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Altered States of Knowledge: The Attainment of Gnōsis in the Hermetica*

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Abstract

Research into the so-called “philosophical” Hermetica has long been dominated by the foundational scholarship of André-Jean Festugière, who strongly emphasized their Greek and philosophical elements. Since the late 1970s, this perspective has given way to a new and more complex one, due to the work of another French scholar, Jean-Pierre Mahé, who could profit from the discovery of new textual sources, and called much more attention to the Egyptian and religious dimensions of the hermetic writings. This article addresses the question of how, on these foundations, we should evaluate and understand the frequent hermetic references to profound but wholly ineffable revelatory and salvational insights received during “ecstatic” states. Festugière dismissed them as “literary fictions”, whereas Mahé took them much more seriously as possibly reflecting ritual practices that took place in hermetic communities. Based upon close reading of three central texts (CH I, CH XIII, NH VI⁶), and challenging existing translations and interpretations, this article argues that the authors of the hermetic corpus assumed a sequential hierarchy of “levels of knowledge”, in which the highest and most profound knowledge (gnōsis) is attained only during ecstatic or “altered” states of consciousness that transcend rationality. While the hermetic teachings have often been described as unsystematic, inconsistent, incoherent or confused, in fact they are grounded in a precise and carefully formulated doctrine of how the hermetic initiate may move from the domain of mere rational discourse to the attainment of several “trans-rational” stages of direct experiential knowledge, and thereby

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from the limited and temporal domain of material reality to the unlimited and eternal one of Mind.

Keywords

hermetica, *Corpus Hermeticum*, *Discourse on the Ogdoad and the Ennead*, gnōsis, ecstasy, altered states of consciousness.

Es gibt allerdings Unaussprechliches. Dies zeigt sich, es ist das Mystische.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 6.522.

1. Introduction: The Problem of Language

Like any other academic discipline, the history of religions relies on discursive language to make itself understood: it is only within the order of critical rational discourse that scholars can discuss and evaluate one another's claims and thereby contribute to the progress of knowledge. More than their colleagues in other disciplines, however, scholars of religion are often faced with the strangely paradoxical task of having to make sense of textual sources which explicitly deny the relevance, indeed the very possibility, of what the scholar is trying to do. The so-called "philosophical Hermetica"—a corpus of texts from late antiquity, attributed to or associated with the legendary sage Hermes Trismegistus¹—are an example *par excellence*.

Scepticism about the modern scholar's basic tool, discursive language, is a recurrent theme in the Hermetica, and central to their message. God is addressed as 'the inexpressible, the unspeakable, named only by silence',² the one who 'cannot be expressed in words',³ and about whom nothing

¹ For an introduction to the Hermetica, including the distinction between a "philosophical" and "technical" corpus, see R. van den Broek (2005a) and (2005b). In the rest of this article, primary sources and translations from them will be referenced as follows: CH = *Corpus Hermeticum*; CMC = Cologne Mani Codex; Cop = B.P. Copenhagen (1992); Mahé = J.-P. Mahé (1978); N/F = A.D. Nock and A.-J. Festugière (1991/1992); NH = Nag Hammadi Library; SH = Stobaeus Hermetica; SvOWM = C. Salaman, D. van Oyen, W.D. Wharton and J.-P. Mahé (1999); vdBQ = R. van den Broek & G. Quispel (1991); vdB = Van den Broek (2006).

² CH I 31. Cf NH VI⁶ 56.

³ SH I.

worthy can be said 'because our speech is no match for him'.⁴ Reasoned discourse (*logos*⁵) has a respectable but strictly propaedeutic role: it leads up to a point, but does not reach as far as the truth,⁶ and the ultimate vision of divine reality will only be seen 'in the moment when you have nothing to say about it', that is to say, in a state of 'divine silence'.⁷ Accordingly, the two descriptions we have of an initiation into the Hermetic mystery both culminate in the initiates attaining a supreme knowledge and spiritual understanding that 'cannot be taught'⁸ but is 'a secret kept in silence':⁹ the unspeakable divinity is addressed by means of hymns sung in silence. In short: these text are marked by the paradox of using language to tell the reader that language is powerless to convey the truth, and claiming to convey a message by stating that it cannot be found anywhere on the page.

How, then, can scholars do justice to such texts? Some would take the postmodern way out, by stating axiomatically that there is nothing beyond language and discourse. Any expression of linguistic scepticism is itself a linguistic statement, and can thus be analyzed as a form of discourse. The problem is that the very axiom is flatly denied by the sources themselves, and hence by taking this road one implies that they are speaking nonsense. Rather than trying to take the sources seriously to begin with, and make an effort to understand what they might mean on their own terms, scholars who choose this perspective end up "correcting" the sources' point of view by replacing them with agendas of their own.

Others will try to somehow make the absent message present to their readers. The problem here is that scholars who take this road are still using the very medium, discursive language, which their sources tell them is inadequate to the task; hence the premise is, again, that the sources are mistaken in their linguistic scepticism. They think the truth cannot be expressed in words, but the scholar knows better, and can do what they cannot. Now this approach logically requires the scholar somehow to have direct, unmediated, non-linguistic "access" to the message; in other words,

⁴) CH XVIII 12.

⁵) For the translation of *logos* as "reasoned discourse", see Cop 29; the translation *logos* combines the two possibilities ("discours" and "mot") mentioned in N/F 105 nt 36.

⁶) CH IX 10.

⁷) CH X 5. Cf. CH XIII 2 ('understanding in silence').

⁸) CH XIII 3 and 16.

⁹) CH XIII 16.

it requires him to be a mystic of sorts himself, who somehow “knows the truth” from direct experience, and what is more, knows it better than those who wrote the texts. Many scholars in the contemporary study of religion—I am referring to the “religionist” current popular particularly in the United States¹⁰—practice something close to such an approach.

With various degrees of sophistication, these first two approaches have often been applied to the study of “mysticism” and various aspects of what is currently referred to as “Western esotericism”,¹¹ including the Hermetic writings. Major scholars of the Hermetica, however, typically represent a third and different approach: that of erudite textual criticism and philology, on a basis of essentially descriptive historiography. The importance of such research can hardly be overstated: without the impressive erudition and attention to linguistic detail that characterizes the work of scholars such as, notably, André-Jean Festugière and Jean-Pierre Mahé (undoubtedly the two pillars of modern research in this field), any adequate understanding of the Hermetica would be simply impossible. But how does such scholarship, grounded as it is in the study of languages, deal with the Hermetic emphasis on the inadequacy of discursive language? The answer was formulated succinctly by Festugière in the very final lines of his *Révélation d’Hermès Trismégiste*: ‘L’historien ne sait que ce qu’on lui dit. Il ne pénètre pas le secret des coeurs’.¹²

With these words, Festugière formulated a basic principle of sound historical research, and of the critical study of religion generally. If it creates any problems in the study of the Hermetica, this is not because of the principle itself, but because it tends to be interpreted in an unnecessarily restrictive manner, as a quasi-positivist doctrine of descriptivism. According

¹⁰ The “religionist” style of religious studies has its roots in the Eranos meetings that took place in Switzerland since 1933, with representatives such as Carl Gustav Jung, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin. See the fundamental study by H.T. Hakl (2001); and see also S.M. Wasserstrom (1999; but note that Gershom Scholem, one of the central authors in Wasserstrom’s study, is the exception here because he did frequently participate in the Eranos meetings but is not representative of the religionist approach). For an analysis of American religionism at the example of a recent case, see W.J. Hanegraaff (2008).

¹¹ For an introduction to the modern study of Western esotericism, see e.g. W.J. Hanegraaff (2004). The standard reference is now W.J. Hanegraaff (2005).

¹² ‘The scholar knows only what he is being told. He does not penetrate the secret of the heart’ (A.-J. Festugière [2006, IV] 267).

to that doctrine, which remains the orthodox position in the field, the scholar is allowed to repeat, translate, paraphrase or summarize the exact statements of his sources—in short: he may tell his reader “ce qu'on lui dit”—, and of course he must put them in context; but going even one step beyond those acceptable procedures is seen as unscientific “speculation” and tends to be encountered with grave suspicion.

The reasons for this attitude are easy enough to understand. Firstly, experts working on a very high level of linguistic and philological expertise naturally distrust those who do not have a similar background training, and they typically complain that “comparativists” and other general students of religion are not sufficiently aware of the technical problems involved, so that they end up building their houses on sand. In many cases, such criticism is entirely justified. It should be evident, however, how easily this attitude can prevent us from even asking—let alone trying to answer—important and entirely legitimate questions about the texts under investigation and the meaning and use they may have had for their intended audience. It is undoubtedly true that in these domains of research, no house can be built without a foundation of thorough text-critical and philological analysis; but it is also true that foundations alone, no matter how solid, do not make a house.

