

The Forbidden Book - A Review

Posted by David B. Metcalfe



"...the magician of (Giordano Bruno's) De vinculis is the prototype of the impersonal systems of mass media, indirect censorship, global manipulation, and the brain trusts that exercise their occult control over the Western masses."

- Ioan Couliano, Eros & Magic in the Renaissance

For those uninitiated into the magical roots of heroism, Disinfo Books (now a division of Red Wheel/Weiser/Conari) recent publication of *The Forbidden Book* provides an interesting thought experiment dealing with the political and psycho-social intricacies of the heroic ideal and traditional philosophy of magic. Originally published in a Spanish language edition by Roca Editorial in 2007 as *El Libro Prohibido*, Guido Mina di Sospiro and Joscelyn Godwin's novel is an important meditation on the potential political implications of esoteric practice.

In *The Forbidden Book* we are introduced to the Riviera della Motta family, an aristocratic family whose line has dwindled to three heirs, an uncle, Baron Emanuele Riviera della Motta, and his two nieces, Orsina Riviera della Motta and Angela Riviera della Motta. They are the last vestiges, in the imaginal world of the novel, of a lineage of Hermetic alchemists begun by Cesare Della Riviera, whose work entitled "*Il Mondo magico de gli heroi*" (*The Magical World of the Heroes*), was popularized, in our reality, by the 20th century Italian Magus Julius Evola.

With the commercialization of the occult, mass mediated audiences are attuned to the watered down Hermeticism of the Positive Thinking movement, the safe paths of Wiccan initiation, or studies of Alchemy and ritual magic obscured by transpersonal psychology and Jungian interpretation. Considering any of these areas as truly potent political techniques is a bit absurd, even Jung's model of archetype and collective unconscious is better seen as prescriptive, rather than actionable, examination of traditional thought.

None of these examples have much to do with traditional practice beyond using it as a source to bolster contemporary thought. The Royal Art, the Art which leads to the formation of the hero, is so-called because it is the province of gods and those that embody or go beyond them, it is a rare Art, and its methodology is not easily found in paperback reprints.

“In many respects, the Oral Torah is more important than the Written Torah.”
– **Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan (z'l)**

The ubiquitous amount of information we have access to may make it appear that we are more fortunate than those who've come before. Without the proper understanding, focus and practice, however, all that we have access to in terms of magical texts provides little beyond historic curiosity. Browsing the reviews for translations of *Il mondo magico de gli heroi* shows the divergence possible in interpreting texts like these. Out of context they become self-fulfilling mythographies for some, intellectual curiosities for others, very few reach the core of the work to find the real gold.

Neo-traditionalist reviews expound on the virtues of *Il mondo magico* in light of their interpretation of Evola's analysis, finding within it a working method for exploring the heights of Traditionalist doctrine. Academics, and antiquarians, comment on the text's charming word play, and unique allegorical narrative. In either case the text shows the face that the reader is ready to see, a fact which highlights the importance of additional guidance in interpreting the functional meaning of the work.

Cesare Della Riviera provides a perfect center point for the plot to turn on, as his historical existence is predicated on a single work, *Il mondo magico*, and references to that work in secondary sources. Outside of these references the material trace of his existence is very thin, and thus he enters easily into the text as character whose influence stretches through time, and reality, to create a bridge between fact and fiction, the real and imaginal.

The narrative in *The Forbidden Book* begins when Leo Kavanaugh, a professor in the Italian department at Georgetown University, is asked by Orsina, a former intern in the department, to help her understand a copy of *Il mondo magico* that has been bequeathed her as part of a family marriage tradition. This is not the popularly published version of the text, but a private, unexpurgated version which contains excerpts that have been removed from the publically available translations of the work.

Upon arrival at the family's estate in Italy Leo is greeted by Baron Emanuele, who carries an aristocratic distance which quickly turns aggressive when he discovers Leo is there to examine the family's private edition of *Il mondo magico*. Here at the outset we are introduced to a situation that most contemporary readers would treat as a story trope, without realizing that this exchange is central to understanding esotericism in its social context.

Initiatory secrecy, or secrecy that has a functional value beyond hiding information, is only possible as a movement from within a family, a small group, a partnership, or an individual. When an initiatory group becomes the object of study the mechanism of initiation is threatened, as it is more difficult to build the imaginal space for proper Hermetic work.

