

Introduction to 'Marsilio Ficino'
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Angela Voss

The importance of the work of Marsilio Ficino of Florence (1433-1499) in the awakening, transmission and dissemination of esoteric knowledge in the West cannot be overestimated. By 'esoteric', we mean a tradition of religious philosophy which embodies an *initiatic* mode of teaching – a promise of access to hidden meanings deep within the fabric of the world which will eventually lead the searcher to a condition of *gnosis* or unity with the source of all being. In the Renaissance, this wisdom was assumed to originate with the Persian Zoroaster or the Egyptian Hermes Trismegistus, and to be passed down via Pythagoras and Orpheus to the 'divine Plato' and his interpreters. We now know that it was chiefly fostered in the fertile climate of Graeco-Egyptian Alexandria in the early centuries BC, where the merging of Greek, Egyptian, Assyrian and Jewish cultures gave rise to a syncretic spirituality which is usually distinguished from - and often opposed to - 'exoteric' religion and science, being dependent on a quite different epistemology. We might call it an *imaginal*, visionary knowledge, arising from the revelation and insight of individual experience, not imposed from without via institutionalised dogma or objective criteria. The traditions which have embodied esoteric learning in the West have chiefly been Platonism, Hermeticism and esoteric Judaism, with their practical aspects of magic, alchemy, astrology and cabbala.

Ficino played a major role in the rebirth of classical learning we know as the Renaissance, through his commitment to the renewal of Platonic and Hermetic philosophies and his determination to integrate their metaphysics into Christianity, a marriage— however problematic—which revitalised religious and cultural life and placed a new emphasis on the capacity of the human soul to realise its innate divinity. The words of Hermes Trismegistus, "a great wonder, O Asclepius, is man!", reiterated by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola in his *Oration*¹ became the battle-cry of the era, in celebration of a new-found human dignity and intellectual prowess. Ficino and Pico's revival of 'pagan' ritual in the service of spiritual enlightenment was however doomed to provoke reactionary forces. In the 1490s the fanatical Dominican monk Girolamo Savonarola railed against both philosophers and astrologers, instigating a puritan regime in Florence. The Inquisition was gaining strength, and the Catholic Church was about to face its most serious challenges in the upheavals of the Reformation and the new scientific discoveries of Copernicus. But for a brief, golden period in 15th century Florence, the ancient gods descended once more and inspired human creativity to unprecedented heights, summoned by the invitation of Marsilio Ficino.

His works include the first Latin version of the Graeco-Egyptian *Corpus Hermeticum*, translations of and commentaries on the entire works of Plato, Plotinus and other major Neo-Platonists and commentaries on early Greek Christian texts such as St. Paul's *Epistle to the Romans* and Dionysus the Areopagite's *Mystical Theology*. The most influential of his own writings were the extensive *Platonic Theology or the Immortality of Souls* and the more popular medical-astrological treatise *Three Books on Life*, as well as a vast output of letters to friends, statesmen, churchmen, philosophers and princes which were published before his death.

At the height of his career Ficino was at the centre of a circle of intellectuals in Florence known as the Platonic Academy, which included his patron Lorenzo de' Medici and many of the leading humanist thinkers of the day. Their aim was not only to promote the perennial wisdom (*prisca theologia*) of the 'ancient theologians', but also to have a direct influence on the arts as an accessible way of bringing it to contemporary humanity. It has been suggested

that Ficino himself provided the programme for Botticelli's *Primavera*, *Birth of Venus* and *Minerva and the Centaur*, and he certainly inspired a new generation of musicians who brought a Platonic imagination to bear on both theory and performance. Such geniuses as Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, John Dowland and Claudio Monteverdi all swam in the tide of the spiritual renewal instigated by Ficino.

It would be wrong however to think of him as a speculative philosopher or even an arcane *magus*—in true Pythagorean and Socratic spirit he combined the active and the contemplative life in service of both physical and spiritual well-being. His ordination as a priest (in 1473) and later as a canon of Florence cathedral enabled him to 'sanctify' the pagan philosophy whilst confirming the supremacy of the established religion, and he was also a physician, practising astrologer and accomplished musician. All these activities contributed to his 'natural magic', a form of psycho-spiritual therapy which seems astonishingly modern in its understanding of the power of the symbolic imagination, yet which remains firmly located within a Neo-Platonic framework.

We cannot do justice to Ficino's depth as a thinker in this small volume, and I can only point the interested reader towards Michael J.B. Allen's extensive publications on Ficinian metaphysics for more comprehensive and detailed scholarship. Here we will focus on one particular aspect of his life and work which has received less attention than it deserves—the role of astrology, which can be seen to epitomise Ficino's approach to the question of knowledge. Ficino was responsible for a shift in astrological philosophy and practice which has only been paralleled in the twentieth-century development of depth and transpersonal psychology, exposing its potential as a symbolic system of initiatory power. The texts in this volume reveal the emergence of a new 'imaginal' consciousness struggling to find its place within a theological orthodoxy that condemned all forms of divination. I have placed them in chronological order, which enables us to trace the unfolding of Ficino's astrological thought—his early encounter with the mysterious powers of the Orphic Hymns, his everyday correspondence, struggle with his own Saturnine temperament, condemnation of deterministic astrologers, attempts to reconcile astrology with Christianity, development of a new therapeutic 'natural magic' and finally a profound metaphysical insight into the mysterious correspondences of cosmic symbolism. We end, appropriately, with his guarded defence against accusations of heresy in the unstable and hostile religious climate of the *fin de siècle*. In championing divinatory astrology, Ficino's determination to reconcile Christianity and pagan philosophy undoubtedly faced its greatest challenge.

Intellectual Background

Ficino lived at a time ripe for upheaval and re-orientation, and saw his vocation as that of renewing the outworn scholasticism of dry theological debate with a living, dynamic connection of the human soul to its source. The medieval subjection of human will to Divine Law was about to give way to the triumph of human reason in the Enlightenment, and in many ways the very strength of the Renaissance movement lies in the tension created by its straddling—and holding together—two worlds which were about to break asunder. Thus a dominant motif of the 'new' religious sensibility was the union of opposites—tradition and innovation, Christianity and paganism, theology and poetry, and most critically, philosophy and religion—whose divorce Ficino saw as being at the root of human ignorance and impiety:

“For learning has been largely handed over to the profane, whence it becomes the greatest instrument of iniquity and moral license, and is rather to be called malicious cunning than religious learning. Meanwhile the most precious pearls of religion are often pawed by ignoramuses who trample

them underfoot like swine... Thus the former know not truth in its purity, which, being divine, enlightens only the eyes of the pious, while the latter fail even to worship God rightly to the fullness of their ability, with the result that they regulate sacred things in ignorance of things human and divine. How long can we bear the miserable lot of this iron age? O ye citizens of your celestial fatherland, o ye inhabitants of the earth, let us finally, I beg of you, liberate philosophy, the divine gift of God, from impiety, if we can—and we can if we will—and let us redeem holy religions, as far as strength permits, from abominable ignorance. I therefore exhort and implore all philosophers to reach out and embrace religion firmly, and all priests to devote themselves diligently to the study of legitimate philosophy.”²

Ficino understood these opposing tendencies to be symbolised astrologically by Jupiter and Saturn and that their conjunction—the fusion of what he would term worldly and intellectual wisdom—held the key to spiritual transformation on earth. His deliberate choice of 1484 (the year of a Great Conjunction of these two planets), to publish his major work, the complete translations of Plato, reveals the seriousness with which he regarded the Hermetic maxim, ‘as above, so below’, and the importance of *human action* in accordance with the heavenly patterns.³ We know that he regarded himself as the spokesman for a Providential renewal of intellectual life; this was based on an understanding that history was divided into periods of religious wisdom, when philosophy and religion held hands, and periods of secularisation when they were sundered and religion declined into superstition. After Plato, both Jews and Gentiles had fallen into ignorance, until the coming of Christ effected a unity once more, through the work of St Paul, St John the Evangelist and Dionysius the Areopagite. The Neo-Platonists, including Plotinus, Iamblichus and Proclus, were believed by Ficino to have had access to “the divine light of the Christians”⁴ for their Platonic interpretations, but thereafter, wisdom once more went ‘underground’ until it was redeemed by the Christian Platonists Origen and St Augustine. There followed another period of veiling, the scholastic Middle Ages, until Divine Providence considered it appropriate to revive it through Ficino’s own work in fifteenth-century Italy. He would therefore have regarded it as inevitable that in the centuries to come, the rupture would occur once again. Furthermore, Ficino divided history into alternate periods of inspiration and interpretation; for example, the divine mysteries spoken of by Moses, the Prophets and the Ancient Theologians were revealed and interpreted by Christ, just as Plato was fully explicated by the Christian Neo-Platonists. Despite Ficino’s enthusiasm for pagan philosophy, we must remember that Christianity could never be other than primary and infallible, the culmination of the prophetic utterances of the ancient sages and the ultimate revelation of Truth.

Marsilio was singled out for his vocation at an early age; we learn from his biographer Giovanni Corsi that he was introduced to the great Cosimo de’ Medici (1389-1464)—the ruler of Florence—by his father Diotifeci who was Cosimo’s physician. On meeting the intellectually precocious ten year-old, Cosimo is said to have remarked: “Your Marsilio here has been sent down from heaven to heal souls”,⁵ and indeed many years later he granted Ficino patronage and set him to work on translating the Greek manuscripts which were being brought to Florence from the East by his scouts. A letter survives from 1462 (text 1) in which Ficino, by way of thanking Cosimo, playfully brings his attention to the ‘meaningful coincidence’ of the sympathetic action between the two orders of being—human and daemonic—which he would later develop into an entire system of astral magic. He tells us that just as he was singing a hymn of Orpheus to the Cosmos, the fateful letter from Cosimo (*Cosmus* in Latin) arrived, granting the very request of the hymn.

