

Appropriations of Space in the Renaissance/ Cabala of the Renaissance

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**Henry Cornelius Agrippa (1486-1535) as a Neoplatonic Opponent of Scholastic Theology and a Humanist Opponent of Scholastic Theologians**

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The most important source of information on Agrippa's life is the correspondence of 451 letters divided into seven books, collected and published in the sixteenth century.(1) Thanks to this correspondence, the main lines of Agrippa's biography are known, though many uncertainties concerning details remain.(2) At the beginning of his career he had several brief academic positions at the universities of Dôle, Pavia and Turin. Later, he had various short-lived employments, as 'advocatus, syndicus et orator' in the service of the free imperial city of Metz, as town physician at Fribourg, as court physician of the French Queen Mother Louise of Savoie, and as court historian of the Governor of the Low Countries, Margaret of Austria. After losing this last position in the early thirties of the sixteenth century, he never held another post. He died under unclear circumstances, having spent his final years in destitution. A balanced historic evaluation and interpretation of Agrippa's thought is complex for two different reasons. Firstly, his writings are difficult to read because they are all written in scholarly Latin, characterized by the use of a specific vocabulary and style containing both medieval, scholastic and renaissance, humanistic elements. Secondly, the objective, unbiased reading of his work is hampered by age-old prejudices against Agrippa. Already during his lifetime, Agrippa was accused by the Church of being involved in illicit magical practices and of embracing heretical beliefs. After his death, these accusations continued to be formulated against Agrippa both by catholics and protestants, and both in scholarly and popular literature. Thus, modern, critical research was burdened with an unhistoric, almost mythical picture of Agrippa as a devilish magician and a mocker of Christianity. In the scholarly research of the past decades, this legendary picture of Agrippa is being challenged, but a new, coherent evaluation of Agrippa's thinking has not yet been developed. This paper aims at contributing to such an evaluation.(3)

Agrippa was an independent and extremely versatile scholar. His correspondence and the writings published during his lifetime show that his attention was mainly focused on the investigation of nature ('the secrets of nature', to use a term frequently used in Agrippa's time) and theology.(4) At first sight, there is little coherence within the body of his writings. However, a careful reading of his works reveals that Agrippa's Neoplatonic way of thinking definitely provide a mutual cohesion between Agrippa's writings.

Agrippa endorsed the basic Neoplatonic views on humankind, as is clear from *On Occult Philosophy*, book 3, chapter 36, the *Dialogue on Humankind* and the *Lecture on the Power and Wisdom of God*.(5) He holds the idea that humankind, before the Fall, lived as immortal, hermaphrodite beings in a state of continuous contemplation of God. The Fall ended this state of bliss, humankind became mortal and was divided into male and female beings. As a result of the Fall, the state of immediate contemplation of God was interrupted and humankind was forced to live henceforth in the darkness of the material world. According to Agrippa, the most important task of humankind is to restore its prelapsarian state. In this context Agrippa stresses the need for spirituality, that is, the need for individual human beings to purify their souls. Agrippa formulates the importance of this task for instance in several letters, in the *Discourse on Monastic Life* and in the final chapters of the *Declamation on the Uncertainty and Vanity of Sciences and Arts*.

In his *Book on the Three Ways to Know God*, Agrippa explains that there are three ways which can lead to a restoration of the direct contemplation of God.(6) The first way proceeds via nature and is the way followed by the heathens; the second way is offered by the Jewish revelation, and the third way is the way of the Christian

revelation. In the *Dissuasion against Pagan Theology*, Agrippa argues that for Christians, the first two ways are useful supplements to the third way, but with the proviso that they can become harmful if too much attention is paid to them.

Agrippa's keen interest for the investigation of the secrets of nature corresponds to the first way to know God. His massive *Three Books on Occult Philosophy*, dealing with natural, celestial and ceremonial magic, is the outstanding result of this interest. It is significant that Agrippa himself stresses that he wrote this work to liberate occult philosophy from its negative reputation caused by charlatans in the field and sustained by many Christian authors from the time of the early Church onward (Letter I, 23, in *Opera*, pp. 620-621). Agrippa completed this work as early as 1509/1510. It circulated in manuscript for many years, during which time Agrippa kept revising it. In 1527, Agrippa first expressed his intention to publish his work in print, but it lasted until 1531 before this project was materialized, and even then only book one was published (two separate editions were published, one in Antwerp and one in Cologne). The first complete edition appeared in 1533 at Cologne, after unsuccessful attempts by the local Inquisitor to prevent the publication.<sup>(7)</sup>

As many other Renaissance students of magic, e.g. Ficino, Agrippa distinguished between black magic and white magic. Müller-Jahncke argued persuasively against the widespread view that Agrippa's magic is demonic, and stressed that Agrippa never intended his work on magic to be used as a manual for the invocation of spirits.<sup>(8)</sup> Agrippa explicitly condemned charlatans in the field of magic. On the other hand, he welcomed the practice of magic by those who have the proper spiritual attitude (which he called on several occasions the key ['clavis']) to the true understanding of magic), that is, by those who have Christian faith in God.<sup>(9)</sup> Magic thus performed is, according to Agrippa, the highest form of philosophy ('absoluta philosophiae consummatio'; letter VII, 26, in *Opera*, vol. 2, p. 1043).

