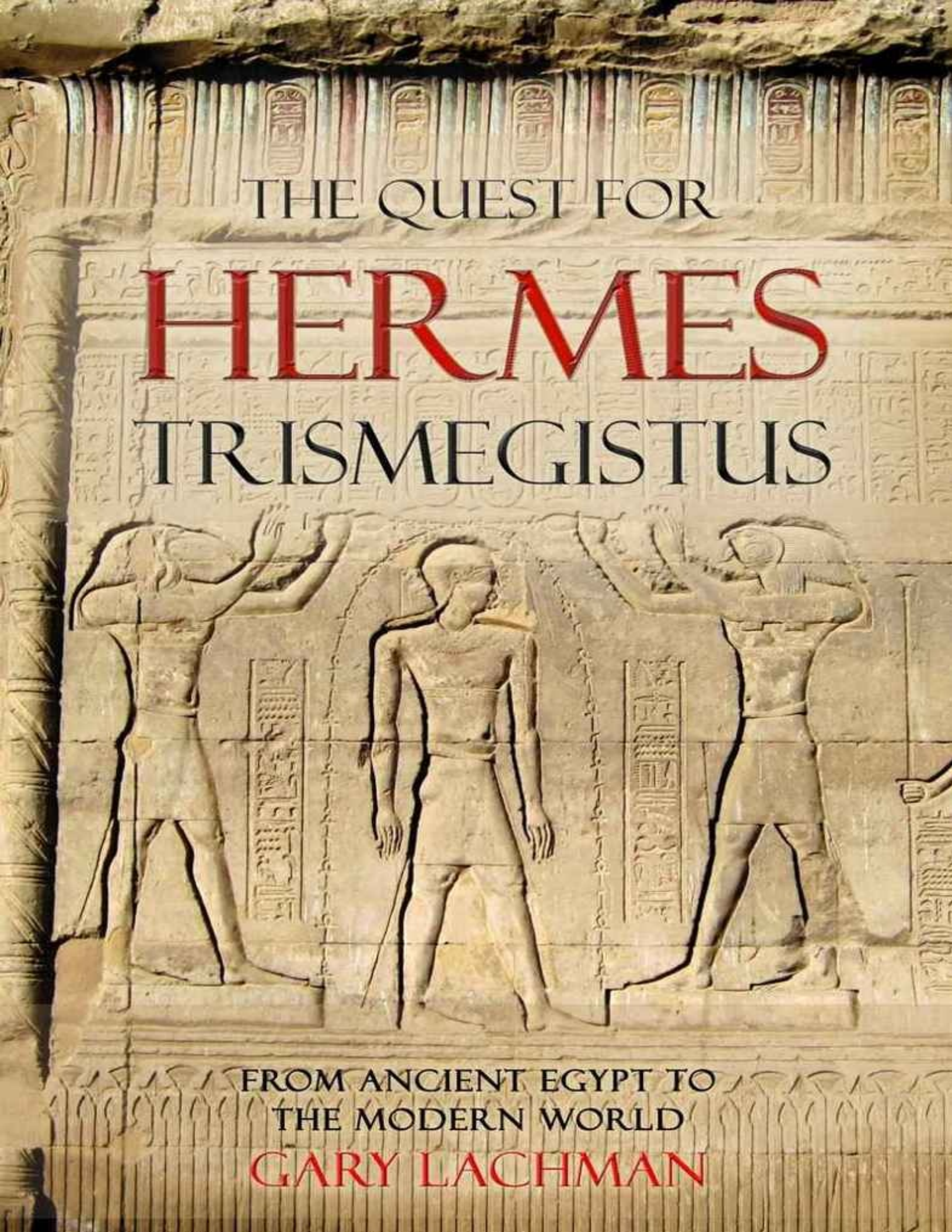
THE QUEST FOR HERMES TRISMEGISTUS



FROM ANCIENT EGYPT TO THE MODERN WORLD

GARY LACHMAN

The Quest for Hermes Trismegistus

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Floris Books

Contents

Without Paganism the world would be empty and miserable.