The Hymns attributed to Orpheus were amongst Ficino's first Latin translations and provided, for the inner circle of the Academy, vehicles for ritual interaction with the life of the world, being invocations to the gods and daemons of the cosmic and elemental realms.⁶ Orpheus himself was revered as a pre-eminent poet and theologian, the teacher of Pythagoras, whose lyre-playing could move animals and even stones; indeed in the Renaissance he became an icon of musical perfection, a demi-god who could transport the listener to divine realms. Evidently Ficino's own musical skills were outstanding, for his friends identified him with the inspired musician and he adopted the Orphic persona, calling his *lira da braccio* his 'Orphic lyre' and decorating it with an image of the poet. As his friend Poliziano eulogised, "Marsilio's lyre, far more successful than the lyre of Thracian Orpheus, has brought back from the underworld what is, if I am not mistaken, the true Eurydice, that is, Platonic wisdom with its all-embracing understanding."⁷

What was it about the hymns that Ficino and his circle so revered? According to Pico, it was precisely because they combined theology with poetry, and poetry was the most powerful way of concealing deeper meanings. To quote Pico again:

"As was the practice of ancient theologians, Orpheus covered the mysteries of his doctrines with the wrappings of fables, and disguised them with a poetic garment, so that whoever reads his hymns may believe there is nothing underneath but tales and the purest nonsense."⁸

Pico hints here at the 'divine something'⁹ that he believed to lie at the heart of Platonic philosophy, suggesting that it might be accessible only to those who have ears to hear, or eyes to see. "Anyone who does not know how to intellectualise sensible properties perfectly through the method of secret analogising understands nothing sound from the Orphic Hymns"¹⁰ he enigmatically asserted, and certainly Ficino was deeply attracted by the multiple varieties of spiritual life in a polytheistic cosmos which responded to human desire, and opened the imagination to ever deeper levels of reality. Indeed, one is struck by the significance of Ficino's pagan entreaty replacing Christian prayer. That he was well aware of the dangers involved in making his translations of the Hymns public is an indication of climate of the time, for he tells us that he did not publish them through fear of being accused of reviving "the ancient cult or worship of the gods and daemons so long and deservedly condemned".¹¹

The perception of the 'secret mutual connivance' (to borrow a phrase from C.G. Jung)¹², or the meeting of 'subjective' and 'objective' realities which Ficino experienced through his hymn-singing depended on a particular kind of 'seeing', a 'seeing through' appearances or cause and effect relationships to a *significance*. This *metaphorical* approach to the apprehension of a meaning beyond the apparent is, in essence, the basis of the esoteric path to wisdom. The letter to Cosimo is important in suggesting the direction in which Ficino was to move with the symbolism of astrology—playfully and poetically, locating its truth not in concrete proofs but in the infinite spaces of the imagination.

Plato

The Platonic texts available in the Middle Ages were few and incomplete, but by the fifteenth century Italian humanists had embarked on extending the corpus, a project which culminated in Ficino's complete edition. Platonism, regarded as the fulfilment of the ancient theology, had long been considered a worthy preparation for Christianity, but it was Ficino who elevated its status to almost equal that of the established religion. Although he was fully aware of their irreconcilability on certain issues (such as the truth of the Trinity), Platonism certainly verged on becoming, in the words of James Hankins, "a special esoteric form of

Christianity for an intellectual elite.”¹³ Plato was always Ficino’s supreme authority, for he reached the heights of divine knowledge and spoke of it with a clarity that would enable Christians to understand the foundations of their faith. Whereas Aristotle wrote *in naturalibus*, on the natural world and its laws, Plato, in a spirit of free enquiry, was considered the greater philosopher *in divinis*, in divine matters.¹⁴ When more Neo-Platonic writings also came to light, it became possible to trace the links between the pagan Platonists and early Christians, establishing that Plato, not Aristotle, had influenced the first Christian thinkers, thus adding to his prestige.

Ficino evidently felt an affinity with Plato from an early age, although he came into conflict with both his father, who wanted him to study medicine, and the Archbishop of Florence who advised him to concentrate on traditional Christian theology. In the Preface to his commentaries on Plato, Ficino tells us why he considered Plato’s writings so powerful: “I consider Plato’s style is more like that of a divine oracle than any human eloquence”, he writes, “now resounding on high, now flowing with the sweetness of nectar, ever encompassing the secrets of heaven”.¹⁵ Plato speaks in symbolic, metaphorical language, he uses jests, humour and fables to convey profound truths, to seize his readers with ‘divine frenzy’ as the poets do, to lift them beyond merely human speculation or discourse. For Ficino, Plato is a high priest, presiding over the rituals of initiation—an initiation that is achieved through the incitement in the reader of a noetic or mystical order of knowledge. In emulation of his master, Ficino himself writes in this figurative and multi-faceted way, bringing poetic images and myths to bear on a penetrating understanding of human nature. Primarily, though, Plato was revered because he upheld the divinity and immortality of the soul—a soul which was free-ranging and self-willed, able to traverse all dimensions of existence. Ficino wrote in the Preface to his *Platonic Theology*:

“Since [Plato] holds the soul to be a kind of mirror in which the image of the divine countenance is easily reflected, his scrupulous step by step search for God continually prompts him to turn towards the beauty of the soul, understanding the famous oracle ‘Know thyself!’ to mean above all that whoever desires to know God should first know himself. For this reason everyone who reads Plato’s writings... with the care that they deserve will derive from them every conceivable benefit, but above all these two most important principles: the pious worship of a known God and the divinity of souls. These form the basis for all understanding of things, for every disposition of one’s life and for all aspects of happiness.”¹⁶

As Pico was to emphasise, the human soul could dwell with the beasts or with the angels; it could live a life limited by the senses, or, through the cultivation of philosophy, liberate itself through self-knowledge. It could penetrate deeply into the true nature of things, or remain bound to a short-sighted vision of human affairs. It could hold the whole cosmos in its view, because as an organ of perception it extended to the Divine Mind itself.

The Platonic Cosmos

To understand the philosophical dimension of Ficino’s astrology, we must return to a world where empirical observation and symbolic conception of the cosmos were one and the same. The fundamental Platonic-Hermetic world structure, set out by Plato in his great Pythagorean creation myth in the *Timaeus*, presents us with an image of a perfectly ordered universe, created in harmonic proportions out of ‘soul-stuff’ by the Demiurge; soul is therefore primary,

the ‘ruler and mistress’ of the material world.¹⁷ Two dimensions are established, the eternal and temporal, the latter being “the moving image of eternity” determined by the motions of seven planets—each planetary cycle preserving its own measure of time. The fixed stars, meanwhile, inhabit the eternal realm and move in contrary motion to the planetary spheres, whilst the earth remains at the centre, like the pupil of a great cosmic eye. Thus we have a three-fold cosmos: earth—heavens—divinity, all imbued with soul, a ‘living being’, a ‘shrine for the eternal gods’.

The Neo-Platonists developed this model into a complex hierarchical system of emanation; at the apex, the One, or perfect unity, situated above and beyond all ‘being’, which out of a superabundant Goodness produces each world as the mirror-image of the one above in increasing levels of materiality and differentiation. At the next level, the pure intelligence of the Divine or Intelligible reality (the realm of Platonic Ideas) is in turn reflected in the intermediate realm of the stars and planets, which is then mirrored in the souls of human beings, which therefore contain a trace of divinity. Pure matter, for the Plotinian school at least, is devoid of life. From the sphere of the earth, the elements earth, water, air and fire lead up into the heavenly spheres of Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn, which in turn lead to the eighth sphere of the fixed stars, and above that to the Divine Mind itself, which is the active intelligence of the One. The human being then finds himself an amphibian, born on the earth yet with a ‘divine imprint’ in his soul which is threefold: instinctive in so far as it inclines to earthly existence, imaginative and intellectual in so far as it corresponds to the cosmos and divinity.

It is tempting to regard the Platonic model as a static, hierarchical structure, favouring the purity of intellect over the sensuality of the earth. However, the later Platonists emphasise a dynamic ‘spiritual circuit’ that conveys divine energy down through the spheres to earth and back again, sowing ‘seeds’ or baits of divine power in natural things. Proclus gives us precise examples of such ‘chains’ or ‘rays’ that link each level of existence through a particular, archetypal quality.¹⁸ For example, the ray which crystallises as ‘Apollo’ on the level of Ideas, will bring forth the ‘Sun-soul’ on the cosmic level, the physical Sun on the material, the King on the human, lion on the animal, heliotrope on the vegetative and gold on the mineral levels. The key is sympathetic resonance, which allows even the most inanimate stone to partake of divine power. This is its ‘occult property’, which can be worked with in theurgic ritual, as well as in more manipulative or ‘lower’ kinds of magic. Similarly, each planetary sphere—on the cosmic level—is alive, populated by echelons of spiritual beings; for example, each planet will have its attendant god, daemon, hero and human soul. It is important to note that we are not talking about the literal, physical planet here, but its counterpart on the level of soul that we perceive by means of the imagination.

Knowledge

So, if the intermediate world of the stars and planets corresponds to the imaginative faculty of the soul, it is then, through the imagination that we can resonate sympathetically with the heavens; the imagination which will lead to a deeper, more unified kind of knowledge. We must distinguish here between our common use of the word imagination, which tends to mean a free-ranging, personal fantasy, and term understood by Ficino as a means of unifying sense-impressions into images, which are then translated by the mind into thoughts. The mind needs the images in order to grasp the universal concepts to which they point—but then can leave them behind as it moves into the pure contemplation of intellectual activity. Imagination, then, plays an essential part in the ascent towards the spiritual union of the Intellect, which in the Platonic sense is the place where the soul realises its identity with the Divine Ideas, and

indeed finds immortality. Ficino uses the scholastic notion of *adaequatio*—the affinity between thought and object—to describe the way knowledge arises:

“As long as the intellect is only potentially prepared to know, it is not yet united with the object potentially to be known; but when it is actually knowing, it is united with it...since the form of that object is inherent in the mind... Thus the knowing mind and the thing known become one, since the form of that thing, as such, molds the mind.”¹⁹

The form of the image leads to the apprehension of the *meaning* by the soul, and “if one pays attention to this signification, it is the thought of God who speaks that one comprehends.”²⁰ In other words, the imagination can become the ground in which purely intellectual—or divine—meanings are given form, which can then be interpreted according to the level of insight the individual is able to bring. In this sense, the entire cosmos becomes an archetypal image which can ultimately reveal its secrets to the one who desires to know them, for desire, or Platonic *eros*, is the force which moves the soul ever closer to union with its source.

We cannot distance ourselves from this cosmos, for its depths will unfold to us in relation to our capacity to grasp them. In fact the three dimensions of the soul can more accurately be described as *qualities of vision*—the movement through them being none other than the development of ever deepening powers of perception. The soul acts as the mediator between God and the body, or the One and matter; so it may take as its starting point the material level of literal, factual understanding (cause and effect thinking), then develop ever more refined perception through the cosmic level of metaphor and symbol (analogy and signification) to the further levels of reason and finally of mystical or anagogic apprehension (contemplation), which embraces all three simultaneously. In his *On obtaining life from the heavens* Ficino applies this unfolding to the hierarchy of the planetary principles, explaining that the Moon, Mercury and Venus correspond to material and sensory elements, the Sun and Mars to the imagination, Jupiter to the reason and Saturn to the contemplating intellect. The seven cosmic steps then may become a powerful guiding image, suggesting the appropriate modes for ritual activity.

This hermeneutical method, intrinsic to esoteric traditions, became a standard means of interpretation applied to Christian scripture (as literal, allegorical, moral and anagogic stages of understanding). By the late medieval period, it was also applied to poetry (specifically by Dante in his *Divina commedia*) and in the Renaissance, to art, the purpose of which was to give concrete, visual or musical form to divine essence. As we saw with the Orphic Hymns, the conscious use of allegory, symbol and metaphor was thus not merely aesthetic, rather, it enabled the reader to gain access to deeper meanings beyond the surface of the text or image, meanings which would not be apparent to—or considered relevant by—everyone. The reader or viewer’s mind would then be led to the ultimate referent of the symbol - the place where it becomes one with the Idea it embodies. Of course—and this is especially important in relation to all forms of divination—the function of a symbol is only fulfilled *at the moment* when its connecting power is activated and grasped—that is fully ‘realised’. This is what is meant by initiation, and in the esoteric traditions the first step towards such *gnosis* is the apprehension of the hidden correspondences in the material world.