Agrippa's correspondence shows that he had a good reputation as an expert on the secrets of nature, and that he conducted experiments throughout his lifetime, usually together with other occultists.<sup>(10)</sup> In this scientific work, his attitude was rationalistic. Thus, he mocked insincere alchemists whose sole aim was to manufacture gold.<sup>(11)</sup> His attitude toward astrology was similar. He was familiar with astrology from childhood and studied it carefully,<sup>(12)</sup> but was strongly opposed to the popular belief in astrological prognostications.<sup>(13)</sup> Agrippa's study of medicine and practice as a physician is strongly linked with his activities as a naturalist.<sup>(14)</sup> Finally, his treatise on geomancy<sup>(15)</sup> and two lost treatises, one on mining and one on firearms, show his expertise in the study of nature.<sup>(16)</sup>

As a theologian, Agrippa was also strongly influenced by Neoplatonism. He believed that there is a strict division between the material world, approachable by our senses and intellect, and the spiritual world, approachable by faith alone. The main consequence of this tenet is that humankind is not able on its own strength to understand God's plan, but that it has to rely on faith to reach this understanding. Agrippa formulates this thought in many passages of his correspondence and writings, primarily in the last chapters of *the Declamation on the Uncertainty and Vanity of Sciences and Arts* (where he uses the Lutheran term 'sola fide', by faith alone).

This Neoplatonic way of thinking explains why Agrippa categorically rejected scholastic theology. According to Agrippa, scholastic theology confounds the study of created things and the study of divine things. More specifically, Agrippa feels that scholastic theology wrongly attempts to underpin and clarify rationally the truths of religion by means of artificial proof and logical reasoning. Agrippa formulates this criticism of scholastic theology in numerous passages of his writings, specifically in his *Lecture on the Power and Wisdom of God* and in chapter 5 of the *Book on the Three Ways to Know God*.<sup>(17)</sup> As an alternative to scholastic theology, Agrippa chooses for a theology which confines itself to the study of those elements in Christian religion which remain uncertain. In concrete terms, theologians should not discuss the articles of faith and the other points concerning which there exists a dogma or binding council pronouncements, which embody the religious truth. Theological research should be confined to things concerning which different views are possible. In their research, theologians should aim at reaching an understanding of the truth, that is, a proper understanding of God's intentions. To conduct this research adequately, theologians must focus on the Bible. Its true meaning should be looked for by means of careful study of the Biblical text itself and by means of careful evaluation of the exegetical work of those theologians who have studied the Bible in good faith. This includes, besides the writings of the canonical writers (that is, the Church Fathers and certain medieval theologians), the writers belonging to the *prisca theologia* and the Hermetic tradition. Agrippa followed this method of research and observed these doctrinal restrictions and in all his theological writings.

So far, we have seen why Agrippa, as a Neoplatonist, opposes scholastic theology as a system. Another important aspect of Agrippa's way of theologizing is the fact that he challenges the theologians of his day who practiced scholastic theology. It was mentioned above that the Inquisition tried to prevent the publication of *On Occult Philosophy*. Similarly, Agrippa's theological opinions were on several occasions attacked by influential theologians as being heretical. In 1509, his public lectures on Reuchlin's *De verbo mirifico* at the University of Dôle were attacked by the provincial of the Franciscan order in Burgundy, in 1518, when he was working in Metz, his endorsement of Lefèvre d'Étaples's work on the triple marriage of Saint Anne was attacked by the prior of the local Dominican friary and a recent doctor of the Sorbonne, and finally, in 1530 a number of passages from his *Declamation on the Uncertainty and Vanity of Sciences and Arts*, published in Antwerp, were condemned by theologians of Louvain university. Each time, Agrippa defended himself at length, by refuting the charges of heresy and by criticizing the arrogant attitude of his opponents, who preferred to condemn rather than to argue and discuss.<sup>(18)</sup> What Agrippa fought against in these polemical writings, was the tendency of professional theologians, trained in the scholastic tradition, to monopolize the debate on theological matters and to ostracize those scholars who did not share their views and who followed different methods of research by marking them as heretics.<sup>(19)</sup> In these writings, Agrippa manifested himself as a supporter of those theologians who advocated reform in the Church and who advanced new methods in divine studies, such as Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, Reuchlin, Lefèvre d'Étaples and Erasmus. For his part, Agrippa wrote his theological works which were meant as invitations to scholarly debate. In concrete terms, this means firstly that he presents his views solely on matters concerning which there exists no fixed doctrine, in other words, concerning which the Church allows theologians to debate. Secondly, he explains his own views concerning the matter at hand, yet he does not make any apodictic statements about them, but rather brings to the fore arguments which are likely to persuade the scholarly reader, and presents them with such a modest attitude as to invite the reader who is not convinced to defend a different view. Agrippa used the label 'declamation' for several of writings to define their dialogical nature.

