

## ‘THE POWER OF A MELANCHOLY HUMOUR’<sup>1</sup>

### Divination and Divine Tears

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The sixteenth-century *magus* Cornelius Agrippa, in his comprehensive *Three Books on Occult Philosophy*, observes:

[the melancholy humour] when it is stirred up, burns and stirs up a madness conducing to knowledge and divination, especially if it is helped by any celestial influx, particularly of Saturn ... By melancholy saith [Aristotle], some men are made as it were divine, foretelling things to come, and some men are made poets.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper I shall explore the connections between the physiological condition of melancholy and the possession of divinatory knowledge, via the development of the idea of philosophical ‘genius’ which arose in the work of the fifteenth-century Florentine Platonist Marsilio Ficino. Ficino’s revival of neoplatonic and Hermetic cosmology and magic within a Christian context was to inform, on many levels, the music, art and literature of the Elizabethan Renaissance, and I would like to trace this influence in particular on the composer John Dowland. Dowland’s appropriation of the persona of the melancholic artist does, I suggest, have far deeper implications than mere conceit or the indulgence of a world-weary personality, and to explore these we will take a multi-levelled approach and evoke the ‘image of melancholy’ through physiological, mythological, astrological, magical and metaphysical contexts. I will conclude that there can be no one definitive interpretation of Dowland’s musical jewel *Lachrimae*, and that the depth and power of its musical symbolism point to more profound dimensions of reality than even the composer himself may have envisioned.

#### The melancholic humour

Firstly, what do we mean by melancholy? The categorisation of the four humours is attributed to Hippocrates (fifth-fourth centuries BCE) who, through close examination of blood, deduced four conditions or substances within it: phlegm, black bile, yellow bile and blood itself.<sup>3</sup> Each of these gave rise to a physiological temperament: phlegmatic, melancholic, choleric and sanguine, which then became the basis of medical diagnosis and prescription. An imbalance of any humour would give rise to an exaggerated display of its characteristics in the personality, thus too much black bile - which was considered to be cold, dry and heavy in quality - would result in groundless depression, sluggishness and mental disorder. If overheated, however, it would produce a madness or frenzy and a breaking out of sores. Aristotle, in his *Problems*, asks why it is that outstanding philosophers, statesmen, poets or artists (or heroes such as Heracles, Lysander, Ajax and Bellepheron) are of a melancholic temperament, or even “infected by the diseases arising

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<sup>1</sup> C. Agrippa, *Three Books on Occult Philosophy (De occulta philosophia*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Antwerp, 1531), ed. Donald Tyson, trans. J. Freake (St Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 1997), LX, 188.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> See Hippocrates, *Nature of Man, Regimen in Health, Humors, Aphorisms, Regimen 1-3, Dreams* trans. W.H.S. Jones (Harvard: Loeb Classical Library, 1931).

from black bile”.<sup>4</sup> The idea arises here that black bile causes a super-human quality to manifest when it is heated excessively, an eruption of mental acuity, passion or desire which ‘shifts’ the consciousness to another level of insight:

Those in whom the bile is considerable and cold become sluggish and stupid, while those with whom it is excessive and hot become mad, clever or amorous and easily moved to passion or desire, and some become more talkative. But many, because this heat is near to the seat of the mind, are affected by the diseases of madness or frenzy, which accounts for the Sybils, soothsayers, and all inspired persons.<sup>5</sup>

Even those with “moderately heated” black bile, says Aristotle, are “superior to the rest of the world in many ways”,<sup>6</sup> chiefly through their acute intelligence.

Thus black bile has two effects: if excessive, it will weigh the body down, force the mind into the body and lead to despondency. On the other hand, if it is not stable it may combust and lead to outbursts of mania. The remedy would be to rarefy the bile with moisture derived from phlegm and blood, and to temper and refine it through the use of specific foods, remedies and healthy regimes. When harmoniously tempered, the black bile was seen to produce a capacity for an understanding of a particular kind – one more penetrating than that produced by the other three humours. Why would this be? We will return to this question a little later.

### **Divine frenzy**

It was Plato who established the spiritual potential of the ‘frenzied’ condition, in suggesting that in such an altered state of consciousness it was possible to become a channel for the influx of divine knowledge. Through the observation of four contexts in which such madness manifested - religious ritual, poetic inspiration, erotic love and prophetic utterance - he transformed a pathology into a “gift of heaven”<sup>7</sup> as it enabled the individual to transcend the human condition and lift his or her mind to the level of the gods - in effect, to ‘realise’ their innate divine nature. The Platonists insisted on the distinction between this ‘divine-sent’ madness which led to inspiration or ecstasy and a derangement of mental faculties which was of purely human physiological or psychological origins and led to insanity.<sup>8</sup> The near-identity of the words *manike* (madness) and *mantike* (prophetic divination) proved, for Plato, their common etymological origins and therefore the essential and prerequisite condition for both foresight and artistic genius which could never be derived from merely human talents:

But he who, having no touch of the Muses’ madness in his soul, comes to the door and thinks that he will get into the temple by the help of art – he, I say, and his poetry are not admitted; the sane man disappears and is nowhere when he enters into rivalry with the madman.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, *Problems* 30.1, translation in J. Radden (ed.), *The Nature of Melancholy from Aristotle to Kristeva* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), ch.1, 57.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 58.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus* 244.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Iamblichus, *De mysteriis* III.2.104, III.25.158, 5-159,13; See Emma C. Clarke, *Iamblichus’ De mysteriis: A Manifesto of the Miraculous* (Ashgate 2001), 75-8; Gregory Shaw, ‘Containing Ecstasy: The Strategies of Iamblican Theurgy’ in *Dionysius* vol. XXI, Dec. 2003, 54-88.

<sup>9</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus* 244.

This state of divine possession - the enraptured performer who was both man and god - was to take hold of the Renaissance imagination and lift the status of poetry and music to unprecedented heights; for if music could embody divine qualities, it could have the effect of raising the listener's soul to a similar ecstatic union through sympathetic resonance.

## Saturn

It became commonplace in Medieval and Renaissance literature to associate the planet Saturn with the melancholic humour, as if he were 'to blame' for it.<sup>10</sup> The correspondence between humours and planets was established by Arabic astrologers such as Abu' Mashar (died 885 CE) who associated stars, elements, humours and colours through their analogical qualities, in the tradition of neoplatonic and Hermetic magical practice. In the tenth century Arabic text *Faithful of Basra* we read:

The spleen occupies the same position in the body as Saturn in the world. For Saturn with its rays sends forth transcendent powers which penetrate into every part of the world. Through these, forms adhere to, and remain in, matter. Even so goes forth from the spleen the power of the black bile, which is cold and dry and it flows with the blood through the veins into every part of the body, and through it the blood coagulates and the parts adhere to one another.<sup>11</sup>

Such correspondences formed the basis of both medical and magical procedures, and were based on obvious correlations between traditional astrological symbolism and 'literal' observation. Bile is black, cold and dry like the earth – Saturn, ruling matter, is also cold (being far from the Sun), slow in its revolutions and dark in colour. Similarly, Mars ruled the choleric, Jupiter the sanguine, and the Moon the phlegmatic temperaments. In classical astrology, as it was established by Ptolemy<sup>12</sup> and affiliated to an Aristotelian 'natural scientific' framework, planets were seen to influence human life causally and directly, and so we find Saturn 'making' the individual unlucky, lonely, miserly and selfish if prominent in particular places in a nativity.<sup>13</sup> Yet the Roman Saturn was originally wholly good, the guardian of wealth and god of farming, and it is only when we go back to his mythological origins as the Greek Kronos that we begin to observe an internal ambivalence which lies at the roots of his nature.<sup>14</sup> As the authors of *Saturn and Melancholy* observe, Kronos, in Homer and Hesiod, is a god of opposites; according to Homer, Kronos as father of Zeus, Poseidon and Hades is "great" but also "of crooked counsel". He is the benevolent god of agriculture, ruler of the Golden Age, but also a gloomy, dethroned solitary god, "exiled beneath the earth and the flood of the seas". He is the father of gods and men, but also the devourer of his own children.<sup>15</sup>

To summarise Robert Graves' account,<sup>16</sup> Kronos was a Titan, fathered by Uranus upon Mother Earth, after he had thrown his rebellious sons the Cyclopes into Tartarus. In revenge, Earth persuaded the Titans to attack their father, led by Kronos who castrated him with a flint sickle as he slept, throwing the genitals into the sea with his left hand. This act

<sup>10</sup> Noted by R. Klibansky, E. Panofsky & F. Saxl, in *Saturn and Melancholy* (London: Nelson, 1964), 1.1.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in *Saturn and Melancholy*, 129-30.

<sup>12</sup> The primary text being Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos* (trans. F.E. Robbins, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1940).

<sup>13</sup> For example, Julius Firmicus Maternus *Matheseos Libri VIII* trans Jean Rhys Brams (Parkridge, New Jersey: Noyes Press, 1975), *Liber tertius*, II.