What then are the implications of these stages of knowledge for astrology? As a symbol-system, it clearly is not necessarily restricted to the observation of ‘effects’ on human beings. What’s more, if planets are also gods, they can be appealed to, and negotiated with, as in divinatory ritual. A horoscope then becomes a dynamic play of divine energy, not a static and immutable blueprint. Iamblichus, in his treatise on Egyptian divination, stresses that it is

only in *active participation*—the divine *work* of theurgy—that the gods reveal themselves to human beings and in so doing, elevate the human soul to the condition of divinity. This can happen because the soul, as we mentioned above, potentially—and in ritual, actually—*knows* them in a way that surpasses all abstract conception, as this knowledge derives from a deep inner identification:

“For an innate knowledge about the gods is coexistent with our nature, and is superior to all judgement and choice, reasoning and proof. This knowledge is united from the outset with its own cause, and exists in tandem with the essential striving of the soul towards the Good. Indeed, to tell the truth, the contact we have with divinity is not to be taken as knowledge. Knowledge, after all, is separated from its object by some degree of otherness. But prior to that knowledge, which knows another as being itself other, there is the unitary connection with the gods that is natural and indivisible....”²¹

The starting point, then, for the soul’s ascent is the Platonic *anamnesis* or remembering its divine origins, and the knowledge that unfolds from this cannot be compared with the human activity of logical reasoning or comparison. It is uncovered through invocation and divination using all elements of the natural world—including stars and planets—as ‘unspeakable’ symbols to attract the presence of the gods. Here is yet another dimension to the Platonic quest, a philosophical magic which intrigued and impressed Ficino and yet inevitably unsettled his orthodox contemporaries. We will return to Iamblichus and Ficino’s justification for his astral magic in *On obtaining life from the heavens* a little later; first however we must introduce the Hermes the Thrice Great, from whose wisdom the occult arts in the Renaissance, especially astrology and alchemy, took their greatest inspiration.

Hermes Trismegistus

In 1462 Cosimo de’ Medici instructed Ficino to put aside his Plato and translate a manuscript recently brought to Florence—namely the fourteen books of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, by the legendary Egyptian sage Hermes Trismegistus. Hermes was already known to Renaissance scholars through the Latin *Asclepius* and the Church Fathers Lactantius and Augustine—by the former favourably as a prophet of Christian truth, by the latter unfavourably as a magician. Hermes, who was supposed to have lived a few generations after Moses, was considered by Ficino (at least in his early writings—he later substituted Zoroaster) to be the fount of the *prisca theologia*, the initiator of an esoteric religion from whose priests Plato had derived his own wisdom. Following Augustine, he established a line of transmission which passed from Hermes, via Pythagoras, Orpheus and Philolaus to the ‘Divine Plato’ himself.²² If Hermes and Moses had exchanged their teachings, which was generally believed, then Hermes’ credentials as an authority for the Judaeo-Christian religion as well as the pagan theology was indisputable. Indeed, the significance of Hermes for the Renaissance Christian could not have been announced more triumphantly than by his depiction in marble at the very threshold of the great cathedral in Siena, in 1482.

There would have been no doubt in the Renaissance mind that this sage—the ruler of the three worlds as the greatest King, priest and prophet—composed his books in Egyptian antiquity, although we now know that they are a product of late antique Alexandria, where the combination of Egyptian religious mysticism and Greek Neo-Platonic philosophy gave rise to an upsurge of esoteric cults. But whenever they were written, recent scholarship has reassessed the prominence of their Egyptian content, and it was the heady synthesis of initiatic

vision and intellectual clarity that so excited Cosimo and Ficino. As befitting his role as high priest, Hermes' authority extended to the domain of ritual magic. Ficino states in his introduction to the *Corpus Hermeticum* that Hermes was identified with the Egyptian Thoth, the god who invented hieroglyphs, and that his writings are concerned with "secret mysteries" and "stupendous oracles".²³ Numerous magical, astrological and alchemical texts were attributed to him, and it was clear that ritual formed an important part of the journey towards *gnosis*. However, the treatises translated by Ficino are of the 'philosophical' variety, concerned with the direct initiation of the adept by his teacher, and focus exclusively on the inner preparation for and experience of union with the supreme divinity.

The relationship of the initiate to the cosmos is central to this process, and the *Corpus Hermeticum* presents us with a mythology of creation in which the powers of the planets are reflected in the soul, signifying the characteristics it assumes on incarnation, and which it discards during the initiation process (whether in death or life). The seven planets are created by the power of the Divine Mind, or *Nous*, as governors of the sensible world, their office being Destiny; He also creates man in his likeness, who looks down through the spheres and reveals the beauty of God to earthly Nature. They fall in love and unite, and man adopts an earthly body. For this reason, he is double; mortal and immortal, and "although above the harmony of the cosmos, he has become a slave within it."²⁴ His divine part is not subject to immutable fate, but in the embracing of an earthly body he becomes subject to the rule of the stars, acquiring the characteristics of the planets as he descends through the cosmos into incarnation. The Hermetic initiation process is centred on the recovery of the memory of man's original undivided divinity, which can be evoked in this life through a spiritual teacher who will guide the soul through its re-ascent, fuelled by its desire to escape its earthly prison. As it rises up again through the seven spheres, it surrenders the relevant 'human' instincts and impulses to each one until it reaches the 'eighth plain' of angelic presences, and finally to the divine principle itself. At this point, he or she 'becomes God'.²⁵ Now this metaphor of movement from earth to heaven implies many different stages of awareness, and Hermes instructs that destiny itself will be experienced differently by those at varying stages of understanding: "all men suffer what has been ordained, but those with reason, who are led by *Nous*, do not suffer as others do."²⁶ In other words, the more material the orientation, the more fixed and immutable 'fate' will appear to be; the deeper the knowledge of cosmic law, the less constrained the individual will be by 'outer' circumstances, and the more able to understand the significance of all that happens in relation to his own actions and being.

The emphasis, then, is on self-realisation, which involves the freeing of human will and understanding from the limitations of the bodily senses; for once the ascent to higher knowledge has occurred, one ceases to be ruled by them and can gain a greater vision where "the sense perception and understanding of the cosmos are one; they are an instrument of God's will to create all things and to return them to that one."²⁷ The deeper knowledge can embrace all levels, the lesser knowledge cannot see past its own boundaries. In Book XII Hermes speaks of divination as the means by which God communicates to man, through the highest part of his soul, or *nous*:

"Now every living creature is immortal by virtue of *nous*; man above all, for he can receive God and he shares God's essence. God communicates with this creature alone: through dreams by night and through signs by day. Through all these he foretells to man the future: through birds, entrails, inspiration, and the sacred oak. Thus man proclaims that he knows the past, present and future."²⁸

Unlike Plato, who distrusted ‘divination by art’—Hermes suggests that prophetic knowledge can be gained through the reading of signs in nature, and Ficino was to take up this idea in his *Disputation against the judgement of astrologers* in relation to astrology. But artificial images were another matter; he would also have read, in the *Asclepius*, of ritual divinatory practices involving the animation of statues, in which a rite of consecration would facilitate the attraction of divine powers by material forms. Although clearly attracted by this and the talismanic magic of the theurgists, Ficino had to deny any approval of them, affirming Thomas Aquinas’s condemnation of artificial images as lures for evil demons. In his *On obtaining life from the heavens* he carefully hides behind Iamblichus, Proclus and Synesius in suggesting that

“in materials which are naturally akin to the things above and have been both collected from their various places and compounded at the right time and in the proper manner, you can receive forces and effects which are not only celestial, but even daemonic and divine.”²⁹

The key phrase here is ‘at the right time’—for the use of astrology to determine the *quality* of the time is central to the effectiveness of the magical correspondence between heaven and earth, and this aspect of Egyptian ritual implied a possible alignment of worlds which could open a channel that reached further than the cosmos. In the end, the material components themselves could be left behind, until all that was needed was observation of the stars. Of such a practice, Ficino dared not speak, but he would have read in Iamblichus that:

“[contemplation of the cosmos] is not for [the Egyptians] purely matter of theorising, but they recommend that we ascend through the practice of sacred theurgy to the regions that are higher, more universal and superior to fate, towards the god who is the creator, without calling in the aid of matter or bringing to bear anything other than the observation of the critical time for action.”³⁰

In this way the divinatory practices of theurgy, for Iamblichus, lead to *divinisation*; they not only give humans the foreknowledge of the gods, but make them divine themselves. In other words, astrology facilitates a supreme method of spiritual ascent—not as an abstract system, but as a means of creating a sacred space within which to *act*. The Hermetic texts also emphasise the role of the desire or longing of the initiate (and desire, from *desidere*, means ‘from the stars’) in the awakening of the soul to its true nature. Ficino fully understood the implications of this, and frequently emphasises the ‘intention’, ‘affection’ or emotional force required to ‘connect’ with the cosmic spirit—which he calls prayer. We are tempted to ask—although Ficino would never directly assert such thing—whether the Christian-Platonic ascent to the One so eloquently described in his *Platonic Theology* is essentially any different from the contemplative theurgy of the Egyptians, in that its basis is the desire and yearning of the aspirant, and its end the deification of the soul;

“Our soul by means of the intellect and will, as by those twin Platonic wings, flies towards God, since by means of them it flies towards all things. By means of the intellect it attaches all things to itself, by means of the will, it attaches itself to all things. Thus the soul desires, endeavours, and begins to become God, and makes progress every day. Every movement directed towards a definite end first begins, then proceeds, then gradually increases and makes progress, and is finally perfected. It is increased through the same power through which it was begun: it makes progress through the

same power through which it was increased; and finally, it is perfected through the same power through which it made progress. Hence our soul will sometime be able to become in a sense all things, and even to become God."³¹

Plotinus

In 1484, the year Ficino published Plato, Pico arrived in Florence—a ‘miraculous youth’ destined to play a definitive role both as a advocator of spiritual magic (particularly Kabbalah), and as an opponent of judicial astrology. This was a momentous occasion for Ficino, for he felt connected to Pico through a profound Saturnine bond. Pico too had been born with Saturn in Aquarius, thirty years (a Saturn cycle) after Ficino. Precociously brilliant, intellectually bold, Pico epitomised the new Renaissance man, and was elevated to the status of hero by his friends in the Academy. His arrival was doubly significant for Ficino, for he encouraged him to start work on the translation of Plotinus. For Ficino, this was an indication of Divine Providence itself, a message sent down from Cosimo on high, for Pico arrived “on the very day that our Plato was published.”³² Studying the Neo-Platonists, in particular Plotinus, Iamblichus, Proclus and Synesius, was to enrich the practical dimension of Ficino’s Platonism and provide him with a philosophical basis for the cosmic sympathy on which magical ritual depended.