A second reason for the “descriptivist” attitude is that historians who study religious texts and traditions tend to be afraid (again, quite understandably) of being perceived as “not objective enough”. As a result, they have a tendency to err in the opposite direction, particularly when dealing with materials that emphasize “subjective” experiences and unusual states of consciousness which are clearly very far removed from the (stereo)typical scholarly state of mind. The unfortunate result is that, in spite of all its refined attention to textual and linguistic detail, current research of the *Hermetica* still tends to read the sources selectively, and as a result, sometimes to misread them. I will attempt to demonstrate this by calling special attention to a series of statements and formulations concerned with subjective experiences and unusual states of consciousness, the relevance and significance of which I believe has been largely overlooked: these aspects of the textual corpus have either not been “registered” on the screen of investigation at all, or if they were, they have been registered inadequately or incompletely, and their significance has not been sufficiently recognized. My further argument is that, hermeneutically, these passages should not

only be taken seriously, but should be placed at the very center of attention in any analysis of the Hermetic corpus as a whole. The heart of the Hermetic message is precisely its emphasis on the centrality of a salvational and noetic experience (often referred to as “gnōsis”) that cannot be verbalized, and which is considered to be wholly superior to rational philosophical discussion. It is therefore with reference to this center that we should evaluate and assess the relative importance of *all* other aspects of the Hermetic corpus.¹³

2. The Hierarchy of Knowledge

All serious scholars of the Hermetica have noted their considerable philosophical and doctrinal diversity, including multiple inconsistencies and contradictions. Like Garth Fowden, who addressed this problem in an excellent and provocative chapter of his *Egyptian Hermes* of 1986, I would argue that it can largely be resolved by taking seriously the concept of a hierarchy of types of knowledge that is explicitly emphasized in several key passages. In CH X 9 the principle is stated succinctly: ‘*Gnōsis* is the goal of *episteme*’ [gnōsis de estin epistemes to telos]. Modern translations of this sentence differ widely, but all of them end up obscuring its very meaning,¹⁴ which is most clearly preserved by simply keeping the key terms untranslated.¹⁵ The same hierarchy is explained (and developed further) in CH IX 10:

¹³ I am, of course, perfectly aware of the objection that the corpus of the “philosophical” hermetica does not constitute a “whole” to begin with, and that any search for some unifying principle is therefore mere speculation. The fragmentary nature of the surviving corpus is obvious, but for reasons I will explain in the second section I do not find the objection convincing either on textual or on theoretical grounds.

¹⁴ My translation follows G. Fowden (1986) 101. Festugière has ‘la connaissance, elle, est l’achèvement de la science’ (N/F 117-118). Copenhaver has ‘knowledge is the goal of learning’ (Cop 32, and see his note in B.P. Copenhaver [1992] 159-160, where he discusses Fowden’s translation along with some other options). Salamon, van Oyen & Wharton have ‘understanding is the fulfillment of knowledge’ (SvOWM 47). Quispel in his Dutch translation writes ‘kennis is de vrucht van de geheime wetenschap’ (vdBQ 119), thereby giving an unwarranted “occult” twist to the text: nothing indicates that *episteme* means “secret science” (= “geheime wetenschap”).

¹⁵ Copenhaver quite rightly emphasizes ‘the problem of translating the Hermetic vocabulary of perception, cognition and intuition’ and continues by stating that ‘especially problematic is the large family of words cognate with the noun *nous* or “mind”; e.g., *noēō*,

If you are mindful [ennoounti], Asclepius, these things will seem true to you, but they will seem incredible [apistai] 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>¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

In other words: although reason (*logos*) and faith (*pistis*) are necessary, the actual *gnōsis* transcends both. The passage continues by stating that it is given to us by an act of God, and we will see how literally this was taken. From these and other examples,¹⁸ Fowden has concluded, convincingly in

noēma, noēsis, noētos, 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*)’ (B.P. Copenhaver [1992] 96). It is possible to trace all these terms systematically thanks to the Index of the *Corpus Hermeticum* compiled by L.S. Delatte, L. Govaerts and J. Denooz (1977).

¹⁶ This important emendation was adopted by Nock and Festugière from T. Zielinski (1905) 338 and note 1 (‘Die Notwendigkeit der Änderung leuchtet ein; man sehe sich doch nur den nächsten Satz an: “die Vernunft dagegen ist gross und kann, wenn sie *bis zu einem gewissen Punkte* vom Logos geleitet wird, die Wahrheit erreichen”’); Zielinski comments ‘Hier begegnet uns die Herabsetzung des Logos in der Hermetik, die sich später immer stärker durchsetzt und in der blasphemischen Einlage XV 16 *ho logos, ouk erōs, estin ho planōmenos kai planōn* ihren Höhepunkt findet’ (note that the passage occurs in what is nowadays referred to as C.H. XVI; on modern translators’ puzzlement about the passage’s meaning, see B.P. Copenhaver [1992] 207).

¹⁷ C.H. IX: 10. I follow Copenhaver’s translation, but with a few modifications. For some reason, all modern translations render “ennoounti” and “agnoounti” by two different words, but it seems more logical to preserve the implied opposition by writing “mindful—not mindful”. Alternatively, in view of the observations in the previous note, one could even write “if you have *gnōsis*—if you have no *gnōsis*”.

¹⁸ A further excellent example is CH XIII 15, where Hermes tells Tat that Poimandres has transmitted to him ‘no more than has been written down’, because he knew that ‘on my own I would be able to understand everything, to hear what I want and to see everything’. In other words, during the final stage of the initiatory journey, the initiate has to leave rational understanding behind, and trust his experience alone; and again, this experience is described as noetic, visual and auditory (although all three are to be understood in a “higher” sense: the reference is to *true* knowledge, vision and hearing by means of the superior “powers” of perception that have come with the purification or healing process described in CH XIII 8-9 [see discussion below]).

my opinion, that ‘...doctrinal variations... reflect an intention that different *successive* levels [or “steps”] of spiritual enlightenment should provide access to different *successive* levels of truth about Man, the World and God...’¹⁹ Hence what might look like irreconcilable differences or even contradictions—the so-called “monistic” and “dualistic” passages being the most frequently discussed example—may instead be interpreted as reflecting successive levels of understanding, what is true on one level being less than perfectly true on a higher level. And furthermore, if “rational discourse” represents a lower level in principle, as frequently repeated by the sources, then one should not be surprised to find that strict logical consistency is not their very first priority.

Roelof van den Broek correctly notes that there is ‘no irrefutable proof’²⁰ for Fowden’s theory. However, rejecting it as speculation merely for that reason would clearly exemplify the descriptivist fallacy (criticized in the previous section), which considers it illegitimate to move beyond “letting the texts speak for themselves”. The fact is that *no* scholar of the Hermetic corpus can avoid taking position with respect to its internal inconsistencies, and it should be understood that *any* such position is an interpretation that goes beyond the empirical data. By far the most common alternative to Fowden’s theory is that of questioning the intellectual sophistication or intelligence of the anonymous authors, compilers and editors, who were supposedly oblivious to logical and doctrinal contradictions. Like Fowden’s theory, this one cannot be proven, but its implicit arrogance is quite evident: it supposes that, due to their superior technical expertise, modern scholars see far more sharply than those folks in late antiquity who produced and used the sources, and it often implies that rational philosophers can expose religious enthusiasts as being confused about their own beliefs.

Since *nobody* knows for sure how to account for the inconsistencies, it seems much more reasonable to give those enthusiasts at least the benefit of the doubt, and to accept Fowden’s perspective as more plausible than its alternative. Therefore I make no excuse for provisionally treating the

¹⁹⁾ G. Fowden (1986) 103. I suspect that Fowden goes a step too far in applying this principle to *all* the writings linked to the name of Hermes, that is, including the so-called “technical Hermetica”; but important though this problematic is, it can be disregarded here.

²⁰⁾ R. van den Broek (2005a) 488.

“philosophical Hermetica” as one corpus, and for placing the three texts under discussion here (CH I, CH XIII, and NH VI⁶) in a sequential order that suggests a progressive development through several levels of initiation and gnostic insight. I am perfectly aware of the fact that strict proof for the correctness of such a sequence is not possible; but I add that the same goes not only for any other possible sequence, but even for the very statement that such a sequence is mere speculation. My final argument in favour of a Hermetic “hierarchy of knowledge”—reflected in a sequence of texts that describe a progress through successive levels of initiation—is, quite simply, that it does better justice to the sources than the alternatives, and that it allows for an amount of inter-textual consistency and internal logic which does not implicitly offend the intelligence of its presumed authors, editors, compilers and readers. Festugière may have voiced a widely-shared opinion when he stated that ‘la culture philosophique de l’hermétiste est médiocre et sa pensée sans originalité et sans vigueur’,²¹ but if there is some truth to this, it still concerns the strictly philosophical level only, not the religious one that the sources themselves consider all-important.

3. *Poimandres*: From Didactic Instruction to Visionary Teaching

A considerable part of the Hermetica consists of didactic dialogues in which a teacher provides a pupil with information about the nature of the world, man, and God, and how they are related. This kind of knowledge belongs to the sphere of philosophy and theology, and lends itself to expression and discussion by means of discursive language. Fowden has plausibly argued that the recurrent expression “General Discourses” [genikoi logoi; but see also the expression exōdiakoi logoi²²] refers to texts of this kind, which were understood as pertaining to knowledge that was important

²¹ ‘The hermetist’s philosophical culture is mediocre and his thought is without originality and without vigor’ (A.-J. Festugière [2006, II] 33).

