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Book Review

Das Erbe des Nikolaus von Kues im Spiegel der Alchemie. By Witalij Morosow. Pp. 268, illus., index. Aschendorff: Münster. 2018. €39.00. ISBN: 978-3-402-16005-3.

In the history of philosophy and ideas, Nikolaus von Kues (Cusanus) immortalised himself with his doctrine of coincidences, which derives a metaphysical unity, that is, ultimately, God, from the mutual immanence of opposites. The telling formula of a *coincidentia oppositorum* seems to recall key features of transmutatory alchemy, above all the polar opposition inherent in the injunction *solve et coagula* ("dissolve and coagulate") characterising several stages of the production of the philosophers' stone. Cusanus lived in the fifteenth century – from 1401 to 1464 – and thus at a time when famous alchemical texts were written, some of them with stunning illustrations. The question arises as to how much Cusanian thought was hidden in alchemical sources and how much Cusanus was guided in his thinking by alchemical practices or thoughts. So far, Gerda von Bredow, Michela Pereira, and Hermann Josef Hallauer have made isolated contributions to the issue. Witalij Morosow's timely investigation is the first book-length study on this subject, exposing the confusing variety of alchemical practices and beliefs, from practical metallurgy to highly speculative soteriology.

From the fact that Cusanus has no written record of transmutational-experimental alchemy, one could easily assume that he was largely immune to this type of knowledge. The situation looks different, however, if other meaningful sources are taken into account, such as the sermons he preached and the marginal notes he left behind in his codices. In his will, Cusanus bequeathed his exquisite private library, with more than 300 manuscripts from the 9th to the 15th century, to a hospital for the poor that he had founded in his home town Bernkastel-Kues. It is a stroke of luck that the codices are still kept in the library of the St. Nikolaus-Hospital, where they are easily accessible for research. As with any scholarly library, the question arises whether all the books united here have actually been read by their owners.

The study consists of four chapters: in the first chapter (pp. 13–53), the author approaches the subject on the basis of mostly German-language and practically-oriented writings from the Moselle region where Cusanus grew up. In the second chapter, Morosow examines alchemy from the perspective of the authorities of the Latin Middle Ages – Albertus Magnus, Roger Bacon, Arnaldus de Villanova, Raymundus Lullus, Geber Latinus (pp. 53–127) – whose writings are all part of Cusanus's library. In a systematic approach, the author attempts to filter out Cusanus's alchemical views on the basis of the passages annotated and excerpted by him (pp. 127–59). In the last chapter, Morosow sketches the history of the effects of the "alchemical Cusanus" from Trithemius to Van Helmont (pp. 159–210). An appendix completes the study, including illustrations and two transcribed alchemical sources which Cusanus used extensively: the *Practica* by Kuno von Falkenstein, Archbishop and Elector of Trier in the decades before Cusanus's birth, and the little-known *Lilium intelligentiae philosophorum* by a certain Uguitius.

Morosow points out that Cusanus must have been familiar with texts on metallurgy and distillation since his youth, although it usually cannot be said for certain to what extent he actually studied these German-language sources from the region. At least it is clear that Falkenstein's Latin *Practica* was known to him. With detective-like attention to detail, Morosow uncovers the identities of the alchemists mentioned in a manuscript formerly owned by

Cusanus (Cod. Harl. 5403, now in the British Library), providing evidence for the identity of one "Magister Peter von Lindau," one of Falkenstein's associates.

Morosow describes in detail the alchemical concepts of figureheads of the Latin Middle Ages. His interest clearly lies in the field of alchemy and is less devoted to the biographical subtleties of the protagonist. Morosow often warns against overestimating the links between the Latin authorities and Cusanus when it comes to alchemy. Cusanus was probably unaware of Roger Bacon's writings that identify him as an alchemist (p. 76), in contrast to Arnaldus de Villanova, whose *Liber de secretis naturae* he must have known, since the version kept in Brixen in the library of the seminary has marginalia in Cusanus's hand. It is well known that manuscripts attributed to Lullus played an important role in the thinking of Cusanus (pp. 101–16), although he was aware that the attribution was questionable, since he had consulted the same sources in Paris under the name of Arnaldus de Villanova.

Good sermons make use of comprehensible examples and comparisons. Nikolaus von Kues drew liberally on the metaphorical potential of distillation and metallurgy. In his sermon on a text of the Apocalypse (1456), Cusanus combined eschatology and transmutatory alchemy. The philosophers' stone here is a heavenly quintessence fired by charity. In a Maastricht sermon (1451), Nikolaus explained the plasticity of the human spirit by referring to the properties of mercury. Already in the early sermon "Assumptio Beatae Mariae Virginis," which he delivered on the 15th of August 1431 in Koblenz, the hierarchy of metals from lead to gold was used as a basis for the Christian catalogue of virtues. "Gold" was the pinnacle, whether it referred to the purity of the soul, the justice of God, or reason, while the corruption of metals could aptly symbolise the soul infested with sin.

Was Nicholas of Kues an alchemist? Certainly not, and Morosow is only too aware of how thin the threads between Nikolaus von Kues and alchemy are. In his scepticism regarding the benefit of practising transmutatory alchemy, Cusanus seems to act entirely in the spirit of Avicenna, Albertus Magnus, and Thomas Aquinas. Over long stretches of writing, Nikolaus seems to have established himself firmly in the subjective realm of the soul. What happens in nature itself served him as a treasure trove of metaphors and comparisons for his spiritual discussions. And even the evidence of his knowledge of alchemical text that Morosow cites cannot shake this impression of Cusanus's narrow view of alchemy: he did not believe that human skill is capable of inducing the transmutation of metals. What this meritorious study is working out is something else. In his search for comparisons and metaphors to convey his spirituality, Cusanus – son of a successful merchant on the Moselle who did not shrink from analogising the relationship between divine creator and human reason with that between coin master and money-changer – often found what he was looking for in metallurgy and alchemy.

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