
KYBALION

A Study of the Hermetic Philosophy of Ancient Egypt and Greece

Written by THE THREE INITIATES

*“The lips of wisdom are closed, except to the ears of
Understanding.” — The Kybalion.*

Editor Sebastiano Vottari

PREFACE

To this edition of the Kybalion

THE.

There's a question every editor should honestly ask before publishing yet another edition of a classic that's already been reprinted countless times: Was it really necessary? Readers who find themselves holding this volume have every right to raise the same question, and I, who have had the burden and privilege of producing this edition of *The Kybalion*, have a duty, at the outset, to answer it frankly.

The Kybalion is not a text unknown to the public. Since its first appearance in English in Chicago in 1908, the work attributed to the mysterious "Three Initiates" has seen many editions around the world, more or less carefully crafted, more or less successful, more or less faithful. Some are translations compiled in a few afternoons by publishers specializing in low-cost esoteric literature; others, more authoritative, have been enriched with valuable philological introductions or commentaries by scholars of Hermetic thought. Faced with such an abundance, proposing yet another version risks appearing superfluous, if not vaguely vain.

Yet, after patiently consulting the available editions and trying to put myself in the shoes of a contemporary reader approaching Hermeticism for the first time, I became convinced that a subtle but real space still remained uncovered. This edition was born precisely in an attempt to fill that space, with the humility of one who knows he adds nothing revolutionary to the legacy of those who came before him, but with the determination of one who believes he can offer readers reading tools that, elsewhere, have been denied or provided in an unsatisfactory form.

II.

Before illustrating the choices that guided this work, it's necessary to say something about the text the reader is about to encounter. And here I'd like to make a frank statement that many editors, for reasons unknown to me, tend to avoid.

The Kybalion is not an ancient Egyptian text. It is not a scroll found in the bowels of a pyramid, it is not a translation of Alexandrian papyri, it is not the modern restitution of an uninterrupted oral tradition dating back to Hermes Trismegistus. The Kybalion is, in all likelihood, a work composed in the early 1900s by the American William Walker Atkinson (1862–1932), an Illinois lawyer converted to metaphysical thought, a prolific editor of spiritual journals, and the author, under dozens of different pseudonyms, of an impressive body of esoteric texts that spanned the entire golden age of the American New Thought movement.

The attribution to the "Three Initiates" is, according to most scholars, a literary device—a veil of collective anonymity that lent the work an aura of ancient and collective wisdom that the mere name of a Chicago lawyer could never have conferred.

Saying this in no way diminishes the value of the text. On the contrary, it restores its true greatness: that of being a brilliant and highly original synthesis, accomplished by a keen and passionate mind, of materials drawn from the Renaissance Hermetic tradition (the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the *Tabula Smaragdina*, Giordano Bruno, the Neoplatonists), from nineteenth-century theosophy, from the nascent psychology of the subconscious, and from that set of Hindu and Vedantic influences that, through Vivekananda and the Theosophical Society, had reached the Anglo-Saxon public at the end of the nineteenth century. The *Kybalion* is a work of synthesis, and like any great synthesis, it manages to be clearer and more pedagogically effective than the fragmentary and contradictory sources from which it draws.

Anyone who approaches *The Kybalion* believing they are reading Hermes Trismegistus himself will, sooner or later, be disappointed or manipulated; anyone who sees it for what it truly is—an early twentieth-century philosophical and practical manual, brilliantly constructed from ancient and modern materials—will, on the contrary, derive lasting benefit. The first task this edition asks of its readers is therefore an act of historical honesty:

understanding the text's true setting in order to fully appreciate its speculative richness.

III.

I now proceed to illustrate, with the greatest transparency I am capable of, the three choices that distinguish this edition from current ones, and which I hope will justify, in the eyes of the demanding reader, the editorial effort of reproducing such a well-known work.

The first choice concerns **linguistic register**. The Kybalion, in its original language, is written in a deliberately solemn English, rich in archaisms, repetitive formulas, obsolete rhetorical figures, and reverential capital letters that give the discourse an almost biblical cadence. This stylistic choice is not a whim of the author, but an essential element of hermetic pedagogy: the text is designed to be meditated upon, repeated, almost chanted, and its slow, sacred rhythm is an integral part of its message. Current translations have, in most cases, approached this aspect in one of two incorrect ways: either they have mechanically reproduced the English archaism, producing pages of laborious and opaque reading; or, conversely, they have aggressively modernized the text, flattening it into a current and colloquial language that has dissolved its philosophical dignity, reducing it to a banal self-help manual.