<sup>14</sup> See *Saturn and Melancholy* 1.2.

<sup>15</sup> *Saturn and Melancholy* 134-5, quoting *Iliad* IV.59; V.721; XIV.204.

<sup>16</sup> In Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths* (London: Cassell, 1955), 6-7; see also *Saturn and Melancholy* 144.

engendered the Furies, who avenge crimes of parricide and perjury. Kronos married his sister Rhea, but it had been prophecied by Uranus and Earth that one of his own sons would dethrone him. So every year he swallowed his children. Rhea was so enraged that she took her third son Zeus to Mother Earth who hid him in a cave to be brought up by nymphs, including the goat-nymph Amaltheia (when he became Lord of the Universe, Zeus set her image among the stars as Capricorn). Rhea had tricked Kronos by giving him a stone in swaddling clothes to swallow. Eventually, Zeus, Poseidon and Hades banished Kronos to Tartarus, where he enjoyed a “sad and thoughtful old age”.

The astrological Saturn preserved the sickle of Kronos in its glyph, along with such symbolism of the heaviness of the stone,<sup>17</sup> the sadness, the old age, the father. But in the tradition of classical astrology the allegory of the myth became concretised into analogy; Manilius speaks of Saturn holding the fate of fathers and old men<sup>18</sup> and those born under Saturn were said to display qualities of heaviness and melancholy. As the doctrine of the four humours developed, Saturnine people inevitably began to be associated with those in whom the melancholic humour was strongest. Yet Kronos’ old age was not only sad, but “thoughtful”. It was this attribute which was to become the key to the transformation of traditional astrological doctrine that occurred in the fifteenth century, as Marsilio Ficino, fervent Platonist, had no choice but to re-interpret Saturn in the light of his philosophical convictions. This was to have extraordinary consequences, both for astrology itself and in the birth of the Renaissance ‘man of genius’.

### The transformation of Saturn

In his medical/astrological treatise of 1489, *Three Books on Life*, Ficino achieves an unprecedented synthesis of the Aristotelian physiology of melancholy, Platonic frenzy and the astrological/mythological Saturn in a typical multi-levelled approach. But before looking at this in some detail, we need to understand why Saturn had such extraordinary resonance for Ficino on both personal and philosophical levels, and how he came to re-vision the possibilities of astrological interpretation. In 1477, Ficino had condemned outright the astrologers of his day, accusing them - the “petty ogres” - of usurping God’s Providence and Justice and denying the freewill of mankind.<sup>19</sup> He could see that astrology, as it survived in its traditional, fatalistic form, remained bound to the literal world of cause and effect, prey to the conjectures and false interpretations of its practitioners and devoid of piety or philosophical insight. Ficino, following Plotinus, understood the human soul to be autonomous and divine, able to move freely, amphibian-like, in a cosmos where every part connected to the whole in a complex ballet. A supreme and unified divine presence or ONE emanated out into creation by means of the continual motion of the *anima mundi*, its traces in the material world perceived by humans not through their abstract reasoning but as ‘occult properties’ through their *imagination*, the soul’s organ of perception.

Plotinus speaks of a universe where the stars are signs or indications of divine will as it manifests throughout creation, signs which can be read by one who is able to “see with different eyes” – that is, poetically, through metaphor and symbol. Such vision, he says,

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<sup>17</sup> The stone swallowed by Saturn can also be associated with the philosopher’s stone of alchemy, in which the ‘literal’ stone has become transfigured into gold, i.e. ‘spiritual’ substance. It is often identified with ‘the divine child’ (see C.G. Jung, *Alchemical Studies* [CW13, London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968], 94-101, 294-7; *Psychology and Alchemy* [CW 12, London: Routledge 1989], 357-431) which has resonances with the original ‘deception’ of Rhea in her substitution of the material stone for the living king of the gods, Zeus. Interpreted alchemically, the stone ‘is’ Zeus, but the spiritual substance must first be extracted from the inert matter before being re-introduced as the transforming agent.

<sup>18</sup> Manilius, *Astronomica* trans. G.P.Goold (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1977), 2, 157.

<sup>19</sup> Marsilio Ficino, ‘A Disputation against the Pronouncements of the Astrologers’ in *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino* vol.3, no.37 (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 1981), 75-7.

depends on the sympathy and correspondence of all parts of the living universe with each other, and is of another order entirely from 'cause and effect' action:

The stars, as being no minor members of the heavenly system, are co-operators contributing at once to its stately beauty and to its symbolic quality. Their symbolic power extends to the entire realm of sense, their efficacy only to what they patently do.<sup>20</sup>

Plotinus observes that the powers of the stars do not lie in themselves, but in the ability of the human being to *perceive* their patterns as analogies: "the wise man is the man who in any one thing can read another".<sup>21</sup> They facilitate the act of divination, in that they are embodiments, on the level of the cosmos, of the archetypal principles residing in the Divine Mind itself and thus can be read as signs of a transcendent wisdom. This is the basis of 'esoteric' thinking, and applied to astrology, implies that a horoscope is not, in essence, a set of finite definitions, but an image of universal principles 'particularised' for the life of an individual. As such, the individual is free to interpret them on whatever level he finds himself - since the soul, for Plotinus, is self-directive.<sup>22</sup> Each principle can be understood literally - which will appear like a fixed fate - or symbolically, which allows for a deeper penetration into its *meaning*. Astrology as *poetic metaphor* rather than natural-scientific fact frees the imagination and allows a mirroring to take place in which the soul sees itself; but more than that, making the step from the literal to the symbolic interpretation, discerning a hidden meaning, was understood by Ficino as the first step towards a deeper spiritual understanding.<sup>23</sup> Allegory, symbolism and metaphor had long been established as means to spiritual knowledge via the Christian Platonic visionary mysticism of Dionysius the Areopagite<sup>24</sup> (who we will return to later) and the four levels hermeneutic of medieval scriptural interpretation; a mode of perception which moved from the objective detachment of a literal fact to a sense of participation and identification of 'knower' with the thing known - a meeting of outer and inner worlds in a teleological process whose ultimate end was anagogic union with God.<sup>25</sup> Theology for Ficino was essentially this dynamic process of understanding, not a statement of dogma - his 'divine Plato' could point to deep mysteries through poetry and metaphor, and he adopts the same method.<sup>26</sup>

Thus Saturn, for all his negative attributes in traditional astrology, had to contain a hidden gold, not only because all the stars revealed the workings of Providence as divine

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<sup>20</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads* II.3.7 trans. S. Mackenna (London: Faber 1962, repr. ed. J. Dillon, New York: Penguin Books, 1992).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> See for example *ibid.*, II.3.9.

<sup>23</sup> As demonstrated most succinctly in his *Liber de sole* (*Opera omnia*, Basle 1576, repr. Phénix Editions, Paris 2000), vol. 1, 965-75, trans. G. Cornelius, D. Costello, G. Todyn, A. Voss and V. Wells in *Sphinx, A Journal for Archetypal Psychology* vol. 6 (The London Convivium for Archetypal Studies, 1994), 124-48.

<sup>24</sup> See Pseudo-Dionysius (sixth century CE), *Divine Names; The Celestial Hierarchy*. Arthur Versluis remarks that in its emphasis on the power of symbolism to convey spiritual understanding, this aspect of Dionysius' work "can be seen as a cornerstone for what has come to be known as Western esotericism, for [it] speaks to the power of the imagination in perceiving transcendent reality through symbolism." (Versluis, 'Dionysius the Areopagite' in *Esoterica*, [www.esoteric.msu.edu/VolumeII/Dionysius.html](http://www.esoteric.msu.edu/VolumeII/Dionysius.html)).

<sup>25</sup> The Christians were indebted to the neoplatonists in their appropriation of the power of symbolic vision, and the neoplatonists to the Egyptians (as for example, Iamblichus, *De mysteriis*. See Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul* (Pennsylvania: Penn State Press, 1998); Peter Struck, *Birth of the Symbol* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), chaps. 6&7. On the four levels of interpretation, see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologia* I. 9-10; Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, the Four Senses of Scripture* (repr.trans.Continuum International Publishing Group, 1998 & 2000); A. Voss, 'From Allegory to Anagoge; the challenge of symbolic perception in a literal world' in eds. N. Campion, P. Curry & M. York, *Astrology and the Academy* (Bristol: Cinnabar Books 2004).

