draws on authors from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including authors who are the subject of my thesis. Nerval, for example, is one of the major sources for Eco and his *Name of the Rose*, as Klaus Ickert and Ursula Schick have shown.<sup>33</sup> Another major influence is Jorge Luis Borges<sup>34</sup>. The debt of *The Name of the Rose* to Borges is so obvious that Klaus Ickert remarks that "*The Name of the Rose* is so imbued with the spirit of Borges [...] that the novel could also be read as a tribute to the Argentine writer".<sup>35</sup> In particular, Eco's work is indebted to two works by Borges: *The Library of Babel* and *The Rose of Paracelsus*, which I mentioned in the chapter on the alchemical rose of the early twentieth century. But Borges is a writer strictly linked to Dante, in particular to Dantean esotericism. In fact, he wrote essays on this subject concerning the history of heterodox Dantean exegesis, collected in his book *Nueve ensayos dantescos* (Nine Dantesque Essays, 1945-1951).<sup>36</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, former director of the National Library of Buenos Aires,<sup>37</sup> was stricken by blindness, and in *The Name of the Rose* the blind librarian of the mysterious library is called Jorge de Burgos. It is Jorge who hides

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<sup>32</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, p. 319-320.

<sup>33</sup> On the influence of Nerval in Eco, see Klaus Ickert, Ursula Schick, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>34</sup> On the influence of Borges in Eco's *Name of the Rose*, see *ibid.*, p. 10-13, 18-20, 32-34, 46- 48, 114-117.

<sup>35</sup> "*Il nome della rosa è tanto imbevuto dello spirito di Borges [...] che il romanzo potrebbe essere letto anche come un omaggio allo scrittore argentino*". *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>36</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions*, ed. Eliot Weinberger, translated by Esther Allen, Suzanne Jill Levine, and Eliot Weinberger, New York, Penguin Group, 1999, p. 265-310.

<sup>37</sup> It is in Buenos Aires, in an antique bookshop, that the author claims to have found the manuscript of Adso's story.

the dangerous book of *The Name of the Rose*, the book that kills those who try to read it, “a banned book that has caused a chain of murders”.<sup>38</sup> The key to the crimes committed is therefore a book. Any monk who comes into possession of this book is murdered. In the end, Jorge will destroy this book, thus the hidden knowledge contained in it will remain a mystery. It is a sinister mystery that characterises not only the banned book but also the abbey itself – whose nature is clearly identifiable in *The Name of the Rose*: “our abbeys are holy places, but around the abbey dignity are woven, sometimes, horrible plots”.<sup>39</sup> Eco’s rose leads the reader to those horrible webs woven in holy places.

### *The absent rose and the limits of interpretation*

The peculiarity of *The Name of the Rose* is that the rose is absent from the narration of the facts. Or rather, it is vaguely mentioned in the novel – but just four times. A reference is made to the faded roses on a relic in the crypt of the church, whilst in two other passages it is linked to Adso’s experience of love. In the first case, it is a passage associated with the *Song of Songs*,<sup>40</sup> and in the second case it is a translation of the *Séquence de la rose* by Alain de Lille. The rose is also mentioned at the end of the novel, with the Latin phrase: “Stat rosa pristina nomine, nomina nuda tenemus”.<sup>41</sup> In other words, all that remains of the rose of yesteryear is the name. The rose thus gives the title to Umberto Eco’s work, but its presence in the text is hidden.

The rose in *The Name of the Rose* is linked to the *topos* of love, as pointed out by Ursula Schick, who speaks of Eco’s novel in terms of a “strict connection between the rose and the theme of love”.<sup>42</sup> But *The Name of the Rose* is also a novel of initiation, or rather a novel in which the concept of initiation exists. In fact, Renato Giovannoli has observed that “the term ‘initiation’, in a more or less broad sense, has often been used – even by the author – in connection with *The Name of the Rose*”.<sup>43</sup> One could therefore speak of an initiatory love and rose in the novel that won him the Strega Prize in 1981.

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<sup>38</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, p. 437.

<sup>39</sup> “Le nostre abbazie sono luoghi santi, ma intorno alla dignità abbaziale vengono intessute, talvolta, orribili trame”. This passage in the English version of *The Name of the Rose* has not been translated, and so this translation is mine. The passage which has not been translated is the following:

“E Roberto perché fu eletto?”

“Non lo so. Ho sempre cercato di non investigare troppo su queste cose: le nostre abbazie sono luoghi santi, ma intorno alla dignità abbaziale vengono intessute, talvolta, orribili trame. Io ero interessato ai miei vetri e ai miei reliquiari, non volevo essere mescolato a queste storie.”. Umberto Eco, *Il nome della rosa* [1980], Milan, Bompiani, 2012, p. 485.

<sup>40</sup> In *The Name of the Rose*, Eco also paraphrases the *Song of Songs* about the “kiss”: “she kissed me with the kisses of her mouth, and her loves were more delicious than wine”. *Ibid.*, p. 238

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 486.

<sup>42</sup> “La stretta connessione tra la rosa e il tema dell’amore”. Klaus Ickert, Ursula Schick, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

<sup>43</sup> “Del resto, il termine ‘iniziazione’, in senso più o meno lato, è stato spesso pronunciato – anche dall’autore – a proposito del *Nome della rosa*”. Renato Giovannoli, “Introduzione”, in *Saggi su “Il nome della rosa”*, p. 8.

Nunzia Rossi stresses that the initiatory rose in *The Name of the Rose* is linked to Power. In fact, she notes that the “textual journey through *The Name of the Rose* may have initiation value”, and that “at the centre of the rose in Eco’s novel is a ‘prince of darkness’, the Power”.<sup>44</sup> According to Nunzia Rossi, “the journey of *The Name of the Rose* is thus a journey [...] to unmask Power, a journey in which Baskerville plays the role of Virgil to a recalcitrant Adso who does not surrender confidently, like Dante, to his master”.<sup>45</sup> Thus, she continues, “*The Name of the Rose* is a long dissertation on the mechanisms of Power that uses ‘occult’ knowledge and terror to keep the herd under control”.<sup>46</sup> One of the ways to free oneself from terror, from fear, is to laugh,<sup>47</sup> as Umberto Eco repeatedly points out in *The Name of the Rose*:

Laughter frees the villein from fear of the Devil, because in the feast of fools the Devil also appears poor and foolish, and therefore controllable. But this book could teach that freeing oneself of the fear of the Devil is wisdom. [...] Laughter, for a few moments, distracts the villein from fear. But law is imposed by fear, whose true name is fear of God. This book could strike the Luciferine spark that would set a new fire to the whole world, and laughter would be defined as the new art, unknown even to Prometheus, for cancelling fear. To the villein who laughs, at that moment, dying does not matter: but then, when the license is past, the liturgy again imposes on him, according to the divine plan, the fear of death. And from this book there could be born the new destructive aim to destroy death through redemption from fear.<sup>48</sup>