Thabit ibn Qurra (835–901)

To G.R.S. Mead (1863–1933) and Frances Yates (1899–1981)
Hermetic scholars *extraordinaire*

Acknowledgments

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Introduction: The Hermetic Quest

In 1463, Marsilio Ficino, scribe to the great Florentine power broker Cosimo de' Medici, was preparing to translate the complete works of the divine Plato from his native Greek into Latin, when his patron asked him to put these aside and turn his attention to something else. That Cosimo should make such a request was surprising. Only recently the great patron of the arts and learning had asked Ficino to translate Plato so that he could read the philosopher's complete works before he died. Cosimo, a very old man for that time (he was 74) more than likely knew he didn't have long to live, yet if it had been his desire to read all of Plato — a considerable task, even with a lifetime ahead of you — he must have surely known that taking Ficino off the job would make this impossible. That he had Plato's works to be translated at all was sheer luck; it was only through the uncertain twists of history that they had become available. The threat of the Turks had led many Christian scholars to abandon Constantinople (modern Istanbul), capital of the Byzantine empire and the second Rome, and head west. The city would fall to the Ottomans in 1453, and to escape Islamic intolerance, the intelligentsia took what they could of their libraries and fled. It was this exodus that brought Plato to Ficino's eager hands, but it also brought the work that took him out of them.

Leonardo de Pistoia, a monk who worked for Cosimo as an agent, purchasing any interesting scholarly works he came across, had discovered an item in Macedonia that he was sure his boss would appreciate. It was a near complete edition of a collection of texts whose existence was suspected, but which had been lost to the west since late antiquity and the beginning of the Dark Ages. Its author was a figure of vast renown, one of the great sages of the past, perhaps the greatest, a magician, philosopher and teacher who many believed had lived before the Flood, and whose teachings were the foundation of a great tradition of wisdom through the ages — a wisdom that Plato himself, Cosimo's favourite, had partaken of. Cosimo's hunger for ideas, for philosophy, and for the intellectual treasures of the past, had sent his agents far and wide, in search of lost knowledge, and they had returned with many marvels. But de Pistoia must have known that he had hit the jackpot. Plato and his disciples were nothing to sneeze at, surely. But what he had here was something else. Cosimo would be pleased. The work de Pistoia brought back to Florence from the land of

Alexander the Great was the *Corpus Hermeticum*, and its author was, depending on your sources, a god, a magician, or something in between: the fabled Hermes Trismegistus, ‘thrice-great Hermes’.

It was no wonder that Cosimo told Ficino to put Plato aside and to get to work on this, and no wonder that Ficino immediately agreed. They both knew from the church fathers, from Lactantius and Augustine, that Hermes Trismegistus was far, far earlier than Plato, and that hunger for the wisdom of the past, for the origin and source of things, that characterizes the time we call the Renaissance, demanded he take precedence. Cosimo and Ficino knew that Hermes Trismegistus was the initiator of the *prisca theologia*, that ‘perennial philosophy’ they both were eager to absorb, and now they had in their hands the actual words of the Great Teacher. So it made perfect sense that before he read Plato, Cosimo would read Hermes. He did, and soon after, he died, in 1464. Only after this did Ficino return to translating Plato.

Hermetic traces

As the historian Frances Yates, who tells this story, remarked, the situation is ‘extraordinary’.[1] There is Plato, to whom, as the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead said, all subsequent western philosophy is merely a footnote, all ready to be translated, and at the last minute he is put aside, to make room for — *who*? Hermes Trismegistus?

Although his cachet today is not quite what it once was, if asked to name a philosopher, most people would come up with at least one, Plato, or Socrates, who they would know of through Plato. But ask someone if they know who Hermes Trismegistus is, and unless you happen to pick a student of western esotericism, you’ll more than likely get that *who?* and a shaking head. Yet half a millennium ago, this was not the case. In late antiquity, throughout the Middle Ages, during the Renaissance, and up to the beginning of our modern times, Hermes Trismegistus was a name to conjure with, literally, ranking, not only with Plato, but with Moses and, in some cases, Jesus Christ. Today most people might have some sense of the Greek god Hermes, and have a vague idea of a character with winged sandals and a funny helmet, who could run very fast — an attribute of his Roman equivalent, Mercury — and who was a messenger for the gods. If they are American, and of a certain age, they might remember the Mercury dime, a ten cent piece taken out of circulation in 1945.[2] Some may think of the logo for FTD florists, who have a winged Mercury swiftly delivering a bouquet. And an observant few might note that Hermes/Mercury often stands guard over banks; as the god of merchants (and also of thieves, which for some may seem ironically apt) this makes sense. But these few crumbs of iconographic significance are a paltry legacy for a figure who once commanded enormous respect from philosophers, theologians, and even scientists. And the epithet ‘Trismegistus’ or ‘thrice-great’, which characterized the author of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, would undoubtedly baffle most people today. ‘Great, great, great’, you say? Isn’t that a bit over the top?

