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How Hermetic was Renaissance Hermeticism?

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Abstract

Based upon key publications by Paul Oskar Kristeller (1938) and especially Frances A. Yates (1964), it has been widely assumed that an important “Hermetic Tradition” emerged during the Renaissance and that Marsilio Ficino’s Latin translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* (first ed. 1471) was at its origin. This article argues that these assumptions need to be revised. Close study of Ficino’s original translation (on the basis of Maurizio Campanelli’s recent reconstruction and critical edition, published in 2011) makes it questionable whether Ficino understood much of the Hermetic message at all; and the famous (unauthorized) first edition of the *Pimander* (1471) turns out to be corrupt in many crucial respects, leading to a long series of defective editions that obscured the actual contents of the *Corpus Hermeticum* for Renaissance readers. Hence we seem to be dealing with a Renaissance *discourse* about Hermes, but hardly with a Hermetic “tradition” in any meaningful sense of the word.

Keywords

Hermetic Tradition – Hermeticism – Hermetism – *Corpus Hermeticum* – Platonic Orientalism – Gnosis – Ecstasy – Frances A. Yates – Marsilio Ficino – Lodovico Lazzarelli – Gabriel du Préau – François Foix de Candale

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That the Latin translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* by Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) was an event of considerable historical importance has been known to Renaissance historians since 1938, when Paul Oskar Kristeller first put it on the agenda in a seminal article in Italian, based on his then recently-completed *Supplementum Ficinianum* researches.¹ To the wider public, it has been known since 1964, when Frances A. Yates brought “the Hermetic Tradition” to the attention of a mass audience by means of her much-noted book on Giordano Bruno.² Since then, and up to the very present, a steadily growing number of publications have been referring to “Renaissance Hermeti(ci)sm” or the “Hermetic Tradition” of the Renaissance as an important dimension of early modern religion and philosophy.³ However, it has long been known to specialists that these concepts are extremely questionable, for a combination of reasons that largely result from Frances Yates’ popular influence. Let us begin by briefly summarizing these problems.⁴

1 From Hermeticism to Hermetism

A first problem is that none of the central figures in Yates’ grand narrative (Marsilio Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Giordano Bruno) can be convincingly described as “Hermeti(ci)sts”, while those for whom Hermetism *was*

1 Kristeller, ‘Marsilio Ficino e Lodovico Lazzarelli’.

2 Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*.

3 For instance Merkel & Debus, *Hermeticism and the Renaissance*; van den Broek & Hanegraaff, *Gnosis and Hermeticism*; van den Broek & van Heertum, *From Poimandres to Jacob Böhme*; Quispel, *Die hermetische Gnosis*; Gentile & Gilly, *Marsilio Ficino and the Return of Hermes Trismegistus*; Gilly & van Heertum, *Magic, Alchemy and Science 15th–18th Centuries: The Influence of Hermes Trismegistus*; Trepp & Lehmann, *Antike Weisheit und kulturelle Praxis: Hermetismus in der frühen Neuzeit*; Mulsow, *Das Ende des Hermetismus*; Lucentini, Parri & Perrone Compagni, *Hermetism from Late Antiquity to Humanism*; Kaminski, Drügh & Herrmann, *Hermetik*; Ebeling, *Secret History of Hermes Trismegistus*; Moreschini, *Hermes Christianus*; Alt & Wels, *Konzepte des Hermetismus*; Alt, *Imaginäres Geheimwissen: Untersuchungen zum Hermetismus*.

4 For detailed discussions of the points in the next section, with proper reference to the many scholars who have contributed to the debate over half a century since Yates’ book on Bruno, see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 322–334. See also idem, ‘Beyond the Yates Paradigm’; ‘La fin de la tradition hermétique’; and ‘Lodovico Lazzarelli and the Hermetic Christ’. I have also made the argument in a webinar format, available as ‘The Revival of Platonic Orientalism’ (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s2HCOuY-EiE>) and ‘The Real Hermetic Tradition’ (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gdLTDzFogzs>).

in fact central (notably Lodovico Lazzarelli, and arguably Cornelius Agrippa⁵) were marginalized and discredited by her. In short, what Yates calls the “Hermetic Tradition” can hardly be called Hermetic at all: insofar as we can speak of a *real* Hermetic tradition, her book did everything to conceal its presence while replacing it with something else that did not fit the label. To prevent any misunderstandings, there is certainly no reason to suspect Yates of any conscious attempt at misleading her readers. Rather, as a typical pioneer, she seems to have been carried away by excitement about her discoveries, and systematic questions concerning issues of terminology, definition, and demarcation just do not seem to have occurred to her at the time.

The second problem is that Yates presented Hermeticism as deeply grounded in astral magic. This allowed her to make sensational claims about “magic leading to science” that went against the grain of current assumptions among historians of science and caused great controversy in the academic climate of the 1960s and 70s. However, although Ficino’s 1471 translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* was supposed to stand at the origin of this entire revival of “Hermetic magic”, it so happens that it contains nothing that, by any definition,⁶ could be construed as “magical” at all! Few readers noticed how skillfully Yates manipulated them (and probably herself as well) into perceiving Hermeticism as thoroughly “magical”, by means of a pervasive over-emphasis on the *Picatrix* and, notably, a few short passages from the *Asclepius* that were concerned with the animation of statues.⁷ Her argument is seriously undermined by the fact that precisely those texts had been known throughout the Middle Ages, and the notorious “god-making passages” had been highlighted and discussed at length from Augustine to William of Auvergne and beyond. In short: what was new in the Renaissance (the *Corpus Hermeticum*) was not magical, and what could be construed as “magical” (the *Picatrix* and *Asclepius* 23–24/37–38) was not new. Of course this does not mean that “Renaissance magic” is not a real phenomenon: it just means that there is nothing specifically “Hermetic” about it.

5 For Agrippa’s dependence on Lazzarellian Hermeticism, see Hanegraaff, ‘Better than Magic’.

6 On the conceptual problems of “magic”, see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 164–177; and idem, ‘Magic’.

7 On this precise point, see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 333 nt 285; C.H II–XVIII are quoted rarely or not at all; only C.H. I is quoted ca. 24 times in the text (mostly in chapter 3) and 3 times in footnotes. For the *Picatrix* these numbers are 23 and 17; but for the *Asclepius* they are 80 and 29. Of those 80, at least 45 are to the passages on the animation of statues, and this number would expand considerably if one were to add the multiple references to e.g. “godmaking”, “idolatry”, or “bad magic”.

Thirdly, the interest in Hermetism among Renaissance intellectuals does not constitute an autonomous tradition but was just one particular manifestation of a much more general phenomenon. Elsewhere, I have proposed to refer to it as “Platonic Orientalism”: the belief, inherited from the Patristic apologists, in a very ancient wisdom tradition that supposedly originated in the Orient and had been passed on mainly through Platonism.⁸ A “Hermetic” version of this ancient wisdom narrative pointed to Hermes Trismegistus in Egypt as the earliest source of divine revelation, and is represented for instance by Lodovico Lazzarelli. An alternative “Zoroastrian” version pointed to Zoroaster in Persia, and is represented, *inter alia*, by Gemistos Plethon and Marsilio Ficino. Finally, a “Mosaic” version followed in the footsteps of the Patristic apologists and pointed to Moses among the Hebrews. This last form of Platonic Orientalism took the form of Christian kabbalah, due to Giovanni Pico della Mirandola’s claim that the original wisdom had in fact been the divine kabbalah revealed at Mount Sinai as a secret wisdom for the priestly elite next to the public Law for the people of Israel. In short, what Yates presented as the “Hermetic Tradition” was in fact a Zoroastrian and Mosaic interpretation of Platonic Orientalism; and precisely the Hermetic interpretation was written out of her narrative.

Finally, moving beyond Yates’ narrative and its influence, many later scholars have added further confusion to the notion of a “Hermetic Tradition” by failing to distinguish clearly between the “philosophical” Hermetica in the Renaissance and their “operative” or “technical” counterparts (especially alchemy, traditionally known as “the science of Hermes”, and to a lesser degree astrology and natural magic). If any text can become “Hermetic” merely by virtue of being attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, while texts with perfectly similar contents that happen to be attributed to some other authority are thereby excluded from “the Hermetic Tradition”, the terminology becomes an empty shell. In the rest of this article, I will be focusing exclusively on the transmission and reception of the “philosophical” Hermetica.