²² As noted by G. Fowden (1986), 99, the meaning of this expression remains obscure. Exōdiakoi logoi [the word “exodiakos” does not exist in Greek] might be a corruption of the term diexodikoi logoi mentioned by Cyril of Alexandria, and could be interpreted as “further”. Cf. van den Broek’s Dutch translation as “nader” (R. van den Broek [2006] 244 and 348-348 nt 621; the word has no exact equivalent in English), or “more specific” discourses complementing or following on the General Discourses. Most important for my argument is that, like the “General Discourses”, they were preliminary to the actual initiation (Fowden, *op. cit.*).

and necessary, but still belonged to lower stages in the progress towards gnōsis. The *Discourse on the Ogdoad and the Ennead* strongly supports this view. Before initiating his pupil into higher knowledge, Hermes Trismegistus reminds him of the ‘progress he has made thanks to the books’,²³ and after the initiation he instructs him to make a report of it and write it down in hieroglyphs on steles of turquoise; this, presumably, is the very text that we are reading. Unless we have ourselves gone through the initiatic rebirth, however, we will not understand it: ‘He who has not first been born from God and is still at the level of the General and Further²⁴ Discourses, is not able to read the contents of this book, even if he has a clear conscience and does not do or consent to anything shameful’.²⁵ In short: an ethical life and proper philosophical training by means of book study and oral instruction are necessary as preparation, but they do not suffice, because discursive language simply “does not get as far as the truth”.²⁶

A higher level of instruction is described in the first treatise of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, known as the “Poimandres”. Because it is largely concerned with how the world came into existence, it has often been referred to as a “creation myth” (and compared with Genesis). But such a label is misleading: we are not dealing with a mythical narrative, but with the description of a vision.

Once, when thought [ennoia] came to me of the things that are and my thinking [dianoia] soared high and my bodily senses were suspended,²⁷ like someone heavy with sleep from too much eating or toil of the body, an enormous being completely unbounded in size seemed to appear to me and call my name and say to me “What do you want to hear and see; what do you want to learn and know from your understanding [kai noesas matein kai gnōnai]”?

“Who are you?” I asked.

“I am Poimandres”, he said, “mind of sovereignty; I know what you want, and I am with you everywhere”.²⁸

²³ NH V.6 14.

²⁴ See note 22.

²⁵ NH VI⁶ 62-63.

²⁶ Paraphrasing CH IX 10 (see quotation, above).

²⁷ See B.P. Copenhaver (1992) 96, who mentions “suspended” as an alternative to his first translation “restrained”.

²⁸ CH I 1-2 (Cop 1).

As demonstrated by Roelof van den Broek in a recent article, this opening scene has very close parallels with Jewish apocalyptic literature, and he specifically discusses the relevance in this regard of the texts contained in the Cologne Mani Codex.²⁹ For example, both in the *Apocalypse of Enos* and the *Apocalypse of Sem*, the protagonist is busy “reflecting”, “thinking”, or “pondering” about the world, how it has come into existence and who has created it; and while he is in this state of philosophical reflection, an angel appears to him who proceeds to reveal the answers to his questions.³⁰ That Poimandres’ vision takes place in an ecstatic or trance-like condition of some kind is evident from the description: the body is rendered passive and the senses are put on hold, thereby allowing free rein to the higher faculty of the soul. Since the visionary is clearly a philosopher of sorts, who has been pondering ‘the things that are’, one understands that this higher faculty is introduced as *dianoia* [thinking]; but in fact it turns out to be endowed with at least two “higher senses” equivalent to the bodily ones: after having asked him what he wants to ‘hear and see’, Poimandres continues not by telling him how the world was created, but by *showing* him, and the vision appears to be accompanied by sound.³¹ The *Hermetica* consistently state that apart from normal bodily sight there is a “higher” faculty of vision, referred to as the eyes of the heart³² or of the mind.³³ The true nature of the regenerated man is perceived only by this higher faculty: ‘by gazing with bodily sight you do <not> understand what <I am>; I am not seen with such eyes...’³⁴

It seems of the utmost importance to me to note that the *Poimandres* contains two successive visions-within-the-vision, and that they are squarely linked to the two parts of the question that the visionary asks of Poimandres: ‘I wish to learn about the things that are, to understand their nature and to know God’.³⁵ In response to the first part of the question—about the nature of the things that are—Poimandres himself ‘change[s]

²⁹ R. van den Broek (2008).

³⁰ CMC 52-53 and 55, as discussed in R. van den Broek (2008). The parallels are obvious also from e.g. the examples of Jewish Apocalyptic literature in E.R. Wolfson (1994) 28-33.

³¹ This point is also highlighted in R. van den Broek (2008).

³² CH IV 11.

³³ CH X 4-5.

³⁴ CH XIII 3. Cf. CH VII 2.

³⁵ CH I 3.

his appearance', and the visionary sees an unlimited expanse of 'clear and joyful' light, for which he spontaneously experiences feelings of love. He then sees how a frightening snake-like darkness appears, watery and smoking like a fire, producing a wailing roar and emitting an inarticulate cry. This call is answered by a 'holy word' [logos hagios] that comes from the light and descends on this dark 'nature' [physis]. Poimandres now gives an explanation. The light, Poimandres, and mind are all one and the same reality, and this reality is the visionary's God ['your God': ho sos theos]; and what is more, the visionary's own mind is one with it. The lightgiving Word is the son of God; it is therefore also the son of the visionary's own mind, and it is due to this faculty that he is able to see and hear. It seems to me that a distinction is implied between God the father as the ultimate divine reality, on the one hand, and his perceptible manifestation as the visionary's God, Poimandres, on the other. God the father as he exists in and of himself remains wholly transcendent, and at the end of the *Poimandres* he will be formally thanked and prayed to. Poimandres as the divine mind and light, in contrast, is the visionary's own mind and light: presumably, it is only as such that the ultimate God reveals himself.³⁶

Poimandres' short explanation leads up to a second visionary episode (or vision-within-the-vision), the significance of which I believe has tended to be overlooked in previous scholarship. The first vision had the visionary in the role of an essentially passive spectator, receiving visionary and auditory instruction about how the world came into being. The second one, however, which answers the question of how to know God, is introduced by a forceful appeal to the visionary: he must now fix his mind³⁷ on the

³⁶ To prevent any misunderstanding: I do not mean to suggest that there are two separate Gods. Rather, a distinction is suggested between the unmanifest and the manifest sides of God, not unlike what we find e.g. in medieval Jewish mysticism, as summarized by Gershom Scholem: 'The Zohar expressly distinguishes between two worlds, which both represent God. First a primary world, the most deeply hidden of all, which remains insensible and unintelligible to all but God, the world of *En-Sof*; and secondly one, joined unto the first, which makes it possible to know God... The two in reality form one, in the same way... as the coal and the flame: that is to say, the coal exists also without a flame, but its latent power manifests itself only in its light' (Scholem [1961] 208). From such a perspective, 'ho sos theos' in the *Poimandres* would be the divine "fire" knowable to the visionary as Poimandres; but this visible manifestation does not exhaust the infinity of God.

³⁷ CH I 6 : 'Alla de noei to phōs'. Whereas Nock and Festugière write 'fix ton esprit sur la lumière' (N/F 9; equivalent in van den Broek's translation in vdBQ 34: 'richt je geest op het

light and get to know it. One might say that from an armchair philosopher who is watching the show, he must become an active “gnostic”,³⁸ seeking to know his own mind as the divine mind. This confrontation with his very own essence is impressively described as Poimandres and the visionary fixing each other with their gaze for a long time:

“Fix your mind on the light, then, and get to know it”.

After he said this, he looked me in the face for such a long time that I trembled at his appearance. But when he raised his head, I saw in my mind the light consisting of powers beyond number, which had become a boundless cosmos. The fire, contained and subdued by a great power, had received a fixed position. This I perceived in my mind due to the words of Poimandres. Since I was beyond myself, he spoke to me again. “In your mind you have seen the archetypal form, the preprinciple that exists before an infinite beginning.”³⁹

Later we will see the initiate into the Hermetic mystery exclaiming ‘I see myself’. From the passage just quoted, it is clear that such an exclamation should be taken not metaphorically but quite literally. Poimandres *is* the light, and therefore if he tells the visionary to fix his mind on the light, the latter responds quite logically by looking into Poimandres’ eyes. But because the visionary’s mind is (as we have seen) one with the divine mind—“both” being nothing but light—, this means no less than that the visionary is, paradoxically, looking into his own eyes. The subject experiences the object as being itself the subject: a dazzling experience of groundlessness that quite understandably brings the visionary “beyond himself” with fear. When Poimandres finally lets go of his gaze, the light that is the visionary himself turns out to have become a boundless cosmos, the archetypal reality “before an infinite beginning”. The spatial/temporal cosmos in which he finds himself turns out to exist as a limitless and eternal reality

licht’), Copenhaver writes ‘understand the light’ (Cop 2). I consider this unfortunate: the sentence must be seen in connection with the vision that follows, in which the visionary and Poimandres do actually gaze fixedly into each other’s eyes (see text).