Cosimo didn’t think so, nor did Ficino, nor did the many who read his translations of these strange, mystical texts. First printed in 1471, they ran to sixteen editions by the end of the next century, and appeared in many translations and in many other collections. Although it’s commonly understood that the Renaissance was fuelled by the rediscovery of the knowledge and

literature of the ancients, of Plato and his school, what's less known is how influential the *Corpus Hermeticum* was on one of the pivotal moments of western consciousness. The man responsible for this, it seems, was the Byzantine Neoplatonic philosopher George Gemistos Plethon. Plethon had studied Zoroaster, the Chaldean Oracles, and astrology, and while in Florence during the Council of Ferrara-Florence (1438–1445) — the failed attempt to heal the rift between the Catholic and Orthodox churches — he lectured Cosimo and his circle on what he called the 'primal theology', the revelation given to mankind at the dawn of time, and the essence of the world's great religions. Plethon's discourses on Plato, and his Alexandrian followers Plotinus, Porphyry, Proclus, and Iamblichus, so impressed Cosimo and his friends that they dubbed him the 'second Plato'. A perhaps greater tribute to Plethon's inspiration was Cosimo's desire to found a new Platonic Academy, which he did in 1462, with Ficino at its head. The original Academy had started in Athens in 387 BC, but by the first century AD it had petered out, and a revived Academy in 410 became a centre for Neoplatonic study, until it was closed down in 524 by Justinian I. Now, nearly a millennium later, Cosimo's passion for Plato was responsible for a philosophical discussion group whose members would include Renaissance figures such as Pico della Mirandola and Michelangelo Buonarroti, and whose ideas would inform the great cultural movement behind the birth of Humanism and the modern world.

If Gemistos Plethon had looked to Plato for wisdom and insight, Plato himself had looked to Hermes Trismegistus. And others had too. If the legends about Hermes Trismegistus were true, then practically every sage and mystic from time immemorial had looked to the thrice-great one as the source of their wisdom. Yet today he is virtually unknown. A faint echo of his influence barely remains when we speak of 'hermetically sealed jars', a usage that has trickled down from the time when alchemy, of which Hermes Trismegistus was believed to be the founder, was taken seriously. This seems small acclaim for someone to whom even Plato had to take a back seat.

Hermes Trismegistus and the Corpus Hermeticum

Who is Hermes Trismegistus and what is the *Corpus Hermeticum?* The second question is somewhat easier to answer than the first. The *Corpus Hermeticum* is a collection of writings of a mystical, philosophical and initiatory character, believed to be part of a much larger body of work, commonly referred to as the *Hermetica*, which are attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, hence their name, but which were certainly written by a number of different authors over many years. Most of these are lost, but from scattered references we can assume that many more Hermetic works existed than we have copies of today. The second century theologian Clement of Alexandria, for example, speaks of forty-two books of Hermes, and a fourth century scribe, who copied a Hermetic text later found among the famous Gnostic Gospels of the Nag Hammadi collection, apologized for not including more Hermetic works, justifying the omission by saying that they were 'numerous'. This could be an excuse for laziness, or a recognition that the works were already well-known. The collection that reached Ficino itself was incomplete, containing only fourteen of the fifteen texts making up the corpus. This was more than likely put together by a Byzantine scholar, sometime in the tenth or eleventh century; at least there is no mention of the *Corpus Hermeticum* as a specific collection prior to that time, and the eleventh century Byzantine Platonist Michael Psellus is the first to refer to it as such. Which is to say that the writings that reached Marsilio Ficino were more than likely not originally collected in the way he received them.