If “Hermeticism” or “the Hermetic Tradition” is better discarded as a meaningful category in the study of Renaissance culture, this certainly does not mean that the 15th/16th-century transmission and reception of the Hermetic writings loses any of its interest or importance. On the contrary, if we get rid of the inherited myths and misperceptions that adhere to this over-worked terminology, this will allow us to focus with more clarity on what actually took place.

8 Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 12–17 (and ch. 1, *passim*). The centrality of the patristic apologists (*ibid.*, 17–28) to the Renaissance *prisca theologia/philosophia perennis* discourse has not received the recognition it deserves.

For referring to the entirely legitimate and important topic of the transmission and reception of the “philosophical” Hermetica specifically, I would propose to henceforth use the term *Hermetism*, as distinct from Hermeticism.⁹

2 What is it that Renaissance Readers were Reading?

In the remainder of this article, we shall be focusing on a question that would seem to have been neglected but is important to investigate in this context: *did the Renaissance admirers of Hermes Trismegistus in fact understand the message that the authors of the “philosophical” Hermetica had sought to impress upon their readers?* If the answer to this question turns out to be “yes”, then we might still be dealing with a specific *tradition* of Hermetism passed on from antiquity to the Renaissance—although this tradition will surely look quite different from Frances Yates’ “Hermetic Tradition”. On the other hand, if the answer is “no”, then it cannot be said that the transmission and reception of the Hermetica resulted in a “tradition” in any meaningful sense of the word. We are then left with only a Renaissance *discourse* about Hermes.

Before exploring the central question just formulated, we should be clear about the background knowledge or background assumptions about Hermes Trismegistus that were already available to Renaissance readers on the eve of Ficino’s translation. These seem to fall under two heads. Firstly, the idea that *Hermes Trismegistus was a supreme authority in the domain of the so-called “occult sciences”*¹⁰ was, of course, nothing new in the fifteenth century: as already mentioned, he had been known for many centuries as the author of a textual corpus that is often referred to as the “operative” or “technical” Hermetica.¹¹ The disputed question was whether such knowledge was licit or not, particularly in view of the obvious resonance between astral magic and the animation of statues praised by Hermes in the otherwise non-operative but “philosophical” *Asclepius*.¹² This is what made *Asclepius* 23–24/37–38 so controversial that Frances Yates got seduced into presenting those passages as the core content of the philosophical Hermetica.¹³ Secondly, *Hermes’s status*

9 Hanegraaff, ‘Lodovico Lazzarelli’, 2 n. 1.

10 For the problematic status of that concept, see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 177–191.

11 See overview in Lucentini & Perrone Compagni, ‘Hermetic Literature II’; and many contributions to Lucentini, Parri and Perrone Compagni, *Hermetism*.

12 See Hanegraaff, ‘Hermetism’.

13 See note 7, above.

as one of the most ancient proponents of ancient wisdom, and a pagan prophet of Christian doctrine, was hardly new either: he had already been mentioned in this capacity by Lactantius and pseudo-Augustine (*Quodvultdeus*), followed by a range of Christian authors through the Middle Ages.¹⁴

In short, it was against the background of an already well-established reputation—whether positive, negative, or ambivalent—that Cosimo de' Medici expressed to the young Ficino his desire to read the newly discovered works of Hermes before his death, giving them priority even over Plato. Cosimo must have expected great things from the *Pimander*: not just another reaffirmation of Hermes's wisdom, or reassurance about his orthodoxy, but some new spiritual insight or revelation that might help him in making his imminent transition from this world to the next. What, then, did he find? What, indeed, *could* he have found?

It is at this point that the situation gets very complicated. To get an idea of what Cosimo and later Renaissance intellectuals were reading, nothing might seem more natural than to consult the first edition of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, published as *Liber de Potestate et Sapientia Dei* or *Pimander* in Treviso in 1471. After all, this is the famous edition that has been highlighted by countless scholars as the very *fons et origo* of Renaissance Hermetism. However, when the Italian scholar Maurizio Campanelli began reading the 1471 Treviso edition closely, in 2002, he made a surprising and disconcerting discovery. As he formulates it in his groundbreaking recent study on Ficino's *Pimander*, 'the number of passages of which I failed to really understand the significance followed one another at a disquieting pace.'¹⁵ In other words, much of the Latin just did not make any sense! Initially the suspicion fell on Ficino himself: could it be that his translation for Cosimo, finished in 1463, had been as bad as this edition would seem to suggest? However, a crucial manuscript from 1466, heavily annotated with corrections in Ficino's own hand, showed otherwise. Campanelli's meticulous reconstruction eventually led him to a different conclusion. Ficino himself never tried to get the *Pimander* printed (which makes one wonder how important he really found it), and the 1471 Treviso edition is the unauthorized initiative of two humanists, the Flemish Geraert van der Leye (Gherardo de Lisa) and his Italian colleague Francesco Rolandello, who seems to have provided the manuscript. But somehow, something went awfully wrong. It would appear that the printers were working under such heavy time constraints that

14 Overwin in van den Broek, 'Hermes Trismegistus I', and Lucentini, 'Hermes Trismegistus II'.

15 Gentile & Campanelli, 'Premessa', x.

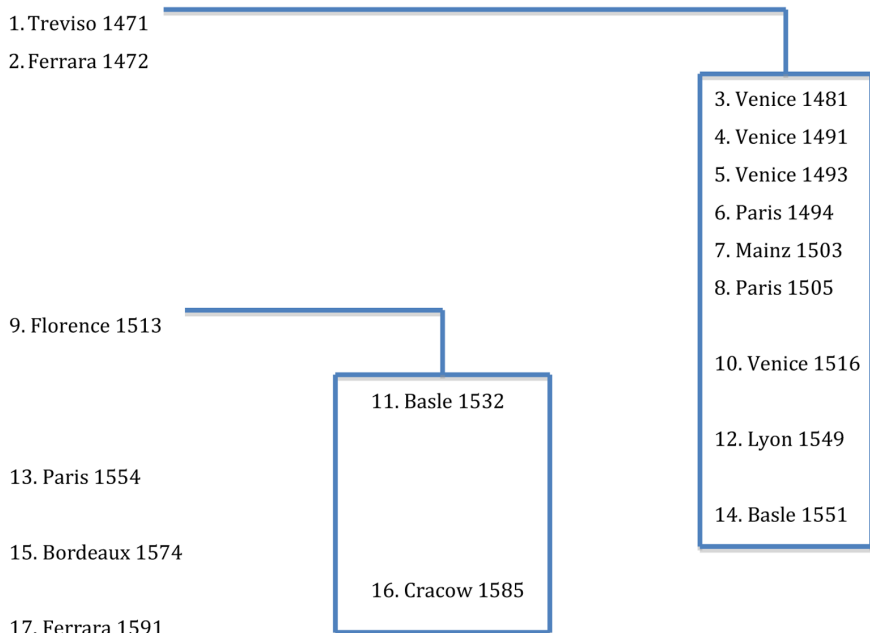


FIGURE 1 15th/16th-century editions of Ficino's *Pimander*

they made countless errors (as well as “corrections” that actually trivialize the text), and neither van der Leye nor Rolandello seems to have taken the trouble to check and correct the proofs. As a result, the 1471 Treviso edition of the *Pimander* is, in Campanelli’s wording, nothing less than ‘an authentic textual disaster’ based upon ‘scandalous negligence’.¹⁶

The troubling fact is that precisely this butchered version of the *Corpus Hermeticum* has become the basis for the great majority of later editions throughout the Renaissance (see Figure 1): the 3rd (Venice 1481), the 4th (Venice 1491), the 5th (Venice 1493), the 6th (Paris 1494), the 7th (Mainz 1503), the 8th (Paris 1505), the 10th (Venice 1516), the 12th (Lyon 1549), and the 14th (Basle 1551). This does not mean that the text remained unchanged, for the problems with the Latin translation did not go unnoticed. Especially since the 1494 edition by Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples, various editors tried to improve the text as best as they could—thereby creating a wide range of variant readings of an original that had already been wholly corrupt in the first place.

What then about the other editions? The 2nd was published in Ferrara on the 8th of January 1472, just a few weeks after the Treviso edition, and is based

16 Campanelli, ‘Introduzione’, CX–CXI.

upon a different manuscript; but although it is much more reliable, it seems to have remained a “stand-alone” edition without much further influence. The 9th edition (Florence 1513) was based upon yet another manuscript and became the basis for two later editions: the 11th (Basle 1532, edited by Michael Isengrin) and the 16th (Cracow 1585, edited by Annibale Rosselli, with very lengthy commentaries). And finally—not counting vernacular versions—we have three editions independent of Ficino’s text: the 13th edition consists of the first publication of the Greek original, by Adrien Turnèbe (Paris 1554; together with a version of Ficino’s Latin translation, heavily corrected and rewritten by Turnèbe on the basis of the Greek, but still recognizably Ficino’s),¹⁷ the 15th was a new Latin translation by François Foix de Candale (Bordeaux 1574), and finally, the 17th was yet another new translation by Francesco Patrizi (Ferrara 1591).