³⁸) In the sense, of course, of somebody who seeks to attain *gnōsis*; not in the sense of an adherent of a gnostic system.

³⁹) CH I 7-8 (Cop 2, with many modifications). In view of van den Broek’s reference to Jewish Apocalyptic literature, it is suggestive to compare this with passages such as found e.g. in 2 Enoch: ‘...but I have gazed into the eyes of the Lord, like rays of the shining sun and terrifying the eyes of a human being’ (see quotation and discussion in E.R. Wolfson [1994] 32).

inside himself: again, the true nature of existence presents itself as a dazzling paradox.

It should be obvious that discursive language and logical rationality—*logos* for short—indeed cannot “reach as far” as a truth of such a kind. In analyzing the *Poimandres*, we should not allow ourselves to be misled by the fact that quantitatively, the bulk of it consists of verbal commentary and discussion: whereas the two visions are presented in CH I 4-5 and 7 respectively, throughout CH 8-26 *Poimandres* explains the visions at length, and answers the visionary’s questions about them. Important and interesting though these discussions are for spelling out the contents and implications of the vision, they are not themselves supposed to contain the truth: they consist not of gnōsis, but of talk about gnōsis. From this perspective, I suggest that Nock & Festugière’s subdivision of the *Poimandres*, which has been adopted by many later scholars, is fundamentally misleading. They saw the text as consisting of a short Introduction (1-3); a Revelation consisting of a Cosmogony (4-11), an Anthropology (12-23) and an Eschatology (24-26); the apostolic mission of the prophet (27-29); and the final prayer (30-31).⁴⁰ Such a subdivision has the effect of reducing the *Poimandres* to a conventional philosophical treatise while marginalizing or suppressing its central emphasis on gnōsis as distinct from mere rational discussion. Instead, I suggest the following subdivision, which highlights CH I 4-7 as the centerpiece of the text:

- I. Opening of the vision (1-3)
- II. Two questions answered by two visionary episodes (4-7)
- III. Commentary on these episodes (8-26)
- IV. Apostolic mission and personal transformation of the visionary (27-30)⁴¹
- V. Final prayer (31-32).

A few words, finally, about these two short final sections. Having finished his explanations, *Poimandres* ‘joins with the powers’. The visionary comes to himself, gives thanks to God the father, and begins to proclaim the

⁴⁰ N/F 2-6.

⁴¹ There is no particular reason to call the visionary a “prophet”, as done by Nock & Festugière: he makes no predictions about the future, but calls on his listeners to wake up to the true nature of reality and of themselves. Furthermore, CH 30 is not about that mission at all, but about what the experience has done to him personally; on this aspect, see my following discussion (text).

message to mankind: we must wake up from our state of spiritual sleep and drunkenness, and take our share in the immortality that is our birthright.⁴² Some turn out to reject the message, while others take it to heart. As for the visionary himself, he has gained permanent access to another and higher state of consciousness: ‘the sleep of my body had become sobriety of soul, the closing of my eyes had become true vision, my silence had become pregnant with good’.⁴³ Thus normal waking consciousness is compared with drunkenness and sleep, and opposed to the soberness and clarity to which he gains access in another than the normal waking state. If we translate ‘ho tou sōmatos hupnos’ simply as “sleep of the body”, as done in all the modern editions, we interpret the visionary as stating that he sees the true reality simply when he falls asleep.

But how convincing is this, really? We have seen that the vision of the *Poimandres* occurred during a state when the visionary’s ‘bodily senses were suspended, like someone heavy with sleep’: thus that state is presented as similar to, but not identical with normal sleep, and indeed most commentators have interpreted it as an ecstatic state of some kind. Now if “sleep of the body” is mentioned again at the very end of the text, it suggests that the vision of truth has now become a regular phenomenon in the visionary’s life. This leads us to either one of two possible readings. We can assume that the entire vision took place in a dream, and that now, whenever he falls asleep he again sees the light: the initial dream vision has become a recurrent dream. This reading might be possible, but if so, it would describe a psychological phenomenon for which I can think of no parallels elsewhere. It seems much more plausible that in this instance too, the text is not referring to normal sleep to begin with, but to some other kind of altered state to which the visionary has learned to gain access or which happens to him spontaneously, and which functions for him as an entrance to spiritual vision. It is quite common for trance-like altered states to be loosely referred to as “sleep”,⁴⁴ and it seems to me that the details of how

⁴²) CH I 28.

⁴³) CH I 30.

⁴⁴) In much more recent periods one might think of, e.g., the phenomena of Mesmeric trance in the context of German Romanticism. The spectacular altered states of Friederike Hauffe, known as the “Seeress of Prevorst”, were routinely referred to as “sleep” (Schlaf) by Justinus Kerner in his famous book about her, but it was well understood by all concerned that this was not normal sleep (on this case, see W.J. Hanegraaff [2001] 211-247). Like-

the *Poimandres* vision is described are consistent with some altered state that falls within the wide range of *ekstasis*⁴⁵ much more than with a normal dream.

4. *Corpus Hermeticum* XIII: The Rebirth of the Pupil

That the attainment of *gnōsis* requires an “ecstatic” altered state of consciousness, somewhat comparable to sleep, is suggested by other passages in the philosophical *Hermetica* as well. In CH X, we read that ‘those able to drink somewhat more deeply of the vision often fall asleep [katakōimizontai], moving out of the body toward a sight most fair’.⁴⁶ But when the pupil desires to have that experience, Hermes tells him that he (and, surprisingly, Hermes himself) is not yet ready for it:

... 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 [gnōsis] 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 else, nor can he move his body in any way. He stays still, all bodily senses and motions forgotten.⁴⁷

As in the beginning of the *Poimandres*, therefore, the vision of truth by means of the “eyes of the mind” requires an unusual state in which all the bodily senses are “suppressed”.

The vision described in the *Poimandres* would seem to have occurred spontaneously, and while its contents are perceived by means of some kind of “internal sight”, they are still essentially visual: the visionary sees light, a

wise, in reading Albert Béguin’s classic study of the dream in German Romanticism (Béguin [1937]), it is essential to understand that when the Romantics spoke about sleep and dream, many of them understood those words as including a whole range of mesmeric states of the kind exhibited by Hauffe.

⁴⁵ For a detailed discussion of *ekstasis* and related terms (*alloiōsis*, *kinesis*, *entheos*, *enthousiasmos*, *daimonismos*, *theiasmos*, *apoplexia*, *ekplexis*), see F. Pfister (1970).

⁴⁶ CH X 5.

⁴⁷ CH X 5-6.

snake-like darkness, Poimandres himself, the cosmos, and the archetypal forms. There is no particular emphasis on ineffability or the incapacity of language to describe what is being shown. In this regard, the text might be seen as representing a level of instruction that is still somewhat lower than the one described in the dialogues that deal with initiation: CH XIII and *The Discourse on the Ogdoad and the Ennead*. In both cases, the attainment of the vision is not spontaneous but induced deliberately; and in both cases there is a very strong emphasis on ineffability and the need for silence.

At the beginning of CH XIII, it has been some time since Hermes Trismegistus came down from the mountain—where, undoubtedly, he has received a divine revelation⁴⁸—and his pupil Tat is pressing him for knowledge. Tat has studied the *General Discourses*, but they spoke in riddles about divinity, claiming that one must first be reborn. He has also followed Hermes' advice of first steeling himself against "the deceit of the cosmos", and now he feels he is ready: he finally wants to learn how to be born again. Hermes responds with some enigmatic statements about the seed of the true good being sown in the womb that consists of 'the wisdom of understanding in silence',⁴⁹ but understandably, this only adds to Tat's frustration: he complains that Hermes still gives him only riddles, instead of speaking to him as a father should speak to a son. Hermes defends himself: it is not that he is deliberately trying to be vague, but that the mystery of rebirth cannot be taught. When Tat keeps insisting, Hermes responds by telling what happened to him (presumably when he was up on the mountain):

What can I say, my child? I have nothing to tell except this: seeing within me an immaterial [aplaston]⁵⁰ 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, nor can it be seen by this

⁴⁸) On the mountain as a site of divine revelation, see e.g. N/F 200 nt 1; Cop 180-181. In light of the reference to 'Poimandres, the mind of sovereignty' in CH XIII 15, one might speculate that Hermes's experience on the mountain was in fact understood to be the very experience described in the *Poimandres*.

⁴⁹) CH XIII 2.