In this edition, I attempted a third approach. I retained the solemnity of the text—the reverential capital letters, the recurring formulas of the *Kybalion* in italics, the rhythmic cadence of sentences, the apostrophes addressed to the reader, the didactic cadence of maxims and commentaries—but I streamlined the more opaque syntactic structures. The result, I hope, is a text that maintains its ritual gravity without requiring the reader to decipher the language first and then the content. It is not a finished work, and some choices will remain questionable: but it is a work accomplished with the declared intention of respecting, even before the words, the tone.

The second choice concerns its **pedagogical approach**. The *Kybalion*, by a deliberate choice of its authors, is written in an apodictic form: it enunciates the Seven Principles, comments on them, illustrates them with images drawn from physics and everyday life, but does not engage with the modern reader. It does not anticipate their objections, does not correct foreseeable misunderstandings, does not bother to draw a line between what it is saying and what others—especially contemporary popularizers of the so-called "Law of Attraction"—surreptitiously make him say. The 21st-century reader who approaches *The Kybalion* without any guidance is likely to fall into one or more of the major misunderstandings that an unmediated reading of this work produces with worrying regularity.

For this reason, I have deemed it appropriate to add a Guide to the Interpretation and Practical Application of Hermeticism, divided into three sections, at the end of the text. This Guide in no way claims to replace *The Kybalion* or exhaust its richness: it is simply a commentary from one reader to another, an attempt to put into writing the clarifications that any competent teacher would give orally to a student approaching the text for the first time. The Guide's three sections address, respectively, the three speculative issues that the inexperienced reader most frequently stumbles upon.

The first crux is Mentalism. "All is Mind; the Universe is Mental" is the most famous and most misunderstood formula in the entire work: read superficially, it leads directly to adolescent solipsism ("if all is mind, then the world is only my projection, and nothing really matters"), which is the exact opposite of what *The Kybalion* teaches. The Guide, in its first section, patiently shows why Hermetic Mentalism is neither solipsism nor sloppy pantheism, but rather a precise doctrine of immanence-transcendence that requires, to be understood, the distinction between the Mind of the Whole (where the universe is constituted) and the individual mind (which operates within that universe as a partial co-creator). Without this distinction, Mentalism becomes a license to delirium; with this distinction, it becomes the basis of an ethic of creative responsibility.

The second crux is the Divine Paradox. The Kybalion simultaneously affirms two things: that the Universe is unreal with respect to the Whole (it is a "dream" that the Whole meditates), and that the Universe is fully real to those within it (its laws are inescapable, pain is real, death has a weight). This simultaneity of absolute and relative is, in the history of thought, one of the most elegant solutions ever proposed to the problem of cosmic illusion; but read quickly, it produces either spiritual nihilism ("nothing is real, therefore nothing matters") or presumptuous arrogance ("I am a divine fragment, therefore I can violate the laws of nature"). The second section of the Guide shows why both of these positions are, in the language of the Kybalion, "half-wisdom," and how the true Initiate instead moves in dual fidelity to the Absolute and the Relative, respecting the laws of the plane on which he exists while cultivating awareness of the plane that transcends it.

The third issue is practical application. Much of contemporary popular literature—from "The Secret" onward, to cite the most notorious case—has plundered the Kybalion, extracting suggestive phrases and building around them a system of "desire manifestation" that adds nothing to the four fundamental principles (Vibration, Polarity, Rhythm, Mental Gender) other than an unfounded promise of consumerist omnipotence. The authentic Kybalion is, on this point, much more severe and much more realistic: Mental Polarization is not "positive thinking," the Neutralization of Rhythm is not the repression of moods, and Mental Gender is not a magic formula for obtaining job

promotions. The third section of the Guide addresses these popular misunderstandings one by one and shows how authentic Hermetic techniques—when practiced in their entirety—require severe inner discipline and yield results that have nothing of the spectacular miracle, but rather everything of a slow transformation of character.

These three sections, I repeat, are not a scholarly commentary on the text, and they do not claim to be the final word on topics worthy of volumes. They are simply the minimum set of precautions without which reading *The Kybalion* risks producing more confusion than enlightenment. The reader is free to ignore them and engage directly with the text of the Three Initiates; but if, having reached the final chapter, he finds himself asking some of the questions the Guide attempts to address, he may not mind finding them addressed at the end of the volume.

The third choice, finally, is what we might call **philological honesty**. In this edition, you will find no promises of miraculous powers, revelations of initiatory secrets finally revealed after millennia, sensational references to the Great White Brotherhood, the Asceticism of Shambhala, or any other mythology of Theosophical derivation. *The Kybalion*, at its best, is a text of practical philosophy that demands to be read, meditated upon, and applied; at its worst—and there are those—it slides into a somewhat dated rhetorical emphasis and certain peremptory proclamations about the "degradation" of sexual practices that

reflect early twentieth-century American Puritanism more than true perennial wisdom. I have preferred to faithfully translate these passages as well, without sugarcoating them, so that the mature reader can see the text for what it is, including its historical merits and limitations, and can form his or her own judgment without the mediation of an editor who replaces his or her discernment.