So what we are dealing with is a great number of *Corpus Hermeticum* editions, full of variant readings, next to an even greater number of surviving manuscripts of Ficino’s *Pimander* (those that were used for the 1471 Treviso edition and the 1472 Ferrara edition, however, are no longer extant). Based upon an extremely thorough comparison of all this material, Campanelli finally selected fifteen manuscripts as a reliable basis for reconstructing Ficino’s original translation. This version is the closest we will ever get to the text that Cosimo was reading. It was published by Campanelli in a meticulous critical edition in 2011.¹⁸

Having established what was and what was not accessible to Renaissance readers interested in the wisdom of Hermes, we can now begin investigating whether the original religious message of the “philosophical” Hermetica was transmitted with any degree of accuracy to 15th- and 16th-century intellectuals.

3 Ficino’s Reading of Hermetism

What was that message? In a large article published in 2008 in *The International Journal of the Platonic Tradition*,¹⁹ I provided a detailed analysis that takes issue with many details in currently available modern translations (English, French, German, Italian, Dutch). While the argument cannot be reproduced here, it

17 Campanelli, *Mercurii Trismegisti Pimander*, LXXX.

18 Campanelli, *Mercurii Trismegisti Pimander*, 1–111.

19 Hanegraaff, ‘Altered States of Knowledge’.

relies on the assumption—partly inspired by Garth Fowden’s analysis in *The Egyptian Hermes* (1986)—that the surviving treatises of the *Corpus Hermeticum* must be placed in a hierarchical order to be fully understood: we are dealing with a Hermetic *paideia* that comprises several successive degrees of initiation. Many Hermetic treatises would seem to fall under the category referred to in the *Corpus* as “general” and “further” discourses (*genikoi logoi, exodiakoi logoi*)²⁰ and are concerned essentially with the groundwork of strictly philosophical knowledge that any pupil was supposed to master. Only after having done so could he embark on a process of initiation into successively “higher” levels of knowledge and bodily/spiritual transformation that went far beyond rational philosophy and discursive language. I argue that C.H. I describes the initial stage of that process, C.H. XIII describes its logical continuation, and the treatise *De Ogdoade et Enneade* (discovered at Nag Hammadi in 1945 and therefore unavailable to Renaissance readers) describes its final culmination. The argument in the rest of this article will ultimately have to stand or fall with the correctness of this analysis, for which I must refer the reader to my original article.

Let us begin with the strong emphasis on “knowledge” that is evident from the very first lines of the Greek *Poimandres* (C.H. I). The unnamed visionary, usually identified as Hermes, describes here how he fell into a kind of trancelike state in which an enormous being appeared to him and asked him right away ‘what do you want to hear and see; what do you want to learn and understand?’²¹ Unsurprisingly, Hermes’s first question is ‘who are you?’ The being then introduces himself as Poimandres, the ‘mind of divine power,’²² who knows what Hermes wants and is always and everywhere with him. Hermes responds that he wants to ‘learn about the nature of things and know God.’²³ It is highly characteristic of the philosophical Hermetica that he is therefore not just interested in knowledge about God, but asks for information about the world as well. I find it crucially important to emphasize that Poimandres answers Hermes’s question (or rather, his two questions: one about the world, one about God) *not* by giving a didactic sermon, but by *showing* him directly.²⁴

20 Ibid., 136 with note 22.

21 C.H. I.1: ‘Quid est ... quod et audire et intueri desyderas? Quid est quod discere atque intelligere cupis?’ (Campanelli ed., 7.11–12). Here and in what follows I will refer to Campanelli’s critical edition of Ficino’s original, but I will mention any substantial divergences (except for simple spelling variants) with the 1471 Treviso edition.

22 C.H. I.2: ‘mens divine potentie’ (Campanelli ed., 7.14–15).

23 C.H. I.3: ‘Cupio ... rerum naturam discere deumque cognoscere’ (Campanelli ed., 7.16–17).

24 On the importance of this point, see Hanegraaff, ‘Altered States of Knowledge’, 138–141.

First he causes him to see in his mind's eye how the world has come into existence, and then he holds Hermes's gaze for a long time until the penny finally drops: Hermes realizes that he is looking at himself, divine Light looking at divine Light. It is only after these two direct visions have passed that Poimandres proceeds to explain them in words. This procedure is consistent with the frequent emphasis, in various parts of the *Corpus Hermeticum* (at least one of which is missing entirely from the 1471 edition, as will be seen!), on direct "interior vision" with the eyes of the heart or the mind.²⁵

Throughout the *Corpus*, the process of conveying superior knowledge about the true nature of reality is supposed to be preceded by philosophical teachings. These truths must be understood by reason first, and must then be accepted as true on the authority of the teacher. In other words: the pupil receives information that can be readily communicated and understood, but its truth must ultimately be accepted on faith. Quite a few treatises of the *Corpus Hermeticum* (the "general" and "further" discourses referred to earlier) restrict themselves to such information. Nevertheless, it is characteristic of the Hermetic attitude that although theoretical knowledge is considered important and necessary as a preparation, it is not enough. A crucial passage in this regard occurs at the end of C.H. IX:

If you are mindful [*ennoounti*], Asclepius, these things will seem true to you, but they will seem incredible [*apista*] if you are not mindful [*agnoounti*]. To understand [*noesai*] is to have faith [*pisteusai*], and not to have faith [*apistesai*] is not to understand [*me noesai*]. Reasoned discourse [*logos*] does <not> get to the truth, but mind [*nous*] is powerful, and, when it has been guided by reason [*logos*] up to a point, it has the means to get <as far as> the truth. After mind had considered all this care-

The vision is described in C.H. I.4–5, and there is a short additional visionary episode in C.H. I.7. Poimandres's explanations of the vision are given in C.H. I.6 and 8–26.

- 25 E.g. C.H. IV.11 ('eyes of the heart', translated by Ficino as 'internal eyes' ['*oculisque internis*'], Campanelli ed., 35.100); C.H. X.4–5 ('the mind's eye': '*mentis oculus*' [Ficino 1471: '*mentis oculis*']); C.H. XIII.3 (the original can be translated as 'by gazing with bodily sight you do <not> understand what <I am>; I am not seen with such eyes ...' [translation Copenhagen], but the entire sentence [Campanelli ed., 97.38–40: '*Cernis me oculis, fili; quando vero meditaris intentus corpore atque aspectu, non oculis hisce videor*'] is missing in the 1471 Treviso edition); C.H. XIII.11 ('I no longer picture things with the sight of my eyes but with the mental energy that comes through the powers' [translation Copenhagen]; Ficino has '*concipio non oculorum intuitu sed actu mentis, qui per vires intimas exercetur*' [Campanelli ed., 100.108–109]).

fully and had discovered that all of it is in harmony with the discoveries of reason, it came to believe, and in this beautiful belief it found rest. By an act of God, then, those who have understood find what I have been saying believable, but those who have not understood do not find it believable.²⁶

This passage clearly describes a hierarchy of types of knowledge: reason (*logos*) and faith (*pistis*) are necessary prolegomena, but the actual *gnosis* (referred to by a family of etymologically related words²⁷) is a gift from God and its content can no longer be communicated through “reasoned discourse” but only beheld directly by some faculty beyond the senses and reason. However, if we now compare this passage with Ficino’s translation, we make some surprising discoveries. First of all, it is important to note that the negation ‘<not>’ in Copenhaver’s translation is based upon an emendation by Arthur Darby Nock who, following Zielinski (and for perfectly convincing reasons²⁸), changed *mou* or *moi* in the manuscripts into *ou*.²⁹ Since the negation does not occur in Ficino’s *Pimander*, he had no other option but to try somehow to translate the sentence in a positive sense: ‘Sermo siquidem meus ad veritatem usque cucurrit’.³⁰ The results are far-reaching. The word *logos* now no longer means ‘reasoned discourse’ in general,³¹ but is seen as referring simply to the discourse (‘sermo’)

26 C.H. IX.10 (transl. Copenhaver, with a few modifications: see Hanegraaff, ‘Altered States of Knowledge’, 134 with note 17).