⁵⁰) See B.P. Copenhaver (1992), 185 for all the possible translations of "aplaston": "unfabricated" (as chosen by Copenhaver), "immaterial", "uncreated", even "true".

fabricated element through which it is possible to see [i.e., the bodily eyes].⁵¹ Therefore I no longer care about that composed form that used to be mine [i.e. my physical body].⁵² 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.⁵³

The dialogue that follows is extremely dense with significance, most of which—as far as I can tell—has been overlooked by modern commentators. Tat responds that Hermes has thrown him into a state of *mania*, or madness [Eis manian me ouk oligen kai oistresin phrenōn eneseisas], and repeats this in different words a bit further on [Memēna ontōs].⁵⁴ The risk for modern readers is to take this too lightly, as a mere expression of amazement (a bit like somebody reacting to an impressive statement by exclaiming “Wow!”). But in a context permeated with Platonism, *mania* refers to the “divine madresses” or frenzies described in Plato’s *Phaedrus* as “altered states” that give access to superior knowledge.⁵⁵

We should therefore take Tat’s statement literally, not as a mere exclamation, but as an observation about something that is happening to him: Hermes’s words have powerfully affected his state of mind. This is borne out by Hermes’s reaction: Tat says that, in this state of *mania*, he can now no longer see himself,⁵⁶ and Hermes takes this as a hopeful sign that his pupil might indeed be experiencing an ecstatic altered state similar to the one he has just been describing. His formulation confirms what I said above about sleep-like states that are no real sleep: ‘My child, could it be

⁵¹ Copenhaver has ‘elementary fabrication’ (Cop 50) but I prefer to give the literal translation given by him in his notes (B.P. Copenhaver [1992] 185). In context, it is clear that the text means to say quite simply that it cannot be seen by the physical eyes.

⁵² Copenhaver has ‘Therefore, the initial form even of my own constitution is of no concern’ (Cop 50), but admits in his notes (B.P. Copenhaver [1992] 185) that the personal references in the following sentences perhaps justify Nock & Festugière’s looser ‘je n’ai plus souci de cette première forme composée qui fut la mienne’ (N/F 201). I have here chosen to be even a bit more loose, in order to render more clearly what is undoubtedly intended: now that he has been reborn in a new immortal body, Hermes no longer cares very much for his old physical body.

⁵³ CH XIII 3.

⁵⁴ CH XIII 4, 6.

⁵⁵ For the analysis of Plato’s four “frenzies” as “altered states”, see W.J. Hanegraaff (2009).

⁵⁶ CH XIII 4: ‘Now I do not see myself’.

that you, too, would have passed out of yourself, as happens to those who are dreaming in sleep, but then in full consciousness'.⁵⁷

Tat repeats that Hermes has thrown him in a 'speechless stupor'. But although he is no longer in the state in which he was before,⁵⁸ he still sees Hermes's external body the way he saw it earlier. This seems to surprise him, presumably because he had expected that his new mode of consciousness would allow him to perceive Hermes's regenerated body. In response, Hermes reminds him that even the mortal body does not stay the same, but changes daily; and this very mutability reveals it to be no more than a deceptive illusion. True reality is entirely different: it is 'the unsullied, . . . , the unlimited, the colorless, the figureless, the indifferent, the naked-seeming, the self-apprehended, the immutable good, the incorporeal'.⁵⁹

Tat realizes that he does not see that reality yet, and therefore his present state of consciousness cannot yet be the one of rebirth. Full of disappointment, he exclaims that he had expected Hermes to make him wise, whereas in fact his understanding is still "blocked".⁶⁰ Hermes confirms this: the true reality cannot be perceived through the senses, but requires a power that is given only through rebirth. Tat must draw that power to himself, ardently wishing for it to come. At the same time, he must suspend the activity of the bodily senses, and cleanse himself of 'the irrational torments of matter'.⁶¹ Tat is quite surprised about this information: he never realized that he had 'tormentors' inside himself. . . . Well, that very ignorance, Hermes explains, is the first tormentor; the others are grief, incontinence, lust, injustice, greed, deceit, envy, treachery, anger, recklessness, and malice. "Under" these twelve are many more, and 'they use the prison of the body to torture the inward person with the sufferings of sense'.⁶² But they

⁵⁷) CH XIII 4. My translation combines elements from Copenhaver (Cop 50), Festugière (N/F 202) and Quispel (vdBQ 158: 'maar jij dan bij volle bewustzijn').

⁵⁸) The formulation 'tōn prin apoleiphteis phrenōn' leaves much space for interpretation: Copenhaver has 'bereft of what was in my heart before' (Cop 50), Festugière has 'ayant perdu mes esprits' (N/F 202), and Quispel has 'mijn vroegere bewustzijnstoestand heb ik achtergelaten' (vdBQ 158).

⁵⁹) CH XIII 6. See R. van den Broek (2008) for the conventionality of such descriptions as referring to divine qualities.

⁶⁰) CH XIII 6.

⁶¹) CH XIII 7.

⁶²) CH XIII 7.

will gradually withdraw from the one for whom God has mercy, and that is in fact what happens during the process of rebirth.

Hermes now instructs Tat to keep silent and say nothing, because this is necessary in order not to obstruct the healing power⁶³ that will come from God. He then begins to systematically purify Tat from his “tormentors”, by summoning ten divine powers in succession, which drive out the twelve.⁶⁴ We are certainly justified in thinking of the “tormentors” as demonic entities that had been possessing Tat’s body without him being aware of it: in fact, at the end of the healing process, Hermes observes that ‘vanquished, they have flown away in a flapping of wings’.⁶⁵

The purification process does not fail to have its effect on Tat. In another treatise of the *Corpus Hermeticum* (CH XI), Hermes had been told that one cannot understand God otherwise than by participating in His own mode of perception:

Make yourself grow to immeasurable immensity, outleap all body, outstrip all time, become eternity and you will understand God. Having conceived that nothing is impossible to you, consider yourself immortal and able to understand everything, all art, all learning, the temper of every living thing. Go higher than every height and lower than every depth. Collect in yourself all the sensations of what has been made, of fire and water, dry and wet; be everywhere at once, on land, in the sea, in heaven; be not yet born, be in the womb, be young, old, dead, beyond death. And when you have understood all these at once—times, places, things, qualities, quantities—then you can understand God.⁶⁶

⁶³ The term “healing” does not occur in the text, but this is in fact what Hermes is doing.

⁶⁴ In CH XIII 12, Hermes gives some explanation about the relation between the twelve “tormentors”, linked to the twelve signs of the zodiac, and the decad, which “engenders soul”. The first seven powers of the decad (knowledge, joy, continence, perseverance, justice, liberality, truth) are the direct opposites of the first seven tormentors; the last five tormentors do not have opposites of their own, but are collectively opposed by the triad of good, life and light.

⁶⁵ CH XIII 9. While I am thoroughly aware of the problematics of the concept of “shamanism”, and how frequently it has been misused for making grand statements e.g. about Greek religion (for an excellent critical analysis, see J.N. Bremmer [2002]), we should not throw out the baby with the bathwater: the description given here is too closely reminiscent of traditional “shamanic” healing processes, including the exorcism of demonic entities, for that parallel to be dismissed out of hand.

⁶⁶ CH XI 20.

And precisely this mode of supranormal perception—not ‘with the sight of [the] eyes’ but ‘with the mental energy that comes through the powers’—has now also become available to Tat: ‘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’.⁶⁷ And more specifically, Tat has also attained the kind of vision described in the second vision-within-the-vision of the *Poimandres*: ‘I see the universe and I see myself in mind’. Hermes confirms that this kind of vision, which ‘no longer pictur[es] things in three bodily dimensions’,⁶⁸ is what is meant by rebirth. Again, the term “rebirth” must be taken quite literally, as the generation of a new, immortal body constituted of the newly-acquired “powers”, which will never succumb to dissolution.⁶⁹

Since he has reached the goal—he has been ‘born a god and a child of the One’,⁷⁰ in a new immortal body –, Tat knows what he might expect next. His new body is constituted not of matter but of spiritual “powers”, and should therefore be able to rise above the seven planetary spheres of which the cosmos is constituted, and thus attain the eighth sphere. Poimandres had described this to Hermes as the final stage of the initiatic ascent:

And then, stripped of the effects of the cosmic framework, he enters the region of the Ogdoad with nothing left to him but his very own power; and together with the Beings he hymns the Father. Those present there rejoice about his arrival. And having become like his companions, he also hears certain Powers that exist above the region of the Ogdoad, hymning God with sweet voice. And then, in well-ordered succession, they rise up to the Father, surrender themselves to the Powers and, having become Powers themselves, enter into God. Such is the happy end for those who have received *gnōsis*: to become God.⁷¹

Tat therefore tells Hermes that he wants to hear the hymns of the Ogdoad. Hermes approves of his pupil’s haste to leave his mortal body behind, but reminds him that Poimandres has transmitted to him only ‘what has been

⁶⁷) CH XIII 11.

⁶⁸) CH XIII 13.

⁶⁹) This is emphasized once more in CH XIII 14.

⁷⁰) CH XIII 14.

⁷¹) CH I 26.

written down'.⁷² the secrets of the final stage cannot be taught. In other words, Tat should not expect Hermes to tell him how to find his way to the Ogdoad: he will have to rely on his own power to do it. A bit teasingly perhaps, Hermes adds that as far as he himself is concerned, Poimandres had 'left it to me to make something beautiful of it', and that he has succeeded: indeed, the Powers are now singing within him and within all things.⁷³ Predictably, Tat reacts by saying that he wants to hear and understand them too.

