Robin Headlam Wells

# Microcosmos: Essentialist Anthropology in Renaissance Europe

Some years ago I published an article on the iconography of the Renaissance lute rose in which I argued that the interlacing strapwork of the typical rose, far from being just a piece of pleasing decoration, had a very precise meaning.[1] In effect the lute rose is a mandala whose geometry is symbolic of a harmonious universe in which the same mathematical laws that govern the macrocosm are recapitulated at the level of the microcosm. Although it draws on an ancient tradition of Pythagorean number symbolism, this symbolic geometry should not be seen as the quaint survival of long-forgotten mysteries. On the contrary, it was a living expression of what were still regarded as fundamental metaphysical realities. In the present paper I should like to develop some of the implications of this argument in the light of recent claims concerning the existence of a representative body of anti-essentialist thought in Renaissance Europe.

The strapwork of the Renaissance lute rose has its origins in the ubiquitous Islamic rosette, a design that originated in the tenth century and is found throughout the Muslim world. By repeating an infinitely extendible geometrical motif the artist gives us, in effect, an incomplete picture of a pattern that exists in its entirety only in infinity. Informing this geometric motif is a long tradition of representing the cosmos by means of number expressed diagrammatically. The belief that numbers are the basis of all physical reality originates in the school of Pythagoras (6th century BC). For the Pythagoreans mathematics was a key that could unlock the hidden mysteries of a universe created on harmonic principles: it explained the revolutions of the heavens; the harmonious rhythms of the natural world; even the life of the individual soul. By charting the correspondences between the manifold levels of existence, the numerologist provided a quasi-scientific account of human nature and its place in the universal scheme of things. It was Plato who first proposed an exact correspondence between the music of the spheres and the harmonies of the soul. In the *Timaeus* he explains how the gift of music was bestowed on man for the purpose of harmonizing the spirit: harmony, which has motions akin to the revolutions of the Soul within us, was given by the Muses to him who makes intelligent use of the Muses, not as an aid to irrational

*Iconography in Cultural Studies*
Papers in English and American Studies VII. Szeged: JATE, 1996

pleasure... but as an auxiliary to the inner revolution of the Soul, when it has lost its harmony, to assist in restoring it to order and concord with itself.[2]

In comparing the revolutions of the soul with "the revolutions of Reason in the Heaven"[3], Plato laid the basis for the doctrine of analogy between macrocosm and microcosm, a principle that dominated medieval and Renaissance metaphysical anthropology and that was to survive well into the seventeenth century. One of the principal channels through which these ideas were transmitted to the Middle Ages was Arabic philosophy. In the work of Avicenna (980-1037), greatest of the Arabic philosophers, the traditional analogy between microcosm and macrocosm was extended and developed into a highly complex psycho-physical theory. Soon after his death Avicenna's works made their way to Spain, and from there to Christian Europe. He was a well-known authority in fifteenth and sixteenth-century England through John Trevisa's and Stephen Batman's translations of the encyclopaedic *De proprietatibus rerum* of Bartholomaeus Anglicus (fl. c.1220-40). Avicenna has been described as one of the supreme names in the history of ideas, "an epoch-making thinker who determined the course of much Western thought."[4] As a Neoplatonist he was particularly interested in the means by which music was able to rehabilitate the soul and, in Plato's words, "restore it to order and concord with itself." Although Plato claimed that music could have a therapeutic effect on the soul, he did not explain how this process actually worked. Arab Neoplatonism attempted to provide that explanation. The result was an elaborate system of correspondences in which the four bodily humours were attuned to their equivalent elements through the agency of music. The most important instrument in Arab philosophy was the 'ud, direct ancestor of the Renaissance lute. The 'ud was a symbolic focus for the system of correspondences that is fundamental to Pythagoreanism. Its four strings were conventionally identified both with the elements and with the corresponding humours and were dyed accordingly: yellow for bile, red for blood, white for mucous, and black for black bile.[5] As well as being identified with the elements and humours, the four strings of the 'ud were associated with the signs of the zodiac, winds, seasons, periods of life, and times of the month and of the day. These were related in turn to human temperament and to the faculties of both body and soul.[6]

The 'ud occupies a place of special honour in medieval Arabic philosophy; indeed it was known as the "philosopher's instrument." According to the ninth-century philosopher and music theorist al-Kindi, every detail of its construction has an arithmetical or geometrical basis in philosophy or astrology.[7] It is at once a symbol of the cosmos — its arched belly was compared to the dome of the

heavens[8] — and a practical means of realizing the rehabilitative function of music that is central to Arabic Neoplatonism. As it became assimilated into European musical life in the later Middle Ages through the brilliant Islamic society that flourished in Spain from the tenth century[9] the 'ud brought with it a complex body of Pythagorean musical lore. That lore was to survive into the Renaissance.