Some works, however, that are a part of the *Corpus Hermeticum* were known of earlier than Psellus. The third century Greek-Egyptian alchemist Zosimus of Panopolis (about whom the psychologist C.G. Jung gave a famous seminar) speaks of two of them, and around AD 500, John of Stobi (or Stobaeus) in Macedonia, edited an anthology of Hermetic writings which includes excerpts from the *Corpus Hermeticum*. Another work included in the *Hermetica* is the *Asclepius* or *Perfect Discourse of Hermes Trismegistus*, whose Greek original was lost but a Latin translation of which — incorrectly attributed to Apuleius, author of *The Golden Ass* — was widely known during the Middle Ages. Indeed, it was through the *Asclepius* that Hermes Trismegistus' importance was made known to Ficino and others in Cosimo de' Medici's circle. But while the texts of the *Corpus Hermeticum* are of a mystical, philosophically pious character, the

Asclepius is somewhat more sensational. Among other things it speaks of Egyptian magic, and gloomily prophesizes the downfall of the ancient Egyptian religion and a descent into barbarity.

There are other Hermetic texts and collections but the most famous Hermetic work is undoubtedly the fabled *Tabula Smaragdina*, or *Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus*, one of the most celebrated works of occult lore. For the nineteenth century French occultist Eliphas Levi, the *Emerald Tablet* 'contains all magic in a single page'.[3] The source of the most well known Hermetic dictum, 'as above, so below', the key to astrology, alchemy, and other occult sciences, the *Emerald Tablet* has a history as mysterious as its author's. One legend has Sara, the wife of Abraham, finding it in a cave after the Flood, clutched in the hands of the dead Hermes himself. In another account the sage, magician and contemporary of Jesus Christ, Apollonius of Tyana, is believed to have been its author, and for still others Alexander the Great is said to have found it in a hidden vault beneath the feet of the Sphinx.

So much for the *Corpus Hermeticum*. What of its mysterious author, the thrice-great Hermes? Here we enter uncertain ground. Depending on your source, there are numerous Hermes Trismegistuses to choose from. One, as mentioned, lived before the Flood and, after inventing hieroglyphics, inscribed his wisdom in them on stele, to preserve it from destruction. After the Flood, another Hermes Trismegistus translated this wisdom into Greek, and transcribed it into books.[4] One built the pyramids.[5] Another created the fantastic city of Adocentyn, where talismanic images were used to regulate the Nile, as well as to make the inhabitants virtuous, and where a towering multi-coloured beacon flashed a different colour everyday.[6] One was Adam's grandson, and inscribed his wisdom on two columns, one of brick and the other of stone, again to preserve it from some world conflagration. Another did the same, this time in secret chambers below Egyptian temples.[7] One passed on his wisdom to Abraham (perhaps through Sara), and thus was responsible for the rise of Israel.

The Roman philosopher and statesman Cicero spoke of five Hermes, the last of whom, after killing many-eyed Argus, as the Greek myth has it, fled to Egypt and there gave the people their letters and their laws. For Marsilio Ficino, resting on the authority of St Augustine, Hermes Trismegistus was a near contemporary of Moses, certainly more ancient than Plato or Pythagoras, and for Lactantius (and less so for Augustine), he presaged the incarnation of Christ.[8] For some he was older than Moses, and was identical to Enoch, who interceded with God on behalf of the fallen angels who were cast out of heaven after dallying with the 'daughters of men'. For some he is the same person as Idris, one of the Islamic

prophets, while for others, he is Cadmus, the founder of Thebes who brought the alphabet to the Greeks. For the Jesuit Joachim Bouvet, a correspondent of the sixteenth century philosopher Leibniz, Hermes Trismegistus was probably responsible for the Chinese *I Ching*, or *Book of Changes*, and for an eccentric German scholar of the fifteenth century, he is the founder of the German people.[9]