In conclusion, two elements characterize Agrippa as a Christian philosopher and theologian, and give him a unique position in the intellectual world of his day. First, his Neoplatonic way of thinking opened his mind to the value of the Esoteric tradition and the Jewish theology for Biblical exegesis. Second, he defended with uncommon vigor the notion of free exchange of ideas among scholars. There is a certain heroic character to this attitude, because it brought him in conflict with influential men who were able to harm one's career (as Agrippa found to his cost) and threaten one's life. Many scholars indeed shared Agrippa's frustration with the intolerant attitude of the professional theologians, but not all of them had the stamina to oppose it as consistently and aggressively as Agrippa did.

## -Notes-

1. *Epistolarum libri VII*, published in: *Opera, quaecumque hactenus vel in lucem prodierunt vel inveniri potuerunt omnia* (...), Lyon: per Beringos fratres, 2 vols., s.a. (reprint Hildesheim: Olms, 1970, with an introduction by R.H. Popkin; henceforth referred to as *Opera*), vol. 2, pp. 593-1073. It must be borne in mind that this edition of the *Opera* is less complete than the edition which bears the title: *Opera, in duos tomos concinne digesta*. (...), Lyon: per Beringos fratres, 2 vols.
2. In 1531, Agrippa wrote a brief survey of his life in letter VII, 21, in: *Opera*, pp. 1020-1030. The best modern biography is included in Ch. Nauert, *Agrippa and the Crisis of Renaissance Thought*, Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1965, pp. 8-115.
3. The paper is part of a study of the rhetorical writings of Cornelius Agrippa, funded by the Dutch Royal Academy of Sciences. The complete results of this study are included in M. van der Poel, *Cornelius Agrippa: The Humanist Theologian and His Declamations*, Leiden: Brill, 1997 (forthcoming).
4. His main work dealing with the investigation of nature is *De Occulta Philosophia Libri Tres* (Three Books on Occult Philosophy). His theological works include four Declamations, namely *De Nobilitate et Praecellentia Foeminei Sexus* (On the Nobility and Excellence of the Female Sex), *Declamatio de Originali Peccato* (Declamation on Original Sin), *Declamatio de Sacramento Matrimonii* (Declamation on the Sacrament of Marriage), *De Incertitudine et Vanitate Scientiarum et Artium atque Excellentia Verbi Dei Declamatio* (Declamation on the Uncertainty and Vanity of Sciences and Arts, and on the Excellence of the Word of God; German translation by G. Güpner, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1993), several discourses or essays, namely *Liber*

de Triplici Ratione Cognoscendi Deum (Book on the Three Ways to Learn to Know God), Dehortatio Gentilis Theologiae (Dissuasion against Pagan Theology), Sermo de Vita Monastica (Discourse on Monastic Life), Sermo de Inventione Reliquiarum Beati Antonii Heremitae (Discourse on the Discovery of the Relics of Saint Antony, the Hermit), Dialogus de Homine (Dialogue on the Human Race), Lecture on the Power and Wisdom of God, Lecture on Platonic love, and finally three Apologies (for which see below, note 18). His miscellaneous writings include eight orations, a brief historical work, and a commentary on Raymundus Lullius's *Ars Brevis*.

5. The Dialogue contains an outline of Agrippa's course on the first dialogue of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, which he taught at Pavia in 1515. It was published for the first time by P. Zambelli in *Rivista critica di storia della filosofia* 13 (1958), pp. 47-71. See below, note 17, for a modern edition of the Lecture.

6. See below, note 17, for a modern edition of several chapters of the *Book on the Three Ways to Know God*.

7. See on the attempts of the Inquisitor to prevent the publication of the work letters VII, 24, 25, 27, 28 and 30, in *Opera*, pp. 1035-1037 and 1052-1056. Agrippa defended himself against these attempts in a letter to the Senate of Cologne (letter VII, 26, in *Opera*, pp. 1037-1052), which was published as a pamphlet in Strasburg, 1535, both in Latin and in German (*Epistola apologetica (...); Ein sendtbrieff an Burgermeister unnd Raht der stat Cöln (...)*). The translation is by a certain Theodorus Faber.) Critical edition of *De occulta philosophia* by V. Perrone Compagni, Leiden: Brill, 1992.