Although we have access to so many texts from various groups and lineages, studied from the outside these texts lose their place within the complex relationship of initiation. For Emanuele, an academic's intrusion into a very delicate orchestration presents not only the possibility of contagion within his personal plans, but a danger to the pedigree of his initiatory lineage.

Novels, such as *The Forbidden Book*, act as ciphers for encrypted relationships that exist between idea, text and action. As the narrative plays out Leo and Emanuele enact the book's initiatory program. Emanuele by right of his family, and Leo by right of his relationship with Orshina, and through a methodology of mental control he learned through devote study of *The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola* as a member of a Catholic lay order.

"The Bible itself is filled with hidden references to alchemical processes. The passion of Jesus Christ is a well known model for the destructive distillation of Lead Acetate. Genesis & The Book of Revelation hold explicit keys to our art."

- **Hans Nintzel**

The term 'hero' has come to mean little more than 'protagonist' in contemporary usage; however its original Greek interpretation is closer to demi-god. Our understanding of the word changed drastically during the early 17th century, as Enlightenment philosophies gained a stronger foothold in European intellectual culture around the same time that *Il mondo magico* was being written.

If we go back to the sources for the concept of hero, we may be tempted to point to legendary figures such as Hercules, or other mytho-typical culture heroes. We would find it more fruitful, however, to study historical personages such as Socrates, Virgil, Pythagoras and Empedocles, all of whom were raised to the status of hero after their death.

Their names stand out in a way that speaks of legend, however we know that they are, most likely, real individuals who lived lives of exceptional genius. Looking again at the etymology of the words we gain a further clue as to what has changed in our understanding of the tradition of Hermetic alchemy since the 14th century. Genius only came to mean 'natural ability' or person of 'natural intelligence or talent' during the 1640's.

The same period that saw the term hero acquiring mundane qualities, saw the word genius being given a lesser standing. As late as the 14th century the word genius still indicated a 'tutelary god,' coming from the root *gignere* which means to 'beget or produce.' Thus one who was possessed of genius was considered to be in contact with the divine, and if the root of the word is attended, then this contact was with the very generative source of existence.

Pythagoras, Empedocles and Socrates were all put to death by the state. The path of the hero is not one of safety, even in societies that accept its possibility. This became even more prevalent in the Middle Ages, with Gnostics such as Al Hallaj, Suhrawardi, and Giordano Bruno being executed for a similar crime, that of standing above their society's gods, seeking to realign the center point on which the world turns.

That Leo would find the spiritual exercises developed by Ignatius of Loyola useful in discovering the deeper aspects of *Il mondo magico* points to what is fully at stake in the heroic quest. Bruno indicated in his writing that he felt Christ was the ultimate figure of the Magus, and

Ignatius of Loyola's spiritual exercises are designed to unify the mind of the devotee with the mind of Christ during his Passion and Resurrection. Beyond that, like Socrates, Raymond Lull, and a number of other famed philosophers and Adepts, Ignatius was a decorated soldier and courtesan prior to the movement of faith which lead to his later spiritual life, and thus familiar with the Art of Chivalry, which is in itself an esoteric practice.



The interplay between Emanuele and Leo, becomes a critique of the pure heathen heroic ideology of Evola, and the alternate heroic ideology found in the Hermetic alchemy of historical Rosicrucianism, or Catholic Adepts such as Marsilio Ficino, Raymond Lull, Robert Fludd and Pico Della Mirandola. Within the narrative a number of threads develop that allow the reader to explore different facets of esoteric philosophy with names, places, architecture and cultural references all supporting an intricate framework of alchemystical insinuations.

"Sight and hearing are only secondary gateways through which the "hunter of souls" (animarum venator), the magician, can introduce "chains" and lures (De vinculis in genere, III, p. 669). The main entrance (porta et praecipuus aditus) for all magic processes is phantasy (De Magia, III, p. 452), the only gateway (sola porta) for internal mental states and the "chain of chains" (vinculum vinculorum) (ibid, p. 453). The power of the imaginary is increased by intervention of the cogitative faculty: that is the thing that is capable of subjugating the soul (ibid.). Therefore the "chain has to pass through phantasy, for "there is nothing in the intellect that was not previously perceived by the senses (quod prius non fuerit in sensu), and there is nothing which, coming from the senses, can reach the intellect without the intermediary of phantasy"

- Giordano Bruno, trans. Ioan Couliano - De Magia, XLIII, vol. III, p. 48

If one doubts the practical expediency of traditional magic philosophy, reports have it that Giordano Bruno's treatise *De vinculis en genere* has at times been included in the curriculum of the London School of Economics. Couliano, in his examination of Bruno's legacy, considers Bruno's writings on the subject to be more effective as a framework for political machinations than the popular works of Machiavelli.