<sup>26</sup> Explicitly stated in Ficino, *Proemium* to the Commentaries on Plato, *Opera omnia* vol.2, 1128-30.

signs, but because Saturn was the highest of them, the nearest to the Divine Mind itself. No planet could be malefic for the Platonist, for whom the entire cosmos moves towards the Good, and increases in divine potency up through the concentric spheres of Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn. Beyond Saturn lies the realm of the fixed stars - symbolically, the divine mind - and beyond that, the One itself. In the microcosm of the human soul, therefore, Saturn represents the furthest outreach of the human mind, its deepest connection with spiritual reality, an intelligence which borders on that of God. The discovery of this gold was even more crucial for Ficino, as he was born with Saturn prominent and strong in his nativity, on his Ascendant in Aquarius, and he identified with a melancholy temperament (see figure 1).<sup>27</sup> He had no choice: if as a philosopher he was penetrating to the unity of all things in the Good, then he had to find the qualities in himself which would lead him there; if it was his melancholy temperament that led him to 'penetrate to the heart of things', then this became a gift, not a curse, of Saturn. He wrote to his great friend Giovanni Cavalcanti:

Saturn seems to have impressed the seal of melancholy on me from the beginning, set, as it is, almost in the midst of my ascendant Aquarius... So what shall I do? I shall seek a shift; either I shall say, if you wish, that a nature of this kind does not issue from Saturn, or if it should be necessary that it does issue from Saturn, I shall, in agreement with Aristotle, say that this nature itself is a unique and divine gift.<sup>28</sup>

From this perspective, Saturn's 'influence' would not be helpful to those who did not practice contemplation but led a worldly life. Ficino explains:

The contemplating intellect - insofar as it separates itself not only from things we perceive but even from those things which we commonly imagine and which we prove about human behaviour and insofar as it recollects itself in emotion, in intention and in life to supra-physical things - exposes itself somewhat to Saturn. To this faculty alone is Saturn propitious. For just as the Sun is hostile to nocturnal animals, but friendly to the diurnal, 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. For Saturn has relinquished the ordinary life to Jupiter, but he claims for himself a life sequestered and divine.<sup>29</sup>

Saturn has "taken over things which transcend the physical"; in this assertion, a new astrology was born, in which Saturn becomes a symbol of the most profound self-knowledge.<sup>30</sup> In one of his most elegant passages of astrological metaphor, Ficino suggests

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<sup>27</sup> Added to which, as an astrologer Ficino would understand the Moon and Mars in Saturn's sign of Capricorn to emphasise his Saturnine characteristics.

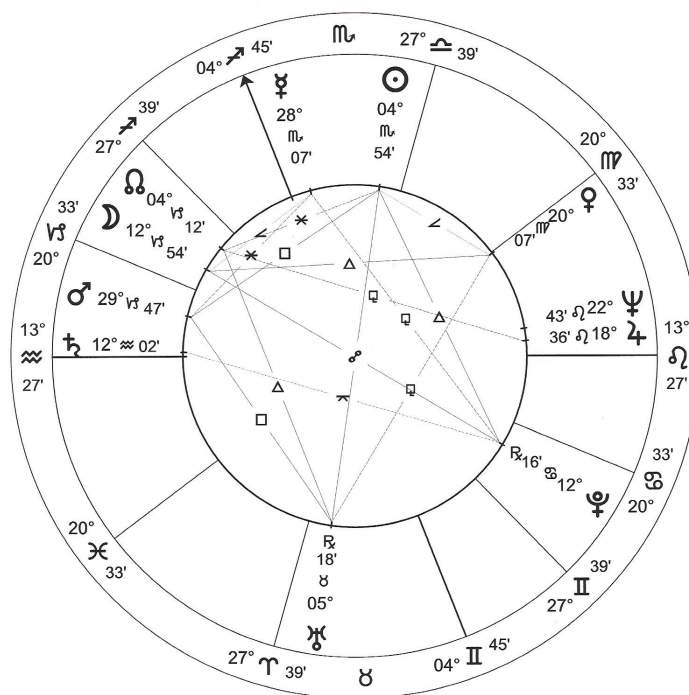
<sup>28</sup> Ficino, letter to Giovanni Cavalcanti, *Letters*, vol.2 no.24 (1978), 33-4.

<sup>29</sup> Ficino, *Liber de vita* III.22, eds. C. Kaske and J. Clark, *Three Books on Life* (Binghamton, New York: Renaissance Society of America 1989), 367.

<sup>30</sup> A 'humanistic' astrology which re-surfaced in the twentieth-century development of theosophical, psychological and archetypal schools of practice. On Ficino's astrology, see Thomas Moore, *The Planets Within* (Toronto, 1982, repr. Herndon, VA: Lindisfarne Press, 1990); Angela Voss 'The Astrology of Marsilio Ficino, Divination or Science?' in *Culture and Cosmos* vol.4, no.3 (2000), 29-45; *Marsilio Ficino* (Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books, Western Esoteric Masters Series, 2006); *Father Time and Orpheus* (Oxford: Abzu Press, 2003).

that in the innermost sanctum of the Platonic Academy it is the true philosophers who will come to know their Saturn, “contemplating the secrets of the heavens.”<sup>31</sup>

**Figure 1: Ficino’s horoscope**  
(19<sup>th</sup> October, 1433, Florence, 13.45 LMT)<sup>32</sup>



## Black Bile and Genius

In the first part of his *Three Books on Life – De vita sana* (‘On a healthy life’) - Ficino discusses ways in which scholars prone to over-stimulation of the mind can lead a healthy life, in a multi-layered exploration of the Saturnine principle when dominant in the human body and psyche. It is typical of Ficino to write on many levels simultaneously, in an attempt to shift the perception of the reader from a literal interpretation and open it up to metaphorical understanding.

He begins by suggesting that learned people are particularly subject to phlegm and black bile, due to an inactive body and over-active mind, for “melancholy, if it is too abundant or vehement, vexes the mind with continual care and frequent absurdities and unsettles the judgment.”<sup>33</sup> The causes of melancholy, he continues, are threefold. Firstly, celestial, because both Mercury “who invites us to investigate doctrines” and Saturn “who makes us persevere in investigating doctrines and retain them when discovered” are

<sup>31</sup> Ficino, *Proemium to the Commentaries on Plato (Opera omnia, vol. 2)*, 1130 (unpublished translation by the School of Economic Science).

<sup>32</sup> Ficino tells us in a letter to Martinus Uranius of 1489 (Ficino, *Opera omnia* vol.I [Basle 1576, repr. Phénix Editions, Paris 2000], 901) that he was born at ‘unam supra vigesimam’ on 19<sup>th</sup> October, 1433 in Figline, Florence. At this period in Italy the system of ‘Italian hours’ was kept, where the day was considered to begin at sunset on the previous day. Therefor 21.00 hours means 21 hours after sunset on 18<sup>th</sup> October, e.g. approx. mid-afternoon on 19<sup>th</sup>. The GMT of 13.45 gives the most accurate correspondence to Ficino’s own description of his chart in this letter. See also A.Voss ‘Ficino and Astrology’ in *Astrology, the Astrologers’ Quarterly* vol.60, no. 3, 1986, 126-138 and vol.60, no.4, 1986, 191-199.

<sup>33</sup> Ficino, *Liber de vita* I.3, Kaske & Clark, 113.

considered astrologically to be cold and dry in quality therefore analogous to the melancholic nature; secondly, natural, in that in intensive study “the soul must draw in upon itself from external things to internal as from the circumference to the centre, and while it speculates, it must stay immovably at the very centre of man”. This is like the Earth itself, fixed at the centre of the cosmos, which is also analogous to black bile in its qualities. But study does not only force the attention inwards, but also upwards, since black bile “is also congruent with Saturn, the highest of planets”. Thirdly, the human cause derives from a drying out of the brain due to “frequent agitation of the mind”; the subtle and clear parts of the blood become used up in the restoring of spirits, and it becomes dense, dry and black. Digestion suffers, and lack of exercise results in heaviness and depression. Those who will suffer most – and no doubt Ficino is talking here from first-hand experience – are those who over-zealously “apply their mind to incorporeal truth” so that it begins to detach itself from the body, which becomes deadened and melancholic. The soul then may become so powerful that it “overreaches the body above what the corporeal nature can endure” and may even fly out of it.<sup>34</sup>

Ficino continues by taking up the Aristotelian association of melancholy with supreme intelligence, which, he says, neither Aristotle, Plato nor Democritus have fully explained.<sup>35</sup> There are two kinds of melancholy, the ‘natural’ variety which is a “dense and dry part of the blood”, and that brought about by adustion. The latter is in turn divided into four kinds, originating from the combustion of the four humours, and can cause harm to the “wisdom and judgment” due to the mania produced by the action of kindling and burning. When the flaring-up of combustion dies down, it leaves a “foul black soot” which weighs down the body and leads to melancholy. So, Ficino suggests, it is the ‘natural’ black bile which leads to wisdom, but only when it is not too abundant or too scarce - conditions which lead to dullness and instability. It must be subtle and rarefied, refreshed and tempered by the moisture of phlegm, bile and blood. It is then easily kindled and burns longer and more vehemently, sustaining its power and maintaining the conditions ripe for intelligence and genius - in fact, Ficino suggests that the level of insight produced in this way conforms to Plato’s definition of divine frenzy.