Laughter leads to freedom from fear; Power (all forms of Power) uses fear to exert control and manipulation, but in *The Name of the Rose* we learn that laughter frees individuals from moral, social and dogmatic constraints, thus producing “a total upheaval of the world”,<sup>49</sup> as pointed out by Klaus Ickert. Therefore, the reading proposed by Nunzia Rossi fits into a sociological perspective, that of the relationship between Power and the subjugated masses. For her, “*The Name of the Rose* is the great metaphor of a deviant world”,<sup>50</sup> whilst Eco himself speaks of “the disaster of an aging world”,<sup>51</sup> stressing that “we live now in very dark times”.<sup>52</sup> *The Name of the Rose* thus presents itself as a summa of knowledge, as well as a mirror of the modern age and its links with past eras. But *The Name of the Rose* is also a novel which, as has already been

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<sup>44</sup> “Il nostro viaggio testuale, lungo tutto *Il nome della rosa*, può avere il valore di iniziazione. Al centro della rosa del romanzo di Eco si nasconde un ‘Principe delle Tenebre’, il Potere”. Nunzia Rossi, “Un libro proibito”, in *Saggi su “Il nome della rosa”*, p. 281.

<sup>45</sup> “Il viaggio del *Nome della rosa* è quindi un viaggio di salvezza sulla terra, un viaggio per smascherare il Potere, viaggio in cui Baskerville fa da Virgilio a un Adso recalcitrante che non si abbandona fiducioso, come Dante, al suo maestro”. *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> “Il *nome della rosa* è una lunga dissertazione sui meccanismi del potere che si serve del sapere ‘occulto’ e de e del terrore per tenere sottomesso il gregge”. *Ibid.*, p. 276.

<sup>47</sup> On the theme of laughter in *The Name of the Rose*, see Klaus Ickert, Ursula Schick, *op. cit.*, p. 32-34, 44-48.

<sup>48</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, p. 461.

<sup>49</sup> “Uno sconvolgimento totale del mondo”. Klaus Ickert, Ursula Schick, *op. cit.*, p. 47-49.

<sup>50</sup> “Il *nome della rosa* è la grande metafora di un mondo deviato”. Nunzia Rossi, “Un libro proibito”, in *Saggi su “Il nome della rosa”*, p. 277.

<sup>51</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, p. 21

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

pointed out, is strongly imbued with elements that refer to esoteric trends. It is a work in which esotericism plays a major role, rather than a secondary and marginal one.

Eco's entire work is imbued with elements and traces of esotericism – for example, the magic evoked in *The Name of the Rose*. In a passage about the two main forms of magic, Eco highlights the need for secrecy about the so-called occult science:

there are two forms of magic. There is a magic that is the work of the Devil and which aims at man's downfall through artifices of which it is not licit to speak. But there is a magic that is divine, where God's knowledge is made manifest through the knowledge of man, and it serves to transform nature, and one of its ends is to prolong man's very life. And this is holy magic, to which the learned must devote themselves more and more, not only to discover new things but also to rediscover many secrets of nature that divine wisdom had revealed to the Hebrews, the Greeks, to other ancient peoples, and even, today, to the infidels (and I cannot tell you all the wonderful things on optics and the science of vision to be read in the books of the infidels!). And Christian knowledge must regain possession of all this learning, taking it from the pagans and infidels tamquam ab iniustus possessoribus, as they had no right to hold it."

"But why don't those who possess this learning communicate it to all the people of God?"

"Because not all the people of God are ready to accept so many secrets, and it has often happened that the possessors of this learning have been mistaken for necromancers in league from birth with the Devil, so that they have paid with their lives for their wish to share their knowledge with everyone. I myself, during trials in which someone was suspected of dealings with the Devil, have had to take care not to use these lenses, resorting to eager secretaries who would read to me the writings I required. Otherwise, in a moment when the Devil's presence was so widespread, and everyone could smell the odor of sulphur, I myself would have been considered a friend of the accused. And finally, as the great Roger Bacon warned, the secrets of science must not always pass into the hands of all, for some could use them to evil ends. Often the learned man must make seem magic certain books that are not magic, in order to protect them from indiscreet eyes."<sup>53</sup>

Yet this passage on the nature of magic is only one of many references to esotericism, and Eco's approach to esotericism is singular in the extreme and merits thorough investigation. In fact, whilst authors like Yeats or Nerval frequented the esoteric and initiatory circles of their time and were familiar with the world of the occult, with Umberto Eco we are faced with a figure who is alien to this esoteric world. Eco was a university Professor, an internationally recognised semiotician, and at the same time a novelist. He is therefore a special figure in the literary field. The rigour of scientific research that distinguishes academic scholarship is combined with literary fiction, which in Eco's case is marked by esotericism. Whilst esotericism underpins Eco's literary work (from *The Name of the Rose* to *Foucault's Pendulum* or *The Prague Cemetery*), it is also true that this esotericism was rejected by Eco. Focusing on *Foucault's Pendulum*, Carole Cusack speaks in terms of the "ironic employment of Western esoteric

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91-92.

motifs”<sup>54</sup> by Eco in his novel. She highlights the distinctive feature of not only *Foucault’s Pendulum*, but of Eco’s entire literary output: “Eco, though fascinated and attracted by esotericism, and concerned by its growing popularity in the contemporary West, finally rejects it in favour of a renewed commitment to rationality and a scientific worldview”.<sup>55</sup> Thus, as Carole Cusack points out “Eco’s fascination with esoteric interpretations is not disputed”,<sup>56</sup> and his knowledge of esoteric symbols and doctrines, but he seems to prefer a rational approach to knowledge, demonstrating that the seductions of esotericism are not real or true. Therefore, as Frank Grenier remarks, “writing about esotericism, or writing the fiction of esotericism, seems to be for U. Eco, as for his characters, to parody his chimeras in order to denounce their tricks and inconsistency”.<sup>57</sup> Eco’s attitude towards esotericism is thus one of the most fascinating aspects of esoteric research. The seduction and fascination with esoteric discourse is accompanied by a rejection of this discourse, which makes it difficult to express a definitive judgement on his idea of esotericism and its relationship with the literary text. There is a sentence in *The Name of the Rose* that could be applied to this ambiguity of Eco’s dual approach to esotericism, which confuses the reader without giving him a precise key to reading: “deceit is necessary and to surprise in deceit, to say the opposite of what is believed, to say one thing and mean another”.<sup>58</sup> These are the words written in a Greek text read and deciphered by William and Adso in *The Name of the Rose* – words that perfectly capture the sensation of the labyrinth that readers face when trying to decipher the hidden meanings in Eco’s work. In another passage from *The Name of the Rose*, Eco writes that “there is no secret writing that cannot be deciphered with a bit of patience”.<sup>59</sup> In another passage from *The Name of the Rose*, he remarks that. These two concepts underpin Eco’s thinking about the limits of interpretation, or the gap between the author’s original intention and the reader’s freedom to interpret the text and possibly find other meanings in it. Eco summarises this dualism as follows:

All along the course of history we are confronted with two ideas of interpretation. On one side, it is assumed that to interpret a text means to find out the meaning intended by its original author or – in any case – its objective nature or essence, an essence which, as such, is independent of our interpretation. On the other, it is assumed that texts can be interpreted in infinite ways.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Carole M. Cusack, “Esotericism, Irony and Paranoia in Umberto Eco’s *Foucault’s Pendulum*”, in *Esotericism and the Control of Knowledge*, ed. Edward F. Crangle, Sydney, Dept. of Studies in Religion, University of Sydney, 2004, p. 63. My thanks to Carol Cusack for her precious advice on the esoteric dimension of Umberto Eco, as well as on various aspects related to the field of esotericism.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>57</sup> Frank Grenier, art. cit., p. 242.