Written several years prior to Anders Breivik's violent outburst in Norway under the auspices of an imagined Templar order, the book deals with the political potentialities of traditional esoteric philosophy. Like in Jan Potocki's *Manuscript Found at Saragossa*, an initiatory novel from the early 19th century, as the story unfolds we are lead into the intricate relationships of politics, philosophy and religion, where religious and esoteric identity becomes a mask for influencing social change, and individual involvement in this game becomes an initiatory experience that restructures personal identity and understanding.

Not only does the book serve as a way in which to view these aspects, but in itself it serves to remind us that future events, such as Breivik's attacks, can be anticipated, in a general sense if not specific times and dates, if one understands the movement of forces within the world. *The Forbidden Book* plays with these notions within the cultural space, focusing on the importance of

place in our sense of self and examining how manipulating culturally significant monuments, or personally significant areas such as a house, can cause effects within a wider cultural context. This is a topic that has become increasingly potent in the ideological warfare of the 21st century, with 9/11 standing at the gateway to the century as a marker for how effective targeted attacks on the cultural infrastructure provide a blank canvas for mapping out political agendas.

The chain of influence which extends from Baron Emanuele through his lectures, and private meditations, brings in students with the promise of extending initiation, however the reality is that the cult of the hero does not include the option for group participation on that level. As Professor David Gordon White examines in his work *Sinister Yogis*, the popular conception of the beneficent sage does not fit completely with the traditional understanding of the role of advanced esoteric practice. In India's tradition, "*characters are identified as yogis precisely when they undertake to enter into or take over the bodies of other creatures.*" Similarly the Magus, if not aimed at theurgic union, quickly moves into the role of manipulator, or as Bruno puts it the Magus becomes a "*hunter of souls*" (*animarum venator*).

In some sense transmission often takes the form of extending the Magus' will into those that follow at the expense of the followers' self-determination. *The Forbidden Book* explores this aspect of initiation within the Western tradition, where it is not as widely discussed as an aspect of practice due to the contemporary focus on esotericism as a psychological or therapeutic model.

When I picked up Couliano's work again, after reading *The Forbidden Book*, I was struck by a cautionary tone that I hadn't noticed on my first reading. Interwoven with Couliano's precise scholarship are sections that read more like desperate warnings from the front lines of some invisible war than objective examinations of the heroic ideal and the theory of erotic bonds.

Read as a scholarly essay, a work like *Eros & Magic* does not allow the reader to directly enter into the reality that he was seeing. Involved in Romanian politics, outside of Gnosticism his studies focused on the rising influence of right wing forces within Romania. Our enculturation puts a very large gap between the concept of the Magus, and contemporary political movements. In order to bridge this gap we need a place in which to explore these ideas, and there is no better place for exploring the imaginal than within the pages of a novel.

Ioan Couliano understood the political implications of magic. *Eros & Magic in the Renaissance* is a wonderful treatise on the similarities between modern marketing, social engineering and propaganda techniques, and the Renaissance conception of the art of manipulating universal bonds. Excised of superstition, the psycho-spiritual tool set of the Magus becomes a means to alter the movement of the "*gran machina dell'universo*" referred to in the opening lines of *Il mondo magico*.

In *The Forbidden Book*, Guido Mina di Sospiro and Joscelyn Godwin have presented a thought experiment which allows us to see the implications of Couliano's analysis, as well as to gain a better understanding of figures such as Julius Evola. Even figures whose influence on society is more directly evident, such as Evangelicals like Billy Graham and Rick Warren, can be better understood in light of the study of erotic bonds and the role of the hero/Magus in manipulating them.

“Beyond the novelistic tale, this is a book that can (and should) be read at progressively deeper and more occult levels; it has multiple layers of meaning and contains profound insights into the ancient and enduring perennial philosophy.”