What is more, this new, refined black bile “has much the appearance of gold”, and in an alchemical image Ficino describes how the spirits distilled from this humour are more rarefied, hotter, brighter and more vigorous, just like the *aqua vita* distilled from heated wine. Their influence on the intelligence promotes sustained investigation and sound judgment, but also leads it further - to a knowledge of a different order of being:

the soul with an instrument or incitement of this kind - which is congruent in a way with the centre of the cosmos, and, as I might say, collects the soul into its own centre - always seeks the centre of all subjects and penetrates to their innermost core. It is congruent, moreover, with Mercury and Saturn, of whom the second, the highest of planets, carries the investigator to the highest subjects. From this come original philosophers, especially when their soul, hereby called away from external movements and from its own body, is made in the highest degree both a neighbour to the divine and an instrument of the divine. As a result, it is filled from above with divine influences and oracles, and it always invents new and unaccustomed things and predicts the future.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> All quotations in this para. from *ibid.* I.4, Kaske & Clark, 113-5.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* I.5, Kaske & Clark, 117.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* I.6, Kaske & Clark, 121-2.

So in the same way that the heaviness of physical black bile is a necessary condition for its transformation into rarefied spirit, so the worldly limitations and depression of Saturn must be a basis for its potential as intellectual concentration, for the literal or material level must not be abandoned, but rather re-visioned and transfigured. Alchemically, if sulphur as *prima materia* is heated to the right temperature, Mercury separates from it and becomes the agent of transmutation during the initial *nigredo* stage of the work. In a constant process of refining and burning eventually the philosopher's stone is produced, the realisation of the *unus mundus* or conjunction of opposites in the psyche of the alchemist.<sup>37</sup> So too, in the re-working of melancholy, it is the Mercurial qualities of intellectual insight which are sustained and fed by the burning vapours of the bile and which in turn penetrate its inert density. Mercury is, astrologically, of an airy nature, and the potent combination of air and earth can also be seen in the position of Ficino's own Saturn in the air sign of Aquarius. Bringing Mercurial qualities to bear on Saturn could therefore be a way to access and free the potential for genius associated with Aquarius (which Saturn rules by night)<sup>38</sup> - and for Ficino there could be no more effective way of effecting and refining the heaviness of black bile, tempering it and harmonising it, than through invoking the airy spirit of music and song. Furthermore, in doing this, he was consciously identifying with the perennial wisdom of the ancient theologians:

Hermes Trismegistus, Pythagoras and Plato tell us to calm and to cheer the dissonance of the sorrowful mind with the constant and harmonious lyre and song ... I too (if I may compare the lowliest person with the greatest), frequently prove in myself how much the sweetness of the lyre and song avail against the bitterness of black bile.<sup>39</sup>

This experience was to inspire an entire system of music therapy based on the imitation of the heavens in words and music, with the aim of engaging the powers of the imagination in the alchemical task of transforming the human soul.

### **The music spirit**

In the third part of his *Book of Life, De vita coelitus comparanda* ('On fitting your life to the heavens'), Ficino recommends the use of specially composed music and song to affect the human spirit in such a way that it takes on the life of the cosmic spirit through the specific qualities of the seven planetary spirits. Song, says, Ficino, works its power through imitation, so when it imitates celestial qualities, it will allow a two-way interaction between the spirits of the performer and audience, and the heavens:

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<sup>37</sup> On the psychic processes of the alchemical marriage, see for example C.G. Jung, 'The Spirit Mercurius' in *Alchemical studies*, part IV; 'The Conjunction' in *Mysterium Coniunctionis* (CW 14, 1963 repr. 1981), part VI; 'The Psychic Nature of the Alchemical Work' in *Psychology and Alchemy*, pt.II, chap.2. See also Liz Greene, 'Love, Alchemy and Planetary Attraction' in this volume.

<sup>38</sup> Albrecht Durer's two engravings *Melencolia I* and *St Jerome in his Study* can be seen to illustrate the qualities of Saturn in Aquarius and Saturn in Capricorn, its night and daytime houses, the former exemplifying artistic frenzy, genius and wild intellectual disorder, the latter discipline, structure and quiet diligence. See Frances Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* (London and New York: Routledge Classics 1979, repr. 2002), ch.6, who suggests that, following Agrippa's distinctions, two different stages of melancholy are depicted here: the inspired imagination of the artist and on a higher plane, the mystical knowledge of divine things. See also the interpretation by John Read at <http://www.alchemylab.com/melancholia.htm>

<sup>39</sup> Ficino, *Liber de vita* I.10, Kaske & Clarke. Other references to the beneficial effects of his lyre-playing include *Letters* vol.1 (1975), nos. 92, 93, 130; vol.2 (1978), nos. 5, 8, 24; vol.4 (1988), no.11; vol.7 (2003), no.18.

Now the very matter of song, indeed, is altogether purer and more similar to the heavens than is the matter of medicine. For this too is air, hot or warm, still breathing and somehow living; like an animal, it is composed of certain parts and limbs of its own and not only possesses motion and displays passion but even carries meaning like a mind, so that it can be said to be a kind of airy and rational animal.<sup>40</sup>

If the song corresponds to the stars, both in relation to the characteristics of the actual constellations AND in respect to the imagination of the performer, then it will cast its power into the singer and listener, especially if the singer has in his or her heart “a powerful vital and animal spirit”. The influence will be intensified by the choosing of “a suitable astrological hour” to maintain a vital connection between the meaning of the words, the musical form and the quality of the moment. But most essential of all, is the *intention* of the performer, an intense desire to make contact with the life-giving cosmic energy which itself effects connection:

For if a certain vapour and spirit directed outwards through the rays of the eyes or by other means can sometimes fascinate, infect, or otherwise influence a bystander, much more can a spirit do this, when it pours out from both the imagination and heart at the same time, more abundant, more fervent, and more apt to motion.<sup>41</sup>

Each planet will have a kind of music proper to it, which can be imitated in order to attract its qualities, for example the voices of Saturn are “slow, deep, harsh and plaintive” and the songs of Mercury “relaxed, gay, vigorous and complex.”<sup>42</sup> Deliberately guarded, Ficino remarks that prayers will have similar power, through the combination of emotional affect and the “natural power” of words themselves. As a Christian priest, he does not want to be seen to be ‘worshipping divinities’, yet it is quite clear that affiliating oneself to the spirits of the stars in this way is at least religious in intent, and at most a thinly-disguised example of neoplatonic *theurgy* whose rituals of invocation to cosmic deities were merely stepping stones in a process of the soul’s assimilation to the supreme One.<sup>43</sup>

Now if we apply a musical analogy to the physiological distillation of black bile, it would surely be to bring the qualities of Mercury - quickness, lightness, subtlety - to bear on a music which is melancholy, heavy, ponderous and earth-bound. We could also suggest that it is precisely through representing in sound the alchemical process of transmutation

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<sup>40</sup> *Liber de vita* 3.21, Kaske & Clark, 359.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* Kaske & Clark, 361.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> At the end of *De vita coelitus comparanda* Ficino tentatively suggests, following Iamblichus, that “sometimes it can happen that when you bring seminal reasons to bear on forms, higher gifts too may descend” (3.26, Kaske & Clark, 391) but he dare not go so far as to imply that his natural magic could lead to mystical union with God. Orthodox theology demanded a clear distinction between the realm of Divine Providence and the ‘natural’ movements of the cosmos. For further discussion on this issue, see Angela Voss *Marsilio Ficino*, Introduction; On Ficino’s natural magic in general, see esp. Brian Copenhaver, ‘Scholastic Philosophy and Renaissance Magic in the *De vita* of Marsilio Ficino’, in *Renaissance Quarterly* vol.37, no.4, 523-554; Thomas Moore, *The Planets Within*; Gary Tomlinson, *Music in Renaissance Magic* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Angela Voss, *Father Time and Orpheus*, ‘Marsilio Ficino, the Second Orpheus’ in *Music as Medicine* ed. P. Horden (Vermot: Ashgate, 2000), 154-72, ‘Orpheus Redivivus: The Musical Magic of Marsilio Ficino’ in *Marsilio Ficino, his Theology, his Philosophy, his Legacy* (Leiden: Brill, 2002) 227-41, ‘The Music of the Spheres: Marsilio Ficino and Renaissance Harmonia’ in *Culture and Cosmos* vol.2, no.2 (1998), 16-38; D.P. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella* (repr. Pennsylvania: Penn State Press, 2000), Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964).

that the listener undergoes, through sympathy, a similar process of refining and intensifying his melancholy humour in the way experienced by Ficino. Hence we could conclude that melancholy music which reflected back to the listener his or her own earth-bound condition, and yet also invoked the cosmic spirit, would have immense power - the power to lift the consciousness of both performer and listener to a new level of perception, and even perhaps induce a condition of sustained 'frenzy' in which prophetic utterance might occur.