27 Conveniently listed by Copenhaver, who emphasises ‘the problem of translating the Hermetic vocabulary of perception, cognition and intuition’. He continues by stating that ‘especially problematic is the large family of words cognate with the noun *nous* or “mind”; e.g., *noeō*, *noēma*, *noēsis*, *noētōs*, *ennoia*, *dianoia*, *pronoia*, etc.; and with the noun *gnōsis* or “knowledge”: e.g. *gignōskō*, *gnōrizō*, *prognōsis*, *diagnōsis*, etc. The first section of the first discourse, for example, contains four of these words: “thought” (*ennoias*), “thinking” (*dianoias*), “know” (*gnōnai*) and “understanding” (*noēsas*)’ (*Hermetica*, 96).

28 Zielinski, ‘Hermes und die Hermetik’, 338 and note 1 (on modern translators’ puzzlement about the passage’s meaning, see Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 207).

29 Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 154. Most modern translations have adopted the emendation. An exception is Salaman, van Oyen & W. Wharton, *Way of Hermes*, 45: ‘My discourse leads to the truth; the mind is great ... [etc.]’.

30 Campanelli, ed., 57.113–114.

31 As rendered by Copenhaver, who seems to have chosen to combine both possibilities mentioned by Nock and Festugière, i.e. “discourse” and “reason”. See Nock and Festugière, *Corpus Hermeticum*, vol. 1, p. 105, note 36: “Discours” paraît le sens obvie. L’enseignement du maître prépare à la vue, mais ne la donne pas ... Cependant le sens de “mot” n’exclut pas celui de ratio, raison discursive commune à tous les hommes, mais inférieure à l’intuition dont jouissent quelques élus’.

that Hermes is presently giving to Asclepius, and which he assures him will lead to the truth. As a further result, there is no longer an opposition between “reasoned discourse” (‘logos’) and the superior power of “mind” (‘nous’) either:³² Ficino simply starts a new sentence which states that the human mind is powerful, and repeats once again that Hermes’s discourse will lead to the truth: ‘Mens quoque ampla et a sermone ad certum quiddam deducta veritatem attigit’. It is important to be clear about the effect of all this. To a reader like Cosimo de’ Medici, and to later readers of Ficino’s *Pimander*, there was nothing left now to suggest that “reasoned discourse” is limited and must give way to some supra-rational gnosis; instead, the passage has been reduced to no more than a conventional affirmation on Hermes’s part that his teachings lead to the truth.

Particularly clear examples of the original Hermetic message of gnosis as superior to “reasoned discourse” are found in the next treatise, C.H. X. In section 9 we find the basic point stated succinctly and without any ambiguity: ‘gnosis is the goal [telos] of *episteme*’ (*gnosis de estin epistemes to telos*). Garth Fowden has emphasized the importance of such statements for understanding the hermetic message,³³ but unfortunately, it seems to have been lost entirely on Ficino. Similar to the modern translations by Nock & Festugière, Copenhaver, and Salaman c.s.,³⁴ he simply writes ‘cognitio scientiae terminus’ (and ‘scientia’, in turn, is a gift from God, ‘dei donum’). Again, it is clear that he missed the specific connotations of ‘gnosis’.

A bit earlier in the same treatise, the pupil says that Hermes’s teaching has filled him with a good and very beautiful vision that almost blinds him. But Hermes responds that the ultimate vision is even more profound:

... we are still too weak now for this sight; we are not yet strong enough to open our mind’s eyes and look on the incorruptible, incomprehensible beauty of that good. In the moment when you have nothing to say about it, you will see it, for the knowledge of it is divine silence and suppression of all the senses. One who has understood it can understand nothing else, nor can one who has looked on it look on anything else or hear of anything

32 On the relation between *logos* and *nous*, cf. the discussion in van den Broek, *Hermes Trismegistus*, 53–55, 316–317.

33 Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, 101.

34 Nock and Festugière write ‘... tandis que la connaissance, elle, est l’achèvement de la science’; Copenhaver has ‘knowledge is the goal of learning’; Salaman, van Oyen and Wharton have ‘understanding is the fulfilment of knowledge’.

else, nor can he move his body in any way. He stays still, all bodily senses and motions forgotten.³⁵

Please note that nothing is said about the content of this gnosis. The text emphasizes that not only is it utterly beyond words, but it requires the suppression of all bodily senses as well. We already saw that in C.H. I the pupil sees a vision whilst being in a sleeplike trance, and here too we get the picture of superior knowledge conveyed in an entranced condition. Indeed, Hermes introduced the passage by the observation that ‘those able to drink somewhat more deeply of the vision often fall asleep, moving out of the body toward a sight most fair,’³⁶ and continued by emphasizing that only when all sensory knowledge is forgotten, is it possible to somehow behold—not strictly speaking the *vision* of the ultimate, for it is not visual, but something that is somehow perceived by a different, spiritual sense. Again, there is the emphasis on the fact that God cannot be perceived by the senses, described by words,³⁷ or analyzed by reason.³⁸

It is not necessary here to go into the details of how Ficino translated the passage, although these are interesting.³⁹ More relevant to my present argument is

35 C.H. X.5–6 (translation Copenhaver).

36 C.H. X.5.

37 Cf. C.H. VII.2.

38 Cf. C.H. X.9. The clearest examples of the hermetic emphasis on gnosis as a superior type of “ecstatic” knowledge—beyond the senses, words, and reason—appear in the ‘Discourse on the Eighth and the Ninth’, discovered at Nag Hammadi in 1945 and therefore not known in the Renaissance. An explicitly initiatic text (like C.H. XIII), it vividly describes how teacher and pupil give stammering expression to a direct “non-visionary vision” which they are utterly unable to express in words. For how the ‘Discourse on the Eighth and the Ninth’ transforms our understanding of the hermetic message, see in particular Mahé, *Hermès en Haute-Egypte*; Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*; and Hanegraaff, ‘Altered States’. The ritual dimension of the Hermetic *paideia* is central to the recent monograph by Anna Van den Kerchove, *La voie d’Hermès*.

39 Campanelli ed., 61.47–57: ‘Adhuc tamen imbecilliores sumus ad conspiciendum; tunc autem poterimus mentis oculos elevare bonique [Ficino 1471: ‘bonumque’] decorem incorruptibilem [‘incorruptibilem’ absent from Ficino 1471] incomprehensibilemque prospicere, cum nihil de illo prorsus dixerimus. Eius cognitio divinum silentium est et intenta sensuum [‘sensuum’ absent from Ficino 1471] omnium applicatio. Qui id intelligit, nihil [Ficino 1472: ‘non’] potest aliud cogitare; qui id intuetur [Ficino 1471: ‘meretur’], nihil preter ipsum aliud intueri; qui id audit, nihil audire post ipsum neque corporis etiam sui membra movere: universis profecto [Ficino 1471: ‘perfecto’] corporis sensibus motibusque solutus, intrepidus agit’.

a point that might seem somewhat trivial at first sight and may have been overlooked precisely for that reason: the similarity in terms of content with Platonic descriptions of divine beauty. Take Diotima's famous description from Plato's *Symposium* (here in the translation by Michael Joyce):

And now, Socrates, there bursts upon him that wondrous vision which is the very soul of the beauty he has toiled so long for. It is an everlasting loveliness which neither comes nor goes, which neither flowers nor fades, for such beauty is the same on every hand, the same then as now, here as there, this way as that way, the same to every worshipper as it is to every other. Nor will his vision of the beautiful take the form of a face, or of hands, or of anything that is of the flesh. It will be neither words, nor knowledge, nor a something that exists in something else, such as a living creature, or the earth, or the heavens, or anything that is— but subsisting of itself and by itself in an eternal oneness, while every lovely thing partakes of it in such a sort that, however much the parts may wax and wane, it will be neither more nor less, but still the same inviolable whole.⁴⁰

Parallels such as these are relevant because for a Platonist and believer in the *prisca theologia* such as Ficino, the Hermetic passage would be quite obviously about the very same experience evoked by Diotima. Both passages speak of a “vision that is not a vision” (that is, it is perceived by the “mind’s eye” rather than in visual form by the eyes of the flesh) by means of which one perceives the ultimate beauty of the divinely good and true. This reality is called ‘incorruptible’ by Hermes and described as ‘neither coming nor going, neither flowering nor fading’ by Plato. Hermes says that it cannot be expressed by words, and Plato writes that it is ‘neither words, nor knowledge’. And finally, both texts make clear that it is different from anything that can be perceived by the bodily senses. The only minor difference is that the hermetic passage emphasizes somewhat more strongly that the person who has the vision will be in a trance-like state at that moment—but even in that respect, a Platonist such as Ficino, familiar with the *Phaedrus*, would have no problem drawing the connection with Plato’s discussion of the “erotic frenzy” (see below). My point here is that once Ficino’s Plato translations had become available, Renaissance readers would have no particular reason to interpret the *Corpus Hermeticum* passage

40 Plato, *Symposium*, 210e–211b (translation by Michael Joyce) in: Plato, *Collected Dialogues*, 562.

in terms of some specifically Hermetic appeal to gnosis. Most probably, what they believed to be reading was a reference to the Platonic vision.

