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The Hidden Knowledge: Introducing Secrets and Philosophy in the Middle Ages

Throughout the Middle Ages, there is little secrecy concerning passion for secrets. Perhaps only a desire for knowledge equals or surpasses such passion. A piece of knowledge, whether banal or exceptional, when labeled as a secret may acquire great prestige, becoming coveted and an emblem of status. The secret is a form or a symbol of power for whomever holds it, for he holds something which remains hidden under the veil of secrecy. The secret is a form of publicity hiding knowledge away, even when it is already public and a secret to no one.

The *Secretum secretorum*, one of the most widely read works in lay circles during the last centuries of the Middle Ages, exemplifies the success of this culture of the secret. That concise encyclopedia, twice translated from the Arabic, renowned for it is (falsely) attributed to Aristotle, gathers a disparate array of information, including moral and political principles for the conduct of the prince, medical precepts for the preservation of health, descriptions of the properties of minerals and plants, a physiognomy and interpretation of character, all bound by

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the uninterrupted thread of the secret, which the author supposedly reveals to his disciple, Alexander Magnus. Thus it is no wonder that in some manuscripts containing the long version further and more hermetic domains were added, such as alchemy, astrology or magic. The iniciatic character of the secret is amplified by the great diffusion the work enjoyed, for the effective secret is that which is diffused and exerts, implicitly or explicitly, an influence on actions. Read and reread in Latin, the *Secretum secretorum* was, until the end of the 15th century, translated into a good many new medieval languages, more or less over the whole of Europe, becoming one of the more successful texts, for the knowledge it communicates to those who are morally prepared and worthy of receiving it. A model of discovery and conveying of knowledge reserved to a few, offered to its recipients for their own sake, is but an example of a culture of secrecy, which we may find more or less explicitly in all forms of understanding or explanation of natural or supernatural things, from the technical arts to medicine and theology.

The medieval success of the *Secretum secretorum* is a sign and a symptom among many others. The literature of secrets is much more vast and the practice of secrecy or its revelation cuts across all domains of activity and all forms of speech, since the concept of secret entails the concept of a corresponding revelation. Without a hint of paradox, the culture of secrecy turned the Middle Ages into an epoch of exaltation and discovery (for another exemplification, see *Il segreto*, a monographic volume of *Micrologus*, 16, 2014).

The secret waiting to be discovered takes on several other forms among medieval authors.

The Augustinian concept of *abditum mentis* (cf. *De Trinitate*, XIV, 7, 9-10), which we may translate as *secret of the mind*, will enjoy a great medieval longevity, standing out in the non-Aristotelian epistemology of 13th and 14th century authors. In the most recondite part of the mind there lies the ground of knowledge, a truth hidden yet available for those who search it, abandoning the world and returning to their inner selves, and who, after finding it may yearn for a blissful life and future. For instance, Henri of Gand, Theodoric of Freiberg, or Meister Eckhart, all draw on that Augustinian reflection in order to build a theory of knowledge capable of renounce sense experience to access the truth. At least in Eckhart such discovery opens toward a mystical (μυστικός, mysticus, secret) and apophatic experience of knowledge.

In a text exerting a profound influence throughout the whole medieval period, Severinus Boethius evokes the exercises (hebdomads) practiced by those

who wish to preserve in their memory the arcana of knowledge, accessible only to the worthy (cf. *Quomodo substantiae in eo quod sint bonae sint cum non sint substantialia bona*, Prologue, transl. S. MacDonnald: «do not object to the obscurities associated with brevity which, since they are a faithful guardian of a secret [*arcani fida custodia*], have the advantage of speaking only with those who are worthy»).

It is not sheer philosophical elitism which justifies the preservation of the highest truths in the secret of few. In Medieval authors it is the very difficulty and seriousness of the highest knowledge that compels it not to be shared with those who are unable to understand it or will use it in a perverse way. This ancient idea on the superiority of Philosophy and philosophers has, for instance, a political use in Averroes' *Decisive treatise*, which addresses the modes of speech and religious experience, a treatise that was unknown to Latin readers during the Middle Ages.

The sortilege of secrecy lies in the fact that the person holding it has, in virtue of it, a further distinction and a very exclusive way to access knowledge. The secret ennobles whoever holds it, or else it becomes an object of curse and righteous punishment, for being its unworthy or illegitimate owner. The secret moralizes knowledge, gives it a cognitive and political value, makes it an instrument of human relations. One of the political variants of the authority of secrets is the power they bestow on those who hold them, when they decide to share them or hide them.

The secret, whether real or conspirative, is always valuable knowledge, for making present what remains hidden and inaccessible for the majority of human beings. One hesitates in deciding whether it is a simple rhetorical device or a viable instrument for the access to domains beyond empirical experience, as in the interpretation of literary images, revelations, visions or the future. Secrecy and prophecy share the same gnoseological pragmatics, they seek the same efficiency as instruments for action in the present, anticipating or making actual what is inaccessible or merely possible.