### Hermes Trismegistus

Ficino's legacy to Western philosophical magic was not only via his neoplatonic translations, but perhaps even more influentially through his translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* attributed to the legendary Egyptian sage Hermes Trismegistus. In fact the Hermetic *corpus* proved, for the Renaissance magi, an unbroken genealogy of ancient philosophers from which Plato himself derived his wisdom.<sup>44</sup> As Frances Yates has demonstrated, the popularity of this work in the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries and the influence of occult philosophy - both Hermeticism and Cabala - on art and literature during this period was profound.<sup>45</sup> Hermetic religious philosophy provided a revelatory counterpart to the Platonic path of intellectual knowledge, being concerned with the direct spiritual initiation of the adept by his teacher. The texts translated by Ficino were in fact composed in the Hellenistic period and owe much to Gnostic and Platonic cosmology, but nevertheless they preserve an essential Egyptian element of experiential wisdom, portraying a transmission of spiritual knowledge through the induction of a 'dream' consciousness which culminated in the rebirth of the adept.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, that this process could be accomplished whilst still alive is now being considered by Egyptian scholars as a potent recapitulation of ancient initiation ritual in which the Pharaoh underwent a 'divinisation' process involving a psychic journey to the realm of the dead.<sup>47</sup>

The myth of the descent and ascent of the soul in Book I of the *Corpus Hermeticum*<sup>48</sup> tells of its original, pristine condition at one with God, its fall to earth, embodiment, and subsequent remembering and desire to return. When clothed in its earthly body, the soul is as if asleep, forgetful of its divine origins, heavy and withdrawn - essentially in a condition of melancholy. Its awakening may take place through a glimpse of the divine (Platonically, through erotic connection with a beauty which is an image of divine beauty) and from there the re-ascent may begin. As the soul travels down through the cosmos to become mingled with Nature, it passes through the spheres of the seven planets, acquiring attributes from them. Similarly, as it returns, it passes up through the spheres, discarding the unnecessary qualities it no longer needs, until it becomes one with God once more.

The notion of the soul trapped in an earthly body, in a vale of tears, gave rise to the phrase 'pessimist gnosis' - that the intense despair of this condition could in some way

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<sup>44</sup> The authority of Hermes Trismegistus was accepted on the authority of both Lactantius (*Institutes*) and Augustine (*De civitate Dei*) - for refs. see Yates, *Giordano Bruno* 6-19; Ficino first specifies the genealogy of the Ancient Theologians in his Preface to the *Corpus Hermeticum* (quoted in B. Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), xlvi. See Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986); D.P. Walker, *The Ancient Theology* (London: Duckworth 1972).

<sup>45</sup> See Yates, *Giordano Bruno; The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* part I.

<sup>46</sup> See Peter Kingsley, 'Poimandres: the Etymology of the Name and the Origins of the Hermetica' in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 56 (1993), 1-24.

<sup>47</sup> For example, see Jeremy Naydler, *Shamanic Wisdom in the Pyramid Texts* (Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2005); Alison Roberts, *My Heart, My Mother* (Rottingdean: Northgate, 2000).

<sup>48</sup> *Corpus Hermeticum* I, trans. B. Copenhaver, *Hermetica* or C. Salaman, C. van Oyen & W. Wharton, *The Way of Hermes* (London: Duckworth, 1999). Similar myths may be found in Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* and Plato's 'Myth of Er' in *Republic X*.

contain the seeds of a yearning to return, and fuel the journey.<sup>49</sup> The essential part played by emotional desire in the gaining of spiritual knowledge - the force of *eros* as described by Plato<sup>50</sup> - was emphasised in the Dionysian tradition of mystical ascent<sup>51</sup> and thereby assimilated by the Sufi mystics (together with Platonic and Hermetic gnostic cosmology) into esoteric Islam. Henry Corbin points out that in this tradition the power of music lies precisely in its ability to arouse the full realisation of both our alienation from the divine and our deep sympathy with it:

It is He who seeks and is sought for, He is the Lover and He is the Beloved. To state this identity is simply to recall the nostalgia of the 'Hidden Treasure' yearning to be known, the nostalgia which is the secret of Creation. It is with Himself that the Divine Being sympathised in sympathising with the sadness of His Names, with the sadness of our own latent existences yearning to manifest those Names, and that is the first source of His love for us who are 'His own beings'... it is precisely therein that Ibn' Arabi discerns the cause of the emotion we experience when we listen to music.<sup>52</sup>

The metaphysics of Love and the melancholy condition of the lover became a dominant theme in the revival of 'occult philosophy' by poets and composers in Italy and England in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. One has only to listen to the madrigals of Claudio Monteverdi to glimpse the sentiments expressed by Corbin, to sense the arousal of a *passionate* connection with a dimension beyond one's grasp. The many levels in which love was experienced pointed, ultimately, to a path of initiation in which the lover's yearning, aroused by the physical presence of the beloved, would culminate in union with divine Lover Himself. In Elizabethan and Jacobean England, it was the artists, poets and musicians who deliberately created the conditions for such a re-awakening of the soul to itself.

### John Dowland

Alas there are few that find the narrow way... and those few what are they? Not dancers but mourners, not laughers but weepers, whose tune is Lachrimae, whose musicke sighes for sin, who know no other ciquapace but this to heaven.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Both 'pessimist' (*apophatic*) and 'optimist' forms of spiritual teaching are found in early Gnostic writings, Hermetic texts and Dionysian theology. 'Pessimist' forms tend to take a negative view of the physical cosmos, emphasising the need to transcend and deliver one's soul from the bonds of matter. For the 'optimist' Gnostic, creation is a manifestation of divinity, the cosmos itself a divine being. The literature on Gnosticism is extensive; for a convenient survey of the tradition see Kurt Rudolph *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism* (San Francisco: Harper, 1987); Hans Jonas *The Gnostic Religion* (Boston: Beacon, 1958); Elaine Pagels *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

<sup>50</sup> Chiefly in *Phaedrus* 250-2 and *Symposium* 210-11.

<sup>51</sup> For example, see Pseudo-Dionysius, *Celestial Hierarchy* 154 (op.cit): "But when... we speak of desire in connection with intellectual beings we must understand by this a divine love of the Immaterial, above reason and mind, and an enduring and unshakeable superessential longing for pure and compassionless contemplation, and true, sempiternal, intelligible participation in the most sublime and purest Light..."

<sup>52</sup> Henry Corbin, *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn'Arabi* (Princeton, New Jersey: University Press, 1969, repr.1997), 152.

<sup>53</sup> William Prynne, *Histrion-Mastix* (London, 1633). As a hard-line Puritan, Prynne (1600-69) attacks theatre and dancing in this extensive pamphlet.

The English composer John Dowland (1563-1625) is best remembered for his melancholy persona - *semper Dowland, semper dolens* ('ever Dowland, ever doleful') was his motto, and the title of one of his compositions. Many of his lute-songs are settings of texts of the utmost despair, darkness and misery, where there is no life or hope left, and Dowland's biographer Diana Poulton has pointed out that three of the most mournful texts - *In Darkness let me Dwell*, *Mourne*, *Mourne Day is with Darkness Fled* and *Flow my Tears* could well stem from Dowland's own hand.<sup>54</sup> But to read these texts as merely expressions of Dowland's own personal misery or his difficult 'life circumstances'<sup>55</sup>, or even as examples of an artistic genre,<sup>56</sup> is surely to deny the most suggestive Hermetic imagery of the soul alienated from its source:

Flow my tears, flow from your springs  
 Exiled for ever, let me mourne  
 Where night's black bird her sad infamy sings,  
 There let me live forlorne.

Downe vain lights, shine you no more,  
 No nights are dark enough for those  
 That in despair their lost fortunes deplore  
 Light doth but shame disclose.

Never may my woes be relieved,  
 Since pitie is fled, and tears, and sighs and groans  
 My weary days of all joys have deprived.

From the highest spire of contentment  
 My fortune is thrown  
 And fear and pain and grief  
 For my deserts are my hopes since hope is gone.

Hark you shadows that in darkness dwell  
 Learn to contemn light  
 Happy, happy, they that in hell  
 Feele not the world's despite.<sup>57</sup>

Dowland was not working alone, for such dark thoughts were nurtured in his artistic milieu. Around Queen Elizabeth herself and her courtier Lucy, Countess of Bedford esoteric circles gathered to discuss philosophy, including the poets Walter Raleigh, Philip Sidney, George Chapman, the playwright Christopher Marlowe and the *magus* John Dee – and most significantly, the radical Italian Hermetic philosopher Giordano Bruno who joined the Sidney circle in London in the 1580s. Their immediate inspiration was Hermeticism, Platonism and Christian Cabala filtered through the Italian Renaissance,

<sup>54</sup> Diana Poulton, *John Dowland* (London: Faber & Faber, 1972), 255.

<sup>55</sup> Dowland left England for the continent in 1594, having failed to obtain the post of court lutenist. See Poulton, 30-45.