The emphasis on gnosis as a superior kind of knowledge is particularly strong in the most explicitly “initiatic” text of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, C.H. XIII. Here Hermes refers somewhat mysteriously to the ‘wisdom of understanding in silence’ and emphasizes that the secret of the ‘lineage’ between God and man ‘cannot be taught’.⁴¹ When Tat keeps pressing him for the secret of spiritual rebirth, he finally responds by stating that something very strange has happened to him:

What can I say, my child? I have nothing to tell except this: seeing within me an immaterial vision that came from the mercy of God, I went out of myself into an immortal body, and now I am not what I was before. I have been born in mind. This thing cannot be taught. ... Therefore I no longer care about that composed form that used to be mine. Color, touch or size I no longer have; I am a stranger to them. Now you see me with your eyes, my child, but by gazing with bodily sight you do <not> understand what <I am>; I am not seen with such eyes, my child.⁴²

Ficino’s Latin does state that Hermes’s mortal body has been changed into an immortal one (‘in corpus sum immortale translatus’), that the mystery of this transformation cannot be taught (‘hoc mysterium non docetur’), and that his new constitution cannot be seen, touched or measured. Very significantly, however, the entire closing sentence of the passage (‘Now you see me ... my child’), about incorporeal vision, is absent from the 1471 edition of the *Pimander* altogether! The sentence did occur correctly in Ficino’s Greek manuscript and in the second edition of 1472, and is reintegrated properly by Campanelli in his reconstruction of the text: clearly, therefore, this is a particularly glaring example of the corrupt state of the 1471 edition. The result is that Hermes’s striking emphasis on transcendental “vision” was largely lost to the readers of the *editio princeps* and all the later editions based upon it.

Further on in the 13th treatise, Tat is granted the spiritual rebirth he has been asking for. He describes how he has now gained the superior power of “mental perception” referred to earlier, by means of which he now experiences a kind of “cosmic unity” with all that exists (and note that the very same experience had

41 C.H. XIII.2.

42 C.H. XIII.3 (transl. Copenhaver, with modifications, for which cf. Hanegraaff, ‘Altered States of Knowledge’).

been promised to Hermes in the impressive “cosmic” passage of C.H. XI.19–20, where it was presented as indispensable for attaining true knowledge of God⁴³):

Since God has made me steadfast, father, I no longer picture things with the sight of my eyes but with the mental energy that comes through the powers. I am in heaven, in earth, in water, in air; I am in animals and in plants; in the womb, before the womb, after the womb; everywhere.⁴⁴

Ficino's translation leaves out Tat's mention that he has been made “steadfast” (Gr. *aklines*), but correctly renders the opposition between visual and mental perception: ‘concupio non oculorum intuitu sed actu mentis’. For some reason, he translates ‘womb’ as ‘body’ (‘in corpore, ante corpus atque post corpus’).

What we have found at this point is that Ficino's *Pimander* shows remarkably little concern for, or understanding of, the specific Hermetic connotations of “gnosis” as a superior, supra-sensual, and supra-rational knowledge of God that cannot be expressed in words but only experienced in silence. Passages that we would nowadays see as key references in that regard (from a perspective, admittedly, that is strongly informed by the crucial discovery of the ‘Discourse on the Eighth and the Ninth’ in 1945), were treated quite carelessly by Ficino, and were usually translated in such a manner that their original connotations remained obscure or wholly invisible.

These findings become somewhat easier to understand if we take into account that Ficino's model in translating the *Corpus Hermeticum* was the Latin *Asclepius*.⁴⁵ It so happens that the *Asclepius* is extremely poor in references to “gnosis” as understood above, and never really goes beyond the level of “philosophical” (or if one prefers, theological) discourse. The text contains extensive discussions about the true nature of, and relation between, God, the world, and man, but these remain of a theoretical kind: one will search in vain for any direct reference to a supra-rational gnosis, or, for that matter, for references to ecstatic or trance-like states as a condition for receiving such gnosis. The simple fact is, then, that Ficino had no particular reason to expect that he would find in the *Corpus Hermeticum* some doctrine different from what he already knew from the *Asclepius*: pious theoretical reflections on the nature of God, man, and the universe. Because he did not know what to look for, he essentially missed

43 C.H. XI.20 states repeatedly that one cannot know God unless one attains this very specific type of perception.

44 C.H. XIII.11 (translation Copenhaver; but I have replaced ‘tranquil’ by ‘steadfast’).

45 Campanelli, ‘Introduzione’, CCXLVII.

the specificity of the Hermetic message, which claims that such rational knowledge (although important in its own right) must ultimately be transcended in an ecstatic “mental vision” beyond visual imagery, reason, or language.

Still, we cannot hold Ficino entirely blameless for failing to get the message, for it was in fact possible for readers in the later fifteenth century to gain a much more accurate understanding. We know this from the case of Lodovico Lazzarelli (1447–1500), who translated the final three treatises of the *Corpus Hermeticum* (not included in Ficino’s *Pimander*, which contains only C.H. I–XIV), and also left us an original neo-Hermetic treatise titled *Crater Hermetis*.⁴⁶ Lazzarelli did not have to rely only on Ficino’s *Pimander* for his knowledge of *Corpus Hermeticum* I–XIV, for he was using an independent Greek manuscript as well,⁴⁷ and clearly studied it very carefully. In sharp contrast with Ficino, it appears to have been obvious to Lazzarelli that the Hermetic message was focused entirely on the search for true felicity by means of self-knowledge and knowledge of God.⁴⁸ The very structure and central message of his *Crater Hermetis* shows that he fully understood the crucial Hermetic tenet that “reasoned discourse” leads only to a certain point but must be transcended in an ecstatic experience beyond rational understanding.⁴⁹

Nothing suggests that Ficino recognized the *Corpus Hermeticum* as conveying such a doctrine. That he shows so little sensitivity to the specific connotations of “gnosis” and related terms in the *Corpus*—always translated simply as *cognitio*—certainly reflects the influence of the *Asclepius* as a model. And furthermore, of course, during the Renaissance the terminology was associated far too strongly with the universally rejected heresy of the gnostics. The very first apology of “gnosticism”, Abraham von Franckenberg’s *Theophrastia Valentiniana*, dates from 1629 and was published by Gottfried Arnold only as late as

46 For Lazzarelli’s life and work, and critical editions with annotated translations of his hermetic writings, see Hanegraaff & Bouthoorn, *Lodovico Lazzarelli*.

47 This can be proven from certain details in Lazzarelli’s references to the *Corpus Hermeticum* in his *Crater Hermetis* (see Hanegraaff & Bouthoorn, *Lodovico Lazzarelli*, 193 n. 55, 211 n. 113–114, 259 n. 214, 265 n. 227).

48 It is significant that Lazzarelli in fact misrepresents the beginning of the *Poimandres* (C.H. I.3) in order to emphasize its relevance to “knowledge of the self”. He introduces that theme with reference to the Delphic Apollo’s *gnōthi seauton*, then introduces Hermes, and finally states that it was in answer to the question ‘how would I be able to know myself’ that Pimander told Hermes ‘Embrace me with your mind, and I will teach you everything you wish to know’ and proceeded to teach him. Actually, Hermes had asked Poimandres for knowledge about God and the world, not self-knowledge.

49 See Hanegraaff, ‘Lodovico Lazzarelli and the Hermetic Christ’, 69–70.

1703.⁵⁰ Before that time, one could not expect a Christian writer such as Ficino to use the term “gnosis” in a positive sense with reference to his own beliefs. Indeed, Lazzarelli does not do so either: like Ficino, he always uses the term *cognitio*.

