

INTRODUCTION

Half a century before the term "Rosicrucian" came into use, the 16th-century Provençal astrologer and soothsayer, Nostradamus, wrote:

A new sect of Philosophers shall rise,
Despising death, gold, honours and riches,
They shall be near the mountains of Germany,
They shall have abundance of others to support and follow them.¹

In this quatrain, written in about 1555, Nostradamus seems to have made a strikingly accurate prediction of the Rosicrucian Brotherhood as described by its followers. Starting in Germany in the early part of the 17th century, this "new sect of philosophers" shunned worldly satisfactions in favor of spiritual ones and was said to have conquered death through the elixir of life. As the last line of the quatrain foretold, Rosicrucianism gained many supporters and eventually spread all over the world. Numerous off-shoots are still found today.

The word "Rosicrucian" has been in our vocabulary for a long time. Yet few words have been used in so many different senses and in such confusing ways. Rosicrucianism is sometimes referred to as being synonymous with one or another of the 20th-century occult groups. Sometimes it is invoked as a vague blanket term for anything to do with alchemy and the pursuit of Hermetic studies; sometimes it is talked about as though it were a specific doctrine like Marxism or Catholicism. To arrive at a clearer definition, you must step back and look at the movement in a wider perspective.

The complex of ideas known as Rosicrucianism may be seen as a loosely-knit organism clustered around a central mythology whose chief symbol is the extremely simple, yet marvelously suggestive, image of a rose linked to a cross. This "organism" first appeared in Germany under mysterious circumstances, and Germany remained the most important center of its development for about two centuries. Much of this study will therefore be concerned with German material.

¹ *The Complete Prophecies of Nostradamus*, translated, edited and interpreted by Henry C. Roberts (New York: Nostradamus Inc., 1968). The French text reads:

*Une nouvelle secte de Philosophes,
Méprisant mort, or honneur & richesses,
Des monts Germaines seront fort limitrophes,
A les ensuyure auront appuy & presses.*

The Rosicrucian myth came into being as no other myth has done. It was, so to speak, deliberately "launched" with great suddenness on its strange course through history. I became intrigued by the Rosicrucian phenomenon partly because of its unique qualities and partly because its origins have never been satisfactorily explained. Initially, I saw it as a straightforward detective mystery, the problem being to find out who created the Rosicrucian legend and why, and having done that, to trace its subsequent development. As I progressed in my study, however, my approach underwent a change.

I had originally thought of the Rosicrucian movement as a vague hotchpotch of ideas clinging to an extremely nebulous legend, containing very little depth of teaching or tradition, and surfacing at various times in history in a disconnected way. But during my researches, the evidence I discovered forced me to revise this view and led me to two unexpected conclusions. First, the movement had a much more continuous history in its early stages than I had supposed; second, it did develop a coherent teaching, which represented a highly interesting late revival of a Gnostic way of thinking. By "Gnostic" I mean, in essence, the view that the human spirit is trapped, as it were, under water, living a kind of half-life, ignorant of the fact that the sunlight and air of the true spirit are overhead. If knowledge (or *gnosis*) can make people aware of this, they will make the effort to swim upward and be reunited with their real element. I shall explain this doctrine and its development more fully in chapter 1 and in later chapters will show how it affected Rosicrucianism.

Apart from its Gnostic features, the Rosicrucian movement must be seen in terms of a wide variety of cultural and intellectual ingredients. In this study, I shall follow many paths and enter into many intriguing areas of symbology, my intention being to examine the history of the Rosicrucian phenomenon from its origins up to the 20th century. The story traces two parallel paths. One pursues the outward history of the successive Rosicrucian brotherhoods, their rites and practices, and the strange and sometimes fascinating characters who were involved in them. The other follows the inner development of Rosicrucianism and examines its intellectual and spiritual heritage and the doctrines that it taught its followers. I shall also look at the influence that Rosicrucianism had outside its immediate circle of practitioners, for example, in literature.

In case the reader is not familiar with the basic facts about the origins of the movement, they are as follows. In 1614, a German text was published at Kassel with the title of *Fama Fraternitatis, dess Löblichen Ordens des Rosenkreutzes* [The Declaration of the Worthy Order of the Rosy Cross], which had been circulating in manuscript for some time, possibly since as early as 1610. The *Fama* purported to reveal the existence of a fraternity founded by one Christian Rosenkruz who lived in the 14th and 15th centuries. It was said

that Rosenkreuz founded the brotherhood after acquiring wisdom during a journey to the East. The members of his order traveled around healing the sick and acquiring and spreading knowledge, but always working incognito. When Christian Rosenkreuz died, his place of burial was kept secret. But recently, says the *Fama*, the burial vault has been discovered by the brotherhood, and this discovery heralds the dawn of a new age.