<sup>56</sup> Peter Holman, in his study of Dowland's *Lachrimae* (*Dowland, Lachrimae 1604*, [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999]) is unwilling to concede that Dowland's music might be connected to "occult neoplatonic philosophy" (48) and prefers to interpret its melancholy as a "fashionable malady of the late Elizabethan Age" (50-1), although he does suggest that one of the functions of the *Lachrimae* compositions was "to cure the melancholy they so powerfully evoke".(52).

<sup>57</sup> John Dowland, 'Flow my Tears', *Second Booke of Songs or Ayres* (London: Thomas East, 1600), dedicated to Lucy, Countess of Bedford. See Poulton, *John Dowland*, 254-7.

principally through the works of Ficino and Pico della Mirandola. I have already mentioned that a poetic genre arose dedicated to conveying the deeper mysteries of spiritual Love through its human counterpart,<sup>58</sup> and Platonic ideas concerning the *initiator* power of artistic forms and the nature of poetic *furor* was hotly debated.<sup>59</sup> But the image with which they consciously identified, an image which infused both popular and intellectual culture, was that of melancholy and darkness. Some say they adopted the name ‘School of the Night’ (following an allusion by Shakespeare)<sup>60</sup> - but whether a formal school or not, they certainly created a milieu for the artistic representation of the despair and hopelessness of the soul trapped in the material world, exalting the veiled mysteries and inward truths of the night over the rational clarity of the day.

We may turn to Dionysius and Sufism again for a deeper metaphysical insight into the ‘divine darkness’ of negative theology, a darkness which symbolises the utter incomprehensibility of God, and which can only be described in paradox as “the dazzling obscurity of the secret Silence” where the mysteries of theology “outshine all brilliance with the intensity of their darkness”.<sup>61</sup> This “superessential Radiance of the Divine Darkness”<sup>62</sup> is the dwelling place of the One, and can only be reached through the realisation of utter ignorance, nothingness, and the suspension of all thought processes.<sup>63</sup> More luminous than the day, this “black light”<sup>64</sup> is not to be identified with the density or darkness of ignorance. As Arthur Versluis explains:

Unknowing, or *agnosia*, is not ignorance or nescience as ordinarily understood, but rather the realization that no finite knowledge can fully know the infinite One, and that therefore it is only truly to be approached by *agnosia*, or by that which is beyond and above knowledge. There are two main kinds of darkness: the subdarkness and the super-darkness, between which lies, as it were, an octave of light. But the nether-darkness and the Divine Darkness are not the same darkness, for the former is absence of light, while the latter is excess of light. The one symbolizes mere ignorance, and the other a transcendent unknowing - a superknowledge not obtained by means of the discursive reason.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> For example, Bruno’s *De gl’Eroici Furori* dedicated to Sir Philip Sidney (1585), Edmund Spenser’s *The Fairie Queene* (1590); Sidney’s *Astrophel and Stella* (1591), and of course the plays of William Shakespeare.

<sup>59</sup> The chief characteristic of ‘esoteric’ knowledge is its ‘secret’ or ‘hidden’ nature, only to be found by those who are able to comprehend it. As for example, Sidney, *Astrophel and Stella* (Apology) “There are many mysteries in poetry, which of purpose were written darkly, lest by profane wits it should be abused” which reiterates the suggestion of Pico della Mirandola that the wisdom of the ancients was concealed in a poetic form: 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”. (*On the Dignity of Man* trans. D. Carmichael, P.J.W. Miller & C.G. Wallis (New York/Indianapolis: Hackett, 1965), 33.

<sup>60</sup> Frederick Turner (*The School of Night* at <http://www.montana.edu/corona/4/school.html>) suggests the group was ‘a sort of loose network’ of poets and intellectuals: See also M.C. Bradbrook, *The School of Night: A Study in the Literary Relationships of Sir Walter Raleigh* (Cambridge: University Press, 1936); Frances Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, 169, 177-8.

<sup>61</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology* ch.1 (trans.A.Versluis, at [www.esoteric.msu.edu/VolumeII/MysticalTheology.html](http://www.esoteric.msu.edu/VolumeII/MysticalTheology.html)).

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* “through the inactivity of all his reasoning powers [he] is united by his highest faculty to it that is wholly unknowable; thus by knowing nothing he knows That which is beyond his knowledge”.

<sup>64</sup> On the black light of Sufi mysticism, see Sara Sviri, *The Taste of Hidden Things* (Inverness, California: The Golden Sufi Centre, 1997), 145-73.

<sup>65</sup> Arthur Versluis, fn.1 to Dionysius’ *Mystical Theology* op.cit.

There are obvious parallels here with the two faces of Saturn: the obtuse harshness of material reality obscuring the superior power of an inner vision which turns the world upside down and ‘sees through’ the veil of appearances. The ‘unconscious’ Saturn - the alchemical *nigredo* - is “Darkness that is only Darkness, a darkness that refuses Light and is demonic, thick and heavy in the extremity of its distance from the Light”<sup>66</sup> - the darkness of the last verse of Dowland’s *Lachrimae* text; whereas Ficino’s Saturnine gold is the “luminous Night”, the “Black Light of Divine Night”<sup>67</sup> which dawns on the soul as it sees itself through the mirror of art - that is, the power of the symbolic imagination. Versluis’ musical analogy suggests that the journey from melancholy to enlightenment can begin through an opening of the senses to the ‘sounding’ of light, that music can in some way become a vehicle for the turning of the darkness into light. As Plato put it, it is through the gifts of sight and hearing that the soul may harmonise itself with the cosmos.<sup>68</sup>

Frances Yates has shown how George Chapman’s poem *The Shadow of Night* (1594) evokes a melancholy humour as a path to such knowledge, and mentions a letter preceding the poem in which Chapman would seem to allude directly to Ficino’s alchemical astrology; the group of elite noblemen are pursuing their occult studies, says Chapman, “with the winged sandals of Mercury” and “girt with Saturn’s adamant sword”.<sup>69</sup> They would have been fully aware that the mirroring of human estrangement and longing, the evocation of the ‘luminous Night’ in poetic and musical images, provided the very means by which the soul could free itself - for it was a function of poetic image to sever attachment to material constraints and illuminate the inaccessible, providing a vehicle through which the senses may perceive intimations of transcendent levels of being. As another example, the poet Henry Vaughan (1622-95) takes us straight back to Dionysius with his “deep but dazzling darkness” of God, exclaiming “O for that Night! Where I in Him might live invisible and dim!”<sup>70</sup>

There is no concrete evidence of Dowland’s association with the School of the Night, or of his own philosophical interests, but he was working in an artistic milieu permeated by esoteric ideas. Christian Cabala and its incorporation into the new movement of Rosicrucianism was finding fertile soil for growth on the continent; Anthony Rooley has pointed out that Dowland was in France from 1580-86 where the academies were actively promoting Platonic philosophy through the arts, and his patrons the Duke of Brunswick, King Christian IV of Denmark and Moritz, Landgrave of Hessen-Kassel were all seriously engaged with Hermetic ideas. The latter was at the centre of an alchemical circle at Kassel where Dowland was employed in 1595.<sup>71</sup> Whilst in England Dowland certainly knew

<sup>66</sup> Tom Cheetham, *Green Man, Earth Angel: The Prophetic Tradition and the Battle for the Soul of the World* (New York: SUNY Press, 2005), 71. See ch.4, ‘Within this Darkness: Incarnation, Theophany and the Primordial Revelation’.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. See also Henry Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, 191: “The theosophy of light suggests the metaphor of a mirror and a shadow. But ‘shadow’ must not be taken to imply a dimension of Satanic darkness.... this shadow is essentially a reflection, the projection of a silhouette or face in a mirror. Our authors even speak of a ‘luminous shadow’... and that is how we must take the following statement: ‘Everything we call other than God, everything we call the universe, is related to the Divine Being as the shadow (or his reflection in the mirror) to the person. The World is God’s shadow’”(Ibn Arabi, *Fusus al-Hikam* 101 & 102).

<sup>68</sup> *Timaeus*, 47b-e.

<sup>69</sup> Yates, op.cit, 158.

<sup>70</sup> Henry Vaughan, *The Night (The Poems of Henry Vaughan, Silurist*, ed. E.K. Chambers [London: Lawrence & Bullen Ltd., 1896]), 253. Poem based on John, ch.3, verse 2. For an overview of the literature, see Douglas Trevor, *The Poetics of Melancholy in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>71</sup> See Anthony Rooley, ‘New Light on John Dowland’s Songs of Darkness’ in *Early Music* 11 (1983), 6-22 (revised as ‘Dowland, Ficino and Elizabethan Melancholy’ in *Elizabethan Mythologies: Studies in Poetry, Drama and Music* ed. R.H. Wells [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994], 189-207); Poulton, *John Dowland*, Ron Heisler, ‘The Forgotten English Roots of Rosicrucianism’ at [www.geocities.com/Athens/Acropolis/1895/rootsrc.html](http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Acropolis/1895/rootsrc.html), 6.