4 The Ecstatic Plato

In spite of the factors mentioned above, it is still somewhat remarkable that Ficino missed the message of the “philosophical” *Hermetica*, given the fact that the basic idea—although expressed in a different context and with a different terminology—became quite important to his mature metaphysics. As early as 1943, Paul Oskar Kristeller pointed out the essentials in a brilliant chapter of his classic and still readable study *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*. The chapter is devoted to what Kristeller called “the Internal Experience”, presented by him as nothing less than the ‘living center’⁵¹ of Ficino’s metaphysics. Kristeller’s chapter discussed the frequent references in the Florentine philosopher’s œuvre to ‘a heightened state of mind, experienced independently of and even in opposition to all outward events, bearing in itself its own certainty’,⁵² and characterized by its noetic claim of ‘disclosing reality’.⁵³ Ficino’s emphasis on such experiences has its foundation in a metaphysical framework basic to the Hermetic writings and shared by the entire *prisca theologia* tradition. In his *Platonic Theology*, Ficino would describe it as follows:

As the Pythagoreans and Platonists believe, during the whole time the sublime soul lives in this base body, our mind, as though it were ill, is tossed to and fro and up and down in a kind of perpetual restlessness, and is always asleep and delirious; and the individual movements, actions, and passions of mortal men are nothing but the dizzy spells of the sick, dreams of the sleeping, deliriums of the insane ... But while all are deceived, usually those are less deceived who at some time, as happens occasionally during sleep, become suspicious and say to themselves: ‘Perhaps those things are not true which now appear to us; perhaps we are now dreaming’.⁵⁴

50 Gilly, ‘Das Bekenntnis zur Gnosis’, 416–418.

51 Kristeller, *Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, 206.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

54 ‘Quamobrem totum id tempus quod sublimis animus in infimo agit corpore, mentem

Exactly the same premise is found in the philosophical *Hermetica*: we need to wake up from our world of deluded perception, and become aware of a divine reality that is so different from it that reason cannot understand it, the senses cannot perceive it, and words are powerless to express it. Such waking up is understood quite literally as an instance of psychological healing. It cures us of the sick delirium of the insane, as Ficino puts it, and makes us sober and clear minded. It is thus that we gain knowledge of what really is, and can no longer be deluded by chimeras.

The basic paradigm for such knowledge Ficino seems to have found not in Hermes, but in Plato himself, and more specifically in the dialogues concerned with love. In 1468, after Ficino had finished his translation of Plato's complete works and felt a need to summarize the essence of the Platonic teaching, he did so by writing a treatise on love; and this commentary on the *Symposium*, popularly known as *De amore*, is in fact an excellent summary of Ficino's essential beliefs.⁵⁵ The *Symposium*, of course, contains the description of Diotima's famous "trans-visible vision",⁵⁶ quoted above, and presents it as the ultimate goal of the soul's ascent. As suggested above, nothing requires us to assume that a Platonist like Ficino would have seen any difference between such a Platonic "vision", on the one hand, and references to superior knowledge as found in C.H. x, on the other.

For Ficino, such knowledge was certainly not just an abstract and theoretical concept in the context of a philosophical metaphysics. On the contrary, the Platonic theology held the promise of an actual, concrete, and highly personal experience that the pious philosopher might hope to be granted one day, as the ripe fruit of his spiritual contemplation; and, as in the Hermetic writings, the reception of such superior knowledge required an unusual, ecstatic or

nostram velut aegram perpetua quadam inquietudine hac et illac sursum deorsumve iactari, necnon dormire semper et delirare Pythagorici et Platonici arbitrantur, singulasque mortalium motiones, actiones, passiones nihil esse aliud quam vertigines aegrotantium, dormientium somnia, insanorum deliramenta ... Proinde cum fallantur omnes, ii tamen minus falli solent, qui interea quandoque, ita ut interdum fit in somno, suspicantur secumque ipsi dicunt: forsitan non sunt vera, quae nunc nobis apparent, forsitan in praesentia somniamus' (Ficino, *Theol. Plat.* XIV.8). My translation is a compromise between the one given by Kristeller (*Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, 208–209) and the new standard translation by Allen and Hankins (Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, 278–279).

55 On *De amore*, its doctrine and its context, see Hanegraaff, 'Under the Mantle of Love'.

56 As already noted above, it is important to emphasize that the "vision" is supposedly not perceived by the bodily eyes but by a faculty of "internal sight", and hence what is "seen" is not actually "visible" in any strict sense.

trance-like state. Ficino did not need the *Corpus Hermeticum* to draw such connections. He could find them in the *Phaedrus*, and more specifically in Plato's description of the so-called Platonic "madnesses" or "frenzies" (*mania* in Greek, translated into Latin as *furor*).⁵⁷ Socrates had explained to Phaedrus that there are four 'heaven-sent'⁵⁸ ways of being transported into a heightened state of mind, enabling a person to perceive higher things that remain hidden to normal consciousness. Firstly, we can be put into an "erotic frenzy" by beholding physical beauty: this awakens in us the desire for the ultimate and perfect beauty beyond physicality, as described by Diotima in the *Symposium* passage. Secondly, there is the "prophetic" frenzy known from cases such as the Delphic oracle or the Sybils, who seem to be out of their minds but actually have a superior vision of things to come. Thirdly there is the "hieratic" frenzy induced by religious ritual—prayer and worship—, which again induce a changed consciousness that brings us into contact with divine realities. And finally there is the "poetic" frenzy: poetry and music, as well, can induce ecstatic states in which we intuit realities not accessible to the normal rational mind.

Ficino referred to the Socratic frenzies in many places of his work,⁵⁹ and made occasional references to rare moments of "ecstasy" in which one might actually be granted a direct intuition of divine reality. Normal bodily functioning, he implies, keeps us from having such an experience; and if the experience occurs, therefore, it has the effect of temporarily suspending vital activity⁶⁰ (in other words, if the supreme experience would last more than just a moment, the body would die). Hence Ficino emphasizes that the moment of perfect illumination is always very short: in fact, it is like a moment out of time.⁶¹ In Ficino's words, 'it remains so for only a brief while ... just as a stone thrown upwards is said to stay in the air for just that brief while between ascent and descent'.⁶² Philosophy, for Ficino, was therefore more than just a rational pursuit, and more than an "intellectual" one, at least according to modern understandings of that term:⁶³ intellectual understanding could only attain its ultimate goal by going beyond itself, so to speak, in a direct noetic experience beyond verbal expres-

57 Plato, *Phaedrus*, 244a–245c, 249d.

58 Plato, *Phaedrus*, 244a.

59 For a more detailed discussion, see Hanegraaff, 'The Platonic Frenzies in Marsilio Ficino'.

60 Ficino, *Theol. Plat.*, XIII.5.2.

61 See references in Kristeller, *Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, 224–225.

62 Ficino, *Theol. Plat.* XIII.5.3.

63 In contrast, the standard medieval distinction between *ratio* and *intellectus* does imply a concept of "intellectual understanding" which seems very close to what is here discussed under the heading of "gnosis".

sion. Ficino never refers to such an experience as “gnosis”, but I suggest that if the authors of the philosophical *Hermetica* could have read his work, they would have.

5 Gabriel du Préau and François Foix de Candale

Tracing the “ecstatic” motif in the Renaissance, and the reception-history of the Platonic frenzies more in particular, would clearly lead us far beyond the confines of “Hermetism” proper. If we restrict ourselves to the reception history of the philosophical *Hermetica*, it should now be clear that none of the many editions based upon Ficino’s translation was capable of transmitting the Hermetic doctrine of gnosis to Renaissance readers.⁶⁴ The situation hardly improved even after the Greek text was first published by François Turnèbe in 1554: neither the new Latin translation published two decades later by François Foix de Candale (1574), nor the one by Francesco Patrizi, seventeen years after that (1591), contain evidence of a more acute understanding of the Hermetic message.⁶⁵ And if we look at yet another of the “usual suspects” of Renaissance Hermetism, at least according to Frances Yates’s narrative, we discover that while Giovanni Pico della Mirandola’s 10 hermetic *Conclusiones* (1486) clearly reflect the influence of the *Corpus Hermeticum*,

64 This preliminary exploration is restricted to editions and translations. A general reception history of the philosophical *Hermetica* focused only on the question of superior knowledge or “gnosis” would lead very far beyond what is possible in this brief article.