<sup>58</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, p. 275.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.

<sup>60</sup> Umberto Eco, “Unlimited Semeiosis and Drift: Pragmaticism vs. ‘Pragmatism’”, in *Peirce and Contemporary Thought: Philosophical Inquiries*, ed. Kenneth Lane Ketner, New York, Fordham University Press, 1995, p. 205.



In analysing this passage by Eco, Carole Cusack observes that “Eco recognises that the second position resembles the esoteric process of interpretation, which he terms ‘Hermetic drift’, in which ‘from similarity to similarity everything can be connected’”.<sup>61</sup>

*Interpretation and Overinterpretation*<sup>62</sup> is the title of a book in which Umberto Eco discusses the concept of interpretation of a literary text, or rather the limits of interpretation. This book is the result of the 1990 *Tanner Lectures* held at Clare Hall at the University of Cambridge. On this occasion, Eco discussed the concept of the “intention of the work” and its interpretation, or over-interpretation with three academics. The three specialists were the philosopher Richard Rorty, the literary theorist Jonathan Culler and the critic and novelist Christine Brooke-Rose. Eco’s three *Tanner Lectures* (“Interpretation and History”; “The Overinterpretation of Texts”; “Between Author and Text”) were complemented by the contributions from each of the seminar participants (Richard Rorty’s “Journey of Pragmatism”; Jonathan Culler’s “Defence of Overinterpretation”; Christine Brooke-Rose’s “Palimpsestic History”). All these contributions were followed by Eco’s response. It was on the occasion of the *Tanner Lectures* (the texts of which are contained in the book *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*) that Umberto Eco revisited the topic of the “adepti del velame”, the “followers of the veil”. He had already dealt with this in *L’idea deforme*, subscribing to Gabriele Rossetti’s ideas and analysing the esoteric dimension that the author of the *Mistero dell’Amor Platonico* attached to the symbolism of the rose, linked to Dante’s esoterism. It is in the work *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* that Eco refers to the “followers of the veil”, and to Gabriele Rossetti and the rose associated with the esoteric interpretation that he proposed. As in the case of *L’idea deforme*, in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, Eco is highly critical of the interpretation of Rossetti and the so-called “followers of the veil”. Eco refers to “the paramount obsessions of the Followers of the Veil”<sup>63</sup> and ironically points out several times how unfounded Gabriele Rossetti’s interpretation is, as can be seen in the following sentences: “Rossetti is surprised that in Dante we find references to the cross, the rose, and the pelican”,<sup>64</sup> or “Rossetti, however, wants the pelican as well. He finds it, on its own, in Paradiso XXXVI [...]. Unfortunately, the rose is not there. So Rossetti goes in search of other pelicans”.<sup>65</sup> In another example “Rossetti, in his desperate and rather pathetic fowling, could find in the divine

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See also Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*, Bloomington and London, Indiana University Press, 1979, p. 57.

<sup>61</sup> Umberto Eco, “Unlimited Semeiosis and Drift: Pragmaticism vs. ‘Pragmatism’”, in *Peirce and Contemporary Thought: Philosophical Inquiries*, p. 206.

<sup>62</sup> Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, with Richard Rorty, Jonathan Culler, Christine Brooke-Rose, ed. Stefan Collini, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54-55.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

poem seven fowls and eleven birds and ascribe them all to the pelican family: but he would find them all far from the rose”.<sup>66</sup> Umberto Eco’s critique of Rossetti’s interpretation is based on passages from the *Beatrice di Dante*, not from the *Mistero dell’Amor Platonico* (Rossetti’s most important and comprehensive work), whilst the symbol of the rose is the focus of Eco’s argument in demonstrating Rossetti’s overinterpretation. A good example is the following passage, in which the rose is associated with Dante, the thirteenth-century poet Ciullo d’Alcamo, and *The Romance of the Rose*:

As regards the rose, because of its complex symmetry, its softness, the variety of its colours, and the fact that it flowers in spring, it appears in nearly all mystical traditions as a symbol, metaphor, allegory, or simile for freshness, youth, feminine grace, and beauty in general. For all these reasons, what Rossetti himself calls the ‘fresh, sweet-smelling rose’ appears as a symbol of feminine beauty in another poet of the thirteenth century, Ciullo d’Alcamo, and as an erotic symbol both in Apuleius and in a text which Dante knew well, the *Roman de la Rose* (which in its turn intentionally makes use of pagan symbology). Thus, when Dante has to represent the supernatural glory of the Church triumphant in terms of splendour, love, and beauty, he resorts to the figure of the spotless rose (*Paradiso*, XXXI). [...] ‘Rosa’ appears in the *Divine Comedy* eight times in the singular and three in the plural. ‘Croce’ appears seventeen times. But they never appear together.<sup>67</sup>

The last sentence of this passage ironically refers to the association between the rose and the cross in Dante, linked to Rosicrucian symbolism and contested by Eco. Although Eco opposes Rossetti’s esoteric interpretation, Jonathan Culler refers to a “hermetic soul” in Umberto Eco, claiming that the author of *The Name of the Rose* prefers over-interpretation to the “right, appropriate, moderate interpretation”:

whatever Umberto Eco may say, what he does in these three lectures, as well as what he has written in his novels and his works of semiotic theory, convinces me that deep down, in his hermetical soul which draws him to those whom he calls the ‘followers of the veil’, he too believes that overinterpretation is more interesting and intellectually valuable than ‘sound’, moderate interpretation. No one who was not deeply attracted to ‘overinterpretation’ could create the characters and the interpretive obsessions that animate his novels. He spends no time in the lectures collected here telling us what a sound, proper, moderate interpretation of Dante would say but a good deal of time reviving, breathing life into an outrageous nineteenth-century Rosicrucian interpretation of Dante – an interpretation which, as he said, had had no impact on literary criticism and had been completely ignored until Eco uncovered it and set his students to work on this interesting semiotic practice.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57-58.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