William Shakespeare, whose *The Tempest* has been called “almost a Rosicrucian manifesto”,<sup>72</sup> and Dowland’s friend Henry Peacham may have been alluding to certain occult interests in a poem dedicated to the musician:

Heere, Philomel, in silence sits alone,  
 In depth of winter, on the bared brier,  
 Whereas the Rose, had once her beautie shoven;  
 Which Lordes, and Ladies, did so much desire:  
 But fruitless now, in winters frost and snow,  
 It doth despis’d and unregarded grow.<sup>73</sup>

Certainly the emblem of the Rose was a common one, and poets delighted in using such metaphors for underlying moral purposes. Dowland’s preoccupation with melancholy can also be seen in this light, for in adopting the personal emblem of a tear, he created a formal vehicle for his art, a symbolic device which could resonate on many different levels.<sup>74</sup> In this way lute-song texts of the period served the same purpose as the popular Emblem Books, which consisted of pithy, epigrammatic poems illustrated by woodcuts designed to teach a moral lesson through allegorical representation.<sup>75</sup> But whatever its religious or even Hermetic associations, Dowland’s musical emblem of *Lachrimae* was a powerful one. He was a renowned lutenist, and there could be no instrument more obviously tear-shaped than a lute; furthermore, the tear, whilst indicating grief, also has a cleansing and healing property, and Dowland alludes to this ambivalence in his dedication of *Lachrimae or Seven Teares* to Queen Anne:

....and though the title does promise tears, unfit guests in these joyfull times, yet no doubt pleasant are the teares which Musicke weepes, neither are teares shed always in sorrowe, but sometime in joy and gladness. Vouchsafe then (worthy Goddess) your Gracious protection to these showers of Harmonie, least if you frowne on them, they bee Metamorphosed into true teares.<sup>76</sup>

A sentiment re-iterated seventeen years later by Robert Burton in his *Anatomy of Melancholy*, a vast compendium of melancholic physiology and psychology:

Many men are melancholy by hearing music, but it is a pleasing melancholy that it causeth; and therefore to such as are discontent, in woe, fear, sorrow or dejected, it is a most present remedy; it expels cares, alters their grieved minds, and easeth in an instant.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Yates, *Occult Philosophy*, 199.

<sup>73</sup> Henry Peacham, *Heere, Philomel in silence sits alone* (1612), quoted in Heisler, op.cit., 8.

<sup>74</sup> On the tear motif in Renaissance music see Holman, *Dowland*, 40-42.

<sup>75</sup> The origin of the Renaissance production of and enthusiasm for emblem books was the discovery in 1419 of a fifth c. ms., the *Hieroglyphica of Horapollo* (printed in Venice, 1505), a Greek translation of an allegedly Egyptian work explaining the hidden meanings of hieroglyphs. The most well-known emblem books were based on the model by Alciati, *Emblemata liber* (1531) which was reprinted 130 times between 1532 and 1790, and included Geoffrey Whitney, *A Choice of Emblems* (1586).

<sup>76</sup> Poulton, *John Dowland*, 343.

<sup>77</sup> Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621, eds. Floyd Dell & Paul Jordan-Smith, New York: Tudor Publishing Company, 1927), Partition II, Memb.6, subs.3.,481. See Holman, *Dowland*, 50-52; Penelope Gouk, ‘Music, Melancholy and Medical Spirits’ in ed. P. Horden, *Music as Medicine* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 179-84.

The emblem of the tear was given exquisite musical form by Dowland in the motif of the falling fourth set to the rhythm of a dotted minim followed by two quavers and a minim, suggestive of its welling up and overflowing.<sup>78</sup>



The phrase then continues with another falling fourth, from c to g sharp, as if to restate more emphatically this “moderate and seemingly human discord” as Ficino describes it.<sup>79</sup> The number four carries with it the significance, in the Pythagorean number symbolism which underlies esoteric thought, of the manifested material world.<sup>80</sup> It is also the mid-point of the seven stages of descent and return of the Hermetic journey, the place occupied by man in his straddling the two realms of nature and divinity. The fourth carries a melancholy quality, neither fully concordant or dissonant, seeking a resolution into the strength and security of the perfect fifth, and its descending motion is a powerful symbolic evocation of a ‘fall from grace’ into earthly existence.<sup>81</sup> Dowland used this theme first of all in his lute solo, *Lachrimae*, before re-working it as a lute-song with the *Flow my tears* text, and it was to be taken up by many of his contemporaries and interwoven into their own compositions as well as alluded to by writers and poets.<sup>82</sup> A ‘catch-tune’ in popular culture, it became a vehicle for the most emotionally intense and extraordinarily complex unfolding of musical melancholy ever composed, in Dowland’s set of seven pavans for five viols and lute, *Lachrimae or Seven Teares* of 1604.<sup>83</sup>

It would seem impossible to ignore a Hermetic programme underlying this work, which on a more exoteric level owes much of the rhetorical subtlety of its musical gesture to the innovations in Italy at the time - in particular the madrigalian school of Luca Marenzio and the *nuove musiche* of the Florentine Camerata whose declamatory style, in service to the arousal of specific emotions through the nuances of musical language, deliberately revived the ancient Greek ideal of musical ethos.<sup>84</sup> It consists of a series of seven ‘passionate’ pavans (each having three repeated sections) which represent seven stages or conditions of weeping, with emblematic Latin titles: *Lachrimae antiquae*, *Lachrimae antiquae novae*, *Lachrimae gementes*, *Lachrimae tristes*, *Lachrimae coactae*, *Lachrimae amantis*, *Lachrimae verae*. These can be translated as: Ancient tears, Ancient tears renewed, Groaning tears, Sad Tears, Compelled or Forced tears, Tears of the Lover

<sup>78</sup> An association first suggested to me by Anthony Rooley.

<sup>79</sup> Ficino, ‘The Principles of Music’, *Letters* vol.7 (2003), no.76, 87. See also Holman, *Dowland*, 40-42 on Dowland’s models for his ‘tear motif’ and an analysis of its musical structure.

<sup>80</sup> Obvious examples include the four cardinal directions, four elements and four humours.

<sup>81</sup> I am indebted to Anthony Rooley’s paper ‘New Light’ for observations on number symbolism.

<sup>82</sup> Composers include William Byrd, John Danyel, Giles Farnaby, Anthony Holborne, Jan Sweelinck and Thomas Weelkes, and more recently Benjamin Britten, Elaine Fine, and Andrew Wilson-Dickson. Literary references include many allusions by Dowland’s contemporaries, including William Shakespeare. The *Lachrimae* sequence (*Tenebrae*, 1978) by the contemporary poet Geoffrey Hill is an example of the revival of interest in the twentieth century. See Holman, *Dowland*, 75-78.

<sup>83</sup> Peter Holman (*Dowland*) gives a detailed musical analysis of the seven *Lachrimae* pavans (52-60). There are various recordings available, recommended are *The Image of Melancholy* (The English Fantasy Consort of Viols with Lynda Sayce, Andrew Wilson-Dickson and John Line, Riverrun Records, 2003, including readings from the *Corpus Hermeticum*); *Lachrimae or Seven Teares* (The Dowland Consort, dir. Jakob Lindberg, *Virgin Veritas* 1986); *John Dowland’s Lachrimae* (The Rose Consort of Viols with Jacob Heringman, Amon Ra, 1992).

<sup>84</sup> See Claude V. Palisca, (ed.), *The Florentine Camerata: Documentary Studies and Translations* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Holman, *Dowland* 42-46. On Dowland’s connections with Marenzio, see Rooley, ‘New Light’. Other influences on Dowland’s music include popular song, French *chansons*, polyphonic church music and dance forms.

and True Tears. Can we not see here the fall, initiation and return of the soul through the lens of ‘pessimist gnosis’? At first at one with God, the soul is ‘renewed’ in the act of incarnation; as it falls to earth it groans with despair, and becomes immersed in its unhappy condition. But it awakes, and begins to be compelled towards a movement away from its immersion in matter, through the yearning of Love, which eventually leads it back to Truth.

There are also interesting resonances to be found with the three phases on the path to God in Sufi tradition. Sara Sviri recounts the writings of Al-Hallaj who describes the states of effort, ‘passive purification’ and Oneness in a way which corresponds closely to our Hermetic interpretation of *Coactae*, *Amantis* and *Verae*.<sup>85</sup> *Coactae*, in the literal sense of meaning forced or compelled, has always been rather an enigma for students of *Lachrimae*, in that it is unclear exactly what this means in relation to tears. Peter Holman suggests they are the ‘insincere tears’ or even ‘crocodile tears’ of the revenger or malcontent,<sup>86</sup> an interpretation which does not accord with any underlying spiritual programme. More relevant, perhaps, is the Sufi state of ‘effort’, where the disciple is constrained or “forced into a situation without any freedom of choice on his part”. He must make enormous efforts to attain God, but reaches a point where he realises that all these are futile, and that he must let go of his will, and surrender to Love.<sup>87</sup> Thus follows the phase of Grace, where “the one who desires becomes God’s desire” and finally that of divine union, “an immutable state of being, a centered point of stillness where fluctuation ceases, where the ‘impulsive self’ becomes the ‘serene self’”.<sup>88</sup> Can one really dismiss as improbable the associations here with the forced, the lover’s and the true tears of Dowland’s work?