65 For instance, with respect to the crucial passages of C.H. IX.10, Foix de Candale has ‘Intelligere namque credere est: non credere autem non intelligere. Sermo etenim meus ad veritatem usque pervenit’ (Foix de Candale, *Mercurij Trismegisti Pimandras*, [sig. F4^v]), while Patrizi has ‘Nam intelligere est credere. Non credere vero, non intelligere est. Sermo enim meus pertingit usque ad veritatem’ (Patrizi, *Hermetis Trismegisti Libelli integri*, 43). As could be expected, both do insert the sentence at the end of C.H. XIII.3 (XIII.4 in Foix’s numeration) that was left out by Ficino: Foix de Candale has ‘Conspice me, o fili, oculis, dum obtutu fixe me corporeo visu consideras. Ego nunc non hisce oculis conspicio, o fili’ (*Mercurij Trismegisti Pimandras*, [sig. L3^v]) and Patrizi has ‘Cernis meo fili oculis. Quando vero deprehendis obnixus corpore, & visu. non oculis his conspicio o fili’ (*Hermetis Trismegisti Libelli*, 16). See also Patrizi’s translation of the passage from C.H. XIII.11: the reference to “steadfastness” is interpreted as part of the previous sentence, i.e. whoever has attained the rebirth [etc.] is made steadfast by God (‘stabilis a Deo factus’); and the next sentence reads ‘O pater, videor, mihi non visione oculorum, sed virtutum intelligibili actu, in coelo esse, in terra, in mari, in aere. In animalibus esse, in stirpibus; in utero, ante uterum, post uterum, ubique.’

their focus is entirely theoretical and they show no interest in any concept of “superior knowledge” or gnosis, with or without ecstatic states of consciousness.

As far as I have been able to ascertain, there are very few exceptions to this disappointing lack of understanding concerning ancient Hermetic spirituality among Renaissance thinkers. As we have seen, only Lazzarelli appears to have grasped the Hermetic message with some degree of adequacy already during Ficino’s lifetime; but his *Crater Hermetis* was published only in a seriously abridged version by Lefèvre d’Étaples in 1505, and its impact seems to have been small—with the notable exception of Cornelius Agrippa, whose essential beliefs were indebted to Lazzarellian Hermetism much more profoundly than has been recognized so far. For that story, fascinating as it is, I have to refer the reader to a separate publication.⁶⁶ Apart from Lazzarelli and Agrippa, I have so far found only two relative exceptions to the general lack of comprehension of Hermetism among Renaissance thinkers.

Gabriel du Préau’s French translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, published in 1549, was based upon three different editions of Ficino’s Latin translation, and du Préau notes himself that these contradicted one another in so many respects that it made him quite nervous.⁶⁷ The hierarchy of types of knowledge in C.H. IX.10 has vanished in Du Préau as it had in Ficino.⁶⁸ In the translation of C.H. X.5, the original idea that perfect knowledge requires ‘suppression of the senses’ is even changed by du Préau into its opposite: he writes that we need to apply all our senses to the task!⁶⁹ Perhaps most interesting is the case of C.H. XIII.3: du Préau does re-insert the final line that was omitted in Ficino’s translation, and his French version can be rendered as follows:

66 Hanegraaff, ‘Better than Magic’.

67 ‘Je me suis semblablement aidé de troys exemplaires en divers lieux inprimez, l’un à Venise l’autre à Paris, l’autre à Basle, lesquelz en maints lieux se contrarient: ou certes ay tousiours usé de celuy qui m’a semblé approcher au plus pres du sain & entier sens de l’Autheur. Ou ie laisse a penser, combine i’ay eu en cela l’esprit vexé & tormenté’ (du Préau, *Mercurus Trismegiste Hermes*, ‘Au debonnaire et studieux Lecteur’ [unpaginated]).

68 ‘Au moyen qu’entendre n’est autre chose, que croire: comme au contraire ne vouloir croire, n’est qu’ignorer. Car tout ce que ie dy, n’est que verité ...’ (du Préau, *Mercurus Trismegiste*, 37; here and in later references I follow Du Préau’s first edition of 1549, except for a few very minor emendations based upon comparison with the more easily accessible 1579 edition titled *Le Pimandre de Mercurus Trismegiste*. I am grateful to Antoine Faivre for lending me his copy of the rare 1549 edition).

69 ‘Au moyen que l’entiere & parfaite cognoissance d’iceluy, n’est autre chose qu’un silence divin, & ententive application de tous les sens’ (clearly reflecting Ficino’s ‘intenta omnium applicatio’; du Préau, *Mercurus Trismegiste*, 39).

What shall I say, my son? I do not know what to say, except that I beheld a true spectacle and vision that it pleased God to reveal to me by a special grace.⁷⁰ So that I am now translated into an immortal body, such as that I am no longer who I was before. I am made into the likeness of God's thought [*la divine pensée*] that was recently shown to me. It is a mystery, my son, that one should not teach just like that, nor publish rashly and unthinkingly. Learn this, therefore, and see it clearly through the appearance of that element that has been created and formed, through which this mystery can easily be seen and known through one's eyes. You see that because of this element I do not take into account the first species that I have, since I have an altogether different colour, texture, or limit than before. For I am now withdrawn from all those things. At present you see me with your corporeal eyes, my son, but if you are attentive with body and gaze to that on which you meditate, you no longer see with such eyes but with [in]eternal ones.⁷¹

What we see here is that the passage is interpreted in terms of a vision given to Hermes by God through a special act of grace, and as an allusion to a Christian understanding of interior rebirth or regeneration. Du Préau added a marginal note of explanation to emphasize that point:

He [Hermes] shows how the process of regeneration must take place, through some vision that he showed him [= Tat, presumably]: note that just as he seems to be other than he was, without his body changing into a different species than before, it is thus that must happen this regeneration

70 Here a marginal note is added by du Préau (see main text).

71 'Que diray ie mon filz? Ie ne scay que dire, fors que ie voy un vray spectacle & vision qu'il plaist à Dieu de speciale grace maintenant me reveler*. Dont ie suis de present translaté en un corps immortel, tellement que ne suis plus celuy qu'estois tantost: ains suis fait tel que la divine pensée, laquelle c'est n'agueres à moy démontrée. C'est un mystere, mon filz qui ne se doit facilement enseigner, ny temerement, & à la volée publier. Parquoy aprends le, & le voy evidemment par l'aparence de cest element qui vient d'estre crée & formé: par lequel ce mystere se peult voir aysément, & oculairement se cognoistre. Tu voy que par cest element ie ne tiens conte de la premiere espece que i'ay: non que i'aye toutesfois autre couleur, ou attouchement, ou limitation, qu'au paravant. Car ie suis maintenant reculé de toutes ces choses. Tu me voys de present des yeux corporelz mon filz, mais quand tu es ententif de corps & d'aspect à ce que tu medites, tu ne voys pas lors de telz yeux, ains des ineternelz' (du Préau, *Mercurus Trismegiste*, 64).

through the son of God taking on a human body, under which his divinity is hidden, as says St. Paul in Romans 5:2.⁷²

As for the passage in C.H. XIII.11, du Préau rendered it quite nicely as follows:

I now see it well, my father, and understand it not through the gaze of my mortal eyes but through the power and virtue of my understanding working through its interior forces. I am now in heaven, in earth, in the water, in the air, in all animals, in all trees, in all bodies, both when they were made and after they will cease to exist, and finally in every place.⁷³

Note that the original reference of being ‘before the womb, in the womb, after the womb’, with its hint of transmigration or reincarnation, has been silently removed: the pupil now experiences himself as being present in ‘all bodies’. In sum, I would say that du Préau’s translation reflects a certain degree of progress in interpretation of the Hermetic message: although it is thoroughly Christianized, we can at least see now that a process of interior “rebirth” is taking place.

Some years after his Latin translation of 1574, Foix de Candale published an additional new French translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, with very extensive commentaries, under the title *Le Pimandre de Mercure Trismegiste* (1579). In his interpretation of C.H. IX.10, he seems to suggest that the truths of faith lie beyond the domain where language (*la parole*) can reach.⁷⁴ This

72 ‘Il monstre comment se devoit faire la regeneration, par quelque vision qu’ il luy monstroit: scavoir est que tout ainsi qu’ il sembloit estre autre qu’ il n’ estoit sans changer son corps en autre espece qu’ au paravant: que ainsi se devoit faire ceste regeneration par le filz de Dieu prenant un corps humain, souz lequel seroit sa divinité cachée comme dit S. Paul. Ro. 5. 2 [etc.]’.

73 ‘Je l’entends bien maintenant, mon pere, & le comprend non par un regard des yeux mortelz, mais par la force & vertu de mon entendement s’ exerçant par ses forces interieures. Je suis de present au ciel, en la terre, en l’ eau, en l’ air, dedans tous animaux, dedans tous arbres, dedans tous corps, & premier qu’ ilz fussent faitz, & apres qu’ ilz cesseront d’ estre, finablement en tout lieu’ (du Préau, *Mercurus Trismegiste*, 66).