When knowledge has no value or even when it doesn't exist, one of the ways of making it coveted and an object of desire is simply to turn it into a secret. And everything involves secrets: power, symbols, customs, time, the past and the future, nature, the voice and silence, the supernatural, the harmony and movement of celestial bodies, the combination of the elements or the causes of catastrophes. It is the infinite search: for any given knowledge it is always possible to show that there are unrevealed secrets, knowledge yet to be discovered. And knowledge will be shared or secretly hidden, which early will become a principle

of demarcation between the sciences of public transmission and the occult and esoteric knowledge, not verifiable except by those who are initiated.

In the Middle Ages, secret and discovery too are said in diverse ways. The vocabulary and the dimensions of the secret are multiple and even more so the possible ways of access to it. *Secrets and Discovery in the Middle Ages* was the subject of the 5th European Congress of the Fédération Internationale des Instituts d'Études Médiévales (Porto, from 25 to 29 June, 2013) and offered a considerable space for philosophical, theological, literary, political, historical and scientific questions around the concept of secret. This volume includes a selection of addresses related with themes closer to the philosophical tradition. The texts were read anonymously and, whenever necessary, reviewed by their authors and adapted for publication in this monographic volume of the journal. The texts are published according to the chronological order of the corresponding subject matter, from Oriental Patristics to the Second Scholastic. A wide array of themes, authors and problems are examined:

Rubén Peretó Rivas in “*Las doctrinas secretas en la obra de Evagrius Póntico* (The Secret Doctrines in the Work of Evagrius of Pontus)”, discusses the forms of the secret for the Oriental Father, who professes to write only certain pieces of knowledge, remaining silent about others, so as not to waste them with whoever is unworthy of receiving them;

Alexander Baumgarten, in “*Boni iudicatio. L'utilisation du mythe d'Orphée et d'Eurydice dans la Consolation de la Philosophie de Boèce* (Boni iudicatio. *The uses of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice in Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy*)”, finds in myth the form of access to a knowledge hidden from those who are unable to interpret it, in this case the possibility of the soul returning to the knowledge of itself;

Sara Barchiesi, in “*Profeta e profezia nell'Epistola di Kāmil* (al-Risālā al-Kāмилиyya) di Ibn al-Nafīs (*Prophet and Prophecy in the Kāmil of Epistle* (al-Risālā al-Kāмилиyya) by Ibn al-Nafīs)”, searches the bonds which, through the power of prophecy and its expository techniques, this text establishes between the philosopher as a perfect human being and the city.

Georgina Rabassó, in “*Rediscovering the Secrets of Voice: Hildegard of Bingen*”, focuses on the mystical and cognitive dimension of inner vision and hearing, to find music as a harmonizing mediation between the divine and the human;

Line Cecilie Engh, in “*The Sweet Secrets of the Bedchamber: Veiling and unveiling in Bernard of Clairvaux’s Sermons on the Song of Songs*”, explores the presence of the vocabulary of secrecy in the intimate space of the bedroom chambers, which, without surprise, reveals the erotic dimension, even if only through literary pictures, present in the wisdom of the mystery;

Manuel Lázaro Pulido, in *Secretos y descubrimiento en el pensamiento franciscano ibérico del siglo XIII* (Secrets and Discovery in 13th Century Iberian Franciscan Thought), addresses mostly the *Historia naturalis*, an encyclopedic text by John Gilles of Zamora, for whom the discovery of nature’s secrets also has a moral and pastoral purpose;

Maria Manuela Brito Martins, in “*O Secretum secretorum na edição de Rogério Bacon: significação dos segredos e enigmas do conhecimento* (Roger Bacon’s Secretum secretorum edition: meaning of the secrets and enigmas of knowledge)”, addresses the reasons by which the Franciscan author prepared a new edition of the work in the above quoted example, as well as the way in which he used his medical art in the discussion of the scientific pursuit;

Tiziana Suarez-Nani, in “*Lire la pensée comme dans un livre: secret et transparence selon Jean Duns Scot et Henri de Gand* (Reading Thought as in a Book: Secrecy and Transparency According to John Duns Scotus and Henry of Ghent)”, inquires whether for those authors the angels, who as opposed to humans do not have bodies and are pure spirit, may withhold secrets, a possibility maintained by Duns Scotus;

Alice Lamy, in “*La philosophie naturelle à l’épreuve du secret angélique. Le mouvement local et la structure du continu selon Thomas d’Aquin Jean Duns Scot et Grégoire de Rimini* (Natural philosophy resists the Angelic Secret. The local movement and the structure of the continuum according to Thomas Aquinas, John Duns Scotus and Gregory of Rimini)”, addresses also the angelic natures and their secrets, here for the purpose of discussing an issue in natural philosophy and how its resolution evokes the introduction of geometry and mathematics in the discussion of the continuum;