In the prestige it accorded to literature and the arts, the Islamic civilization of medieval Spain far surpassed anything that Western Christendom was able to offer and had a profound influence on the course of European culture.[10] In the twelfth century there was a revival of interest in Pythagoreanism, notably at the School of Chartres.[11] The principles of Pythagorean number symbolism were already familiar in the West from the work of well-known writers like Macrobius and St Augustine.[12] But with the impetus of new ideas from the Islamic world there was renewed interest in numerology. Number symbolism is a fundamental aspect of the medieval artistic imagination;[13] insofar as it was capable of showing that all fixed aggregates defined by the same number were related to one another, numerology provided the Christian writer, not just with a way of structuring his work, but with a means of imparting knowledge of man, of nature, and consequently of God. As Sir William Ingpen puts it, since the created universe is "an harmonious body, containing number, order, beauty, and proportion," the best way to know its author is "to begin with numbering."[14] In the Middle Ages the most dramatic monuments of Pythagorean symbolism were not works of literature but buildings. The medieval Gothic cathedral was designed as a visible embodiment of divine order; in the words of Robert Jordan, it was "an analogue of creation itself, a concrete microcosm of the abstract, musico-mathematical perfection of the universe."[15] One of the most remarkable features of the Gothic cathedral is the rose window. Adelhard of Bath (fl. early 12th century), who had travelled as far as Syria and committed himself to making Arab philosophy known to the Christian world, believed that, through a study of the seven Liberal Arts, man is capable of intuiting the *musica mundana* and participating in its harmonies.[16] A similar vision inspired the great rose windows of the thirteenth century. In the silent music of their geometry each of these windows embodies the fundamental principles of the Pythagorean universe. In his analysis of the rose in the north transept of Chartres cathedral Painton Cowen explains how everything in the window is derived from three basic figures: the equilateral triangle (representing the Trinity or the soul); the square (unfolding the relation between spirit and matter, Father and Son); and the circle (symbolizing the perfection of the cosmos itself).[17] Its hidden geometry symbolizes the interpenetration of microcosm and macrocosm. It

is this principle that Alain de Lille (c. 1128-1202), most influential of the Chartrian Neoplatonists, describes in a key passage from the *Plaint of Nature*.[18] Man's own nature, says Alain, is formed "according to the exemplar and likeness of the structure of the universe so that in him, as in a mirror of the universe itself, Nature's lineaments might be there to see. For just as concord in discord, unity in plurality, harmony in disharmony, agreement in disagreement of the four elements unite the arts of the structure of the royal palace of the universe, so too, similarity in dissimilarity, equality in inequality, like in unlike, identity in diversity of four combinations bind together the house of the human body."[19]

The Neoplatonists of the twelfth-century Renaissance believed that through an understanding of this universal mystery man could come to know his true essence and thus realize Timaeus' ideal of rational self control based on a knowledge of the laws of nature. With the Neoplatonic revival of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries there was a reaffirmation of the belief that the harmony of the universe was a function of mathematical laws. Revival of interest in the principle of universal harmony is reflected in the flood of Renaissance treatises with titles such as *De harmonia mundi totius* (Francesco di Giorgio, 1525), *Harmonices mundi* (Kepler, 1619), and *Harmonie universelle* (Mersenne, 1636). It is reflected also in the preoccupation of Renaissance painters, sculptors, and architects with Vitruvius' theories of architectural proportion.[20] In claiming that temples should be modelled on the proportions of the human body, Vitruvius (lst century BC) was endorsing the traditional Pythagorean belief that man is the measure of all things. As the Italian mathematician, and friend of Leonardo da Vinci, Luca Pacioli (1445-1509) wrote in a treatise entitled *De proportione*, "from the human body derive all measures and their denominations and in it is to be found all and every ratio and proportion by which God reveals the innermost secrets of nature."[21] The well-known figure of the Vitruvian man inscribed in a circle within a square is a symbolic representation of this idea. By basing their designs on Vitruvian principles, architects like Alberti (1404-72) and Palladio (1508-80) were not so much celebrating man himself as attempting to reproduce in microcosm the harmonies of a mathematical universe.

In Renaissance England the Pythagorean revival manifests itself in a variety of ways — in a renewed interest in astrology and magic; in works of popular astronomy; in architectural treatises; in theatre design; and in number symbolism of all kinds. The greatest Elizabethan example of the numerologist's art is *The Faerie Queene*. Spenser's description of the House of Alma is a symbolic

restatement of Vitruvian architectural principles. The geometric figures on which Alma's castle is based — circle, triangle, and square — are the basis of all Pythagorean representations of the universe and serve to articulate the interpenetration of microcosm and macrocosm. The same figures form the basis of the Renaissance lute rose.

