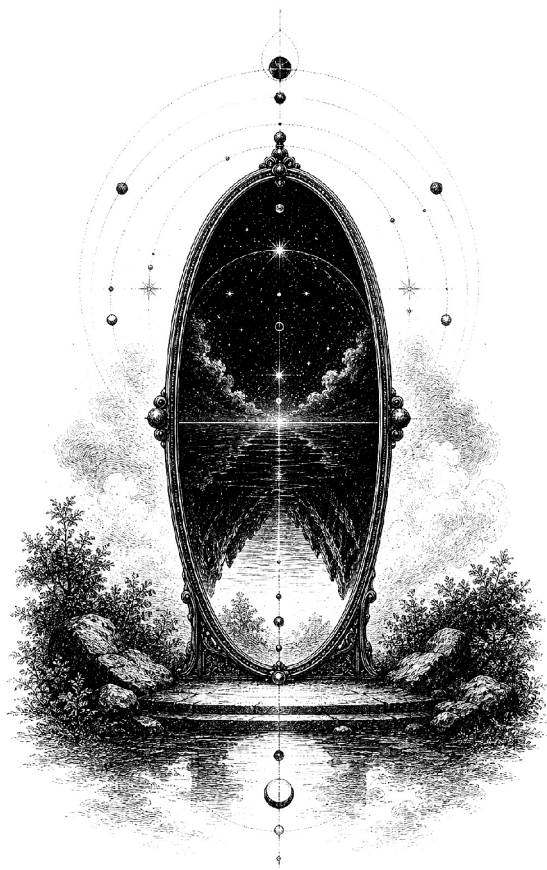


CHAPTER II

THE REALM OF MIRRORS

THE PRINCIPLE OF CORRESPONDENCE



“As above, so below; as below, so above.”

– *The Kybalion*

An introductory reflection on a scene from Stanisław Lem's The Cyberiad.

In Stanisław Lem's *The Cyberiad*, a robber demands knowledge instead of gold. Trurl and his companion answer with a machine that supplies information in overwhelming abundance. The robber expects revelation. What he gets is more than he can use, until the accumulation itself becomes his prison.

The joke raises a question that will accompany us through this chapter: what turns information into understanding? A fact can be true and still tell us little about what matters. As we enter the Realm of Mirrors, we will look for patterns that help us make sense of the world—and ask how to distinguish a revealing connection from one we merely wish to see.¹

Listening not to my voice but to the voice of reason, it is wise to agree that all is one.

– Heraclitus of Ephesus²

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MIRRORS AND PIGEONS

Our journey through the Realm of Dreams, following the Principle of Mentalism, took us toward the origins of the universe and some of its least familiar levels. To explore the second Hermetic principle—“As above, so below; as below, so above”—we now enter the Realm of Mirrors, where visible and hidden orders seem to

reflect one another. The Principle of Correspondence offers a compressed metaphor for something the ancient Greek word *kosmos* evokes: an ordered world.

In the Hermetic account, everything that exists belongs to a unity. Matter, energy, and consciousness are understood as different expressions of one source, the Universal Mind. A common pattern is thought to appear across different forms and levels of existence. To examine a part is therefore to seek insight into the whole, because the universe is interpreted as an expression of Primordial Thought. This is the philosophical premise of our journey; particular resemblances will still need to be examined on their own merits.

We will travel among different kinds of order and structure: those created by culture and those investigated in the natural sciences. We will consider patterns in the cosmos and in earthly life, then look at their reflections in mythology, symbols, and mathematics. Through the lens of the second Hermetic principle, our minds—and our bodies—become small mirrors in which a larger pattern of creation may be glimpsed.

Our minds are particularly adept at finding patterns, sometimes even where a supposed connection does not exist. Other animals can also develop behavior that appears to reflect a nonexistent causal relationship. In his 1948 experiment, the American psychologist B. F. Skinner provided pigeons with food at regular intervals, independently of their actions. Several birds developed repeated movements, such as turning or moving the head in a characteristic way. Skinner interpreted this as behavior reinforced by its accidental proximity to feeding and described it as “superstition.”³ It offers a more limited, useful

warning: a repeated sequence can look like cause and effect even when our action does not control the outcome.⁴

Recognizing real regularities can plainly be useful. Finding food, avoiding danger, choosing shelter, and understanding other members of a group all depend partly on learning what tends to happen. Yet sensitivity to patterns can also lead us astray. Within culture—the environment we help construct—imagined orders may become powerful shared realities. A belief can organize behavior for generations without the causal explanation attached to it being correct.

We must therefore travel carefully through the Realm of Mirrors. Anyone who has entered a funhouse knows why: a mirror can distort as easily as it reflects. It may give an unwary traveler a convincing picture that is nevertheless false.

Order does exist, at least locally, even while total entropy increases. The second law does not forbid stars, organisms, or civilizations. We encounter structures on a cosmic scale, in the web of galaxies, and closer to home, in the arrangements, rhythms, and cycles of the world around us. Physical laws give us reasons to investigate that order; resemblance alone does not establish one universal design. In the Hermetic interpretation, however, the image becomes a compelling one: each of us is a little mirror of the beauty and order of the cosmos, while the cosmos is itself imagined as a vast mirror of Logos, the Universal Mind. That image should make us look more closely at what is reflected, not relieve us of the need to distinguish a revealing connection from an illusion.

Plotinus offers a related image in the *Enneads*: spoken expression reflects an inward expression in the soul, which in turn reflects a higher principle.⁵ The

movement from one level to another is central to the comparison. A reflection is neither wholly separate from what it reflects nor simply identical to it.

OUR PLACE IN THE COSMOS

An ordered environment gives us bearings for psychological and social life. We discover who we are through relationships with other people, through distinctions between ourselves and our surroundings, and within the spaces and times our cultures organize. A home, a boundary, a remembered anniversary, or a shared ritual can give structure to experience before we ever turn that structure into a theory.

Many mythological traditions present earthly life as reflecting an order established by divine or sacred powers. Mircea Eliade used the term *hierophany* for a manifestation of the sacred within the world of ordinary experience. In his account, religious space is not homogeneous: certain places have a different significance from others. A sacred center provides a point of orientation, a way to inhabit a meaningful world rather than an undifferentiated expanse.⁶ This is Eliade's influential interpretation of religious experience, not a claim that every culture has an identical account of creation or sacred space.

A tree, mountain, stone, river, threshold, doorway, or column may become a sign that organizes such a world. A boundary can also serve as a passage: a place imagined to connect the human and the divine. The vertical image of a world axis, or *axis mundi*, is especially powerful. It locates a center and links different levels—above and below, heaven and earth. Around it, a culture may arrange further contrasts: light and darkness, life and death, soul and body, good and evil. These associations vary. Their interest