- Robert Schoch, Review of *The Forbidden Book*, Paranthropology Journal Vol. 3, No. 2

In order to build out the reality of the Riviera’s private edition of *Il mondo magico*, original sections were written for the novel that expand on the initiatory symbolism of the work within the context of the story. Mina di Sospiro and Godwin’s original additions to the Hermetic corpus add a specific depth to the allegorical motifs in the book, and weave it more deeply into the real fabric of esoteric history.

Godwin’s scholarship has gone much further than Couliano’s in identifying the political potency of specific occult narratives. His hermeneutic agility, which has allowed him to open up areas as innocuous as the Atlantis myth, is used here to create an atmosphere in which we can clearly see how individual attention when properly applied can act as a catalyst to larger social dramas. Within the narrative of a murder mystery the web of influence amongst individuals, groups and ideologies becomes a map for the study of occult cause and effect.

Known for extensive research into the subjects of his books, Mina di Sospiro is able to match Godwin’s scholarship while adding a direct knowledge of the culture of the Italian aristocracy. He is a Marchese (the Italian equivalent of a Marquis) who studied orchestration under Swiss conductor Antoine-Pierre de Bavier, and spent summers in his youth with the legendary film composer Miklós Rózsa.

Not only does this add an air of realism to the setting, it also provides a valuable ground for understanding a unique aspect of Hermetic alchemy, with its direct ties to the aristocracy, which has been lost in its commercial exposition. Those acclimated to the psychologically obtuse, individualized and self-reflective writing that characterizes much of contemporary fiction will find a doorway to a new understanding the role of archetype and legend.

Assute readers can find further illumination reading it in light of works like *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (*Poliphilo’s Strife of Love in a Dream*, c. 1499), which Godwin has written extensively on, or Rabelais’ *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, as a complex allegorical exposition of Hermetic alchemy, socio-political philosophy, and the interplay of erotic bonds on the methodology of progressive initiation.

In light of Mina di Sospiro’s previous works, which have at times have explored allegorical anthropomorphism, it may also be helpful to see the central character of *The Forbidden Book* as the book itself, played out and refracted through the narrative as its potentialities are discovered by each character, who in turn reflect the book’s truth by their ability, or in-ability, to fully embrace the Hermetic ideal of the hero.

The story becomes a place for distilling the deeper implications of Hermetic alchemy. *The Forbidden Book* provides an ample playground for becoming familiar with the rules of the game, and readers of any inclination would do well to enter into its mystery.

The Forbidden Book is available as an E-Book from Amazon.com and will be available soon in a print edition from Red Wheel/Weiser/Conari.

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Guido Mina di Sospiro was born in Buenos Aires into an ancient aristocratic Italian family, but raised in Milan from when he was three months old. A protege of the late Hungarian composer Miklos Rozsa, upon his urging he moved to Los Angeles, and attended the Cinema Production Department at the University of Southern California.

He lives in Washington, DC with his wife and three sons, and with them migrates annually to Europe.

Joscelyn Godwin was born in Kelmscott, Oxfordshire, England on January 16, 1945. He was educated as a chorister at Christ Church Cathedral School, Oxford, then at Radley College (Music Scholar), and Magdalene College, Cambridge (Music Scholar; B.A., 1965, Mus. B., 1966, M.A. 1969). Coming to the USA in 1966, he did graduate work in Musicology at Cornell University (Ph. D., 1969; dissertation: "The Music of Henry Cowell") and taught at Cleveland State University for two years before coming to the Colgate University Music Department in 1971.

He has taught at Colgate ever since.

David Metcalfe is Books Editor for The Revealer, the online journal of NYU's Center for Religion and Media. An independent researcher and artist focusing on the interstices of art, culture, and consciousness, his essay "Of Dice and Divinity – Some Thoughts on Gambling and the Western Tradition," was included in the 2011 publication of The Immanence of Myth.

Writing and scrawling regularly for The Eyeless Owl, his illustrations were brought to life in the animated collaborative grotesquery A Serious Enquiry Into the Vulgar Notion of Nature featured at select venues in downtown Chicago during the Spring and Fall of 2010. He contributes to Evolutionary Landscapes, Alarm Magazine, Reality Sandwich, The Revealer, and is currently co-hosting The Art of Transformations study group with support from the International Alchemy Guild.