As the medieval cosmos was gradually superseded by the Copernican universe, the doctrine of correspondence began to lose its power as an anthropological model, and eventually became simply a figure of speech without any basis in reality. The mathematical language of circles, squares, and triangles that had once been the *lingua franca* of Renaissance philosophers, architects, and instrument makers became a dead language. However, it would be quite wrong to imply that the new astronomy was the immediate cause of the demise of Pythagoreanism as an intellectual system, or that there was anything like a clean break with the old ideas. On the contrary, it was Pythagorean principles that inspired the great Renaissance astronomers. It was their search for a universal model that was more harmonious, more rational, and above all simpler, than the old Ptolemaic model that led Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo to formulate their new theories.[22] Indeed, without his passionate conviction that the harmony of the solar system was expressible in musical notation, Kepler would never have discovered the celebrated Third Law of the *Harmonices Mundi* (1619), the law that was eventually to lead to Newton's theory of gravity.[23] Based, as it was, in mathematics, Pythagoreanism seemed to promise an account of the universe that was more scientific than the traditional medieval model with all its beautifully labyrinthine complexities. It was the same search for a more scientific method of inquiry that led political philosophers to look for a key to the meaning of human society in nature rather than in God's will. When the sixteenth-century Italian historian Gasparo Contarini explains the legendary stability of the Venetian republic, he appeals to Pythagorean principles of natural harmony.[24] A similar concern to discover the universal laws of nature can be seén in Renaissance metaphysical anthropology. Among the most influential of the Neopythagorean philosophers of the fifteenth century is Pico della Mirandola with his systematically mathematical view of the universe.[25] It has been suggested that Pico is typical of a growing tendency in this period to de-centre man, to show, that is to say, that human nature is not a trans-historical datum, but is discursively produced.[26] This could hardly be further from the truth. Far from de-centering man, Pico is concerned to locate man precisely at the centre of the universe ("medium mundi").[27] Like Alain before him, Pico sees man as a kind of alembic in which

are distilled all the materials of nature; he is, to use a particularly appropriate modern metaphor, the interface between God and nature ("interstitium et quasi cynnus natura").[28] Because man is a microcosm of the whole universe, he can acquire a knowledge of nature's laws through an understanding of his own essence: hence the importance for Pico of the ancient maxim "know thyself."[29] Man's celebrated freedom of choice is a function, not of his lack of a nature that is uniquely and essentially human,[30] but of his precisely defined location on the map of cosmos. Just as Alain imagined the voice of God explaining how there will always be contradictory principles at war within man, the one with the power of corrupting him and changing him into a beast, the other capable of transforming him into a god[31], so Pico's deity makes it clear that, if man allows himself to be ruled by the sensual side of his nature he will become brutish, but that if he cultivates the rational side, he may become like an angel.[32] Like the Neoplatonists of the twelfth-century Renaissance, Pico sees the final stage in this process of spiritual rehabilitation as an intuitive sympathy with the *musica mundana*: "If through moral philosophy the forces of our passions have by a fitting agreement become so intent on harmony that they sing together in undisturbed concord ... then we shall ... drink the heavenly harmony with our inmost hearing."[33]

Pico composed his *Oration* in 1486. The same formulaic view of man's essentially divided nature is rehearsed in the sixteenth, the seventeenth, and the eighteenth centuries.[34] The gulf that separates the fifteenth-century psychologist from his eighteenth-century counterpart is vast. Yet despite the revolutionary changes in scientific method that divide the pre-modern from the de-mythologized modern world, traditional patterns of thought die hard. When Alexander Pope proposes to reduce "the science of Human Nature" to "a few clear points" he is writing as a true representative of the Enlightenment. But his characterization of man as an oxymoronic figure ("darkly wise and rudely great") teetering insecurely on the isthmus between angels and brutes[35] would have made immediate sense to Alain some six centuries earlier, or indeed to St Augustine seven centuries before him.[36] In the light of such a long and continuous tradition of essentialist anthropology it would seem unwise speak of an anti-essentialist Renaissance *episteme*, or to claim, as Foucault does, that "man is only a recent invention, a figure not yet two centuries old."[37] It is true that in fifteenth-century Italy there was a reaction against the rhetorical and lyrical celebration of human rationality and freedom that characterizes the early humanist movement, and a recognition, especially in Pomponazzi and his followers, of the illusory nature of man's supposed powers of self-determination. But this reaction takes place within an