Francesco Fiorentino, in “*Calcolo e mentalismo nel secolo XIV* (Calculation and Mentalism in 14th Century)”, asks why a scientific revolution did not occur in the 14th century, despite a strong interest for nature and the growing resort to mathematization to understand nature, and, refusing the model of anticipation, searches an answer by discussing

the relations between theory and practice in scientific knowledge and the ultimate purpose of theological knowledge in that century;

Ángel Poncela González, in “*La crítica a la Filosofía de Ibn Jaldún y la purificación del Islam (Ibn Khaldun’s Criticism of Philosophy and the Purification of Islam)*”, discusses the reasons and the proposal by the Tunisian historian concerning the adequate way of living within Islam, challenging Philosophy and its decline as a superior mode of acquiring knowledge, yet which endangered the balances internal to the religious organization of the Islamic community;

Marisa das Neves Henriques, in “*Version portugaise du Secretum secretorum: entre la fascination visible et l’opacité linguistique (The Portuguese Version of the Secretum secretorum: between evident fascination and linguistic opacity)*”, discusses the linguistic specificities of one of several medieval translations of the *Secretum secretorum* to vernacular languages, taking special interest in this case for the peculiarities that allow the identification of the context of the original reception in Portuguese;

Manuel Méndez Alonzo, in “*The Thomist Philosopher and the Cannibals: Alonso de la Veracruz’s Theses on Cannibalism and Crimes against Nature*”, discusses the accusations of cannibalism against native American Indians as an argument for deprive them of their political and ownership rights;

João Rebalde, in “*Luis de Molina frente a Boécio e Tomás de Aquino: os segredos da providência e a liberdade humana (Luis de Molina facing Boethius and Thomas Aquinas: the secrets of providence and human freedom)*”, discusses Molina’s arguments for a providence without causal efficacy in the responsibility for human actions, without prejudice for divine perfection or the traditional arguments in its favor; finally,

Roberto Hofmeister Pich, in “*Sobre a filosofia da história de José de Acosta (On the Philosophy of History of José de Acosta)*”, surveys the work *Historia natural y moral de las Indias* in order to understand the underlying philosophical view to such an understanding of History, at one time natural and moral.

The vocabulary of secret (*absconditus*, *abditus*, *arcanum*, *mysticus*, *misterium*, *secretum*) is a diverse and rich one, as we may observe in these notes or studies addressing texts in Greek or Arabic or Romance, and mostly in the Latin language. Such studies cannot aim to offer a systematic approach on secrecy

nor to exhaust its problems, but to diversely illustrate the possible contours of a culture of the secret. They too approach an extended temporal arch and different geopolitical horizons, including Greek and Latin Christianity, Islamism, the inter-religious polemic, reaching as far as the colonization of the New World.

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This volume contains only part of the addresses presented to the Congress *Secrets and Discovery in the Middle Ages*. Other presentations will be included in two further volumes to be published in the near future: Maria Adelaide Miranda – Alicia Miguélez Caveró (eds.), *Portuguese Studies on Medieval Illuminated Manuscripts*; and José Meirinhos – Celia López Alcalde – João Rebalde (eds.), *Secrets and Discovery in the Middle Ages, Proceedings of the Congress*, both to be included in FIDEM's series "Textes et études du Moyen Âge", now published in Barcelona and Madrid. This last volume will include two other papers related to Medieval Philosophy: C. Belo, «Theories of Prophecy and the Faculties of the Soul in Medieval Islamic Philosophy»; C. Teleanu, «La découverte démonstrative des secrets au moyen de l'Ars inventiva de Raymond Lulle».

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The Fédération Internationale des Instituts d'Études Médiévales (FIDEM) has given a wide testimony of the trust it placed on the organizers of its 5th Congress, having endorsed and supported many of their parallel initiatives, namely, the five-yearly FIDEM General Assembly, the public presentation of the latest issues in the series "Textes et Etudes du Moyen âge", the Alumni meeting of the Diplôme Européen d'Études Médiévales.

The organization of the congress has counted upon the support of several institutions worthy, on that account, of public acknowledgment, for without their generosity it would not have been possible to make the congress a reality or publish the works presented in that major meeting. Among those endorsements we acknowledge, we emphasize: the Rectorate of Porto University, the Faculty of Arts of Porto University, the research units the Institute of Philosophy (UI&D 502) and the Centre for Transdisciplinary Research «Cultura, Espaço e Memória» (UI&D 4059), and Brepols Publishers. The organization of the Congress has benefited from funds from the Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (Foundation for Science and Technology), through the strategic Project of the Institute of

Philosophy (PEst-C/FIL/UI0502/2011, with FEDER funds from the Programa Operacional Factores de Competitividade – COMPETE, Ref. FCOMP-01-0124-FEDER- 022671).

Preparation of this volume has relied on the cooperation of several specialists in Medieval Philosophy and Theology. We thank the authors and also the anonymous referees of the submitted texts. I also thank the cooperation of Celia López Alcalde and João Rebalde, who co-edit the volume and have given proof of their great proficiency in the accomplishment of practical editorial issues.