Of all his ancient authorities, Plotinus provided Ficino with the most convincing argument for a divinatory astrology in his *Enneads* II.3, where he considers the question ‘Are the stars causes?’ He urges us to distinguish clearly between two orders of influence relating to the stars; causation and signification. It was generally accepted that the stars had a direct physical affect on the material world, including the human body, but says Plotinus, these effects are limited and in no way can influence human will. Whereas their *symbolic* power is not restricted: “their symbolic power extends to the entire realm of sense, their efficacy only to what they patently do.”³³ His arguments, taken up by Ficino in his *Disputation*, centre on the pre-eminent goodness and immutability of the heavens; the stars are impassive, stable and perfect, and therefore cannot vary their character, gender, or demonstrate maleficity, anger or any other human attribute. These are simply projections by traditional astrology (Mars is masculine, warlike etc.). Their movements cannot in any way ‘produce’ poverty, health, wealth or any vices and virtues, for as part of the ‘cosmic ballet’ set in motion by the Divine Mind, they are “continuously serene and happy in the good they enjoy” and indifferent to the turbulences of earthly life. However, their patterns may be read as *signifying* other parts, in the same way as a diviner interprets flights of birds:

“We can but believe that their circuit is for the protection of the entirety of things while they furnish the incidental service of being letters on which the augur, acquainted with that alphabet, may look and read the future from their pattern—arriving at the thing signified by such analogies as that a soaring bird tells of some lofty event.”³⁴

In other words, a distinction must be made between the physical, literal existence of the stars and planets and the *human activity of symbolising*—seeing them as representatives of archetypal principles on the cosmic level. The planets do not lay down the future, but the diviner can perhaps use them as an ‘incidental’ means of foresight: “All teems with symbol” says Plotinus, “the wise man is the man who in any one thing can read another, a process familiar to all of us in not a few examples of everyday experience.”³⁵ Plotinus illustrates this with reference to the chains of being mentioned earlier, for there must be, he says, one principle from which each entity takes its origin, “constituting a unity of many forms of life

and enclosing several members within the unity.”³⁶ Each member of the chain then becomes its own ‘All’, or self-embracing unity, which generates even more chains of being in a kaleidoscopic vision of sympathetic and analogous corresponding parts. This would provide, says Plotinus, “a reasonable basis for divination.”³⁷

The wise man then, is able to “profit by the significance of the sidereal system”,³⁸ using its patterns to understand his own nature and the part he must play in the whole; the ignorant man, on the other hand, who believes that his life is subject to a fate determined by the stars, will only become “sunken in [the sidereal system] and dragged along with the whole”. Plotinus acknowledges that the ordering of the stars, as in a horoscope, corresponds directly to human temperament and personality, but believes it is possible to transcend this ‘lower nature’ entirely and move towards “that Principle which no one possesses except by deliberate usage but so many appropriate, becoming, each personally, the higher, the beautiful, the Godlike”.³⁹ Plotinus could not have stated more clearly that *symbolic perception* is the key to spiritual ascent, and that the patterns of the stars facilitate a cosmic or universal perspective on human concerns, enabling the diviner access to a trans-temporal mode of understanding, where past, present and future are one. By contrast, causal or literal thinking about ‘effects’ binds the soul to the material world, “shackling us to our illusions” as Ficino was to say. Thus how we experience the world will depend on our level of insight.

In ancient practices of omen-reading and divination, the voice of the gods was heard directly through the natural phenomenon—be it liver or flight of birds—which was then proclaimed by the *interpretes*. By the time of the Neo-Platonists, ‘reading the signs’ had been appropriated into an intellectual system of great subtlety, where the very act of interpretation was taken up ‘psychologically’ into an individual’s spiritual itinerary of ascent to the One. In other words, there is a purpose to the divination that is not about foreseeing earthly events or making a decision as ends in themselves, but is primarily concerned with the salvation or divinisation of the human soul. Through divination, Iamblichus insists, “the god moves our mind to the truth of things that are, have been, and will be.”⁴⁰ True acts of divination, including those using stars and planets, are therefore not of human but divine instigation:

“... the gods send forth signs to human beings, using not only the services of daemons, but also those of souls and of all of nature and all things in the cosmos which obey these, guiding them according to a single principle, and allowing their own motion to proceed from them in whatever way they wish. Indeed, then, while being transcendent over all things and free from every relationship and co-ordination with those in the realm of becoming, they lead everything in the realm of generation and nature in accordance with their own will. In this way, then, this explanation of divination concords with the account of the creative activity and foreknowledge of the gods. For it does not drag down the intellect of the supreme beings into this world and to us, but while this remains stable in itself, it refers back to it the signs and all divination, and reveals them as proceeding from it.”⁴¹

Ficino’s Astrology

As a Christian, Ficino could only attribute the absolute foreknowledge of Iamblichus’ gods to God Himself, who uses the prophet ‘as a tongue’ to convey divine truth to mankind (even though he or she may not fully understand that they are saying). The question of how far astrology could lead to this divine truth—that is, how far revelation through the signs of the heavens could be equated with the ‘grace’ of revelation through Christ—inevitably arises in relation to Ficino’s practice, although he is careful not to ask it. He was fully aware of the thin

ice under his feet when speaking ‘Platonically’—that is, symbolically, of the cosmos, for reasons which will become clear a little later. But it would be evident to him that the mysterious realisation of another order of reality could occur with equal intensity in the ritual of astral magic or the Christian mass, and that it was on the ‘exoteric’ level of discourse *about* the stars that the differences had to be observed and honoured. Much of what previous scholars have referred to as Ficino’s ‘self-contradiction’ or ‘inconsistent views’⁴² ceases to be problematic when we realise how adept he is at using different contexts for different purposes. As we begin to unravel the threads of his astrology, it will become clear that Ficino moves between two languages, that of Christian orthodoxy and that of the symbolic imagination, and the distrust of the former for the latter is the reason for his frequent guardedness and occasional seeming self-contradiction on the question of the legitimacy of astrology. He keeps his pagan and Christian voices separate, moving effortlessly between them and never allowing astrological showings to *determine* the working of the divine: as a Platonist, he will see *through* the cosmos to the Divine Mind; as an orthodox Catholic, he will locate God beyond the limits of the stars; as a Hermetic magician, he will use images and invocations to sympathise with the world soul; as a faithful follower of Aquinas, he will deny the legitimacy of talismanic magic; as a physician, he will claim that the powers sown in the world by the *anima mundi* are natural, health-giving properties; along with Plotinus, he will suggest that they are gods; and as a true occultist, he will remain silent when necessary.

Platonic thinking—that is, being able to differentiate between the literal, symbolic and mystical modes of knowledge we mentioned earlier—underlies all Ficino’s discussions on astrology and divination. He clearly distinguishes between ‘human’ (literal and to a certain extent, allegorical) and ‘divine’ (symbolic and mystical) levels of knowledge, which enables him to divide astrologers into *plebei* and *praecipui*, that is, those who are bound by their own opinions or the rules of the textbook and those who read the stars as divine signs.⁴³ Both use traditional techniques, cast horoscopes, and give interpretations, but the former believe the stars determine human action, while the latter see them as indicating the path to freedom and self-knowledge. The former judge from rational inference, the latter from an intuitive ‘gift of the soul’. If we fully grasp this distinction, Ficino’s own practice of traditional judicial and electional astrology does not contradict his condemnation of *astrologers* in the *Disputation*.

Astrology in Ficino’s Letters

We have already introduced Ficino as the singer of Orphic Hymns, appealing to the daemon of the Cosmos in his letter to Cosimo. In his voluminous correspondence, astrological imagery, mythology and techniques abound. The sympathy he observes between heaven and earth excites and delights him, and always serves as a guide to right action and an indication of deeper truth. He warns his friends of difficult transits and analyses their horoscopes, complains of his own, attributes delays and upheavals to the planets, and even writes to Pope Sixtus IV with astrological advice. He uses the language of the tradition, yet is not bound by it. In the letter to Rinaldo Orsini, Archbishop of Florence (text 2), Ficino demonstrates how astrological metaphor enables him to derive meaning from an unexpected event, which he then turns into a convincing appeal for withdrawn payment. Here we find a play of symbolism that allows Ficino room to negotiate with a potentially adverse fate and re-direct it to the good—in this case, his own pocket.

From an early age, Ficino was familiar with his own horoscope, and its symbolism resonated strongly with him; indeed, he could see there the signification for his vocation, as he wrote to John of Hungary:

“In your wish to attribute the cause of our work to Fate you have touched upon our birth chart. I do not, of course deny that in this configuration Saturn rising in Aquarius, the Sun and Mercury in the ninth house of the heaven, and the aspect of each of the remaining planets to the ninth house, all signify a restorer of the ancient teaching, but I do deny that they produce such a man.”⁴⁴

Saturn, whose sphere is located furthest from the earth but closest to the Divine Mind, must signify for the Platonist the highest philosophical knowledge; but for the traditional astrologer its dominance would be taken to *determine* hardship, ill health or poverty, namely the limitations of earthly life. As Ficino makes clear in the above quotation, any idea of planets *producing* qualities rather than *signifying* them is to be rejected. It was undoubtedly the case that his own greatest struggle was against melancholy and ill health, and he saw these afflictions reflected in his Saturn rising in Aquarius. At the level of intellect, then, Saturn promised great gifts, but the price to pay was a physical body and emotional life prey to heaviness and weakness. In many ways, we have to understand Ficino’s humanistic astrology as part of an intensely personal quest to overcome himself, and in so doing, to lift it out of the deterministic model inherited from the classical tradition to a new ‘psychological’ level of insight. He holds two worlds together: on the one hand, complaining bitterly about Saturn to his great friend Giovanni Cavalcanti (text 3), and on the other, bringing a Platonic understanding to bear on his bodily limitations, refusing to succumb to a fatalistic attitude: No, says Ficino, either Saturn does not signify my melancholy, or if it does, “this nature itself is a unique and divine gift”. The potential of a melancholic temperament for producing genius had been suggested by Aristotle⁴⁵ and Ficino explored the subject further in *On a healthy life* (the first book of *Three Books on Life*) where for the first time it is associated with Saturn; for just as the black bile of melancholy needs to be tempered by the distillation of the other humours, so Saturn needs Mercury to infuse the power of intellectual contemplation with quick intelligence. The result is a mind “made in the highest degree both a neighbour to the divine and instrument of the divine” with the power of divination and prophecy.⁴⁶ Here we are in the territory of alchemical symbolism, and Ficino uses the metaphor of hidden gold to refer to the gift of Saturn available to those on the philosophic path. In their correspondence, Ficino and Pico refer to themselves as Saturn and Mercury, recognising the significance of their friendship for the task of spiritual alchemy—the *coniunctio* of the soul with the divine—entrusted to them by Providence.