IV.

It remains to say a word about the audience to which this edition is addressed, and the expectations that it would be reasonable to place upon it.

The Kybalion is not a book for those seeking comforting truths. It doesn't promise happiness, solve financial problems, cure illnesses, or make the person you desire fall in love. Anyone who reads it hoping to find these things will be profoundly disappointed, and rightly so. The Kybalion is, rather, a manual for inner reorientation: it proposes a certain vision of the universe (mental, vibratory, dual, rhythmic, causal, generative) and invites the reader to relate their daily experiences to this vision, drawing consequences for their emotional, relational, and work lives. The benefits that a consistent practice of this discipline can offer are real, but modest in nature when compared to the promises of current pseudo-esoteric literature: they are, primarily, greater mastery of one's own moods, a more lucid ability to understand the relational dynamics of others, greater patience in the adverse

cycles of life, and a certain underlying serenity that is independent of external events.

For those who approach *The Kybalion* with this realistic attitude, the text has much to offer. It can offer a language for self-reflection that is different, and more expansive, than that of current psychology. It can offer a moral vocabulary that simultaneously avoids materialistic cynicism and devotional optimism. Above all, it can offer the rare experience of a discourse that treats the reader as an adult interlocutor, capable of intellectual effort and inner discipline, rather than as a child to be entertained. For this reason, despite the inevitable naiveté of a text from over a century ago, *The Kybalion* has retained its ability to speak to ever-new generations of readers over the decades, and has inspired, more or less openly, a large portion of the psychological and spiritual literature of the twentieth century and the first decades of our own.

If this little book succeeds, in any of its pages, in leading the reader toward that kind of experience—not toward a dazzling revelation, but toward the slow focusing of a lens through which to view the world and oneself—then it will have accomplished its purpose, and the work I have put into it will have been amply rewarded. If, however, the reader, upon closing the last page, feels the need to pick it up again after a few months, perhaps after a life event that has shaken them, to quietly reread some chapters and discover meanings that the first reading did not reveal, then *The Kybalion*—and not this modest edition of mine—will have done

what its anonymous authors hoped it would: it will have spoken to an ear that, in the meantime, had become receptive.

As the famous phrase that opens and closes the entire work warns: "The lips of wisdom are closed, except to the ears of Understanding." This edition, in its own small way, has sought only to make those lips a little more comprehensible, without claiming to remove the mystery that makes them, with each renewed reading, capable of saying something new.



To the reader who is about to venture into the pages that follow, we can only wish, in the words of the text itself: *"Where the steps of the Master fall, the ears of those who are ready for His Teaching open wide."* May his ears, and mine, be—to the extent possible—among them.

The curator

CHAPTER 1: HERMETIC PHILOSOPHY

From ancient Egypt came the fundamental esoteric and occult teachings that have so powerfully influenced the philosophies of all races, nations, and peoples for many thousands of years. Egypt, the home of the Pyramids and the Sphinx, was the birthplace of the Hidden Wisdom and the Mystical Teachings. From this Secret Teaching all nations have borrowed. India, Persia, Chaldea, Media, China, Japan, Assyria, ancient Greece and Rome, and other ancient lands drank freely from the banquet of knowledge that the Hierophants and Masters of the Land of Isis had so richly spread for those willing to partake of the great storehouse of mystical knowledge the Masters of that land had assembled.

In ancient Egypt dwelt the great Adepts and Masters who have never been surpassed, and rarely equaled, throughout the centuries since the time of the Great Hermes. In Egypt was the Great Lodge of Lodges of the Mystics. Through the doors of its Temples entered the Neophytes who, later, as Hierophants, Adepts, and Masters, traveled to the four corners of the earth, carrying with them the precious knowledge they were ready, eager, and willing to impart to those ready to receive it. All students of the Occult acknowledge their debt to these venerable Masters of that ancient land.

But among these great Masters of Ancient Egypt was one whom they hailed as "Master of Masters." This man, if man he was, dwelt in Egypt in the very earliest days of its history. He was known as Hermes Trismegistus. He was the father of Occult Wisdom; the founder of Astrology; the discoverer of Alchemy. The details of his life story have been lost due to the immense lapse of time, although many of the ancient countries have disputed the honor of his birth in their historical accounts. The date of his sojourn in Egypt, in his last incarnation on this planet, is not known, but it has been placed in the early days of the most ancient Egyptian dynasties, long before the days of Moses. The best authorities consider him a contemporary of Abraham, and some Jewish traditions go so far as to assert that Abraham acquired some of his mystical wisdom from Hermes himself.

As the years passed after his departure from this plane of life (tradition says he lived three hundred years in the flesh), the Egyptians deified Hermes and made him...

END PREVIEW