Soon after the *Fama*, the *Confessio Fraternitatis* appeared (1615), also published at Kassel, but this time in Latin. The *Confessio* repeated the message of the *Fama* with even greater force, holding out the promise of a reformed world and the overthrow of papal tyranny. Like the *Fama*, it boasted of the exalted and powerful knowledge possessed by the secret brotherhood.

Then, in 1616, a third work appeared, the strangest of all. It was published at Strasbourg in German under the title of *Die Chymische Hochzeit Christiani Rosenkreutz* [The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreuz]. In it, the narrator, supposedly Christian Rosenkreuz himself, describes his experiences as a guest (not the bridegroom, as suggested by the title) at the wedding of a king and queen who dwell in a wondrous castle. The wedding develops into an extraordinary sequence of events in which the guests are subjected to tests of their worth and some are killed and brought to life again during an alchemical operation. Occult imagery abounds. There are portals guarded by lions, magical fountains, and ships corresponding to the signs of the zodiac. This luxuriant symbolism has lent itself to countless interpretations, but the connection between *The Chemical Wedding* and the other manifestos is not clear, nor are the precise motives of its creator in producing it.

Although *The Chemical Wedding* was published anonymously, its author was almost certainly a Tübingen Protestant theologian named Johann Valentin Andreae, who was also possibly the author or coauthor of the *Fama*. The authorship of the *Confessio* is unknown. Andreae himself is a strange and enigmatic figure who will be examined in a later chapter.

The publication of the Rosicrucian writings stirred up a great controversy in Germany. Many people wrote eulogizing the movement in the hope that they would be sought out and admitted to the order. Others claimed to be Rosicrucians themselves and issued pamphlets in the name of the brotherhood. Still others published writings attacking the movement as a mischievous or heretical organization. The more writings that appeared on the subject, the more confused the whole picture became. Since that time, the fog that surrounds Rosicrucianism has remained, but the cult, in one form or another, has survived and continues to gather adherents.

The durability of Rosicrucianism has, I believe, partly to do with the appealing quality of the rose-cross motif. The rose and the cross individually have been given various interpretations. In Chris-

tian symbolism, they are sometimes found representing the Virgin Mary and Christ, as in a prayer inspired by the Litany of Loreto, which refers to the rose as:

Flower of the Cross, pure womb that blossoms
Over all blooming and burning,
Sacred Rose Mary.²

C. G. Jung has shown that the rose is a symbol lying deep in the collective unconscious which represents the maternal womb and perfection achieved by balance. The cross is an equally deep-seated symbol linked, according to Jung, with the tendency for man's inner consciousness to seek fourfold patterns. It appears in mythologies all over the world. In its Christian manifestation, it symbolizes suffering and sacrifice.

It has been suggested that the founders of the Rosicrucian movement, which was initially ultra-Protestant, selected the rose and the cross because these devices appeared on Luther's coat of arms and/or because they were on that of Andreae. Either of these theories may be true, but the symbol would not have caught hold in the way it did unless it had an intrinsic power. Nor would it have caused a continued growth around this central myth.

To understand why Rosicrucianism has survived for nearly four centuries—and possibly longer—we must look beyond the appeal of the rose-cross motif, powerful though it may be. This motif is merely the tip of a very large iceberg of symbolism, a symbolism that is capable of speaking to every age with renewed force, using a language that touches off responses deep within us. Whereas our outer consciousness expresses itself in words, our inner consciousness communicates in symbols. Throughout history we have used symbolic systems of one kind or another—astrology, Qabalah, alchemy, Tarot—to enable our inner selves to evolve. These systems are like springs welling up from some deep reservoir which appears to be fed by the totality of our experience of ourselves and our universe. Thus, any profound system of symbology has a universal dimension, through its source; a cultural dimension, through the society in which it flourishes; and an individual dimension, through its effect on the people who receive it.

It is not possible here to analyze fully the symbolism of the Rosicrucian manifestos, as this book deals mainly with their historical significance. But it is important to point out that they are capable of yielding an enormous wealth of meaning which can be extracted ei-

² C. G. Jung, *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, translated by R. F. C. Hull, Bollingen Series XX (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), p. 363.

ther from a study of the imagery or by treating the language as a cipher. These writings have something powerful and personal to say to everyone who studies them in depth, and any group or individual taking the Rosicrucian symbolism and working with it wholeheartedly will partake of some of its force.