For a Saturnine person, then, a life devoted to the study of divine things will bring the greatest benefits, whereas if he or she attempted to lead a worldly life or half-heartedly pursue an intellectual one, Saturn will be an enemy. “For just as the Sun is hostile to nocturnal animals, but friendly to the diurnal,” Ficino writes in *On obtaining life from the heavens*, “so Saturn is hostile to those people who are either leading publicly an ordinary life or even to those fleeing the company of the crowd but not laying aside their ordinary emotions”.⁴⁷ In shifting the responsibility for directing one’s life firmly onto the individual, Ficino found the key to an inner wisdom by which one could ‘avoid the malice of fate’. This opened a new dimension for astrology in the light of the autonomy and divinity of the human soul, affiliating it to Platonic metaphysics and recovering its Hermetic initiatory dimension, for the ‘turning inward’ can be seen as the third or ‘moral’ stage of the four levels of interpretation, where the individual *participates* in the symbolic meaning and a change or deepening of self-knowledge takes place. In his Preface to the Commentaries on Plato, Ficino says that true philosophers will find their place in the heart of the Platonic Academy, and that they will come to know their Saturn “contemplating the secrets of the heavens”.⁴⁸

The injunction to take responsibility for one's own fate is illustrated in a beautiful letter to a younger member of the Medici family (text 8). The planets are not just "outside in some other place" says Ficino, but are mirrored in the soul in such a way that we can work with their images and direct our inner life accordingly. The task of raising oneself above the stars is seen as a shift from astrology to theology, in the sense of moving from a dependence on the astrologers' pronouncements to a realisation of the freedom gained through entering the cosmos in an act of active imagination. The planets then reveal a higher truth to the soul; the Sun becomes 'God Himself', and Venus human nature. Ficino exhorts the young man to "prudently temper" the heavenly signs in order to "live a blessed life under divine auspices." He was to provide detailed instructions for such tempering in his *On obtaining life from the heavens*.

The *Letter on Music* is Ficino's sole excursion into music theory, and is quite unique both in its treatment of the musical scale as a metaphor for the incarnation and ascent of the soul and in the comparison between the *qualities* of astrological aspects and musical intervals. The fundamental harmonic structure of the universe was established by Plato in the *Timaeus*, where the Demiurge divides the world soul into proportions following the mathematical ratios of 2:1, 3:2 and 4:3. These intervals correspond to the octave, fifth and fourth in music. Thus one arrives at a scale, known as the Pythagorean scale, in which these three intervals are perfect and primary. However, by Ficino's time, musicians were incorporating consonant thirds (5:4) and in this letter he departs from tradition in describing the syntonic scale, with the third considered more consonant than the fourth.⁴⁹ This is significant, not only in terms of musical practice, but because he is drawing a parallel with the intrinsic nature of the astrological aspects which depend on the ratios. In applying the relationships between musical intervals to the signs of the zodiac, astrological interpretation becomes dependent on 'hearing' the aspects and experiencing their resonances, thus shifting perception from abstract conception to intuitive understanding. In the case of the fourth, which from the Platonic perspective is a perfect consonance, a compromise has to be reached, for in musical practice its quality is not as sweet and gentle as the perfect third, and astrologically the square aspect is one of tension and incompatibility. Ficino calls it a 'moderate and seemingly human' discord; later, in his Commentary on Plotinus, he rejects the idea of dissonance altogether, whether between signs or musical tones, as they all contribute to the 'absolute concord' of the heavens or of the octave, and square aspects indicate changes for the good.⁵⁰ The tension of the opposition aspect, reflecting the unbearable discord of the seventh, is neatly resolved metaphysically by Ficino, as he likens the perfection of the octave to the return of the soul to its source in death, the traditional meaning of the eighth house.

The 'harmonies of the spheres', then, which give rise to our audible music, may be used to inform a kind of composition or improvisation which aims to evoke particular qualities and affect the listener, for music, as Ficino explains in his *On obtaining life from the heavens*, is itself an airy spirit which directly affects the human spirit—that subtle bond between soul and body—in the same way as the patterns of the stars:

"celestial figures by their own motions dispose themselves for acting; for by their harmonious rays and motions penetrating everything, they daily influence our spirit secretly just as overpowering music does openly."⁵¹

Which is why musical incantation was considered by Ficino to be the most effective form of 'imitating' the heavens, through giving audible images to the 'secret' properties of the planets. The *Letter on Music* begins to suggest a musical vocabulary for composition or improvisation, for the playing of particular intervals would evoke specific aspects for the listener. If this was done in accordance with the 'actual' planetary figures, a strong sympathetic resonance would

be set in motion between the heavens, the performer and the audience. We know that Ficino used his astrological ‘music therapy’ for himself and his friends, and regarded it as fundamental to his spiritual work. “To the Egyptian priests”, says Ficino to Francesco Musano, “medicine, music and the mysteries were one and the same study. Would that we could master this natural and Egyptian art as successfully as we tenaciously and wholeheartedly apply ourselves to it!”⁵² Ficino’s commemorative bust in Florence cathedral portrays him holding a volume of Plato like a lyre, testimony to music’s role in the elevation of the soul (see figure 1).

The final text in this collection, a letter to the poet Angelo Poliziano (text 12), is a stark reminder of the anti-astrological atmosphere in Florence in the 1490s. For whatever reason, Ficino finds himself obliged to disavow any astrological belief, and argues that in his *Book of Life* he has simply been recounting Plotinus. The tone is severe and defensive, and not altogether convincing—in fact it is possible to sense an element of fear. Several members of the Academy were to die in suspicious circumstances soon after this letter was written, including Poliziano and Pico, whose massive *Disputations against Divinatory Astrology* Ficino endorses here. We do not fully understand, even now, why Pico was impelled to write such an unrelenting attack on astrology that, unlike Ficino’s, even denies the possibility of symbolic understanding. Voluntarily or not, Pico was under the influence of Savonarola who preached hellfire and damnation for both astrologers and Platonic philosophers, and furthermore it is quite possible that Pico’s nephew, Gianfrancesco, edited his papers posthumously. We do know, however, that the trio of Ficino, Pico and Poliziano would get together with a bottle of wine and laugh at the astrologers for their ignorant assumptions, and that Pico modelled his attack on Ficino’s earlier unpublished treatise of 1477.

The Disputation against the Judgements of the Astrologers

If we regard Saturn in Aquarius in Ficino’s horoscope as signifying tradition, a tradition which could easily become fixed into dogmatic inflexibility—then we can interpret Jupiter in Leo as a counter-influence, bringing temperance and bestowing meaning through the free play of creative imagination. In this very opposition we can see his need to transcend the dictates of an astrology which insisted on a determinist position and subjected human free will to the stars. In 1477 Ficino wrote, but did not publish, an extensive attack against astrology; or rather, against the judgements of a certain kind of astrologer. As we can see in his prefatory letter to Francesco Ippoliti (text 4) he did not spare his words against the diviners who were not able to move past literal and causal predictions to a philosophical, that is symbolic, understanding. In assuming determined effects by the stars on human behaviour, these ‘petty ogres’ denied human freewill by attributing all life events to material causes, thus binding people to an immutable fate. This, in Ficino’s eyes, was the result of a ‘literalisation’ of the astrology of the classical tradition instigated by Ptolemy, which subsumed an essentially divinatory core of symbolic meaning into a dominant Aristotelian model of natural scientific ‘cause and effect’. Ptolemy, in his definitive *Tetrabiblos*, defined astrology as a set of universal causal influences on human beings, set in motion from the moment of birth or seed moment. Particular characteristics were attributed to the planets, and they were described as transmitting influences to earth via a substance called ether. Ptolemy’s Aristotelian cosmos became appropriated by a Stoical determinist tradition of astrology, where there was no room for negotiation with divinity; the cosmos, stripped of its gods, became a natural scientific rather than divine structure, set into operation by the Prime Mover and known through human reason. As such, interpretations were given material bases, arising from the assumption that planetary movements were the universal causes of human action in the same way as they caused natural phenomena such as tides or weather. This astrological ‘science’ was popularised by Roman writers and passed on through the rich Arabic culture of translation to the medieval Latin West

where it met scholastic Christianity head-on, stirring much theological debate on the nature of stellar influence and causation.

It was Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century who ‘Christianised’ Aristotle, establishing the orthodox position on such matters and amalgamating his cosmic hierarchy into a universal order which depended on the Providence of God. Most significantly for astrology, this is a cosmos knowable through human *scientia*, a self-evident, revealed truth about the nature of things demonstrable through logic. As such, astrology as a natural influence from the stars was perfectly acceptable, both on the world and on the ‘lower’ nature of humans who were ruled by their instincts and passions, only man’s rational soul was exempt from their influence and could not be determined by their movements. The problem for Aquinas was that of divination as a human practice—not all divination, for ‘natural divination’ as used by doctors, astrologers or even as experienced through dreams, which relied on human experience, imagination and understanding, was part of the natural order of knowledge. But any other kind of foreknowledge, which implied a super-human foresight or ‘unnatural’ kind of knowing, could only be a sin as it usurped the prerogative of God to reveal such things through the grace of Divine Revelation.⁵³ St Augustine had similarly condemned all forms of prediction, insisting that it was illegitimate to claim foreknowledge of events through divination, and that even if such practices worked, it was due to the agency of evil demons.⁵⁴ Thus no ‘human’ art or technique using natural phenomena could be acceptable; it was impossible for man to claim prophetic insight from the signs of nature. Imagination, for scholastic theology, belongs to the realm of sense-perception and although divine truths may be accessed through dreams or ‘phantasms’ it cannot be relied on except as the ground from which ‘higher’ knowledge may be abstracted. It is only through the cultivation of Reason that humans may approach the divine Intellect and through God’s grace that they may have hidden truths revealed to them.

It is hardly surprising then that judicial astrology would be condemned; for if its claims were true, and human will was determined by the stars, it would deny the ‘higher’ action of Divine Providence and bring a material cause to bear on the divinity of the soul. On the other hand, if astrologers acknowledged the participation of cosmic divinities as agents of revelation through an act of divination, such insights could only be false and misleading as there could only be one source of true revelation. The picture is black and white: humans cannot access knowledge relating to the soul through a rational enquiry based on an empirical system, nor can they know the will of God through appealing to a polytheistic cosmos which was banished by the coming of Christ, the ultimate and only arbiter.

As far as Ficino was concerned, the use of rational methods to account for the divine movements of the soul was not only absurd but dangerous, threatening both human autonomy and divine authority—and he spends a good deal of time in his *Disputation* taking up the scholastic argument against it. He felt impelled to utter an outcry of indignation at the ignorance of those astrologers who, caught in the trap of causality, masqueraded as prophets – “all this is poetic metaphor, not reason or knowledge!” exclaims Ficino in allegiance with Aquinas; we can catch the irony in his tone, as he knows full well that poetic metaphor is precisely the way to convey a truth about the world, if only the astrologers could see it. But they *think* they are working with a natural scientific system, and reduce the power of astrological symbolism to “silly similitudes”. Like Plotinus, Ficino points out how ridiculous it is to assume that planets and constellations have natures and attributes like animals or humans. He shows how these astrologers’ interpretations spring from either their own opinions or unthinkingly from text-books, and how they invert the truthful order of the world, assuming power to the planets and stars as determining factors in human life when clearly they are not. He could not be stating more clearly that astrologers do not know what they are doing.