As we can see, Hermes' reputation was certainly based on some remarkable achievements. But in general, and in addition to these accomplishments, Hermes Trismegistus is the mythical creator of civilization, responsible for medicine, chemistry, writing, laws, art, astrology, music, magic, rhetoric, philosophy, geography, mathematics and much more. No wonder that Zosimus the alchemist, no stranger to hyperbole, called him 'one thousand times great'. When Clement of Alexandria attributed forty-two books to him — no mean feat for any writer — he was actually selling the thrice-great one very short. The Neoplatonic philosopher Iamblichus credited Hermes Trismegistus with twenty thousand books, while for Manetho, an Egyptian historian and priest of the third century BC, he was responsible for thirty-six thousand. According to the esoteric scholar Manly P. Hall, one of these, the legendary *Book of Thoth*, 'contained the secret processes by which the regeneration of humanity was to be accomplished'.[10] Some believe that the Tarot deck is this fabled book, but others, such as Eliphas Levi, recognize that 'the monuments of Egypt' are its 'scattered leaves', where 'the capital letters are temples, and the sentences are cities punctuated with obelisks and the sphinx'.[11] It's no surprise then that throughout the Middle Ages and up to the late Renaissance, Hermes Trismegistus was known simply as 'the Egyptian'.

Yet while for Ficino, Lactantius, St Augustine, and many others Hermes Trismegistus was a real person, a great sage who started the 'Hermetic chain' of adepts, reaching from his own primal age to Plato, his real origin lies in the impact of Egyptian religion and philosophy on the Greeks who inhabited Egypt after its conquest by Alexander the Great. When Alexander founded Alexandria on the shores of the Mediterranean in 331 BC, it quickly became the centre of Hellenistic culture in Egypt. Here, in a pluralistic, multi-cultural society much like our own, many different religious and philosophical traditions met and influenced each other. Jewish, Egyptian and Greek ideas — and later those of early Christianity — blended into strange new combinations, giving rise to the religious syncretism that is synonymous with the city of its origin. One result of this was the syncretic Greco-Egyptian god Serapis, who was a Hellenistic version of the Egyptian gods Osiris and Apis and whose main temple was the

Serapeum in Alexandria, and whose popularity later even reached Rome. Another syncretic union was the result of the identification of the Greek god Hermes with the Egyptian wisdom god Thoth.

Thoth was an important deity, responsible, among other things, for magic and writing, and he was, like Hermes, a psychopomp, or guide to souls in the underworld. When Hermes met Thoth in Greco-Egyptian Alexandria, Hermes Trismegistus was born. Not long after, followers of the thrice-great one came together and devoted themselves to understanding his wisdom and to achieving the same cosmic illumination that Hermes himself had experienced, and which they spoke of as *gnosis*, a sudden, direct, and transformative *knowledge* of reality. It was then that the Hermetic ‘Religion of the Mind’ began.

In search of ancient wisdom

As Frances Yates points out, one of the great ironies of history lay behind the rediscovery of the *Corpus Hermeticum* and the 'Hermetic Renaissance' that followed it. This was the belief, mentioned above, that Hermes Trismegistus was a real person and that the Hermetic texts were written in a pristine, golden past, a time when men 'walked more closely with the gods'[12] and the light of the divine shone more brilliantly. For the men of the Renaissance, the idea that the more ancient a wisdom or sage, the more respect it or he warranted, was predominant. This is not that different from how many people feel today, as a look in any New Age bookshop, with titles like *Supernatural: Meetings With the Ancient Teachers of Mankind, and Ancient Wisdom: Modern World*, suggests.[13] As in the Renaissance, for many of us the 'old' means the 'better'. The idea of a perennial philosophy, that primal theology that Gemistos Plethon spoke of, became a central theme of Ficino's Hermeticism, and has informed esoteric philosophy ever since. As the historian Christopher McIntosh remarked, Ficino 'started the habit of talking in terms of a special wisdom handed down from sage to sage', and practically every occult thinker who followed him did the same.[14] Indeed, 'Hermetic', 'occult', and 'esoteric' are by now interchangeable terms used to refer to ideas and beliefs associated with that wisdom. Yet by the early seventeenth century, the myth of Hermes Trismegistus had suffered a severe blow. Several factors were responsible for this, but it was the rise of Humanist scholarship that first sounded Hermes' death knell. It was almost by chance that in 1614 the Huguenot scholar Isaac Casaubon, caught up in the struggle between Rome and Luther that led to the Reformation and reshaped the face of Christendom, realized that the Hermetic writings that had had such an immense influence over philosophers, theologians, and scientists were most likely forgeries — or in any case, were not what their many advocates believed they were. Casaubon discovered that they were not, as many believed, written in dim ages past, but had emerged in late antiquity, a product of the philosophical melting pot of Alexandria in the years following Christ. This discovery, combined with a strong anti-Hermetic movement within the Church, and the rise of modern science — evidence of a profound shift in western consciousness — meant the downfall of the thrice-great one. From a figure of awe and universal respect, Hermes Trismegistus became something of a joke, his believers

obstinate madmen, and his philosophy superstition.