But what are these powers, and *where* are they? As noted by van den Broek,⁷⁴ the above quotation from CH I 26 describes a post-mortem experience, whereas CH XIII (like the *Discourse on the Ogdoad and the Ennead*) proceeds to describe the hymn of the Powers as an ecstatic experience during this life. Since Tat has now twice repeated that he wants to hear the hymn of the Ogdoad, and since Hermes not only responds positively but the treatise actually follows with a "secret hymn",⁷⁵ it would be quite logical to assume that this hymn is heard during an ecstatic ascent to the Ogdoad and the Ennead. However, something else seems to be intended. I would argue that in the final part of CH XIII Tat does not actually gain access to the Ogdoad yet (let alone to the Ennead); rather, Hermes is giving him a foretaste of that experience by allowing him to listen to the nine (not ten, as will be seen) powers that have driven out the twelve "tormentors", and that are now singing, not "up there above the seven spheres", but within himself and in 'all things'. Admittedly the difference is a very ambiguous one, and perhaps deliberately so, because the text keeps suggesting that the external cosmos paradoxically (or, if one wishes, "holographically"⁷⁶) exists inside the visionary's own mind, and that the "powers" are of the same nature as the visionary himself; but nevertheless, when "powers" are mentioned in the concluding part of CH XIII, this consistently refers to those that have driven out the "tormentors".

⁷² CH XIII 15 (cf. note 18, above).

⁷³ CH XIII 15.

⁷⁴ R. van den Broek (2006) 66.

⁷⁵ CH XIII 17-20.

⁷⁶ The concept of holography has been enthusiastically adopted by authors in the "holistic science" sector of the New Age movement (inspired notably by the physicist David Bohm and the neurologist Karl Pribram), often leading to wildly imaginative interpretations (see W.J. Hanegraaff [1996/1998] 139-151). But the association with "New Age" should not keep us from perceiving the applicability of this concept in a context such as the present one.

In response to Tat's request, Hermes proceeds to sing a "hymn of praise" in which he addresses those powers within himself, asking them to sing a hymn to the One and the universe. He introduces this as follows:

Be still, my child; now hear a well-tuned hymn of praise, the hymn of rebirth, which I had not thought to reveal so easily, if you had not reached the very end.⁷⁷ It cannot be taught, but is a secret kept in silence. Therefore, my child, stand in the open air, face the south wind when the setting sun descends, and bow down in adoration; when the sun returns, bow likewise toward the east. Be still, child.⁷⁸

How should we imagine this scenario? Hermes is certainly not just bursting out in song on the spot; rather, he gives ritual instructions, first emphasizing the need for silence, and then telling his pupil to bow to the south at sunset, and to the east at sunrise.⁷⁹ Furthermore, Hermes is not singing with the normal bodily voice, nor is he heard by Tat's bodily ears: we should remember that, ever since Tat was purified of the "tormentors", the two interlocutors have been communicating on the level of their new, transfigured, immortal and invisible bodies. Hence there is no inconsistency in the fact that a hymn is sung and heard, and yet it all happens in silence; and it would follow that the text of the hymn as given in CH XIII 17-20 should not be understood as a literal transcription. Finally, note that this hymn "sung" in the mind by Hermes should not be confused with the hymn of the powers within him: of the latter, no description is given at all.

Hermes begins by addressing the universe—the earth, the trees, the heavens, the winds, the planets—to pay attention, because he is about to sing a hymn to their creator, who is 'the mind's eye' [ho tou nou ophthalmos]. Then he addresses the powers within him, asking them to sing to the One and the universe (note that the decad of CH XIII 8-9 seems to have changed into an Ennead, for "perseverance" is not mentioned; but this could be a simple copyist's error). And apparently they respond to his call: 'this is what the powers within me shout; they hymn the universe'. Again,

⁷⁷) Among various possible formulations, I here follow in the tracks of SvOWM 69: it is only because Tat—perhaps even somewhat to Hermes's own surprise—has progressed so quickly in the right direction that Hermes feels he can now reveal the hymn.

⁷⁸) CH XIII 16.

⁷⁹) It is puzzling that Tat must bow to the south, not the west, when the sun goes down.

about the song of the powers itself no further information is given, but it is implied that Hermes and Tat are both hearing it.

When the hymn is finished, Tat says that he has copied it or noted it down “in his cosmos”, but Hermes corrects him: he should say “in the world of his mind” or “intelligible cosmos” [en tōi noetōi]. Presumably this is to emphasize the difference between what happens in the material cosmos, and what happens on the transfigured level where the hymn has been sung. Tat’s mind is now completely illuminated, and he likewise wishes to send praise to God. Hermes warns him not to be too rash or heedless, but is reassured by Tat that he will only be saying what he sees in his own mind. He then briefly asks God to accept his offerings, in gratefulness for the gift of rebirth. CH XIII ends with Hermes reminding Tat that he must keep silent about the miracle of rebirth and tell no one about it: a perfect example of the “paradox of secrecy”, which is broken in the very act of being emphasized.

5. The Ascent to the Ogdoad and the Ennead

I have argued that CH XIII does not include an ascent to the Ogdoad and the Ennead, in spite of the reference to such an ascent in CH XIII 15 and Tat’s expression of hope that he may be granted that experience. When Tat was purified of his “tormentors” and reborn in an immortal body, he attained the “cosmic” vision described in CH XI 20 (see quotation, above), but clearly this vision was still limited to the region of the seven planetary spheres, for otherwise he would not have expressed a wish to hear the hymns of the powers in the eighth sphere. Rather than hearing those hymns, however, what he got to hear was the song of the nine or ten powers within Hermes and himself; and in any case, he might hear them sing, but nothing in CH XIII indicates that he *saw* anything. This changes with the second Hermetic initiation known to us, first discovered at Nag Hammadi in 1945 and of revolutionary importance for our understanding of Hermetic religiosity:⁸⁰ the

⁸⁰ The untitled treatise known as *The Ogdoad and the Ennead* was first translated in J. M. Robinson (1988) 321-327. I have mainly used the French translation (with Coptic original) in J.-P. Mahé (1978) 64-87 and the very recent Dutch translation by R. van den Broek (2006), 239-245, with extensive commentaries that also take into account other editions by Dirkse, Brashler and Parrot (in Parrot [1979]), J. Holzhausen and H.-M. Schenke (1997), A. Camplani (2000) and I. Ramelli (2005). Quotations refer to the pages of the

short but fascinating treatise known as the *Discourse on the Ogdoad and the Ennead*.

The (unnamed) pupil in this treatise begins by reminding Hermes that, the day before, he had promised to lead his intellect first to the eighth, and then to the ninth sphere. Hermes reacts to this with a word of caution: the promise was made only insofar as such a thing lies within the range of human possibility, and only on the assumption that the pupil has properly integrated the teachings of the preceding stages. He goes on to explain the basic process of spiritual “generation” or (re)birth. From the (divine) Power, Hermes had received Spirit, and this means that he has quite literally been made pregnant by the Power (that is, the “spirit” functions here as a kind of spiritual “seed”). The energy of that spirit he then transmitted to his pupil, so that the higher insight or understanding is now present in the latter.⁸¹ Thus the pupil has been born from Hermes as one of his spiritual sons; for Hermes has brought forth many children, who are therefore the pupil’s brothers. It is important to realize that whereas CH XIII describes the rebirth of the pupil, the *Discourse on the Ogdoad and the Ennead* begins at a point where the pupil has already been reborn: this is a quite straightforward argument in favour of a sequential order describing successive levels of initiation.

First, Hermes, together with the pupil and his other sons,⁸² will pray to God to ‘give him the spirit to speak’.⁸³ Such a request for inspiration is not

Nag Hammadi manuscript. As is well known, Mahé’s two-volume study focusing on the Nag Hammadi Hermetica and the Armenian Hermetic definitions (Mahé [1978] and [1982]) has revolutionized research in the field, leading the Greek-centered classicist paradigm linked to the name of Festugière to be replaced by a new one that fully acknowledges the Egyptian and religious dimension of the Hermetic literature.

⁸¹) Behind this concept we may suspect Aristotle’s theory of sexual generation in *The Generation of Animals*, according to which semen is a pneumatic substance full of life-giving spirit (*De gen.an.* 735b32-736a1; and see discussion in W.R. Newman [2004] 169f).

⁸²) Cf. also NH VI⁶ 54: ‘when you understand the truth of what you are saying, you will find your brothers, my sons, united with you in prayer’. One might interpret such sentences as hinting at an actual Hermetic confraternity, and assume that the *Discourse on the Ogdoad and the Ennead* reflects a collective ritual in which the leader initiates a new “brother”, surrounded by his “brethren”, into the ogdoadic/enneadic mystery. I consider it more likely, however, that the unity with his “brothers” is believed to take place on the level of mind, and therefore does not require those brothers to be physically present.

⁸³) NH VI⁶ 53.

unusual, as noted by Van den Broek,⁸⁴ but in view of how the initiation is about to develop, I suggest that the word “inspiration” must be taken quite literally: during the initiation process a higher divine Power will be speaking through Hermes’s mouth, from where he can transmit the life-giving word to his pupil. In contemporary parlance, Hermes will be “channeling” the divine. Some initial support for such a reading can already be found in the passage immediately before the prayer. The pupil says: ‘the efficacious power⁸⁵ of what [you have spoken⁸⁶], I will receive from you, Father. . . .’⁸⁷ And even more suggestive, Hermes says that they will ask for the gift of the eighth sphere to come to them, so that each of them will receive what he needs: ‘you, [the gift] of knowledge; me, on the other hand, to be able to speak from the fountain that wells up in me’.⁸⁸ Indeed, we will see that this exactly describes the respective roles played by Hermes and the pupil during the initiation.