essentialist view of humanity.[38] After the Reformation the meliorist view of human nature came under increasing attack. The new challenge came from two main quarters: from radical Protestants on the one hand, and from primitivists on the other. Neither of these positions can be described as anti-essentialist. The former replaced Pythagorean essentialism with an uncompromising assertion of the innate and absolute corruption of the natural man, the latter with a belief in his inherent goodness. Donne's *Hymn to God my God, in my sickness* is a good example of just such a substitution of one form of essentialism for another. Beginning with what looks like a classic Pythagorean statement of the perfectibility of the soul through attunement to the *musica mundana*, the poem performs the kind of *volte-face* that is so typical of Donne and concludes with an acknowledgment of the fact that it is only by accepting his own innate and essential depravity that the writer can entertain any hope of salvation. Only by a total obliteration of the old Adam can Donne learn to sing the New Song and thus hope to join the "Quire of Saints." To argue, as Catherine Belsey does[39], that Donne's Hymn de-centres its human subject is to misunderstand either the whole drift of the poem, or the soteriology that it articulates with such ingenious precision, or perhaps both. However, if humanists — and it has to be emphasized that in the sixteenth century this means both conservatives and radicals — continued to assert that man is "an Epitome or Compend of the whole creation" they should not be dismissed simply as representatives of the tail end of a pre-scientific mysticism.[40] Although modern scholarship commonly uses the term "principle of analogy," to describe the doctrine of correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm, what this theory actually refers to is, not the metaphoric, and therefore strictly speaking improper, comparison of the teleology of one category with that of another, but the operation of an identical law throughout the universe: a state is not, strictly speaking, *like* a human body; rather, states and bodies are different structures that happen to obey the same universal laws. Just as Kepler's empirical observations convinced him that behind the confusing phenomena of nature was a harmonious world of unchanging mathematical realities, so the anthropologist believed that a study of the telos that defines the true essence of human nature could lead to an understanding of those same laws of universal nature.

Thanks to the research of A.K. Hieatt, Christopher Butler, Alastair Fowler and other scholars it is now common knowledge to all students of this period that Elizabethan poets were in the habit of organizing their works in accordance with Pythagorean structural principles. But because the best-known Elizabethan numerologist (Spenser) happened to be an antiquarian, it has been popularly

assumed that Pythagoreanism was a quaint and unrepresentative eccentricity even in the sixteenth century. Only recently has it begun to be clear just how false that view is. As T. McAlindon shows in *Shakespeare's Tragic Cosmos*, the age's most profound imaginative attempts to understand man's psychological, political and ethical life are informed by an essentialism that is deeply rooted in Pythagorean tradition.[41] That same view of human nature is encapsulated in the iconography of the lute rose; like the medieval rose window, whose geometry it shares, it symbolizes the interpenetration of microcosm and macrocosm. I would suggest, in conclusion, that we should treat with some scepticism Jonathan Dollimore's claim — now widely regarded as an axiomatic truth — that it is historically incorrect to read Renaissance literature "through the grid of an essentialist humanism."[42] Indeed I would go further and say that only a profound ignorance of Renaissance iconography could lead one to suppose that It is possible to read this period through the grid of an anti-essentialist constructivism.

*University of Hull*

## Notes

1. Robin Headlam Wells, "Number Symbolism in the Renaissance Lute Rose". *Early Music* 9 (1981), pp. 32-42. For an expanded version of this paper see Robin Headlam Wells, *Elizabethan Mythologies*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994, chap 5.

2. Plato. *Timaeus* (trans. R.G. Bury). Loeb Classical Library. London: Heinemann 1929, 47D

3. Ibid., 47C

4. David Knowles, *The Evolution of Medieval Thought*. London: Longman, 1962, p. 197; see also Norman Daniel, *The Arabs and Medieval Europe*. London: Longman, 1975, 263ff.