Carole Cusack disagrees with Jonathan Culler's idea of over-interpretation being preferable to rational interpretation in Eco,<sup>69</sup> thus reflecting the empirical reading of Richard Rorty's contribution. Umberto Eco, though, does not give a definitive answer to this question, leaving the reader in doubt: "I thank each of the contributors to this debate, for having provided me with so many challenging insights, and so many interpretations of my work. And I am sure that each of them thinks as I do. Otherwise they would not be here".<sup>70</sup> This is Eco's response to the three scholars of the *Tanner Lectures* who debated the question of the interpretation of a literary text with him. Eco says that he agrees to some extent with the three different approaches of Rorty, Culler and Brooke-Rose: "I am sure that each of them [Rorty, Culler, Brooke-Rose] thinks as I do". Thus, even Jonathan Culler's hypothesis of Umberto Eco's "hermetic soul" cannot be dismissed. Of course, it is undeniable that there is a significant difference between Eco's academic work and his literary production: the rejection of esotericism and the esoteric interpretation of literature in his scholarly writings and, at the same time, the structuring of his literary works on esotericism, presented both with fascination (*The Name of the Rose*) and irony (*Foucault's Pendulum*). This is what emerges from analysis of Eco's academic writings and novels. In the absence of documents demonstrating Eco's intentions, his idea of esotericism and its relationship with literature, we cannot express a definitive judgement on his thought. Hypotheses can be made, but at academic and scientific level they prove nothing: they remain unproven and scientifically invalid suggestions. We need to know whether Eco was an "outsider" or an "insider" in the world of esotericism. Gérard de Nerval was an author Eco liked very much and about whom he wrote essays and books.<sup>71</sup> Nerval was deeply influenced by esoteric doctrines, not only as a matter of personal interest but because he was fully committed to the esoteric circles of his time. He was also a profound connoisseur of the occult and his literary works contain this esoteric knowledge. On the contrary, we know nothing about the relationship between the world of esotericism and Umberto Eco. We only know that he was a university Professor with an encyclopaedic culture and that the history of esoteric currents was one of his particular interests and, as Frank Grenier points out, "[he] found in the occult tradition a privileged field for exploration".<sup>72</sup> For this reason, Umberto Eco's literary production remains an unexplored area of research, which could yield interesting results.

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<sup>69</sup> See Carole M. Cusack, "Esotericism, Irony and Paranoia in Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*", in *Esotericism and the Control of Knowledge*, p. 76.

<sup>70</sup> Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, p. 151.

<sup>71</sup> See Umberto Eco, *Sulla letteratura*, Milan, Bompiani, 2008, p. 35-69; Umberto Eco, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, Harvard University Press, 1994. On the relations between Nerval and *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco, see Marina Mureşanu Ionescu, "Nerval en filigrane dans *Le Nom de la Rose* d'Umberto Eco", *Revue Nerval*, n. 2, 2018, p. 229.

<sup>72</sup> Frank Grenier, art. cit., p. 237.

Moreover, any reflection on the esoteric dimension of the work by Eco must take into account the semiotic theories that he developed, as well as his ideas on the function of language and on the limits of interpretation. In his academic works, such as *Lector in fabula*, Umberto Eco speaks of the reader's interpretative freedom.<sup>73</sup> As we have previously seen, a few decades before Eco, Mario Praz talked about the interpretative freedom granted to the reader, underlining the risk of being seduced by "ideas which are aroused in the mind of the interpreter, but which certainly did not exist in the mind of the artist".<sup>74</sup> Praz opposes the subjective interpretations of the critics and states: "it happens only too often that the unsuccessful artist which lurks repressed in the soul of the critic seeks an outlet in the composition of a critical novel, or in projecting on to some author or other a light which is quite alien to him, which alters his appearance and brings it up to date, greatly to the detriment of the correct interpretation".<sup>75</sup> This observation by Mario Praz is very relevant, especially when dealing with literary works that convey a message of an esoteric nature. Thus, when considering a work such as Nerval's *Sylvie*, so dear to Umberto Eco, one can speak of the "fog effect" coined by Eco, that is to say the effect "by which we never exactly understand whether Nerval is speaking of the past or of the present, whether the Narrator is speaking about a factual or a remembered experience, and the readers are compelled to turn over the pages backwards to see where they are – their curiosity being always defeated".<sup>76</sup> But if we can see the "fog effect" theorised by Eco in Nerval's *Sylvie* – the result of his subjective and personal intuition, it is also true that the strong presence in *Sylvie* (as in all Nerval's literary work) of esoteric elements and motifs is undeniable. This is not a subjective interpretation by the reader, but a factual reality that transcends any personal reading: esoteric doctrines underpin Nerval's literary production. The understanding of Nerval's obscure text does not depend on the interpretation that each reader wants to give it, rather it depends on the knowledge that the reader has of esotericism. This knowledge allows a sliding scale of understanding, depending on the level of the reader: the four levels that Dante spoke of in the *Convivio*. It is also true of other authors whose work is full of elements of esoteric knowledge, such as Goethe, Péladan or Yeats. Likewise, it is true of Dante and the love poetry of the Middle Ages, where the esoteric dimension is not a secondary aspect. In this respect, Francesco Zambon, a specialist in medieval allegorical literature, refers to a "key of an occult nature" to define the interpretations "proposed by the hermeneutic current ranging from Gabriele Rossetti to Luigi Valli and more recent followers",

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<sup>73</sup> Umberto Eco, *Lector in Fabula. La cooperazione interpretativa nei testi narrativi* [1979], Milan, Bompiani, 2010.

<sup>74</sup> Mario Praz, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>76</sup> Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, p. 147. Umberto Eco devoted a three-year seminar to the concept of the "fog effect" in *Sylvie* by Nerval, and the result of this research was published under the title *Sur Sylvie* (VS 31/32, 1982). See *ibid.*, p. 137.

pointing out, however, that “in the studies of these authors there are not lacking here and there insights that Danteans would do well not to overlook”.<sup>77</sup>

As I pointed out in chapter II, notwithstanding his highly critical approach to the Dantean heterodox current, one of Eco’s merits was to deal for the first time in a comprehensive and thorough manner with the issue of Dantean esotericism in the context of academic research. In fact, he drew attention to this aspect that had been neglected until the 1980s. The same applies to the relationship between literature and esotericism: it is also mainly thanks to Umberto Eco that interest in the subject of esotericism has increased and today represents one of the most fertile research opportunities. In this respect, Eco’s literary production has played a fundamental role, mainly due to his masterpiece *The Name of the Rose*. Even here though, Eco leaves the reader confused, starting from the title: it is a novel about the rose, but the rose is virtually non-existent. In fact, this is what Umberto Eco writes about the choice of the title with the rose as its main symbol:

The idea of calling my book *The Name of the Rose* came to me virtually by chance, and I liked it because the rose is a symbolic figure so rich in meanings that by now it hardly has any meaning left: Dante’s mystic rose, and go lovely rose, the Wars of the Roses, rose thou art sick, too many rings around Rosie, a rose by any other name, a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose, the Rosicrucians. The title rightly disoriented the reader, who was unable to choose just one interpretation; and even if he were to catch the possible nominalist readings of the concluding verse, he would come to them only at the end, having previously made God only knows what other choices. A title must muddle the reader’s ideas, not regiment them.<sup>78</sup>

“This rose is more than a flower”<sup>79</sup> is what Gary S. Vasilash says about Eco’s Rose. In *The Name of the Rose* it is an esoteric rose, an initiatory one, and one that initiates the reader into esotericism. As Sandra Debenedetti Stow – praised by Umberto Eco for discovering the links between *The Romance of the Rose* and *The Name of the Rose* – remarks, “reading [is] a kind of esoteric act”.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> “Una chiave di natura occultistica, come quelle proposte dalla corrente ermeneutica che va da Gabriele Rossetti a Luigi Valli e a più recenti epigoni, benché negli studi di questi autori non manchino qua e là intuizioni che i dantisti farebbero bene a non trascurare”. Francesco Zambon, “La scrittura d’amore”, in *Esperimenti danteschi. Paradiso 2010*, ed. Tommaso Montorfano, Genoa-Milan, Marietti, 2010, p. 250.