Then follows the prayer (NH VI⁶ 55-57). Hermes’s lengthy opening invocation need not be discussed here in great detail, but begins by calling attention to God’s supreme divine attributes, including the fact that he is named only in silence.⁸⁹ This first part of the prayer ends with a string of mysterious words and vowels that represent God’s “secret name”: ‘Zōxathazō, a oō ee oōō ēēē oōōō <iii> oōōōō ooooo oōōōōō uuuuuu oōōōōōō oōōōōōō o o <oōōōōōō> Zōzazōth’.⁹⁰ Hermes then asks God for the gift of wisdom, since he and his sons have been living in piety, have

⁸⁴ R. van den Broek (2006) 330 n 534.

⁸⁵ *Inter alia*, I am thinking here of a parallel in CH XVI 2 about the operative power of the Egyptian language, as opposed to the empty speech of Greek philosophy: ‘For the Greeks, O King, have new words that are fit only for practical demonstrations. And that is the philosophy of the Greeks: a mere noise of words. But we are not using words, but sounds of great power’ (on this rather commonplace opposition, see also the footnote in A.D. Nock and A.-J. Festugière [1991/1992] 232-233 n 7 and B.P. Copenhaver [1992] 202-203).

⁸⁶ See, however, the arguments of R. van den Broek (2006) 332 n 546, in support of the alternative reading “I will speak”.

⁸⁷ NH VI⁶ 55.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ See also the phrase ‘whose will generates the life of images everywhere’, with commentaries by J.-P. Mahé (1978) 102-103, and R. van den Broek (2006) 335 n 554. I find it most likely that the reference is to the animation of statues, notoriously praised by Hermes in *Ascl* 23-24 and 37-38.

⁹⁰ NH VI⁶ 56.

been following his law, and have done everything to be granted the supreme vision. Finally, before offering God sacrifices in gratitude for his grace, Hermes puts a strong emphasis on God's generative power.

And then suddenly everything happens very quickly. The prayer is followed by a ritual kiss or embrace [aspasmos],⁹¹ which seems to have an immediate effect, as noted by Hermes: 'Rejoice of this! Already from them⁹² the Power that is light is coming towards us'.⁹³ The initiation is spectacularly successful, for from one moment to the next, the pupil has passed into an ecstatic visionary state, and starts to describe his experience.

A problem in interpreting what follows is that we cannot know for certain which passages must be attributed to Hermes, and which ones to the pupil. Van den Broek's numbering and commentaries imply (although he does not spell this out explicitly) that we are dealing with a continuous dialogue, rather than with a few "blocks" of text for Hermes and the pupil respectively (as argued by Camplani⁹⁴), and I find this reading the most convincing by far. Of particular importance, in my opinion, is that the result is a conversation in which *only* the pupil is having a visionary experience, whereas Hermes's role is strictly that of a guide: having initiated the pupil's experience by means of the kiss or embrace, he now comments on the pupil's exclamations and guides him through his experience. Presumably he can understand the pupil's utterances because at his own initiation he has had the same experience, but nothing suggests that he is having that experience right now. If we follow this interpretation, the dialogue looks as follows:

⁹¹ In view of the earlier emphasis on spiritual "procreation" as basic to the initiatic process, a parallel with the *Gospel of Philip* (mentioned by R. van den Broek [2006] 339 n 576) is highly suggestive: 'For it is by a kiss that the perfect conceive and give birth. For this reason we also kiss one another. We receive conception from the grace which is in one another' (NH II.3 59).

⁹² According to van den Broek (2006) 339 n 577, it is not very clear what "them" refers to, and Mahé adds '(= les êtres supérieurs-?)' (Mahé 75). I confess I find nothing puzzling about it: Hermes has been invoking the powers of the Ogdoad and the Ennead, and now they arrive (or at least, their power does). Similar to what we saw in the *Poimandres*, God himself remains a transcendent mystery.

⁹³ NH VI⁶ 57.

⁹⁴ According to A. Camplani (2000) 86-90, NH VI⁶ 57:31-58.22 are about Hermes' own illumination and divinization, and NH VI⁶ 59:15-60:1 about the illumination and vision of the disciple.

[pupil:] I see, yes, I see unspeakable depths.

[Hermes:] How shall I tell you, my son, [...] of [...] place? How [shall I speak about?] the All? I am the Mind.⁹⁵

[pupil:] I also see a Mind that moves the soul.⁹⁶ By a holy ecstasy I see him that moves me. You give me power. I see myself!⁹⁷ I want to speak! Fear holds me back! I have found the beginning of the Power above all Powers, and who does not himself have a beginning. I see a fountain bubbling with life.⁹⁸

The depths that are suddenly perceived by the pupil are ‘unspeakable’, and indeed Hermes’s commentary states that he cannot say anything about them. The divine Mind perceived by the pupil, which is the very fountain of life, turns out to be both Hermes’s and the pupil’s *own* mind. In other words: the experience is *exactly* equivalent to the second vision-within-the-vision described in the *Poimandres*. And as happened in that case, when the pupil realizes that the divine mind is his very own mind, so that he is literally looking at himself, his initial reaction is one of fear.

The text continues:

[Hermes:] I have told you, my son, that I am the Mind.

[pupil:] I have seen. It is impossible to express this in words.

[Hermes:] [That’s right], my son, for the entire eighth sphere and the souls that are in it and the angels are singing their hymns in silence. But I, Mind, understand them.

[pupil:] How should one sing those hymns? [I see that] speaking with you is not possible anymore. I keep silent, father, I want to hymn you in silence.

[Hermes:] Yes, do so, for I am the Mind.

⁹⁵ Mahé translates as “Intellect”; Van den Broek as “Geest”. In the present context “mind” seems the most logical translation to me, since the text uses the coptic equivalent of *nous*, and because (as we have seen above) the discovery of the visionary’s own *nous* as identical with the divine *nous* (which is light) is a constant feature elsewhere.

⁹⁶ The text could also be translated as ‘I see another Mind that moves the soul’ (as in Mahé), but like van den Broek I prefer this translation because it results in a more logical dialogue.

⁹⁷ This is repeated later, NH VI⁶ 60-61.

⁹⁸ NH VI⁶ 57-58.

So now that the pupil has had the decisive vision of Mind as his own mind, he is about to express himself in the manner appropriate to souls that have attained the eighth sphere: by means of silent hymns that are heard and understood only by an interior faculty of perception. We have seen earlier that the final stage of the ascent must be mastered by the pupil alone, and that verbal instruction is useless. This is exactly what happens here: the pupil now takes the initiative and does the rest on his own power. Hermes's words are no longer of any use.

Before looking at what happens next, it is important to note the radicality of the last sentences just quoted. It is well understood that the souls and angels in the eighth sphere are hymning God, the divine Father of All; but actually the pupil tells his "father" Hermes that he wants to sing a hymn to *him*! Hermes's reaction indicates that this is not taken as blasphemy, but as reflecting a correct understanding of the basic message: Hermes *is* the divine Mind, and therefore can be addressed as such.

The text continues:

[pupil:] Hermes, I understand the Mind that cannot be interpreted because it is enclosed within itself. I rejoice, Father, because I see you smile. The All rejoices! Therefore no creature will be deprived of your life, for you are the citizens' Lord everywhere. Your providence preserves [us]. I invoke you, Father, Aeon of Aeons, divine spirit of life, who showers everyone with spiritual rain.

What do you say of that, father Hermes?

[Hermes:] I say nothing about it, my son, for we must be silent to God about what is hidden.

The repetition of the same word for "rejoicing" can be interpreted here as reflecting the fact that the pupil himself is the Mind as well, and therefore when he rejoices at the smile of Hermes/Mind, it is the All that rejoices at his own smile of rejoice about his own smile of rejoice . . . Again, the radical collapse of any distinction between subject and object leads to a paradoxical vision of the groundlessness of the ground of being.

The pupil now proceeds to the actual singing of his silent hymn; and appropriately, the text says absolutely nothing about its contents. But while he is in the middle of it, the pupil seems to have a moment of fear, when

his confidence falters: he breaks the silence, and Hermes has to tell him to bring his focus back to the hymn:⁹⁹

[pupil:] O Trismegistus, let not my soul be deprived of the <divine> contemplation, for as the universal master you have power over everything.

[Hermes:] Return to the hymn, my son, and do it in silence. Ask what you want in silence.

The pupil follows his advice, and with success:

When he had finished the hymn, he exclaimed:

[pupil:] Father Trismegistus, what shall I say? We have received this light, and I see this same vision in you, and I see the Ogdoad and the souls in it and the angels singing hymns to the Ennead and her Powers. And I see Him who has power over all of them and who creates by the spirit.

[Hermes:] It is good that from now on we keep silence. Do not speak too hastily about the vision. From now on we must sing hymns to the Father until the day we will leave this body.