8. W.-D. Müller-Jahncke, 'Von Ficino zu Agrippa. Der Magia-Begriff der Renaissance-Humanismus im Überblick'. In *Epochen der Naturmystik. Hermetische Tradition im wissenschaftlichen Fortschritt (...)*, eds. A. Faivre and R. Chr. Zimmermann, pp. 24-51. Berlin: Schmidt, 1979.

9. See, e.g., the letter to Tritheim, written upon the completion of the first version of *On Occult Philosophy* (letter I, 23, in *Opera*, pp. 620-623); *Declamation on the Uncertainty and Vanity of Sciences and Arts*, the conclusion of chapter 48. See also letters III, 56 and V, 14, in: *Opera*, pp. 759-760 and 873-874, where Agrippa stresses that the true meaning of occult writings is only revealed to those who are illuminated by the divine spirit.

10. See for his reputation, e.g., letters III, 1 and 55, in: *Opera*, p. 719, pp. 758-759). See for his experiments W.D. Müller-Jahncke, 'The Attitude of Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486-1535) towards Alchemy', in: *Ambix* 22 (1975) (Part 2), pp. 134-150.

11. See Müller-Jahncke (note 10) and *Declamation on the Uncertainty and Vanity of Sciences and Arts*, chapter 90, in *Opera*, vol. 2, p. 266.

12. See *Declamation on the Uncertainty and Vanity of Sciences and Arts*, chapter 30, in: *Opera*, vol. 2, p. 72, and, for his study of astrology, e.g., letters III, 56, 57 and V, 59, in: *Opera*, pp. 759-763, pp. 913-914.

13. See, e.g., letters IV, 8, 19 and 29, in: *Opera*, pp. 789-790, pp. 798-799, pp. 809-810. See also his *Prognosticon vetus in Agrippinarum archivis inventum* (s.l.,s.d.), a mock prophecy, which shows Agrippa's contempt for popular astrology (P. Zambelli, 'Umanesimo magico-astrologico e raggruppamenti segreti nei platonici della preriforma'. In *Umanesimo e esoterismo*, eds. E. Garin et al., p. 157 ff. Padua: A. Milani, 1960).

14. See for his degree in medicine letters II, 19 and VII, 21, in: *Opera*, p. 666, p. 1022), Nauert (note 3), p. 72, note 40 and J. Orsier, *Henri Cornéllis Agrippa (...)*, Paris: Librairie générale des sciences occultes, 1911, p. 21. He worked as a physician in Geneva and Fribourg and was the court physician of Louise of Savoie; see also letters II, 7, 58, V, 85, et VI, 7, in: *Opera*, p. 650, pp. 714-715, pp. 934-937, pp. 943-944, and his *Remedy against Pestilence* (in: *Opera*, vol. 2, pp. 588-592).

15. *In geomanticam disciplinam lectura*, published posthumously in *Opera*, vol. 1, pp. 520-526; see also *Declamation on the Uncertainty and Vanity of Sciences and Arts*, chapter 13, in: *Opera*, vol. 2, p. 42, and letter IV, 20, in: *Opera*, p. 799.

16. See for the work on mining *Declamation on the Uncertainty and Vanity of Sciences and Arts*, chapter 29, in: *Opera*, vol. 2, p. 66. See for the work on firearms, called *Pyromachia*, letters IV, 44, 54, et 73, in *Opera*, p. 821-822, p. 835, p. 858.

17. Edition of the Lecture, with notes by P. Zambelli in E. Garin et al., *Testi umanistici su l'ermetismo (...)*, Rome: Fratelli Bocca, 1955, p. 119-136. A part of the fifth chapter of the Book on the Three Ways to Know God is included in the same volume, pp. 154-158 and pp. 161-162 (notes); pp. 147-154 and pp. 158-161 include an annotated edition of chapters 2-4 of this work.

18. Expostulatio super Expositione Sua in Librum de Verbo Mirifico (...), in: *Opera*, vol. 2, p. 492-498. De Beatissimae Annae Monogamia (...) Propositiones (...) Defensio Propositionum Praenarratarum contra Quendam Dominicastrum Earundem Impugnatorem (...), s.l. 1534 (not in *Opera*); Apologia adversus Calumnias propter Declamationem de Vanitate Scientiarum, et Excellentia Verbi Dei (...) Quaerela super Calumnia, ob Eandem Declamationem (...) Illata, s.l. 1533 (not in *Opera*).

19. See for this tendency J.K. Farge, *Orthodoxy and Reform in Early Reformation France (...)*, Leiden: Brill, 1985, especially chapter four.

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