But after this thorough rejection, a new voice appears, in which Ficino brushes past Thomist orthodoxy and speaks with the Platonists, suggesting that divination through art may

indeed be the grounds for a revelation that is divine. As he explores the nature of prediction itself, he postulates that it is perfectly possible to know the future—but not through the kind of limited speculation he has just condemned. It happens through a completely different mode of knowing—that induced in divination, whether by ‘divine infusion’, ‘natural instinct’ or ‘by art’ – of which astrology and augury are two forms. The augur or diviner needs technique, needs to know the rules, but within this framework his or her insight comes from another place. It is not a human judgement, but a divine inspiration, a ‘gift of the soul’. Following the Platonic distinction between divine and human knowledge, Ficino suggests that there is a great deal of difference between a merely human attempt to read the signs and the divine condition of prophecy, which is inherent to all human beings, but which few are able to use. The petty ogres do not *realise* this ability; they remain bound to a level of perception which is factual and literal, and most importantly, temporal. True prophetic utterance comes from a consciousness which transcends linear time, conveying truths directly from the eternal Mind itself—where past, present and future are one. The wiser the interpreter, the more accurately he or she will be able to read the message signified by the birds, or the stars, as Plotinus suggested, but this does not mean the stars have wills. Ficino agrees with the Neo-Platonists, that divination is a divine mode of perception, and will allow the soul to move nearer to the philosophical goal of intellectual knowledge. The wise astrologers use the stars to understand the Providence of God; the ignorant create their own prison by imposing causal action on a realm whose truthful manner of revelation is that of the sign. As Ficino wrote to Francesco Marescalchi, fate or freedom are not dependent on the stars, but on the will of the individual:

“But perhaps someone may say it is foolish to wish to contend against unassailable fate. I, however, reply that it can be opposed as easily as one may wish to oppose it, since by that very opposition one may immediately overcome what one wishes. Surely the movement of the heavenly spheres is never able to raise the mind to a level higher than the spheres. But he who puts them under examination seems already to have transcended them, to have come near God Himself and the free decision of the will.... Furthermore, although any adverse and, as I might say, fatal action habitually proceeds from one contrary position of the stars to another, no one dares assert that will itself and reason, resisting the assumed force of the stars, arise from the force of the stars; but rather we understand that they flow from providence and freedom itself.”⁵⁵

Letter to Federico, Duke of Urbino and The Star of the Magi

Ficino originally included the matter of the letter to Duke Federico in his *Disputation*, addressing the theme of astrology as a signifier of religion. It highlights for us the impossibility, in the end, of reconciling orthodox Christianity and practices of divination, however prophetic they may be. He begins by emphasising—as we might expect—that astrological configurations can in no way be taken as the cause of religions or of the birth of Christ, but that as signs they can clearly indicate both events on earth and the movements of the divine mind, since they are ordered and arranged by God. What level is seen, is dependent on the perception of the astrologer. Most astrologers, he concedes, are only able to perceive the literal and material significance of astrological configurations, but the “wise or divine” man would be able to perceive the “plans and purposes” of divine minds, which are in the train of the Divine Mind itself. So when Ficino talks of the Star of the Magi, or of the eclipse at the Crucifixion, he is talking of events that to some are merely strange apparitions, but to those with eyes to see, are in fact miraculous occurrences. In *The Star of the Magi* sermon he

suggests that the comet or star which the Magi followed to Christ was super-natural in that it was moved by the Angel Gabriel, and that this spiritual dimension would have been evident to the Magi. Just as Christ was both human and divine, the heavens could be read on two levels: the positions of Jupiter, Venus and the Sun at the time signifying an “unusually just, shining and compassionate” King, the angelically propelled comet implying that this would be no merely human sovereign. Similarly in respect to the eclipse at the Crucifixion in the letter to Federico, Ficino tells us it was the same Angel, who “in the form of a full moon, in an action that overcame the powers of nature, substituted the moon for the sun and changed midday into night”. No doubt everyone would have been in awe of the darkness, but not everyone would have ‘seen’ the supernatural initiative.

Here Ficino has to hold in balance two perceptions of the cosmos, the literal and the imaginal. On the one hand, the established order of the planetary spheres with God situated above them and ruling their movements, on the other, the intelligible, hidden reality which they point to—and may reveal—to those who can see it. The former conception, the foundation of orthodoxy, required an order of being ‘above the stars’ operating directly through Divine Providence and manifesting as miraculous events. God may give signs *through* stars (confirmed by Albertus Magnus who asserted that “in those things which God operates by means of the heavens, the indication of heaven is nothing other than divine providence”⁵⁶) or initiate miraculous things, such as the birth and death of Christ, independently of them, but a miracle could not occur through the natural order of planetary cycles, being ‘above’ the order of ‘signs’. Ficino quite happily talks of a possible horoscope for Christ, for He “had to have appeared in one of the twelve signs”, and of the comet appearing in one of these signs “not as the cause of Christ, but a sign”, but does not suggest that the Star of the Magi might have been, in fact, a brilliant conjunction of planets (such as the Jupiter-Saturn conjunction of 7 BC).

For the pagan diviners on the other hand, there could be no further, ‘miraculous’ level beyond the *theophany* of the sign itself. In this sense orthodox theology has forced a wrong comprehension on the revelatory function of the cosmos, seeking to establish a level of operation ‘beyond’ what the stars may reveal, a domain of miraculous revelation which overrides all natural phenomena. The idea of the cosmos as a divine space, capable of revealing truth through *symbol* then becomes opposed to a dualist universe where God and nature are split asunder; the natural world only knowable through reason, and the divine world only knowable through Grace. Viewed ‘exoterically’, even the Christian-Platonic cosmos bound Ficino in its hierarchical structure, the gods and daemons forming a vertical stepladder to God, and necessarily giving way to the primacy of the ultimate Revelation. Such a ‘literal’ vision strained to accommodate the *experienced* revelation of omens and signs as ‘divine’ in its conceptual order. Ficino’s letter to Cosimo illustrates the point: for he might equally as well have appealed to God to help him, and attributed Cosimo’s benefice to His direct intervention. How could the ‘level’ of divinity at work here possibly be ascertained? In actual *practice*, the gods announce their authority, which is precisely why they had to be outlawed. Ficino will of course leave these questions unresolved, but in so doing highlights a paradox that touches the quick of the exoteric-esoteric divide in Western religion. Or perhaps we should say that in the end, he resolves them by speaking from a place beyond such a divide, as we shall see in his *Book of the Sun*. Nevertheless, it was not easy for him to fully justify, to the ordinary ‘priest in the street’, his use of active magical ritual and he did come dangerously near to overstepping the orthodox line, as we shall see in the extract from his *Book of Life*.

On obtaining life from the Heavens

Ficino wrote his *Three Books on Life* in 1489, having elected astrologically the day on which to begin.⁵⁷ It is dedicated to hard-working scholars who were particularly prone to ill

health and melancholy through their sedentary and intellectual life-style. The first ‘self-help’ book of its kind, it gained immense popularity, running to thirty editions by 1647. The first two books, *On a healthy life* and *On a long life*, demonstrate Ficino’s medical expertise and contain practical advice on daily regime, including diet, exercise, herbal remedies and general lifestyle. Particularly interesting is Ficino’s defence of the melancholic humour (black bile) as the physical basis for the Platonic ‘frenzy’ which leads to genius, and the association of this genius with Saturn. The third book, *On obtaining life from the heavens*, introduces Ficino’s particular form of psycho-spiritual therapy, a ‘natural’ magic that enables individuals to work, through their imagination, with the qualities and movements of the stars and planets in order to align their soul with the soul of the world, thereby obtaining the gifts of the planetary spirits. He repeatedly claimed that in this work he was interpreting Plotinus, in particular *Ennead* IV.3.11 where Plotinus explains the working of sympathetic magic:

“And I think that the wise men of old, who made temples and statues in the wish that the gods should be present to them, looking to the nature of the All, had in mind that the nature of soul is everywhere easy to attract, but that if someone were to construct something sympathetic to it and able to receive a part of it, it would of all things receive soul most easily. That which is sympathetic to it is what imitates it in some way, like a mirror able to catch the reflection of a form.”⁵⁸

In chapter one, Ficino further elaborates on Plotinian metaphysics to establish the function of the world soul, which contains ‘seeds’ of the Ideas in the Divine Mind and sows them in the material world. These ‘seminal reasons’ then are the ‘occult’ properties of matter, inherent at all levels of creation from the patterns of the stars to stones. Thus the meaning of astrological figures is endowed by the Soul, which also produces human characteristics via the location and movements of the heavenly bodies at the time of birth. Here again we have the chains of being, each species corresponding through its seminal reason to an archetypal Idea, and each element of the chain united in essence; for in the words of Proclus, “similarity is powerful enough to attach beings to one another.”⁵⁹

In order to explain how the gifts of the soul become transmitted to the body, Ficino introduces the notion of a spirit, part immaterial, part material, which mediates between the two and is particularly suited to absorbing the occult properties of the stars—we might think of it as a form of astral body. It is the function of natural magic, therefore, to cultivate the spirit to receive particular properties from the stars, using specially prepared ‘baits’ such as talismans, smells, foods, images, music, words or even thoughts. The key factors in this process are “timeliness, power and intention”. For example, if one wanted to cultivate the power of love, Venus would be the principle to work with. One would choose a time when the planet Venus was well-aspected, create the appropriate ritual vessel with the power to resonate sympathetically, and focus all one’s attention and concentration on the task. In this way a channel is opened in which the gifts will flow from the Idea, through the celestial mediator, into the soul of the operator and those present. Pico called this activity “marrying the world”, and Ficino deliberately uses down-to-earth similes to emphasise its ‘natural’ and non-daemonic status:

“Nor do affirm here a single word about profane magic which depends upon the worship of daemons, but I mention natural magic, which, by natural things, seeks to obtain the services of the celestials for the prosperous health of our bodies.... The Magus... is the cultivator of the world... for the sake of human welfare he tempers the lower parts of the world to the upper parts,

and just like hens' eggs, so he fittingly subjects earthly things to heaven that they may be fostered."⁶⁰

Ficino argues that the 'secret' influences of the stars and planets are analogous to the obvious effects of overpowering music, and that the magician is simply tuning in to the life-giving properties of nature. But this does raise the question of where the line is drawn between nature and divinity—for when does an 'occult' property become a living presence? When Ficino talks of the planetary spirits responding to invocations, and the cultivation of one's guardian daemon, we are clearly in the realm of autonomous, active spiritual entities, and at some point the 'natural' daemons of the cosmos become 'supercelestial' gods. He insists that he is not worshipping the stars, yet advocates prayer—even going as far as suggesting that the gifts of the celestial or angelic souls to human souls are enticed “not so much by some natural means as by the election of free will or by affection.” Prayer is here linked to study and manner of life as a 'natural' inclination of human will. When speaking of images, Ficino is constantly alert to the Thomist position, that the natural attraction of matter is acceptable, but that engraved words or signs which could be picked up by daemonic intelligences is not. But if an engraved word could attract a demon, how much more so could a sung invocation? What exactly is the distinction between a planetary god and a 'natural', if 'occult', planetary power? In chapter 21 we read

“When at the right astrological hour you declaim aloud by singing and playing in the manners we have specified for the four gods, they seem to be just about to answer you like an echo or like a string in a lute trembling to the vibration of another which has been similarly tuned. And this will happen to you from heaven as naturally, say Plotinus and Iamblichus as a tremor re-echoes from a lute.....”