5. Henry George Farmer, "The Influence of Music: From Arabic Sources". *PLMA* (1926), p. 103; see also Titus Burckhardt, *Moorish Culture in Spain* (trans. Alisa Jaffa). London: Allen & Unwin, 1972, p. 71

6. Farmer, op. cit., pp. 97-8

7. Amnon Shiloah, *The Theory of Music in Arabic Writings (c. 900-1900)*. Munich: Henle, 1979, p. 258

8. Farmer, op. cit., p. 101

9. Frederick Copleston, S.J., *A History of Philosophy*. 9 vols. London: Burns Oates, 1946-75, 2. p. 196-9; Knowles, p. 199

10. Charles Homer Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century*. 1927. Repr. New York: Meridian, 1957, pp. 278-337; Copleston, vol. 2. p. 186-200; Crombie, A.C. Augustine to Galileo: The History of Science AD 400-1650 London: Falcon P, 1952, pp. 19-43; Knowles. p. 193-205

11. Winthrop Wetherbee, *Platonism and Poetry in the Twelfth Century The Literary Influence of the School of Chartres*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972, p. 11-73; see also Russell Peck, "Number as Cosmic Language", in *Be Things Seen: Reference and Recognition in Medieval Thought* (ed. David L. Jeffrey). Ottawa: U of Ottawa P, 1979. p. 48

12. Saint Augustine, *Confessions* (trans. William Watts, 1631). Loeb Classical Library. 2 vols. London: Heinemann, pp. 1922-5.

13. Vincent Foster Hopper, *Medieval Number Symbolism*. New York: Cooper Square, 1969.; see also Peck, p. 47-8

14. Sir William Ingpen, *The Secrets of Numbers According to Theologicall, Arithmeticall, Geometricall and Harmonicall Computation*. London, 1624, p. 2

15. Robert M. Jordan, *Chaucer and the Shape of Creation*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1967, p. 47

16. Though it is not thought that Adelhard had any direct connection with the School of Chartres, his ideas anticipate the fundamentals of Chartrian thought (see Wetherbee, p. 21-2).

17. Painton Cowen, *Rose Windows*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1979, pp. 124-5

18. Alain de Lille, *The Plaint of Nature* (trans. with a commentary by James J. Sheridan). Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1980.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 118-9

20. Rudolf Wittkower, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*. 3rd ed. 1962. Repr. London: Tiranti, 1967.

21. Quoted by Wittkower, p. 15

22. Edwin Arthur Burtt, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Physical Science*. Rev. ed. 1932. Repr. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949, pp. 23-73

23. Eric Werner, "The Last Pythagorean Musician: Johannes Kepler", in *Aspects of Medieval and Renaissance Music* (ed. Jan La Rue). London: Oxford UP, 1967, p. 868; see also Burtt, p. 52

24. Gaspar Contarini, *The Commonwealth and Government of Venice* (trans. Lewes Lewkenor). London, 1599, pp. 64-5; see also Ellen Rosand, "Music in the Myth of Venice". *Ren Q* 30 (1977), p. 511-37

25. Burtt, p. 42

26. Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*. 1984. Repr. Brighton: Harvester, 1986, p. 169

27. Pico della Mirandola, "Oration on the Dignity of Man" (trans. Elizabeth Livermore Forbes), in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man* (ed. Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller, and John Herman Randall, Jr.). Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1948, p. 225

28. *Ibid.*, p. 235

29. *Ibid.*

30. This view was commonplace in criticism of the 1920s, 30s, and 40s. However, as William G. Craven rightly remarks, "the idea of man literally choosing his own nature, in a metaphysical sense, would have been nonsensical to Pico" (William G. Craven, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Symbol of his Aae*. Geneva: Droz, 1981, p. 29). Dollimore's interpretation of Pico's anthropology seems to be based on a misunderstanding of Cassirer's *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy* (1927).

31. Alain, pp. 118-9

32. *Ibid.*, p. 225

33. Mirandola, p. 234

34. See for example Pierre de La Primaudaye, *The French Academie*. Rev. ed. London, 1618, p. 633; Sir Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici* (ed. Halliday Sutherland). 1906. Repr. London: Dent, 1962, p. 39; Alexander Pope, *The Poems* (ed. John Butt). London: Methuen, 1963, p. 511, 516

35. Pope, pp. 502, 516

36. St Augustine writes: "Love lifts us up [to heaven]... Our body with its lumpishness strives towards it own place" (2.391); cf. *Confessions*, VIII.x, (1.451-3).

37. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1966), unattributed English trans. 1970. Repr. London: Tavistock Publications, 1977, xxiii. J.G. Merchior describes Foucault's account of the Enlightenment *episteme* as "a brazen historical caricature" (*Foucault*. London: Fontana Collins, 1985, p. 99).

38. Antonio Poppi, "Fate, fortune, providence and human freedom", in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy* (ed. Charles B. Schmitt, Quentin Skinner and Eckhard Kessler). Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988, pp. 641-67.

39. Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice*. London: Methuen, 1980, p. 87

40. Rudolf Allers, "Microcosmus: from Anaximandros to Paracelsus". *Traditio* 2 (1944), pp. 364-5

41. T. McAlindon, *Shakespeare's Tragic Cosmos*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991, chaps 4, 8.

42. Dollimore, p. 155