The Effluents of Deity
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Alchemy and Psychoactive Sacraments in Medieval and Renaissance Art

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Preface

“… from Whom all blessings flow.”

The Ghent Altarpiece was the decade-long collaboration of Jan van Eyck and his presumed brother Hubert, commissioned by its donors Joost Vijdt and his wife Lysabette Borluut, and apparently facilitated in its completion by the patronage of Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy, and his newly wed third wife Isabella of Portugal. Its twenty-four disparate panels seemingly baffle a unified conception, blamed on the different intentions of the two artists, the spiritual aspiration of its pious donors, and the political dynastic ambition of its unacknowledged noble patrons.

Its theme is the End of Time as revealed in the Apocalypse of John, an event widely anticipated with the approach of the mid-millennium. The donors and patrons, by the manipulation of its complex theological symbolism, are striving to position themselves in the ascendancy for the renewal of the world as the New Jerusalem. It offers the hope of a Eucharist upon the True Presence, consisting of the alchemical Water of Life, the sacred effluent of Divinity, the elixir of Gnosis, whose implausible secret is blatantly disclosed only for those who have eyes to see.

Philip inaugurated the Altarpiece with the founding of the Order of the Golden Fleece, an elite chivalric society based on alchemical principles, whose highest knights were initiated by secret rites celebrating their spiritual transcendence to golden perfection. The model was King Arthur’s Round Table, and the Altarpiece also establishes Philip’s claim to the divine sanction of the legendary king in the quest for the Holy Grail and a final Crusade to recapture the Holy Land.

The Altarpiece is construed as an alchemical talisman to rearrange and call down the occult powers of the cosmos to bless his and the donors’ aspirations. To this end, it encompasses symbolism assimilated into Christendom from the ancient mystery cults and pagan antecedents that authenticate the sovereignty of the Valois lineage. Prime among these is the figure of the Gorgon Medusa
and her European analogue as the fairy mermaid known as Melusina. The sacred aquatic stone that crystallized from her spilled blood is an alchemical version of the holy Eucharist.

The Ghent Altarpiece is the central point of reference about which we circle and repeatedly return as we place it in its greater context of what we might call medieval and Renaissance ecstatic scholarship, the intense meditation upon the Holy Scriptures to summon the visionary apparition of the secrets of its ultimate truths. The rabbi Abulafia, as the culmination of a millennium of such scholarship, had such a vision toward the end of the 13th century and set off to convert the pope.

The papacy was always a dual authority, with temporal rule often more demanding of concern than the mystical experiences of those members that the Church honored by canonization into the ever-swelling company of saints. The context for the Ghent Altarpiece was the third quincentennial expectation for the long awaited End of Time. It hadn’t happened, as expected, for the millennium. In anticipation of that event, the bishop Bernward of Hildesheim, a metallurgist and alchemist, later canonized as saint, constructed another great work of art and architecture, the Michaeliskirche and its monastic school, for his tomb and pathway to celestial transcendence. The painted ceiling added to celebrate his canonization encodes the same secret that Abulafia divulged.

The third quincentenary and the millennium marked calculations for a period of time much more immediate. At the end of the 1st century, it was already overdue for an event expected within the lifespan of the original apostles and prompted the apocalyptic Revelation of John on the island of Patmos that established the vocabulary of symbols for the later repetitions.
Acknowledgments

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