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Ronald Douglas Gray
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Goethe the Alchemist

In his autobiography, Goethe half-apologetically admits the youthful enthusiasm he experienced for alchemical and mystical readings: Georg von Welling's obscure *Opus Mago-Cabbalisticum et Theosophicum* and the anonymously published *Aurea Catena Homeri*, as well as works by Paracelsus, Basilis Valentinus and van Helmont. Originally published in 1952, this study shows how the symbols and concepts of alchemy played a key role in the genesis of Goethe's later works, both scientific and literary. Author of, among other books on German literature, *Goethe: A Critical Introduction* (1967) and *An Introduction to German Poetry* (1965), Ronald D. Gray details Goethe's alchemical readings, and shows how these influences were processed and transformed into a unique blend of scientific and poetic accounts of reality. Unprecedented in its approach, this study will be of interest to readers of German literature, as well as to anyone interested in the history and evolution of mysticism.

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*A Study of Alchemical Symbolism in
Goethe's Literary and Scientific Works*

RONALD DOUGLAS GRAY



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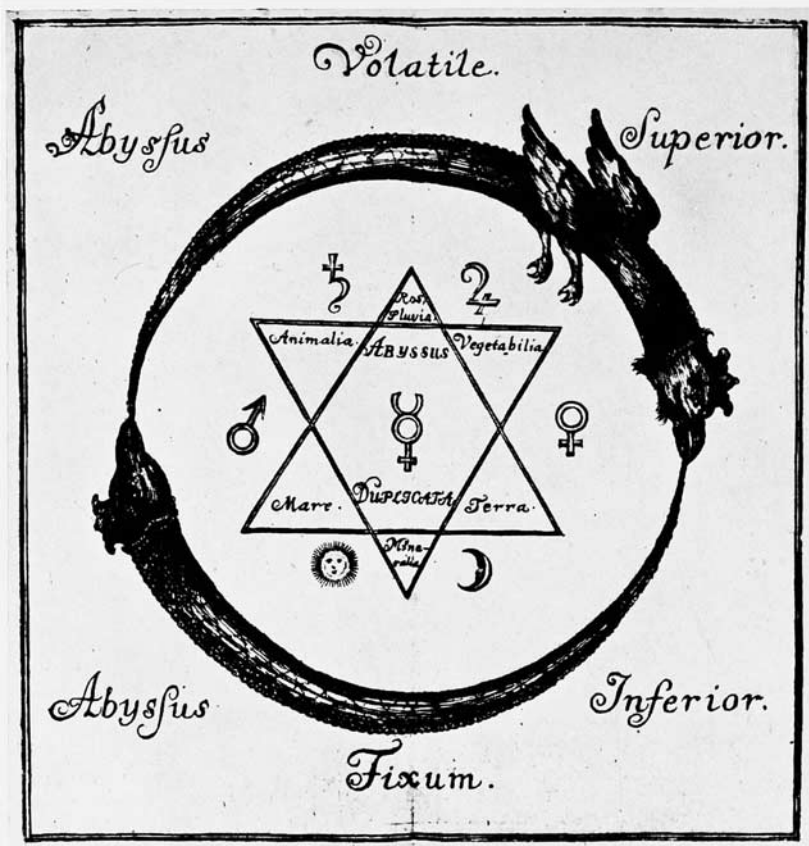
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PLATE I



First frontispiece of the *Aurea Catena Homeri*, showing the cosmic hexagram surrounded by the symbols of the planets or metals, and by the 'Ourobouros'.

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GOETHE THE ALCHEMIST

A STUDY OF
ALCHEMICAL SYMBOLISM IN
GOETHE'S LITERARY AND
SCIENTIFIC WORKS

BY
RONALD D. GRAY

*Assistant Lecturer in German in
the University of Cambridge*



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To
H. C. E. & A. L. P.

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- Diagram of Goethe's Urpflanze *p. 82*

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PREFACE

THIS book sets out to show that Goethe was profoundly influenced throughout his life by the religious and philosophical beliefs he derived from his early study of alchemy. Alchemy can be interpreted in many ways: as the art of gold-making, as a symbolical representation of mystical doctrines, or, as in the writings of C. G. Jung, as a projection of the unconscious mind, concerned with the integration of the personality. As Goethe knew it, it was primarily concerned with mysticism. In his hands, however, it underwent some transformation: the mystical aspect became less important, while he attempted to provide more logical, more scientific evidence of the symbolical truth of alchemy.

It is essential to distinguish clearly between alchemy, mysticism, and neo-Platonism. Alchemy was not necessarily mystical, if the word is used, as it was by William James, to indicate a belief in the possibility of ecstatic, ineffable union with the divine such as is often said to be achieved by contemplation. Nor was it identical with neo-Platonism, in spite of its many affinities. That Goethe was influenced by neo-Platonism is an obvious fact, which I do not wish to deny. Alchemy was, however, the form in which he first encountered neo-Platonism, and it is in alchemical symbols that Goethe expresses himself in his scientific works. Equally obvious is the fact that Goethe was not a mystic in the sense that Meister Eckhart and St John of the Cross were mystics. On the other hand, he made practical use of the tenets of mysticism in his day-to-day life, and thereby achieved that inner solidarity and harmony which is one of his claims to fame. His whole striving was, not to reject one world in favour of another, but to combine the two, to find the ideal in the real.

Not all the symbols in this book are exclusively alchemical, though most are. All, however, are closely linked with alchemy, and I have not resisted the urge to include a little more than the title strictly implies.

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I need hardly add that, since this is not a biography of Goethe, it does not claim to present more than one aspect of his many-sided personality. There is little here of the serene lover of Greek antiquity. But it is not generally realized that even when his faith in Greece and Rome was strongest, Goethe was still in sympathy with the beliefs, though not the methods, of his occult teachers.

I am deeply indebted to my friend Mr Humphry Trevelyan for his painstaking criticism of the original draft and for his numerous suggestions and comments. It was from a parallel suggested by him that the comparison between Goethe's 'Urpflanze' and Boehme's 'Seven Qualities of God', set out in Chapter Four, was developed. I also acknowledge with gratitude the assistance received from Professor E. M. Butler, and from Professor Emil Staiger of Zürich University. My great indebtedness to the theories of C. G. Jung will be evident from the footnotes. Dr Agnes Arber, author of 'Goethe's Botany', and Dr Marjorie Sweeting, Fellow of Newnham College, have helped me with the botanical and geological sections, and I have relied on Dr Arber's translation of the *Metamorphosis* essay on all points of scientific nomenclature. I thank also the Master and Fellows of Emmanuel College, the Ministry of Education, the London County Council, and the Headmaster and Governors of Emanuel School, Wandsworth, for the grants which made it possible for me to devote my time to this study, and Mrs Herta Quinn for her careful typing of the manuscript. Special thanks are also due to the Syndics of the Cambridge University Press for their willingness to undertake the publication of the book. Above all, I thank my wife for making it possible for me to write it.

The original texts of quotations made in translation in my narrative will be found at the end of the book, together with references to literature. The bracketted figures in the narrative refer to these notes.

R. D. G.

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