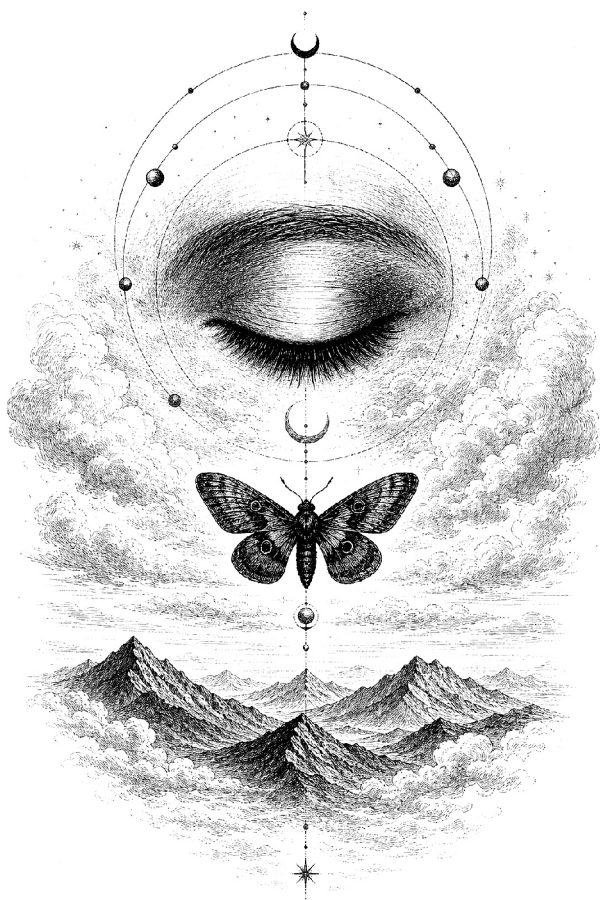


CHAPTER I

THE REALM OF DREAMS

THE PRINCIPLE OF MENTALISM



“THE ALL is MIND; The Universe is Mental.”

– *The Kybalion*

“[...] On the northern shore of this island stands an enchanted city. Its king is called Mirakles. Billions of years ago, Mirakles came to this uninhabited island and, weary from his journey, lay down upon its green shore to refresh himself with sleep. He lay down and fell asleep. And he dreamed of a vast city and thousands of subjects, of the beautiful Princess Chryzeida, of palaces and gardens [...]. Whatever he dreamed within himself came to pass outside him on the island, and comes to pass there still. It does not truly exist; it merely happens, and happens without end! [...] All of it dreamed into being, weary of dreaming, and longing through the ages to awaken together! All of it will vanish without a trace the moment the king awakes. [...]”

– Bolesław Leśmian, *Przygody Sindbada Żeglarza*¹

THE BUTTERFLY’S DREAM

“THE ALL is MIND; The Universe is Mental.” This is how *The Kybalion* states the Principle of Mentalism, the first of its seven Hermetic principles. Published in 1908 under the name Three Initiates, the book draws on an older tradition while presenting its own modern formulation. Its opening principle takes us straight into the mystery of existence. It is our ticket for the first great journey: a reflection on the reality of being, on the true nature of what we call reality.

For centuries, sages, philosophers, scholars, and artists have wrestled with the question of how real our existence is. How “real” is what we perceive

through our senses—our bodies, other people, our immediate surroundings, our planet, and ultimately the entire universe? What might we see if we could look beneath the surface of reality? Is it possible that, as in Leśmian's tale of King Mirakles, we are all merely a god's dream?

The Chinese philosopher and sage Zhuangzi captured this beautifully in his famous story. Once, he dreamed he was a butterfly. On waking, he realized that perhaps he was a butterfly now dreaming that he was Zhuangzi...

Many of us experience this "existential uncertainty," with its accompanying sense that the real world is somehow unreal: when we finish a compelling book or a captivating film, when we wake from an unusually vivid dream, when we have a fever, and sometimes after using—or overusing—various intoxicants.

From time to time, this individual feeling emerges in culture on a broader, collective scale. This may help explain the appeal of the Wachowskis' original *Matrix* trilogy. The films give visible form to an unease that has haunted the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries: the suspicion, lurking somewhere in the cellars of the subconscious, that the world of liberal democracy and corporate prosperity is a collective illusion. Set beside Francis Fukuyama's 1989 essay "The End of History?", they suggest a darker answer to the question of where history has brought us.

As we study Hermetic teachings today, in the early twenty-first century, cultural hits and trends deserve our attention. They offer valuable insight into the fears and desires that currently dominate the social unconscious. It is easy to see how, for several decades now, successive generations of teenagers—"immortal" through computer games, bored with real

life, and rebellious as ever—have been captivated by sagas of vampires who are unlucky in love and locked in rivalry. Meanwhile, their parents vent their frustration and anger by watching, with masochistic persistence, episode after episode of television series in which they themselves appear as zombies. Like those hated “zombies,” battered with shovels and burned alive, they stubbornly rise from the dead day after day, put on their jackets or suits, drive their children to school, and set off on the daily treadmill of their quasi-lives. This tells us a great deal about how we experience reality today, and about the paths we should follow to approach Hermetic wisdom from a contemporary perspective.

For decades, we have been haunted by the feeling that “something is wrong” with our world. Art—including popular, mass-market art—intuitively detects, transforms, and expresses the currents of the social unconscious. It reaches into places where “specters awaken,” opens the secret drawers of our intuitions, fears, and desires, and briefly sheds light on what remains invisible even in daylight. Inspired art, like inspired philosophy such as Hermeticism, expresses itself through symbol and metaphor. These are, in a sense, the “opposite pole” of the mathematical formulas that describe the universal, cosmic laws of physics or chemistry. To learn something about ourselves and the universe, then, we can follow either path. We do so in the hope that our everyday, common-sense Euclidean geometry and its axioms are merely a “special case” of the geometry of the universe—an illusion of our senses—and that these two seemingly parallel lines, the paths of art and mathematics, meet somewhere at infinity...

In a sense, these two paths to knowledge—the artistic and the scientific—are alike. Both draw on talent and imagination. Practicing art or science,

especially when science requires advanced mathematics, also calls for creativity, skill in a particular technique, and command of a craft. Behind both lies an irresistible need to ask important questions and search for answers.

Yet even if we lack mathematical or artistic training, we need not give up. Each of us has a key to an experience that ordinary waking reason and perception cannot fully contain: our capacity to dream. A dream is not itself an answer, but a clue. It allows us to experience a world taking shape within the mind and to ask what that experience might tell us about reality. Hermetic philosophy gives those questions one language; scientific inquiry approaches the nature of mind and the universe through different methods. Our journey begins with the questions that make us want to follow either path.

PATHS THROUGH THE NIGHT

We begin our Hermetic journey through the cosmos, then, in the Realm of Dreams. We enter it night after night, spending roughly a third of our lives asleep if we average eight hours a night. Sleep supports our health and our ability to learn, remember, and respond to the world. Most of us know how even a poor night's sleep can affect our concentration, mood, and reactions. Prolonged sleep deprivation can seriously impair functioning, although its effects do not follow one identical timetable in everyone. A person may also underestimate how impaired they have become. The familiar passage from waking into sleep is no optional luxury: it belongs to the basic rhythm of our lives.

The Realm of Dreams is an extraordinary place. Although other people—and many other animals—share the experience of sleep, we encounter our own dreams from within. Heraclitus contrasted the shared world of