<sup>78</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, p. 490. Barbara Seward, in the preface to her book *The Symbolic Rose*, had already highlighted the multiplicity of meanings of the rose symbol, stressing that “the history of roses, even in the Western world alone, is too vast in its totality for a single study”. Barbara Seward, *op. cit.*, p. V.

<sup>79</sup> Gary S. Vasilash, “The Diaphanus Bud”, *Chronicles of Cultures*, January 1984, p. 12. This article has also been translated into Italian (by Gino Scatata): Gary S. Vasilash, “La Gemma Diafana”, in *Saggi su “Il nome della rosa”*, p. 254.

<sup>80</sup> “La lettura [è] una sorta di atto esoterico”. Sandra Debenedetti Stow, *Dante e la mistica ebraica*, p. 120.

Milano, 31 maggio 1994

Cara Signora,

ho letto il Suo saggio con infinito piacere e La ringrazio. Quando sarà pubblicato sarò lieto se mi manderà l'estratto.

Sono stato colpito dal parallelo che Lei fa col *Roman de la rose*. Se dovessi reagire in base a ciò di cui ero cosciente, nello scrivere il mio romanzo non pensavo affatto al *Roman de la rose*. Lo stesso titolo è stato scelto quasi all'ultimo momento, in base al verso finale, che ha un'altra origine e -incredibile dictu- non mi era passato per la testa che ci potesse essere una analogia. Però è assolutamente vero che nei miei primi studi medievali io citavo il *Roman* e mi ero intrattenuto sulle pagine sugli specchi di Jean de Meun. Certamente quando ho inventato il mio specchio nella biblioteca io pensavo anche a quelle pagine. Detto questo, lavoravo su tali e tanti ricordi medioevali che tutte le influenze erano più o meno inconscie e indirette. Comunque La ringrazio per averle portate alla luce.

Cordialmente, il suo



Umberto Eco

Dott. Sandra Debenedetti Stow  
Hadeganiot 31/4  
Tivon (Israel) 36000

Letter from Umberto Eco to Sandra Debenedetti Stow on 31 May 1994



## CONCLUSION

In his *Linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d'Amore*, Luigi Valli affirmed that if the hypothesis of the “veil of love poetry”<sup>1</sup> was true, many chapters of our literary history would have to be rewritten, since the question of the *Fedeli d'Amore* is relevant not only to Italian and French poetry, but also to European love literature in the Middle Ages, the influence of which extended to the Renaissance thence to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This concept was constantly referenced by Gabriele Rossetti, who called for a new interpretation in an esoteric key of Italian, French and English literature, and more widely of European literature, as can be clearly seen in the title of his work preceding the *Mistero*, namely *Disquisitions on the Antipapal Spirit which Produced the Reformation; its Influence of the Literature of Europe in General, and of Italy in Particular*.

Based on this hypothesis postulated by Rossetti and confirmed by Valli, in my research I focused on the period and the European literary authors (especially French, English and Italian) that the author of the *Mistero dell'Amor Platonico* and his successors had not studied, mainly from the nineteenth century, but also the twentieth century. Before concentrating on these two periods, I presented a historical and phenomenological reconstruction of the theme of the esotericism attributed to Dante and the medieval love poets, paying particular attention to the analysis of literary texts and to the considerable number of historical documents used in my research. The first part of the thesis also covered the Renaissance, through writers such as Shakespeare, whom Gabriele Rossetti had only mentioned in passing in his works and letters. One of the main strands of this research was used to investigate the relationship between this phenomenon in the history of ideas and the writers and poets of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, through the study of the symbol of the rose – the most important symbol of the esoteric doctrine of love. In fact, both Gabriele Rossetti and Luigi Valli repeatedly stressed that the symbol that underpins esoteric love in literature is the rose. This perspective then led me to the exploration of the esoteric dimension of many authors of European (and American) literature from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century: Dante, Guido Cavalcanti, Cecco D'Ascoli, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Guillaume de Lorris, Jean de Meun, Rabelais, Shakespeare, Edmund Spenser, Philip Sidney, Giordano Bruno, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Victor Hugo, Honoré de Balzac, George Sand, Gérard de Nerval, Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, Jules

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<sup>1</sup> “Il velame della poesia d'amore”. Luigi Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d'Amore*, p. 492.



Verne, Joséphin Péladan, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Joris-Karl Huysmans, Rémy de Gourmont, William Blake, William Butler Yeats, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, Paul Valéry, Gabriele D'Annunzio, Rainer Maria Rilke, Fernando Pessoa, Jorge Luis Borges and Umberto Eco. These writers and poets have produced some of the most important works of world literature and indelibly marked the history of literature with their masterpieces, from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century. To assert that all these authors share an esoteric dimension implies that a substantial part of European, indeed of world literature of any period, has been deeply influenced by esoteric thought and ideas. As Arthur Melzer aptly remarks, if we read an esoteric text exoterically, we will not understand the true original meaning of the work. If an author writes a novel or a poem to convey an esoteric message, it follows that the esoteric aspect is the real message of the literary composition. The *topos* of love perfectly sums up the duality that emerges on reading a literary text: the esoteric and the exoteric meaning. Dante spoke of the four senses of reading in the *Convivio*, the first being literary and the last being esoteric, as Antoine Faivre pointed out.<sup>2</sup> Thus, if an author wants to express an esoteric concept through the allegory of love, and the reader interprets this love as the expression of a feeling, a passion, an emotion or a carnal pleasure, it follows that the interpretation is essentially inaccurate, or at any rate incomplete and merely reflects the literal meaning. Exoteric and esoteric meanings go hand in hand in an esoteric literary work, which embraces them simultaneously, then it is up to the reader to grasp the esoteric meaning or simply consider the exoteric or literal meaning. If we consider, for example, the concept of falling madly in love, we can interpret it literally and believe in a love story where someone in love literally loses their mind, or we can go beyond the literary meaning and observe that the true meaning is mystical, namely madness as an *excessus mentis*, an altered state of consciousness in which the individual comes face to face with the divinity, the invisible reality (see chapter VII). Interpretation becomes even more complex when the esoteric meaning of a theme or symbol in a literary text conceals an allusion to politics or religion, suggesting the occult dimension of history. The rose is a symbol that presents the reader with these different dimensions, all of which are esoteric. The rose can be found in literature of all periods and traditions and is always associated with the concept of love. As noted by Luigi Valli, one of the characteristics of the rose in medieval love literature is that it appears in a literary text in a vague undefined manner, without ever being explained. Whilst Alberto Orlandi in the fifteenth century spoke of “the fresh and vague rose”,<sup>3</sup> in the sixteenth century Shakespeare pondered, “what’s in a name? That which we call a rose”.<sup>4</sup> This highlights the mystery of the rose in literature that surrounds the

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<sup>2</sup> See Antoine Faivre, *Accès de l'ésotérisme occidental*, t. I, p. 126.