Yet the power of the Hermetic vision remains, as anyone who reads the *Corpus Hermeticum* will know. Ficino and his contemporaries may have been wrong about who Hermes Trismegistus was and when his books were written — although some scholars now believe they were not quite as wrong as was thought — but as I hope this book will show, they were right about his importance.

Hermes revisited

As someone interested in the Hermetic tradition, I had of course known of the mythical Hermes Trismegistus, and years ago had written an article about the 'Hermetic Renaissance' for the journal *Gnosis*.[15] But it was while writing my book *Politics and the Occult* that I began thinking about him again. Part of the book was devoted to the ideas of René Guénon and Julius Evola, two influential writers who belong to the Traditionalists, a school of esoteric thought that speaks of a 'perennial philosophy', and whose work is based on the belief that ages ago, mankind received an original and once-and-for-all divine revelation. This was subsequently lost — although traces of it, they believe, can be found in the world's great religions — and until it is recovered, modern civilization will remain mired in materialism and decadence, at least according to Guénon, Evola, and their followers. As readers of *Politics and the Occult* will know, I took argument with much of the Traditionalist view, yet I found myself wanting to know more about the figure most associated with this idea of a 'primordial revelation', and with the writings in which this revelation was revealed. That a figure who for some centuries was rated as highly as Moses — perhaps even higher by some — could be relegated to the intellectual dustbin, and his works considered forgeries, intrigued me, and it was a strange feeling to come upon some image of Hermes or Mercury overlooking a bank and to realize that this was an echo of the same figure gracing many alchemical texts, or the tile floor of Siena Cathedral.[16]

When I went back and read the texts attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, and the works of scholarship that have gathered around them, I became fascinated with the history of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, which more and more read like a philosophical adventure story. From its origins in Ptolemaic Alexandria to its rediscovery in Renaissance Florence, the *Corpus Hermeticum* was secretly shuttled across medieval Egypt, Turkey, and the Middle East. Fleeing the ravages of religious intolerance and wars of conquest, it travelled from Alexandria to the mysterious city of Harran, where it became the prophetic book of a strange community of Hermeticists. From Harran it reached Baghdad, where, in the midst of Islam, it informed the mystical philosophy of the Sufis. And when Islamic fundamentalism came to power, it abandoned Baghdad to find a haven in a Constantinople that would itself soon fall to the Turk. I was struck

by how while cities fell and empires crumbled, the fragile pages of the *Corpus Hermeticum* miraculously survived, testament to how the mind, that insubstantial mystery, can withstand the harshest blows of the material world. The Hermetic quest took place within, in the interior world, that was true; but it travelled roads in the outer world as well. And Hermes Trismegistus himself, his spectacular rise and fall, from the source of ancient wisdom to a literary hoax: the more I thought of this curious history the more it struck me that it was emblematic of some great change in western consciousness itself, a change that the philosopher Jean Gebser spoke of in terms of different 'structures of consciousness'. And the Hermetic teachings which, with Hermes' fall, went 'underground', these too seemed evidence that now, centuries later, another shift in consciousness was on the rise.

The more I looked at these teachings of Hermes, the more I was struck by how much they resonated with ideas I had discussed in some of my books. This was especially true of the Hermetic idea of *gnosis*. It was a curious sensation to feel that a *knowledge* that anonymous seekers pursued centuries ago in the deserts of Egypt was the same knowledge that I had myself sought in different ways today, here in postmodern London. This feeling of continuity made these unknown seekers come to life, and made my own part in the Hermetic quest more *real*. It was a strange feeling to suddenly grasp that what I was reading were not just words on paper, but the record of someone, much like myself, trying to grapple with the unknown. At times I had a dizzying sense that time, space, and history had vanished, and that the unknown seekers of Alexandria and myself were in a very real way contemporaries.