74 ‘Ces choses donc, ô Aesculape, te sembleront veritables les entendant, & incroyables les ignorant. Car entendre est croire, & ne croire est n’ entendre pas. Ma parole est parvenue iusques à la verité, la pensée est grande: & estant conduite par la parole iusques à quelque chose, peut parvenir à la verité. Laquelle ayant apperceu toutes choses, & trouve estre consonantes à ce, qui est exposé par la parole, a creu, & a acquiescé en ceste belle foy. A ceux donc, qui entendent les choses, qui nous ont esté dictes de Dieu, elles seront

is probably no coincidence, for in his long and verbose commentary, based upon the leading idea of a perfect consonance between the Hermetic teachings and the Christian faith, Foix de Candale now presents us with something very close to the hierarchy of knowledge originally intended in the Hermetic text. He argues that 'faith has its degrees'⁷⁵ and distinguishes between a first degree of simple 'listening', a second degree of 'believing', and a third and highest degree of 'understanding & knowledge of God':

The third degree is knowing or understanding, which is given by God to the man who generously pursues in himself the exercise of faith, through which he advances in the knowledge of divine things, through the opening of that grand example of whom we have often spoken, and in whom man sees that which the mouth cannot speak, the eye has not seen, and the heart has not thought, as seen by St. Paul in his ecstasy, by Moses on the mountain, and by Hermes in his vision.⁷⁶

The last reference is, of course, to the vision of Poimandres described in C.H. 1. Foix de Candale emphasizes that it does not involve corporeal sleep and, interestingly, makes explicit reference to the Platonic terminology of divine frenzy through erotic "desire":

... when the affection & generous will make use of their intelligible virtues with ardent desire, to conceive of a subject that is greater and more worthy of veneration than they are capable of comprehending. And by this means they can be easily vanquished & subjugated, even without any corporeal sleep, through the intelligible virtues, guided by a good will & ardent affection, as we see happen to Hermes in this place, without any corporeal sleep an abnegation & suppression of the senses.⁷⁷

croyables: & à ceux, qui ne les entendent, incroyables. Ces choses & tant te soient dictes du sens & intelligence' (Foix de Candale, *Le Pimandre de Mercure Trismegiste*, 321–322).

75 'Car la foy a ses degrez' (ibid., 323).

76 'Le tiers degre est cognoistre ou entendre, lequel est donné de Dieu a l'homme qui continue liberalement en soy l'exercice de la foy, par lequel il entre si avant en cognoissance des choses divines, par l'ouverture de ce grand exemplaire, duquel nous avons souvent parlé, & dans lequel l'homme voit ce, que bouche ne peut dire, œil n'a veu, & cœur n'a pensé, comme saint Pol la veu en son ravissement, Moïse en la montaigne, & Mercure dans sa vision' (ibid., 323).

77 'quand l'affection & liberale volonté employe d'ardant desir ses vertus intelligibles, a concevoir subiect plus grand & digne qu'ilz ne peuvent comprendre. Et par ce moyen

Foix de Candale explains that this is how ‘saintly persons’ have always been addressed by God in visions, mentioning Daniel and St. Paul as examples. In such cases, the normal bodily forces and faculties are temporarily suppressed, so that they fall to the ground, and nothing is left to them but

... the use of reason, intelligence, & knowledge, together with the other intelligible virtues, for which it is more than reasonable that all corporeal actions & virtues make place while keeping silence, given their dignity over above matter and all that belongs to it.⁷⁸

That the contents of the vision go beyond normal understanding is likewise typical for true divine ecstasy, according to Foix de Candale. Hermes perceives a person who is

... *boundless*—which must be understood in term of size—and *incomprehensible*, that is to say, as regards his form or representation, which are the pure qualities proper to the vision of a subject that is so marvelous that it can neither be understood by any measure or figure, nor circumscribed by the imagination, no matter how subtle.⁷⁹

Of course Foix de Candale is thinking entirely from a pious Roman Catholic perspective, assuming that Hermes represents the eternal Christian truth of the *philosophia perennis*. But he also does show, at last, some explicit interest in, and sensitivity to, the original Hermetic concept of “superior knowledge” (although obviously without using a term such as “gnosis”). This was a modest first step, at last, towards a more adequate understanding of the Hermetic message.

peuvent facilement estre vaincus & subiiguez, voire sans aucun sommeil corporel, par les vertus intelligibles, conduites d’une bonne volonté & affection ardante, comme en c’est endroit nous voyons estre advenu à Mercure, sans aucun sommeil corporel un amortissement & suppression de sens’ (ibid., 2).

78 ‘l’usage de la raison, intelligence, & cognoissance, avec les autres vertus intelligibles, ausquelles il est plus que raisonnable, que toutes actions, & vertus corporeles donnent lieu & silence, à cause de la dignité qu’elles ont par dessus la matière & toute sa suite’ (ibid., 2).

79 ‘*desmesuree*, entendons en grandeur, *et incomprehensible*, c’est à dire de forme ou representation: qui sont les pures qualitez propres à la vision d’un si merveilleux subiect, de ne pouvoir estre comprins par grandeur quelconque, ny figure, ou circonscrit par imagination o[u] subtilité quelconque’ (ibid., 2).

6 The End of a Grand Narrative

My conclusions in the previous section do not pretend to be more than exploratory. Very important research has been done in recent years on the material transmission of Hermetic texts by means of editions and translations during the Renaissance, and such research is the indispensable foundation for everything else. But because most of this research does not go beyond the bibliographic level, we still have much to learn and discover about how the *contents* of the various editions and translations in fact relate to each other, or about how editors, translators and commentators interpreted those contents from their various doctrinal or philosophical perspectives. With respect to Ficino, what I have been arguing can be summed up in one sentence: he does not seem to have understood much of the specific religious message of the philosophical Hermetica when he translated the *Corpus* in 1463, but he did discover a closely equivalent message in the Platonic philosophy (obviously understood by him through the lenses of various other, Middle- and Neoplatonic authors and texts).

If my analysis is more or less correct, there are several consequences. Firstly, the iconic status of the 1471 Treviso edition of Ficino's *Pimander* needs to be revised and relativized. Due to its butchered condition, it must have created more confusion than clarity; and, moreover, it did not bring anything new to what Renaissance thinkers already knew (or rather, believed they knew) about Hermes and his message. Secondly, "Renaissance Hermetism" was actually not very "Hermetic" at all. The essential Hermetic doctrine of salvation by means of a "supra-rational" knowledge or gnosis was largely or completely overlooked. With just very few exceptions (perhaps only Lazzarelli, followed by Agrippa), it seems that Renaissance intellectuals were far more interested in aspects that are in fact marginal to the *Corpus Hermeticum* and the philosophical Hermetica generally: notably the idea of a venerable *prisca theologia* and concepts of astral magic. Thirdly, it follows that we cannot speak of a "Hermetic Tradition" in any precise sense of the word, that is to say, of an actual transmission of Hermetic spirituality from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance. That terminology should be abandoned. It is much more correct to speak of a *discourse* about Hermes. Finally, this discourse should not be seen as some autonomous entity. It makes more sense to see it as just one dimension of a much broader and more fundamental Renaissance discourse on ancient wisdom. As suggested earlier, we might refer to it as Platonic Orientalism: the idea of a very ancient spiritual wisdom transmitted by Platonism and originating not in Greece but deriving from some Oriental source. The most important candidates were Zoroaster, Hermes, and Moses; and hence we could speak of a Zoroastrian,

a Hermetic, and a Mosaic variant of Platonic Orientalism. Very significantly, the Hermetic variant was defended *not* by Ficino but by Lazzarelli. Ficino preferred the Zoroastrian option, while Pico della Mirandola went for the Mosaic one.

All of this implies a decisive final end to the grand narrative presented by Frances Yates half a century ago. While some readers might regret this, Yates herself, in an article published in 1979, showed a healthy sense of realism and modesty in this regard: 'My next book ... will not be a "Yates Thesis" but only another Yates attempt at laborious digging, or a sign-posting of fields in the hope that others will dig more deeply'.⁸⁰ And so they have done indeed. If a deeper analysis of the Hermetic materials and their manner of transmission implies the demise of Frances Yates' "Hermetic Tradition", one has to believe that—whether grudgingly or not—she would approve of the fact.

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80 Frances Yates in *Encounter* 3 (1979), 61, as quoted in Jacob & Gosselin, 'Dame Frances Yates', 425.

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