<sup>3</sup> “La fresca e vaga rosa”. Alberto Orlandi, *O maligna tirampna, o crudel serpe*, in *Le Rime del Codice Isoldiano*, p. 81.

<sup>4</sup> William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, p. 107.

symbol of the rose. In fact, beyond the strictly literary meaning linked to sentiment and passion in love, in this thesis we have seen that the rose can be linked to a mystical dimension (the mystical rose), to a sinister spiritual dimension, such as the black rose mentioned by the alchemist Fulcanelli (chapter XII), or it can be linked to the world of initiation, as in the case of the Order of the Alchemical Rose referred to by Yeats (chapter X). The study of the symbol of the rose leads to an exploration of these worlds, which are closely connected with the esoteric currents in the history of ideas. All the authors studied in this thesis are linked in different ways to these esoteric realities. Whilst Rossetti, then Valli, advocated rewriting the history of literature, in my research the focus is rather on rethinking literature, in which the esoteric dimension is not marginal, but fundamental.

Whilst we should be prudent in suggesting that there are traces or elements related to the esoteric tradition in literature, this study shows that esoteric thought and doctrines are present in a considerable number of European authors, as well as in American literature and in the Islamic tradition, as we have seen in this thesis (especially in chapter VII). Thus, the esoteric dimension is by no means a secondary element in the literary production of the seminal authors in the history of literature, rather an element of great significance, and the *raison d'être* behind their literary works from Dante to Shakespeare, Goethe to Nerval, and Blake to Yeats. Valli wrote in his *Linguaggio segreto* that “many chapters of our literary history will have to be rewritten”,<sup>5</sup> and through this study on the initiatory symbolism of the rose, linked in particular to the historical phenomenon of the *Fedeli d'Amore* and its legacy in future centuries, I propose to rethink literature. But only a certain kind of literature, the initiatory type dealing with love and rose symbolism, at least in the case of the authors I cover in my work, whom I examine from a perspective that considers esotericism, to put it in the words of Guy Michaud, as “one of the main drivers”<sup>6</sup> of the most important literary works in history, from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century. When looking back over history, we realise that the literary works that are considered unparalleled masterpieces are, in most cases, writings that encompass the mystical dimension, the reality of the invisible, the mystery of our existence, rather than works that express the author's subjectivity or that speaks about themes related to a specific historical period. In his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, Thomas Stearns Eliot writes that true poetry is an act of escaping from emotions, from passions, from personality. True poetry is, for Eliot, an “escape from emotion”:

Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course,

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<sup>5</sup> “Molti capitoli della nostra storia letteraria dovranno essere rifatti”. Luigi Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d'Amore*, p. 492.

<sup>6</sup> “Le nerf moteur”. Guy Michaud, *op. cit.*, p. 371.

only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.<sup>7</sup>

The last sentence is particularly significant because it shows that fighting one's emotions is advocated precisely by the most sensitive people – those who are only too aware of the temporarily benign yet inexorably destructive force of passions, and of the ego. Hence the need for an initiatory poetry that can express the idea of “an escape from emotion”, which does not mean that poetry wants to convey a message about the coldness of the soul, or insensitivity, thus creating a being devoid of conscience. On the contrary, the poetic act (or, more generally, the literary act, whether in poetry or a novel) must aim to teach the human being a lesson, a means of achieving a personal initiation, in a kind of palingenesis that involves a transformation of the being, a second birth. Mircea Eliade defines this as a “mystical birth”, for “the novice emerges from his ordeal endowed with a totally different being from that which he possessed before his initiation; he has become *another*”.<sup>8</sup> Thus, to paraphrase Eliade's words, it is a “basic change in existential condition”,<sup>9</sup> an “ontological transmutation”<sup>10</sup> of the existential regime that Franck Grenier rightly describes as “an inner journey which demands [...] the starting point for a radical transformation involving the entire being”.<sup>11</sup> The mystical rose found in the literature of every era reflects this mystical-initiatory dimension. It represents the path leading alchemically to the perfection of the being, the transformation of base metal into gold, following the example of *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius where the protagonist is transformed from a beast (the base metal, a metaphor for being immersed in the illusion of the external world) into a divinity (gold, or the symbol of spiritual regeneration), after eating a garland of roses.

Given that the mystical rose has initiatory value as a symbol guarding an esoteric knowledge that leads to the ontological mutation of the being, literature itself becomes a form of initiation. It replaces the Master Initiator who guides the reader along the initiatory path towards a higher knowledge, the Holy Land. As Antoine Faivre remarks, “the Holy Land is not only geographical but internal, hidden, esoteric”: “it is the place where heaven and earth meet”.<sup>12</sup> In other words, to quote Antoine Faivre again, it is the knowledge “of the relationships uniting us with God or the divine world”.<sup>13</sup> The reader thus unconsciously becomes an initiate,

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Stearns Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, in Thomas Stearns Eliot, *Selected Essays* [1932], London, Boston, Faber and Faber, 1986, p. 21.

<sup>8</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation. The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth*, p. X.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>11</sup> “Un voyage intérieur exigeant [...] le point de départ d'une transformation radicale engageant l'être entier”. Frank Greiner, “Préface”, in James Dauphiné, *Ésotérisme et littérature. Étude de symbolique en littérature française et comparée du Moyen Âge à nos jours*, p. XX-XXI.

<sup>12</sup> “La Terre sainte n'est-elle pas seulement géographique mais intérieur, cachée, ésotérique”; “elle est le lieu de rencontre du ciel et de la terre”. Antoine Faivre, *Accès de l'ésotérisme occidental*, t. I, p. 95.