It is important to note that the pupil has seen the vision “in Hermes”, that is to say, in a manner exactly equivalent to how Hermes had seen his first vision-within-the-vision “in Poimandres”, whose body had changed into light. However, we are here dealing with a higher level than the one described in the *Poimandres*: what is seen is not the creation of the world, but the eternal sphere of the Ogdoad and the Ennead above the domain of change and generation.

The initiation has been completed. The pupil has now found peace, and wants to thank God for having granted him the supreme vision he had been asking for. A distinction is implied between the silent hymn of contemplation that was sung during the ecstatic state of the Ogdoad and Ennead, and verbal hymns that may be addressed to God afterwards, as

⁹⁹) That this “moment of doubt” occurs in the midst of the hymn follows from the fact that Hermes tells him to “turn back” to it.

signs of gratitude. Such a hymn is now sung by the pupil,¹⁰⁰ and as a counterpart of the opening invocation that preceded the initiation, it again ends with a sequence of vowels: ‘a o ee o<o> eēē oōō iii<i> oōōō ooooo oōōōō uuuuuu oōōōōō oōōōōōō oōōōōōō {ōō}’.¹⁰¹

The rest of the text is interesting, but less relevant for us here. Hermes is instructed to write everything down in hieroglyphs on steles of turquoise, place them in his (Hermes’s) sanctuary at the right astrological moment, and protect the book with an apotropaic formula. Presumably, then, it is the text of this very book that we have been analyzing.

6. Concluding Remarks: The Context of Experience

We may readily agree with André-Jean Festugière and later scholars about the philosophical inconsistencies in the *Hermetica*, but I can find no such inconsistencies in how the core message of the way towards *gnōsis* is explained and described. On the contrary, there is a compelling internal logic to both theory and practice, and the three basic texts we have been analyzing—C.H. I, XIII, and NH VI⁶—mutually complement and confirm one another even in regard to small details. In order to make this tight consistency visible, we need to place the three treatises in a sequence: the initial illumination leading to knowledge of the world and of God is described in the first one; this is followed by the process of rebirth described in the second; and the sequence culminates in a description of how the already reborn pupil is initiated into the eighth and the ninth. We are certainly not dealing here with a vague and irrational obscurantism that could be shrugged off as undeserving of close analysis; on the contrary, what we find is a very precise and carefully formulated doctrine of how one may move from the domain of rational discourse to the attainment of several “trans-rational” stages of direct experiential knowledge, and thereby from the limited and temporal domain of material reality to the unlimited and eternal one of Mind.

There can be no doubt that this process was believed to require a profound alteration of the initiate’s habitual state of consciousness: *gnōsis* could only be attained in an unusual “ecstatic” state. What we do not

¹⁰⁰) NH VI⁶ 60-61.

¹⁰¹) NH VI⁶ 61.

know is how, exactly, such a state was induced. In the *Poimandres* it just seems to happen to Hermes, presumably by the grace of God, although the breakthrough is prepared by intensive intellectual reflection on the nature of reality. In CH XIII the process is more complex. Hermes's description of what has happened to him seems to trigger a similar process in Tat, but several ritual acts are required in order for his faculty of understanding to get really "unblocked". Tat must first be purified of his "tormentors", who are exorcized by the higher powers that Hermes invokes; and next, to hear the hymn of the "Powers" he must bow down in adoration at the rising and the setting of the sun while Hermes prays to God and again invokes the powers. In the *Discourse on the Ogdoad and the Ennead*, finally, the initiation is once more introduced by prayerful invocations, but now the decisive "alteration of consciousness" seems to be triggered by a ritual kiss or embrace.

Such descriptions cannot fail to lead us back, finally, to the vexed question of whether there actually existed organized communities of Hermetic devotees where such initiations were practiced (as has been forcefully argued, for example, by Jean-Pierre Mahé), or whether the texts should be understood as no more than *Lese-Mysterien* (as argued by Festugière, who adopted the term—but not its intended meaning—from Richard Reitzenstein¹⁰²). Scholars have taken various positions with respect to that question, but the truth is that we do not know. I would suggest that the problem is not so much this fact in itself, to which we may simply have to resign ourselves, but the implicit assumptions that tend to accompany the two alternatives, and which create the impression that they are incompatible. If one reads the Hermetica as reflecting practices that actually took place, this still does not allow us to read them naively as a kind of first-hand "eye-witness reports": for this they are far too literary and composed, reflecting an evident intention of didactic use.¹⁰³ On the other hand, Festugière's concept of *Lese-Mysterien* is linked to another concept of his, that of "literary fictions", chosen for the very title of the chapter in which he discusses ecstatic revelations:¹⁰⁴ for us moderns, he writes, it is evident that the

¹⁰² On the difference between Reitzenstein's and Festugière's understanding of the term, see R. van den Broek (2006) 69.

¹⁰³ See in this regard the discussion in R. van den Broek (2006) 69-71.

¹⁰⁴ Festugière (2006, I), ch. IX (full title: Les fictions littéraires du logos de révélation).

descriptions of such revelations ‘comportent aucun fond de vérité’¹⁰⁵, and if people in the Hellenistic period believed in them, the only possible explanation is their limitless credulity. About the latter opinion it is of course pointless to fight;¹⁰⁶ but the idea that “people cannot possibly have had such experiences”, and must therefore have invented them, reflects a peculiar blindness on Festugière’s part—quite on the contrary, people have such experiences so frequently that they have been reported through all periods of history and all over the world. Therefore, if the *Hermetica* were intended as *Lese-Mysterien* in some sense, and even if the accounts are fictional inventions, this implies neither that the experiences have ‘aucun fond de vérité’, nor that there were no communities that used them.

It seems most plausible to me that the Hermetic treatises originated in loosely organized circles or networks of people in the educated milieu of Hellenistic Egypt¹⁰⁷ who were convinced that experiences like these were possible, and which almost certainly included at least a few people who had had them themselves, or were having them on a regular basis. Their altered states may well have been spontaneous, like the one described in the *Poimandres*, but could also be facilitated or induced by “triggers” of various kinds; and undoubtedly the contents of their experiences were strongly conditioned by their prior beliefs. The various contents as well as the internal logic of their belief system allowed them to define quite precisely what one could expect to happen during the higher and ultimate stages of the progress towards *gnōsis*, to which they must all have aspired. I suspect that ritual purifications and invocations of higher powers as described in CH XIII may well have been practiced, but such practices do not require an organized group or a congregation: for example, it is easy to imagine one advanced believer in the Hermetic religion trying to “heal”

¹⁰⁵ Festugière (2006, I) 309.

¹⁰⁶ Scholarship simply has no means of access to whatever “meta-empirical” reality believers assume to exist: e.g. we can study Hermetic beliefs about God, but we cannot study either God himself, or even the question of whether or not he exists. On this basic point (which reflects Festugière’s statement that the scholar ‘knows only what he is being told’) see W.J. Hanegraaff (1995) 99-129.

¹⁰⁷ On how we may most plausibly imagine these milieus, see G. Fowden (1986) Part III. See also R. Chlup (2007) 155-156, for an analogous approach that quite rightly mentions Colin Campbell’s concept of the “cultic milieu” in this context (C. Campbell [1972]; and cf. discussion in W.J. Hanegraaff [1996/1998] 14ff).

another believer of his “tormentors”, quite similar to the way such healings are still being practiced in the circuits of alternative spirituality today.

Among the members of such circles or networks, various kinds of texts must have circulated: not only those that answered all kinds of questions of a doctrinal, theological or philosophical nature (the “General Discourses” and perhaps “Further Discourses”), but also *Lese-Mysterien* that provided an idealized description of the successful attainment of gnōsis. Even as “fictions” read by individuals, such texts would have functioned as ideal models and sources of inspiration for their readers, who must have hoped that what had happened to Hermes and Tat might happen to them one day—if only they persisted in their spiritual practice of diligent study and steeling themselves against “the deceit of the cosmos”. Perhaps they might even be granted the gift of the *Ogdoad and the Ennead* one day, when a brother who had already attained the highest level would open that domain to them by means of a ritual kiss or embrace.

In sum, we need no formal organizations, or quasi-masonic Hermetic “lodges”,¹⁰⁸ to take the Hermetica seriously as the reflection of actual religious practice; and Festugière’s concepts of *Lese-Mysterien* and even “literary fictions” need not imply a rejection or marginalization of ecstatic or altered states, either as basic conditions for how the attainment of gnōsis was believed to take place, or as a theoretical framework for making sense of late-antique Hermetism. And finally: although it is true that “le secret des coeurs” remains necessarily beyond the reach of scholarly research, and although Wittgenstein is right that “one must be silent about that of which one cannot speak”, none of this implies that scholars of the Hermetica can afford to ignore or marginalize the role and importance of ecstatic and other altered states of consciousness, as has mostly been the case so far.

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¹⁰⁸ One finds this suggestion frequently in Quispel, for example G. Quispel (1998), and sometimes in Van den Broek, for example R. van den Broek (2000) 81: ‘small Hermetic communities, groups, conventicles or Lodges’. Speaking of “circles of adepts” engaged in rituals of initiation, as done by J.-P. Mahé (2003) 6 (‘des cercles d’adeptes’) of course carries the same quasi-masonic suggestion.

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