Since Rosicrucianism links up with the whole Hermetic/Qabalistic tradition, it is possible to apply it in various ways. For example, it can be used for mystical contemplation or for magical manipulation—the distinction being, broadly speaking, that in mysticism we attempt to communicate with the divine by projecting our consciousness beyond the physical world, whereas in magic we attempt to operate on the physical world using correspondences with the divine world. The Rosicrucian movement, as we shall see, has included followers of both paths.

A persistent feature of Rosicrucianism as it developed later was the idea of the mysterious adept commanding secret knowledge and strange powers. This was the basis of Edward Bulwer-Lytton's "Rosicrucian" novel, *Zanoni*, typified by a curious anecdote which I came across while researching in Bulwer-Lytton's library at Knebworth. Among the books is Mary Atwood's treatise on alchemy, *A Suggestive Inquiry into the Hermetic Mystery* (1850). Pasted into the fly-leaf is an advertisement from *The Times*, written in Latin, which translates as follows: "If this comes into the hands of a Brother of the Rosy Cross or an explorer of the Hermetic Transmutation I request that they get in touch with me by letter." It was signed "F. R. C.," which was clearly intended to stand for "Fratres Rosae Crucis" (Brother of the Rosy Cross). The address given was the post office, Shaftsbury, Dorset. The original owner of the book, one Edward Bellamy, who worked at the British Museum Library, must have been an alchemical enthusiast, for, slipped into the book, is his account of the sequel.

It appears that, having twice written to "F. R. C." and received no reply, Bellamy returned home one evening to find that the adept had called while he was out. His wife described him as "a pink-coloured country-looking man of grave but pleasant aspect," who explained that he was leaving the following day for a voyage round the world. As he left, the adept said: "Your husband will know me by this." Then he took from his neck "a remarkable looking chain of dull and soft-looking gold links, a most superb cross of rose-coloured enamel studded with diamonds of the size," she said, "of large peas, with a serpent of blue enamel round it." He allowed the wife to examine the jewel and then left, never to call again. Stories of similar adepts abound in the literature of Rosicrucianism.

Other aspects of the Rosicrucian legend have also exercised fascination. The whereabouts of Rosenkreutz's burial vault, for example, has been a favorite subject of speculation. Dr. R. W. Felkin, an English occultist and a member of the Hermetic Order of the

Golden Dawn, set off in search of the vault in 1914. So absorbed was he in his quest that he remained unaware of the signs of impending war until it was almost too late. He was able to leave Germany at the eleventh hour and through the help of Freemason friends in Hanover and Amsterdam.

In the Third Reich, Rosicrucianism became a *bête noire* of the Nazis. As head of the S. S., Himmler commissioned a history of the brotherhood, *Das ältere Rosenkreuzertum*, by Hans Schick, a book to which I shall be referring later.³ In one department of Himmler's foreign intelligence service, a group of researchers "studied such important matters as Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry, the symbolism of the suppression of the harp in Ulster, and the occult significance of top-hats at Eton."⁴

Rosicrucianism in various forms is very much alive in various parts of the world today. Yet there is only one book in English that approaches being a comprehensive history of the movement, namely, A. E. Waite's *Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross*.⁵ Frances Yates' book, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* covers only the very early stages of the movement's development, and Frans Wittemans' *A New and Authentic History of the Rosicrucians* is sketchy and in places highly inaccurate.⁶ The intention of the present volume is to fill this gap by telling the story of the development of Rosicrucianism, beginning with its roots.

To complete this introduction, I must record my thanks to a number of people. First of all, as a long-standing admirer of Colin Wilson's work, it gave me great pleasure when he agreed to write the Foreword. In previous books, I have had occasion to thank Ellic Howe, who has been a generous mentor over many years. For this book, he gave me his unstinting help and advice, lent me important material, and read and commented on the manuscript. Likewise, I must thank Gerald Yorke for the loan of material and for helpful suggestions. I am also grateful to Dr. Richard van Dülmen of the Bavarian Academy of Sciences for giving me the benefit of his specialized knowledge of Rosicrucian history; to R. A. Gilbert for the loan of material relating to A. E. Waite; and to the publishers mentioned in various footnotes who gave me permission to make quotations. Finally, space prevents me from listing here the many friends in this country and abroad who have encouraged me by their interest and enthusiasm and so helped me to complete what has been an arduous but rewarding task.