<sup>13</sup> “Des rapports nous unissant à Dieu ou au monde divin”. *Ibid.*, p. 16-17.

guided by his Master: the literary text. In this respect, Emanuele Trevi considers literature to be the repository of initiatory knowledge, which he explains as follows:

In a world that is now totally Christianised and therefore completely devoid of the spiritual needs associated with initiation, here are the fairy tales, for example, so full of initiatory themes, or many of the legends of the Arthurian cycle, and especially those about Parsifal and the mysteries of the Grail... And again the great flowering of love poetry in the French, Provençal and Italian Middle Ages, with all its cryptic allusions to a transcendent plane, to a possible individual salvation, to the change of destiny generated by the encounter with the beloved woman... And the initiatory flavour of certain milestones of modernity is undeniable, such as *Ulysses* by Joyce and *The Waste Land* by Eliot.<sup>14</sup>

This passage perfectly sums up the idea that the literature of any era is characterised by an initiatory dimension, from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century of Joyce and T. S. Eliot. In all the authors studied in this research on the symbolism of the rose, the initiatory character of their literary works is undeniable. The key to reading is to be sought in the teaching of an esoteric-initiatory doctrine. But the study of the symbol of the rose has led us to explore another aspect linked to the concept of initiation, namely the relationship between certain authors and the initiatory circles of their time, an aspect that is also linked to what is called “secret history” – the occult and secret history of Europe, or more generally the secret history of humanity. This secret history, hidden from the masses, was the main subject of Gabriele Rossetti’s research in the nineteenth century, but we have seen that it was also one of the main themes of many nineteenth and twentieth century authors, such as George Sand, Honoré de Balzac, Gérard de Nerval, Joséphin Péladan, Edward Bulwer Lytton, Ezra Pound, as well as figures linked to the esotericism of these two periods, including Giuliano Kremmerz, Fulcanelli and Pierre Dujols. We have noted the importance that at times membership of initiatory Orders has represented for certain authors, as their works have been strongly influenced by this affiliation. It is true, for example, in Jules Verne and Nerval, who were presumably affiliated with the *Société Angélique*, or William Butler Yeats, who was a member of the Golden Dawn. Then there are the various Rosicrucian Orders to which writers and poets such as Péladan or Stanislas de Guaita belonged. The symbol of the rose also leads us to the discovery of this initiatory and underground world that many writers and poets from the nineteenth century and the first half

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<sup>14</sup> “In un mondo ormai totalmente cristianizzato e dunque del tutto privo delle necessità spirituali connesse all’iniziazione, ecco le fiabe, per esempio, così piene di temi iniziatici, o ancora molte leggende del ciclo arturiano, e soprattutto quelle su Parsifal e i misteri del Graal... E ancora la grande fioritura della poesia d’amore nel Medioevo francese, provenzale, italiano, con tutte le sue criptiche allusioni a un piano trascendente, a una possibile salvezza individuale, al cambiamento del destino generato dall’incontro con la donna amata... Ed è innegabile il sapore iniziatico di alcune pietre miliari della modernità, come *Ulysse* di Joyce e *La terra desolata* di Eliot”. Emanuele Trevi, *Il viaggio iniziatico* [2013], Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2017, p. 94. On the initiatory dimension of literature, see Emanuele Trevi, *Viaggi iniziatici. Percorsi, pellegrinaggi, riti e libri*, Turin, UTET, 2021; Andrea Rondini, “Emanuele Trevi e la teoria iniziatica della letteratura”, *ENTHYMEMA*, n. XI, 2014, p. 138-167. On the concept of initiation, see also *Ésotérisme et initiation. Études d’épistémologie et d’histoire des religions*.

of the twentieth century frequented. But this underworld also influenced the lives and literary productions of authors such as Nerval, Péladan or Yeats, in addition to exerting a profound influence on the history and culture of societies. The actions of the Orders or initiatory Societies played a major role, directly and indirectly in many historical events, including political and religious ones, as well as in the history of ideas. As we have seen, in the 1970s James Webb published a book whose title leaves no doubt as to the subject matter: *The Occult Establishment* (1976). Recent research, for example by Giorgio Galli, has confirmed the relationship between history and esoteric currents, between esoteric thought and politics (as well as religion), and between an “esoteric” and an “exoteric” history. In my thesis, the occult history of humanity that is referenced several times in literature (even in twentieth century works on alchemy by Fulcanelli and Pierre Dujols and to some extent by Elémire Zolla) is confirmed by historical documents, such as those mentioned in chapter VI, in particular Paolo Rumor’s memorial on the historical truths handed down from his father, the politician Giacomo Rumor. This does not mean accepting such claims as true, rather recording these testimonies as phenomena that have their place in the history of ideas, whether true or false. Far from proposing a conspiratorial view of reality, it is undeniable that men of letters like George Sand, Balzac, Nerval, Bulwer Lytton or Pound, who frequented nineteenth and twentieth century esoteric circles, as well as intellectuals, have spoken of a hidden, occult, secret history. As mentioned in chapter VI, in *Lost Illusions* Honoré de Balzac perfectly expressed this paradox of a double history, one secret and unknown to the masses, the other official but false: “there are two kinds of history: official history, all lies, the history which is taught in schools, history *ad usum delphini*. Then there is secret history, which explains how things really happened: a scandalous kind of history”.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the study of the rose (coupled with the *topos* of love) has introduced us to a discussion of mysticism but also an exploration of the influence of esoteric currents in literature and in the history of ideas, also touching on the theme of the secret history of Europe. As explained in the Introduction to this research, the starting point for this thesis is the work by Gabriele Rossetti *Il Mistero dell’Amor Platonico del Medio Evo*, based on the idea of an esoteric European literature, where the key is to be found in the theme of love and the symbol of the rose. Moreover, in this study I have also shown the direct or indirect influence of Gabriele Rossetti’s contribution to literature, art, and above all various fields of nineteenth and twentieth century academic research. For example, the influence on Gabriele Rossetti’s sons, notably Dante Gabriele Rossetti and William Michael Rossetti, who founded the artistic and literary Pre-Raphaelite Movement, in turn strongly influenced the literature, art and culture of the second half of the nineteenth century, as well as the twentieth century. There is also the interest

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<sup>15</sup> Honoré de Balzac, *Lost Illusions*, p. 676.

aroused in authors such as Ezra Pound or the legacy Rossetti left to the academic world. In fact, Henry Corbin's research addresses the question of the European *Fedeli d'Amore* in order to study the *Fedeli* in the Islamic tradition, particularly the Persian *Fedeli d'Amore*. Gabriele Rossetti's ideas were the basis for Luigi Valli's research, which in turn had a considerable impact on twentieth-century culture, on some of the most important figures of the time, such as Carl Gustav Jung and, as mentioned, on Ezra Pound and Henry Corbin. Directly or indirectly, Gabriele Rossetti and the question of the *Fedeli d'Amore* have had a remarkable impact on intellectuals such as Mircea Eliade, Denis de Rougemont, Erich Auerbach and on figures linked to the world of Western esotericism, such as Joséphin Péladan, Pierre Dujols, René Guénon and Paul Sédir.