Plotinus may call the seminal reasons 'gods' and thus give them philosophical sanction—but undoubtedly, here Ficino finds himself in dangerous territory. He insists that the work is a commentary on Plotinus, but Plotinus was not interested in active ritual, relegating its influence to effects on the 'irrational soul' and preferring the path of pure contemplation. Rather we have to look to Iamblichus, Proclus, Synesius, and the Chaldaean and Arabic astrologer-magicians for the true sources of Ficino's inspiration. As we have seen, theurgic ritual aimed very high indeed, and was not just concerned with psychological alignment to nature. Ficino knows this, of course, and hints at the 'higher gifts' which may descend through ritual activity, quickly assuring the reader that he will be discussing the “impure superstition of the heathen” and the “pure piety of the Gospel” at another place. As Christian priest, Ficino is constantly aware of the need to reassure possible critics of his orthodoxy; he tends to be evasive on controversial areas and hide behind others, such as 'the Arabs' or 'the Platonists' when suggesting risky procedures, particularly those involving images. Even so, he was held to task by the Papal Curia and had to appeal to his friends to intercede on his behalf, composing an *Apology* in defence of the natural, health-giving purpose of his magic.

The dangers of idolatry and demonic intervention were not ignored by Ficino, hence his very real caution; but he knew that the awakening of the imaginative power of the soul—which elsewhere he describes as a daemon in its own right—was merely the first step of a journey towards spiritual union with the ultimate Divine principle, call it the One or God. He would suspect that theurgic ritual was as powerful as that sanctioned by the Catholic Church, and allows himself to speculate—prompted by Iamblichus, that if celestial and cosmic divinities include some higher powers which can free us from fate, “much more therefore does a supercelestial divinity redeem us from fatal necessity” (chapter 22). These higher powers can

certainly no longer be considered natural, being located in the Divine Mind itself. The astrologer has now become high priest, directing his craft or his “diligence” towards the engagement of cosmic and spiritual forces, creating an alignment between two worlds which will allow the “divine chance” to be grasped, the grace of the gods – or God? – to descend.

The Book of the Sun

In the same year that Pico’s vehement attack on astrology was published, and Savonarola was launching his polemics against Platonic philosophy, Ficino wrote what may be considered as the summation of his esoteric philosophy, his final statement on the nature of mystical knowledge which brings both pagan and Christian paths into a single focus. Along with its companion, *The Book on Light*, this work explicitly takes us on journey through the levels of interpretation in relation to the central symbol of the Platonic tradition, namely the Sun, and its comparison to God. The central metaphor is daring indeed – for the suggestion that the pagan symbol of the Sun can lead to the apprehension of the Christian God – that not only is the Sun *like* God, but *is* God in the deepest mystical sense, achieves the ultimate synthesis of the two traditions. Furthermore, by showing that traditional astrological language is allegorical, Ficino places it within a hermeneutical procedure that can then move further and deeper. Notice that the title of chapter one clearly states “this book is allegorical and anagogical rather than dogmatic”, and that Ficino tells us that his method will be to “advance from the manifest to the occult” not through rational argument, but through “certain correspondences drawn from the light, according to our abilities”. He is taking the reader on a path of intellectual initiation, and in true Platonic style will be poetic and playful, concealing the deepest mysteries in veils of symbolism. It is remarkable how subtly Ficino does this. In the second chapter, he urges the reader not to engage in abstract speculation about the nature of the universe, but to go outside and look up at the stars. The starting point in this endeavour must be the simple, direct, visual experience of the stars’ physical presence: “When you look upwards at heavenly things, the firmament immediately announces the glory of God and the works of his hands through the very rays of the stars, and through the aspects or inclinations of their eyes as they wander.” So, we start with the physical body of the Sun and its movement through the constellations of the zodiac, which Ficino shows to be the origin of its astrological qualities. Astronomy and astrology are here intertwined, for the planets’ ‘literal’ movements and positions give rise to their allegorical interpretations, just like a sacred text.

From chapter nine, Ficino moves to a new level of symbolic discourse; from the Sun being *similar* to God, it is now the *image* of God: the physical sun is ‘seen through’ to “the virtue and divinity of God”. In other words, we have moved from allegory to symbol, from the manifest light to the hidden light, which becomes a metaphor for Truth. The two lights—the natural and divine—are explained in chapter eleven; for just as the Sun’s natural light manifests in the world of the senses, so the hidden, intelligible light “kindles the inner spiritual eye.” This is the mythological Sun, the god Apollo, who leads men’s minds to the truth through oracles, poetry and music. In the following chapter, we go further, to the anagogic level of perception where Ficino relates the fecundity, light and heat of the Sun to the threefold order of angelic beings and to the Divine Trinity of Father, Son and Spirit. He also differentiates between three kinds of light, relating them to types of perception: red light to taste and touch, mixed light to hearing and smell and white to imagination and sight. This is what Ficino means by ‘proceeding Orphically’, unfolding the many in the one, disclosing the multi-levelled dimensions of the imaginal cosmos.⁶¹ Finally, the visible Sun unites with the symbolic Sun in chapter thirteen as Ficino draws the distinction between idolatry, which is the worship of the literal, visible aspect alone and veneration of the ‘supercelestial’, spiritual Sun which *is* the ‘bounty of the Father’ and which can only be perceived *through* its visible

counterpart. In this way he finally unites, through an image, the exoteric ‘God above the Sun’ with the esoteric ‘God as the Sun’, thus combining His transcendence and immanence. The book ends with an exhortation to worship that principle of unity, the one beginning of all things, with “the same ritual observance that all celestial things give to the Sun.” As the stars and planets all bow to the Sun, so the human soul bows to God through the harmony and order of his ritual activity.

Ficino’s astrology is an astrology of the hidden light, the light of Platonic wisdom that leads human beings out of their cave of ignorance. From his metaphysical viewpoint, the language of the Ptolemaic tradition—if not understood as a stepping stone to deeper, transcendent symbolism—confines the astrologer to the world of natural causation. By bringing ‘Platonic reasoning’ to bear on astrology, its symbols can be referred back to their deepest possible referents, the Ideas in the Divine Mind itself. In so doing, it could be argued that Ficino re-connected astrology with its ‘truth’ in the sense of its foundation in divination, where the realisation of the unity of the three worlds—divinity, world, man—occurs in one instant apprehension of meaning. That he managed to do so as a Christian priest, in the face of a Church which condemned both deterministic and divinatory astrology, bears witness to his extraordinary ability to move to a metaphysical position beyond discursive reasoning or dogma, and speak from it. Perhaps ultimately, Platonic knowledge and Christian faith could only meet at a place beyond the cosmos, which is why the question of astrology became so problematic and crucial; it either had to lead to the One, or be rejected entirely—and if it was to achieve the former, it would have to confront the unassailable gates of Christian orthodoxy. Ficino came as close as anyone to squaring the circle and indeed he was the last to do so before the intellectual world was split asunder. There were *magi* in the following centuries such as Cornelius Agrippa, Robert Fludd, Paracelsus and John Dee who developed the Hermetic practices of alchemy, magic and medicine, and astrologers such as William Lilly who brought a Christian piety to divination, but Pico’s arguments against judicial astrology took root in a new age of rationalism and spawned an intense debate on the ‘irrational’ nature of divination and magic. With the domination of empirical science as the yardstick with which to measure ‘truth’, divination could no longer justify itself and became relegated to superstition and witchcraft. Johannes Kepler, a century after Ficino’s death, exemplifies the dilemma of the ‘enlightenment’ astrologer who, in formulating a scientific explanation for the effects of planetary aspects, has no choice but to reject outright any magical or divinatory elements of the craft.

Ficino in the last 500 years

The influence of Ficino’s Platonic Academy spread far and wide in the 16th century. In the words Paul Oskar Kristeller, the twentieth century pioneer of Ficinian scholarship:

“In his *Platonic Theology* [Ficino] gave to his contemporaries an authoritative summary of Platonist philosophy, in which the immortality of the soul is emphasised.... His Platonic Academy with its courses and discussions provided for some decades an institutional center whose influence was spread all over Europe through his letters and other writings. Assigning to the human soul the central place in the hierarchy of the universe, he gave a metaphysical expression to a notion dear to his humanist predecessors; whereas his doctrine of spiritual love in Plato’s sense, for which he coined the term Platonic love, became one of the most popular concepts of later Renaissance literature.”⁶²

Indeed Ficino's Commentary on Plato's *Symposium* of 1469 (*De amore*) initiated a new genre of literature, the love treatise, which was in vogue in Europe for at least the next two hundred years. The philosophical and social ideal of spiritual Love as a virtuous way of life was cultivated by the elite, promoted by treatises such as Leone Ebreo's *Dialoghi d'Amore* (1535) and Baldassare Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* (1528). The latter describes the character of the ideal courtier, based on Platonic principles of appropriate education and artistic refinement, although in all Renaissance evocations of Plato's elevation of erotic relationship, the beloved has necessarily become transposed from a beautiful youth to a celebrated woman.

England was slower than Italy, France or Spain to absorb Ficino's Platonic legacy. As Sears Jayne observes, "Between 1485 and 1578 there were more than a hundred different editions of various works of Plato in France; in England during the same period, not one."⁶³ But at the end of the sixteenth century, this was to change. Jean de Serres dedicated a new Latin translation of Plato to Queen Elizabeth, and Guy Le Fevre de la Boderie published a French translation of Ficino's *De amore* which was to have considerable influence on poets such as Philip Sidney, George Chapman and Edmund Spenser. In Elizabethan England, the influence of Ficino's Platonism was not only literary, however. Around the Queen there emerged a circle of intellectuals who gathered to discuss philosophical matters; among them, the *magus* John Dee and the radical Italian Hermetic philosopher, Giordano Bruno, who joined the Sidney circle in London in the 1580s. In particular, a poetic genre arose dedicated to conveying the deeper mysteries of Love. Reviving the esoteric and magical teachings of Hermes Trismegistus, Christian Cabbala and Neoplatonism through the translations and writings of Ficino and Pico, the poets of the 'School of the Night' identified with the image of melancholy and darkness as a necessary condition for spiritual enlightenment, and sought to convey through artistic forms an initiation into the secrets of spiritual union.