³ Hans Schick, *Das ältere Rosenkreuzertum* (Berlin: Nordland Verlag, 1942).

⁴ H. R. Trevor-Roper, *The Last Days of Hitler* (London: Macmillan, 1947), p. 23.

⁵ A. E. Waite, *The Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross* (London: Rider, 1924).

⁶ Frances Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972); Frans Wittemans, *A New and Authentic History of the Rosicrucians*, Durvad (a.k.a. F. G. Davis) trans. (London: Rider, 1938).

INTRODUCTION TO THE SECOND EDITION

Fourteen years ago, when I first began writing this book, it was not generally possible to refer to Rosicrucianism without a great deal of explanation. Many people had never heard of it, and those who had tended to possess only the haziest idea of what it was. Historians, if they spoke of it at all, were inclined to dismiss it as a fringe topic of little or no scholarly interest. Along with other esoteric matters, it belonged to a disreputable district that was either to be avoided or viewed with disdainful curiosity from the main road.

Today, as the book goes into its second edition, the situation is entirely different. Esotericism is steadily being reclaimed for academic use. Avenues of tidy methodology, lit by impeccable scholarship and paved by the work of such scholars as Frances Yates, are advancing even deeper into the esoteric ghetto, to the regret of those who found in its very murkiness a special promise of adventure, but to the enrichment of historiography as a whole.

One result of this process is that the word "Rosicrucian" is now common currency among historians. It, too, has been reclaimed. This book, while not pretending to be more than an outline, remains the only general history of Rosicrucianism from its inception to the present day. I have made certain revisions to it on account of my change of view on certain questions and in the light of comments received in letters, for which I am most grateful. My own research in Rosicrucianism and related areas continues. In the meantime, I hope that the new edition of this book will continue to stimulate interest in this rich field.

INTRODUCTION TO THE THIRD EDITION

There is a synchronicity in the fact that, as this book goes into its third edition, we stand at the threshold of a new millennium. Millenarian ideas helped to launch Rosicrucianism, and it is tempting to see parallels between the present age and that of the Rosicrucian manifestos. The two eras have much in common: momentous changes, bitter divisions and conflicts, a sense of this world having gone wrong and a yearning for a better one. Understandably, the Rosicrucian promise of a new age based on an ancient wisdom retains for many its appeal and relevance.

In a way, Rosicrucianism has come full circle. Thanks to the fall of the Iron Curtain, it is now once again in evidence in the territory—once called Bohemia, now the Czech Republic—which played such a key role in its early history. It has, so to speak, returned home. As proof of this, a conference called "The Rosicrucian Enlightenment Revisited," was held in the enchanting town of Český

Krumlov on the river Moldau in September 1995. The conference, which was organized by the New York Open Center and *Gnosis Magazine*, in honor of the late Frances Yates, would, of course, have been unthinkable in such a setting a decade earlier. It was at this event that the idea for a new edition of this book with its present publisher was born during discussions with Donald Weiser and Betty Lundsted. I would like to express my appreciation to them and also to Vladislav Zadrobilek, present at the same meeting, who has undertaken a Czech edition with his firm, Trigon Press. I also wish to renew my thanks to Colin Wilson for his insightful Foreword.

In preparing the text for this edition, I have filled out certain aspects of the Rosicrucian story and have taken account of the work that other scholars have carried out in this field since the appearance of the previous edition. Much important research, for example, has centered on the *Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica* in Amsterdam, founded by Joost R. Ritman, whose acquisitions include highly important textual evidence on the origins of the Rosicrucian movement. Carlos Gilly, an associate of this library, has in recent years carried out and published pioneering studies on the early Rosicrucians, which have thrown a whole new light on the subject and rendered obsolete much of the work of previous authors. Other scholars who have greatly advanced research in the broader history of Rosicrucianism include Roland Edighoffer and Antoine Faivre. I have also gleaned much fresh insight into the subject from Tobias Churton, a writer and film-maker who has created remarkable documentaries on the Gnostic and Rosicrucian traditions.

To survey all of this new work in a book of this size would be impossible, but, where significant recent research has been done, I have at least tried to refer the reader to the relevant sources. Omissions, however, are inevitable. No account of Rosicrucianism can ever be complete, as the history continues to be written—and created.

—Christopher McIntosh