In addition to the study of the symbol of the rose and the theme of love, this research work has analysed a range of European literary works, but also different fields. As I have pointed out, Gabriele Rossetti repeatedly emphasised that the doctrine of love of the *Fedeli d'Amore* was to be found in nineteenth-century authors who were not necessarily connected with the *Fedeli d'Amore*, as in the case of Victor Hugo, Honoré de Balzac and Thomas Moore. This is why I have also considered authors who were not directly linked to Dante or the *Fedeli d'Amore*, such as Jules Verne, Goethe, Huysmans and Rimbaud but who, in reality, although apparently very diverse, are connected in some way by the symbol of the mystical-initiatory rose and the *topos* of esoteric love. The mystical-initiatory rose is common to all the protagonists of my research who are linked in other ways – some evident, others less so – such as the link with Dante or with the esotericism of medieval love poetry, or directly or indirectly linked to Gabriele Rossetti and his legacy in the history of ideas. This very complex research work encompasses a range of literature from different eras, as well as other fields, touching on art, music, religion, politics, historical events and the history of ideas. Thus, this study on the esoteric and initiatory dimension of the rose has made it possible to explore subjects such as Rosicrucianism (chapters V-IX), Sufism (chapter VII), Freemasonry (in particular, chapters VII-XV), Mozart's music (chapter VII), Pre-Raphaelite art (chapter VIII) and Alchemy (chapters XII-XIII)

This multiplicity of themes confirms the interdisciplinary character of my research. Referring to the relationship between the love poetry of the Italian *Dolce Stil Novo* poets and the Arab tradition, more specifically to the understanding of *Dolce Stil Novo* poetry through Henry Corbin's contribution on Islamic culture, Giorgio Agamben remarked: "the importance of Corbin's studies for the understanding of Stilnovistic lyricism is proof of the need for the humanities to overcome the specialist division into compartments. Only a 'discipline of

interdisciplinarity' is adequate for the interpretation of human phenomena"<sup>16</sup>. Interdisciplinarity is therefore fundamental for a better understanding of the relationships between the various fields of the humanities. This is the case, for example, of the relationship between literature and esotericism.

"We are 'condemned' to learn and to reawaken to the life of the spirit through books",<sup>17</sup> wrote Mircea Eliade in the 1970s, highlighting the fact that in modern society, books are now the repositories of knowledge that might otherwise disappear – knowledge of the spirit, and of mystical things. Literature is a means of preserving and transmitting initiatory knowledge, whilst the study of the symbol of the rose in literary texts enables the reader to discover this mystical-initiatory knowledge as well as the concepts that have given rise to esoteric currents in the history of ideas. The initiatory dimension of the symbolism of the rose has thus highlighted an aspect that emerges implicitly rather than explicitly in my research, namely the fact that the history of literature is profoundly and continuously (not marginally or occasionally) influenced by esotericism. Gabriele Rossetti postulated a rewriting of the history of European literature, a view shared as we have seen by Luigi Valli. Rossetti's approach was predominantly focused on a political explanation and on the theory of an occult history of Europe in which the secret Orders and Societies play a major role; however, there are examples of European literature in which the influence of esotericism is by no means a secondary aspect, rather the very essence of the work. In fact, if we consider all the authors I have analysed and studied, it could be said that the nature of literature (certainly much of European literature) is esoteric, since esoteric thought and doctrines infuse the literary works of all the writers and poets we have encountered, the rose being one of the major channels for conveying this hidden knowledge.

My research on the rose of the *Fedeli d'Amore* and nineteenth and twentieth century European authors suggests that literature is one of the most effective means of affirming, exploring, conveying and transmitting ideas and knowledge of an esoteric nature. The dialogue between esotericism and literature offers an unexplored research opportunity which is ripe for development. Whilst the theory of an esoteric literature proposed by Gabriele Rossetti in the nineteenth century was ostracized and considered an interpretative delirium, today the relationship between esotericism and literature is considered a vast and fertile domain that opens up research opportunities in literary studies. Therefore, the incomprehensibility of many

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<sup>16</sup> "L'importanza degli studi di Corbin per la comprensione della lirica stilnovistica costituisce una riprova della necessità, per le scienze umane, di superare la divisione specialistica in compartimenti. Solo una 'disciplina dell'interdisciplinarietà' è adeguata all'interpretazione dei fenomeni umani". Giorgio Agamben, *Stanze. La parola e il fantasma nella cultura occidentale*, Turin, Einaudi, 1977, p. 102.

<sup>17</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Ordeal by labyrinth. Conversations with Claude-Henri Rocquet*, with the essay "Brancusi and Mythology", translated by Derek Coltman, Chicago, London, The University of Chicago Press, 1982, p. 62.

literary works can be explained through the influence of the thought and tradition of esoteric currents. Esoteric ideas are, in fact, manifest throughout literature, whilst literature finds its *raison d'être* in esotericism. Literature becomes the repository of esoteric knowledge, whilst esoteric ideas and symbolism are expressed through literary texts. Thus, esotericism becomes literature and maybe provides the answer to the Shakespearean question: “what’s in a name? That which we call a rose”.





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## La Rose initiatique

### Des *Fidèles d'Amour* à la littérature européenne des XIX<sup>e</sup> et XX<sup>e</sup> siècles

#### Résumé

Ce travail de recherche transversale et interdisciplinaire porte sur les relations entre littérature et ésotérisme, à travers l'étude du symbole de la rose dans la littérature européenne, notamment dans les littératures française et anglaise des XIX<sup>e</sup> et XX<sup>e</sup> siècles. Le point de départ de cette étude est l'ouvrage de Gabriele Rossetti, *Il Mistero dell'Amor Platonico del Medioevo*, qui proposa, au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, une lecture ésotérique de l'œuvre de Dante et des *Fidèles d'Amour*, à savoir les poètes d'amour italiens du Moyen Âge. Selon Rossetti et le courant critique qu'il inaugura, cette doctrine de l'amour ésotérique s'est transmise jusqu'au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, et le symbole le plus important pour comprendre la doctrine ésotérique de l'amour est la rose, à laquelle est consacrée cette thèse, qui étudie la dimension initiatique de la reine des fleurs dans la littérature chez des auteurs des XIX<sup>e</sup> et XX<sup>e</sup> siècles, comme Gérard de Nerval, William Butler Yeats ou Umberto Eco.

**Mots-clés :** symbolisme de la rose ; *Fidèles d'Amour* ; littérature comparée ; littérature française ; littérature anglaise ; ésotérisme

## The Initiatory Rose

### From the *Fedeli d'Amore* to the European Literature of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

#### Summary

This transversal and interdisciplinary research work focuses on the relationship between literature and esotericism, through the study of the symbol of the rose in European literature, particularly in nineteenth and twentieth century French and English literature. The starting point for this study is Gabriele Rossetti's *Il Mistero dell'Amor Platonico del Medioevo* which, in the nineteenth century, explored the esoteric dimension of the work of Dante and of the *Fedeli d'Amore* (the Faithful of Love), namely the Italian love poets of the Middle Ages. According to Rossetti and the critical movement that he gave rise to, this medieval doctrine of esoteric love spread into the nineteenth century. The most important symbol for understanding the esoteric doctrine of love is the rose, to which this thesis is devoted, through studying the initiatory dimension of the rose in literature by nineteenth and twentieth century authors, such as Gérard de Nerval, William Butler Yeats and Umberto Eco.

**Keywords :** symbolism of the rose ; *Fedeli d'Amore* ; comparative literature ; French literature ; English literature ; esotericism

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