Ficino's transformation of Saturnine melancholy into intellectual insight was given its most famous artistic expression of the era by the composer John Dowland with his emblematic world-weary persona. Dowland's *Lachrimae* compositions have a Hermetic agenda which speaks through the simple, yet profound, metaphor of the falling tear and which also owe their extraordinary emotional power to Ficino's revival of Platonic *eros* as the guiding force of the soul.⁶⁴

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries also saw the growth of occult societies such as Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry, with their emphasis on initiation and 'hidden' knowledge of the secrets of the universe. Deeply influenced by Christian Hermeticism, one can trace the origins of these movements to Ficino's Renaissance ideal of the Perennial wisdom, but he himself would not have associated the intellectual truths of Platonic Christianity with the practices of alchemy or angelic magic, or have regarded nature as withholding her secrets for the favoured elite. It is perhaps as though Ficino's attempts to keep his 'natural magic' within the bounds of Plotinian metaphysics could not be sustained in an era where religion and science were being torn asunder, and the early modern *magus* was led to penetrate ever further into the mysteries of existence as a necessary counterbalance to their increasing rejection by the light of Reason.

It is perhaps significant that Ficino was not chiefly remembered for his astrology, which indicates firstly that it was an integral element of his Platonism and secondly that the mainstream tradition of classical astrology (as instigated by Ptolemy) pursued its own turbulent course, at odds with both scientific and religious paradigms, in the following centuries. The Enlightenment, Sears Jayne suggests, "administered the *coup de grace* to renaissance Platonism" and he quotes Samuel Parker's *A Free and Impartial Censure of the Platonick Philosophy* (1666):

“That Platonisme is almost nothing but an allegorie is too notorious to want a proof. Plato’s two famous dialogues, viz his *Symposium* and his *Phaedrus*, ranked by Ficinus among his metaphysical and theological treatises, treat of nothing but love and beauty, and of them, too, in poetick schemes and fables.”⁶⁵

“Nothing but an allegorie” – the metaphorical knowledge of cosmic order has been reduced to a mere flight of fancy, devoid of any intellectual substance, in relation to the mighty edifice of Reason.

There was a brief revival of Platonic thought in England in the early nineteenth century, when Thomas Taylor championed and translated neoplatonic and pagan texts such as Iamblichus’ *On the mysteries* and the Hymns of Orpheus, but on the whole it remained out of fashion – even ridiculed – until, as Ficino might put it, Providence saw fit to entrust the esoteric vision to a movement which was to have profound influence on the astrology and psychology of the modern era: Theosophy. From the mid-nineteenth century, a renewed interest in the experiential dimension of mysticism together with a revival of Ficino’s idea of the Perennial Wisdom underlying all religion produced a movement, led by Helena Blavatsky, which sought to unite science, religion and philosophy in pursuit of an ageless Truth. From Theosophy emerged the Anthroposophy or ‘spiritual science’ of Rudolf Steiner, incorporating a new form of astrology which embraced both spiritual and physical dimensions of reality in an attempt to bring the rigorous, empirical methods of scientific enquiry to the realms of metaphysical insight.

Ficinian – or in a wider sense neoplatonic - influence now informed the ‘theosophical’ astrology of Alan Leo, with his emphasis on the spiritual dimension of planetary symbolism, and the ‘humanistic’ and subsequent ‘psychological’ astrology of Dane Rudhyar and Liz Greene. The latter of course owing much of its popularity and accessibility to the work of C.G. Jung, who more than any other thinker in the last century has preserved the mysterious connection of the human soul with the cosmos through his exploration of the psychological and spiritual dimensions of symbolic perception. Jung’s work was carried forward in the movement of archetypal psychology (notably by James Hillman, Thomas Moore and Noel Cobb), which whilst preserving the imaginative and soul-centred core of Ficinian Platonism, emphasises the polytheistic rather than monotheistic dimension of a metaphorical universe.; furthermore it would not be inaccurate to suggest that the ‘new-age’ movement itself with its multiplicity of holistic practices has grown out of the soil of Renaissance natural magic. Meanwhile, the world of scholarship has experienced a surge of interest in Renaissance Hermeticism, magic and esotericism. Ficino’s Platonic Commentaries and *Platonic Theology* are receiving English translation for the first time, his *Book of Life* has a scholarly edition and his complete collection of letters are being published by the School of Economic Science.⁶⁶ Most significantly, his astrology is undergoing a serious re-assessment as a vital and integral part of his Platonism, and there is a growing movement to bring astrological and divinatory studies into the Academy in the true spirit of the Ancient Theology, which embodied above all else the creative synthesis of philosophy and religion. The vocation of the self-effacing, humble Florentine to heal the rifts in the human soul continues, it would seem, albeit from a higher plane.

Notes ⁶⁷

¹ *Asclepius* I.6; Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man* in Carmichael, Miller & Wallis, 3.

² Ficino, Prologue to *De Christiana religione*, quoted in J.Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, 289.

³ Jupiter and Saturn come together in their cycles every 20 years. Roughly every 200 years, the conjunction takes place in a new element (according to the division of zodiacal signs into earth, water, air and fire) and is termed a 'great conjunction'. According to Arabic astrology, these indicated great changes to law and religions.

⁴ Ficino, *De Christiana religione*, quoted in Hankins, 283. For a fuller account of Ficino's historico-theological vision, see Hankins 283-7.

⁵ G. Corsi, 'The Life of Marsilio Ficino' in *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino* vol. 3, 138.

⁶ The Orphic Hymns were most probably composed in the Hellenistic period, when Orphic cults were popular. On Ficino's use of the Hymns, see 'Summoning Plotinus: Ficino, Smoke and the Strangled Chickens' in M.J.B. Allen, 1995, XIV, 63-88; also M.L. West, *The Orphic Poems*.

⁷ Angelo Poliziano, *Opera, quae quidem extitere hactenus, omnia* 1.310 (Aldus, Venice, 1498).

⁸ Pico, *On the Dignity of Man*, 33.

⁹ *Ibid.* 23.

¹⁰ Pico, *900 Theses* 10.7, trans. S. Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 507.

¹¹ Ficino, *Opera omnia*, 933 (quoted in M.J.B. Allen, 'Summoning Plotinus', 77).

¹² C.G. Jung, *Synchronicity- An Acausal Connecting Principle* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1972), 36.

¹³ Hankins, 287.

¹⁴ See Hankins, 'Introduction: The Revival of Plato' 3-26, this ref., 5.

¹⁵ Ficino, Preface to the Commentaries on Plato, trans. School of Economic Science (unpublished).

¹⁶ Ficino, *Platonic Theology* trans. M.J.B. Allen & J. Warden, vol. 1, 148.

¹⁷ Plato, *Timaeus* 29e-39e.

¹⁸ Proclus, *De sacrificio et magia* (see trans. Ronan at <http://www.esotericism.co.uk/proclus-sacred.htm>)

¹⁹ Quoted in P.O. Kristeller, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, 50.

²⁰ Ficino, *Theologica Platonica* 10.7, quoted in P. Moffit Watts, 'Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and Three Renaissance Platonists'. 297.

²¹ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, 1.3, trans. E. Clarke.

²² See Ficino's Preface to the *Pimander* in B. Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, xlvi.

²³ Ficino, *Opera omnia* 1837-9.

²⁴ *Corpus Hermeticum*, I.15, trans. C. Salaman, D. Van Oyen & W. Wharton, *The Way of Hermes*.

²⁵ *Ibid.* I.26.

²⁶ *Ibid.* XII.7.

²⁷ *Ibid.* IX. 6.

²⁸ *Ibid.* XII.19.

²⁹ Ficino, *On obtaining life from the heavens*, ch. 13 (trans. C. Kaske & J. Clark, *Three Books on Life*, Book III).

³⁰ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, VIII.4, trans. E. Clarke.

³¹ Ficino, *Theologia Platonica* XIII.3, trans. C. Trinkaus, 'Humanist Themes in Marsilio Ficino's Philosophy', 483.

³² Ficino, Preface to Commentaries on Plotinus, trans. School of Economic Science (unpublished).

³³ Plotinus, *Ennead* II.3.8, trans. S. MacKenna.

³⁴ *Ibid.* III.1.6.

³⁵ *Ibid.* II.3.7.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.* II.3.9.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Iamblichus *On the Mysteries* III.17, trans. E. Clarke.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, III.16.

⁴² Carol Kaske, 'Ficino's shifting attitude towards astrology in the *De vita coelitus comparanda*, the letter to Poliziano, and the *Apologia* to the Cardinals' in ed. Garfagnini, *Marsilio Ficino e il Ritorno di Platone* 372, ref.2; D.P. Walker, 'Marsilio Ficino and Astrology', *ibid.* 341-2.

⁴³ Ficino, *Opera omnia*, 1609.

⁴⁴ Ficino, *Letters* vol. 7, no.19.

⁴⁵ Aristotle, *Problems* 30.1.

⁴⁶ Ficino, *On a healthy life* ch.6 (trans. C. Kaske & J. Clark, *Three Books on Life*, Book 1).

⁴⁷ Ficino, *On obtaining life from the heavens*, ch. 22.

⁴⁸ Ficino, Preface to the Commentaries on Plato, trans. School of Economic Science (unpublished).

⁴⁹ See W. R. Bowen, 'Ficino's Analysis of Musical *Harmonia*' in *Ficino and Renaissance Neoplatonism*, 17-27.

⁵⁰ Ficino, Commentary on Plotinus, *Opera omnia* 1615.

⁵¹ Ficino, *On obtaining life from the heavens*, ch. 17.

⁵² Ficino, *Letters* vol.1, no. 5.

⁵³ See Aquinas, 'Whether Divination is a Sin' in *Summa theologica* II.2.95.

⁵⁴ Augustine *City of God*, V.7, XXI.8.

⁵⁵ Ficino, *Letters*, vol. 3, no.29.

⁵⁶ Albertus Magnus (attr.) *Speculum astronomiae*, quoted in P. Zambelli, *The Speculum astronomiae and its enigma*, 97.

⁵⁷ See Ficino, letter to Pico, *Opera omnia* 901.

⁵⁸ Plotinus, *Ennead* IV.3.ii, trans. S. MacKenna.

⁵⁹ Proclus, *De sacrificio et magia* trans. Ronan.

⁶⁰ Ficino, 'An Apologia dealing with Medicine, Astrology, the Life of the World, and the Magi who greeted the Christ Child at His Birth', trans. C. Kaske & J. Clark, *Three Books on Life*, 397.

⁶¹ See Ficino's letter, 'Orphic Comparison of the Sun to God and the setting forth of causal forms' in *Letters*, vol. 5 No.27.

⁶² P.O.Kristeller, *The Classics and Renaissance Thought*, 59.

⁶³ Sears Jayne, *Marsilio Ficino, Commenary on Plato's Symposium on Love* 21.

⁶⁴ See Angela Voss, 'The Power of a Melancholy Humour: Divination and Divine Tears'

⁶⁵ Sears Jayne, 23.

⁶⁶ See Bibliography for details.

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