There is a hypnotic quality about the repetition of the *Lachrimae* theme, which acts on the mind as a constant reference point as it is re-worked inventively in different ways, and Dowland captures, in the very texture of the music, the qualities of each stage through his use of musical space and resolving dissonance. Those familiar with the lute-song would be able to hear the words in their imagination as they listened to the first pavan, *Lachrimae antiquae*, which would then be present like a mantra, gradually revealing a deeper meaning through the ever more subtle re-working of the theme. The third pavan *Gementes* literally appears to groan with its repeated falling intervals; the fourth pavan, *Tristes*, is the most dense and melancholic, complex and earth-bound, whereas the fifth *Coactae* carries more movement, the beginnings of active intention (or wilful effort?) and change of direction. In the final two pavans the texture becomes more translucent and ethereal, the rising themes in *Amantis* representing the active force of eros,<sup>89</sup> and *Verae* ending with an evocation of eternity in which the music seems suspended in time: “complete receptivity, complete fluidity, complete transparency”.<sup>90</sup> At the very end, the *lachrimae* theme ‘turns upside down’ and *rises* a fourth, symbolising the complete reversal of the human condition from ‘falling into matter’ to reunion with transcendent being.

It is important to note that Dowland called these pavans ‘passionate’, a word which we have already encountered in reference to the heartfelt longings of the Sufi mystics, and which suggests both suffering and intense emotion or desire; this music is not for merely cerebral or aesthetic appreciation.<sup>91</sup> One is reminded of Ficino’s insistence that only songs

<sup>85</sup> Sviri *The Taste of Hidden Things*, 41-3.

<sup>86</sup> Holman, *Dowland*, 56-7.

<sup>87</sup> Sviri, *The Taste of Hidden Things*, 24.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>89</sup> Although Peter Holman disagrees: “Amantis, I suggest, is concerned with...types of virtuous love, not erotic passion” (*Dowland*, 59).

<sup>90</sup> Sviri, *The Taste of Hidden Things*, 43.

<sup>91</sup> The common medieval understanding of ‘passion’ was to ‘to suffer or endure’. From the fourteenth century a sense of strong emotion or desire was added, and from the late sixteenth a sense of amorous or sexual love. The meanings ‘strong liking’ or ‘enthusiasm’ derive from the mid seventeenth-century (from <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?l=p>).

which are full of emotion and ‘affect’, that imitate the “intentions and passions of the [human] soul” can attract the sympathies of the cosmic soul.<sup>92</sup> I would suggest again that they are passionate in the most fervent religious sense, in the intensely personal context of heartfelt prayer. The music is inward, private, certainly not intended for public display, but encouraging a focussed concentration more akin to participation in a ritual. Again we can use the words of Corbin to articulate the evocation of *connection* deeply implicit in these pieces, a sense of the fragility of the human condition and longing for its spiritual fulfilment which lies at the Hermetic roots of Islamic mysticism:

Ibn’Arabi’s method of theophanic prayer [is a] prayer which draws its inspiration from a God whose secret is sadness, nostalgia, aspiration to know Himself in the beings who manifest his Being. A passionate God, because it is in the *passion* that his *fedele d’amore* feels for him, in the theophany of his *fedele*, that He is revealed to Himself.<sup>93</sup>

Or, in the language of the neoplatonic *magi*, Dowland’s music can be seen as theurgic in the sense of creating the conditions for the sympathetic resonance of macrocosm and microcosm – the soul of the world and the soul of the human being. Certainly *Lachrimae* demands engagement from the heart of both player and listener, a passion given containment and direction by the formal musical structure and sustained by the very quality of the sound - for perhaps the most striking characteristic of these pieces lies in the combination of the instruments. The five viols produce a texture which is intense and unremitting, sonorous, heavy and earthy - analogous to black bile and the qualities of Saturn. The pitch range of instruments (treble, two tenors, two basses)<sup>94</sup> is a microcosm in itself, corresponding to the threefold Platonic intellect, imagination and sense, or heaven, cosmos and earth. If we were to hear these instruments alone, it would be difficult not to remain in the forgetful, if intoxicating, condition of self-indulgent melancholy. But with a stroke of genius, Dowland adds a lute to the texture, whose quality is predominantly airy, transparent and ethereal. There could be no better illustration of Ficino’s “slow, deep, harsh and plaintive” sounds of Saturn, penetrated by the “relaxed, gay, vigorous and complex” music of Mercury - for the lute part weaves a continual commentary through uniting all five parts at once, penetrating to the core of the texture yet also binding it, infusing it with air, transmuting the *prima materia* of the viols and distilling its intensity. In this way, the music embodies the immense sadness of human life and yet simultaneously the possibility of another order of existence, inducing the ‘divine discontent’ which Plato describes as the necessary condition for the wings of the soul to grow.<sup>95</sup> It is as if the lute, as Mercury, tempers the melancholy humour of the viols and allows it to burn more powerfully and steadily, as Ficino described - a process demonstrated at the close of the last pavan where the viols remain suspended and motionless like a halo whilst the moving lute part performs the ‘active’ alchemical operation, drawing the attention inwards towards the centre.

The number seven, numerologically, is deeply significant in terms of evoking the unfolding of a cosmological principle: for example, the sevenfold cycle of Saturn,<sup>96</sup> the seven planetary spheres and the seven notes of the musical octave. In the same way, these pavans unfold musically, each stage containing the potential qualities of, and leading inevitably to, the next. We could suggest that whilst the tear embodies human melancholy;

<sup>92</sup> Ficino, *Three Books on Life* III.21, Kaske & Clark, 359.

<sup>93</sup> Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, 94.

<sup>94</sup> Or one tenor and three basses.

<sup>95</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus* 251-2.

<sup>96</sup> The cycle of Saturn is 28 years.

the music provides the image or container within which that melancholy may become gradually transformed or reworked into the realisation of a divine will. Thus *Lachrimae* works on all levels - sense perception, emotion, symbolic imagination and spiritual surrender.

Might it possible that Dowland knew, either first or second-hand, the work of Ficino or Agrippa on the power of melancholy to induce divination and prophecy? Had he read the Hermetic texts, or come into contact with Sufi mysticism?<sup>97</sup> Or does it matter? *Lachrimae or Seven Teares* is unique in the repertoire in terms of its length (around half an hour) and instrumentation; it deliberately cultivates a 'hidden' meaning under the guise of an artistic genre and moreover its repetitive and rhythmic structure seems purposefully designed to induce the altered state of consciousness prerequisite for Hermetic initiation. It is as though - whatever Dowland's intentions - the music itself *is* the catalyst which allows the soul to awake from its dark night and strive to return. Through the juxtaposition of extreme beauty and extreme melancholy an almost unbearable tension of opposites is constellated - like the alchemical burning within the alembic - which can only result in the breaking through of a new order of insight. I would even suggest that in this work, Dowland has forged a musical crucible in which the *unus mundus* of the alchemists may be glimpsed, the *gnosis* of the philosophers tasted. Whether he intended it or not, is perhaps not even important. For those on a spiritual path, the symbolism of music such as this will be self-evident, because it will resonate with inner experience. For those who do not sympathise with this 'way', such meanings will appear opaque and without foundation, if not fantastic and irrelevant. The 'truth' is surely not to be found in the historical facts, the musicological analysis, the literary sources or the artistic genres, but in what is revealed to the soul of the listener.

To end, some further thoughts of Cornelius Agrippa who carried the practical magic of Ficino so influentially into the sixteenth century. He developed the taxonomy of melancholy into a three-fold process, describing the melancholy power as attracting three kinds of daemons; firstly, daemons which carry the mind into the imagination, resulting in artistic gifts; secondly, those which turn the mind to the reason, bestowing a profound human wisdom, and thirdly those which elevate the mind to the intellectual understanding, where it may know the "secrets of divine things" through "supernatural divination".<sup>98</sup> Dowland may have been plagued with black bile and weighed down by the world - but he was also inspired by the daemons of the imagination. Might we not consider the possibility that, in unspoken collaboration with Hermes Trismegistus, he is able to lead his listeners - those who have ears to hear - even further, to the place where the power of melancholy is fulfilled in the soul's gift of divination, which is also the place of its *divinisation*?

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<sup>97</sup> There appears to be a considerable lack of clarity on Dowland's religious position in relation to his Catholic or Protestant allegiances; see Poulton, *John Dowland*, 41-44. From the surviving contradictory evidence she concludes: "perhaps the answer may be found in Dowland's temperament; as complex and as full of contradictions as the age in which he lived" (43).

<sup>98</sup> Agrippa, *Occult Philosophy*, LX, 189.