What follows is a record of my own attempt to understand *gnosis*, and to trace the course of Hermes Trismegistus and his teachings in western history. Generally, the ideas associated with Hermetic philosophy are at best assigned a marginal place in accounts of western consciousness. But as I hope a reader will see, Hermes was a key player in our history, and the Hermetic quest was involved in some of the most important developments that led to who we are. But Hermes Trismegistus is not only a figure from our past. He is, I believe, equally important for our future.

As Frances Yates, who opened doors to spiritual and intellectual palaces so many of us have entered, remarked, Hermeticism is a religion 'without temples or liturgy, followed in the mind alone'.[17] If this is true, than anyone interested in the Hermetic quest needs nothing more than his or her own mind to embark on it.

Notes

1. Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 13.
2. Although commonly referred to as the ‘Mercury dime’, the coin actually depicts the goddess Liberty wearing a Phrygian cap; the wings symbolize free thought.
3. Eliphas Levi, *The History of Magic* (York Beach, Maine: Weiser, 2000), p. 79.
4. Florian Ebeling, *The Secret History of Hermes Trismegistus* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2007), p. x.
5. Antoine Faivre, *The Eternal Hermes* (Grand Rapids: Phanes Press, 1995), p. 19.
6. Yates 1971, pp. 54–56.
7. Ebeling, p. x.
8 Yates 1971, pp. 7–10.
9. Faivre 1995, p. 101. See also D.P. Walker, *The Ancient Theology* (London: Duckworth, 1972), p. 221.
10. Manly P. Hall, *The Secret Teachings of All Ages* (New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2003), p. 96.
11. Levi, p. 80.
12. Yates 1971, p. 5.
13. By Graham Hancock and the Dalai Lama, respectively.
14. Christopher McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians* (Wellingborough: Crucible,1987), p. 30.
15. Gary Lachman, ‘The Renaissance of Hermetic Man,’ *Gnosis*, Summer 1996 pp. 28–33.
16. Yates 1971, p. 42.
17. Ibid, p. 5.

1. The Religion of the Mind

If there is one idea we need to grasp in order to understand the Hermetic ‘Religion of the Mind’, it is *gnosis*. This is at the centre of not only the *Corpus Hermeticum* and other *Hermetica*; it is at the heart of practically all spiritual, esoteric, mystical, and occult literature and practice. It is a Greek word meaning knowledge, but it is a knowledge different from, but not necessarily exclusive of *episteme*, another Greek word meaning knowledge. But while *episteme* refers to the body of ideas arrived at through reason and experience — what we usually refer to when we speak of knowledge — and from which the discipline of epistemology, the philosophical analysis of how we know what we know, arises, gnosis is something different. That 2 + 2 = 4, that water is composed of two atoms of hydrogen and one of oxygen, and that the earth circles round the sun, are items of knowledge that fall under *episteme*. We may argue about these things, question whether they are true, and, as some philosophers have done, come up with reasons why we can’t possibly know them or anything else, but they are all items of knowledge that have been arrived at through reason and empirical observation. What one knows with gnosis isn’t. A dictionary definition of gnosis gives us ‘intuitive knowledge of spiritual truths’. A more forceful definition might be ‘immediate, direct, non-discursive cognition of reality’. In this sense gnosis is as immediate and direct an experience as being thirsty and drinking cold water on a hot day. What one knows in gnosis isn’t arrived at by argument, logic, or empirical — that is, sensory — observation. It can’t be taught in schools, although the *means* of arriving at gnosis have been, and continue to be, not in universities and colleges, but in groups dedicated to esoteric practice, as the Hermetic groups who sought the Hermetic gnosis did. I should mention that ‘esoteric’, ‘Hermetic’, and ‘occult’ are often used interchangeably, to refer to studies and disciplines that fall outside the mainstream organs of orthodox religion, philosophy, and science, and deal with extra-sensory reality. While ‘Hermetic’ refers specifically to Hermetic philosophy — although it too is often used very loosely — ‘occult’ is a more broad umbrella term, and ‘esoteric’ indicates an ‘inner’, not necessarily secret but, let’s say, less advertised aspect of a religion, spiritual teaching or school of thought.

While in the knowledge that falls under *episteme* we may be subject to doubt

and uncertainty, in gnosis we are not. There, as G.R.S. Mead, a great modern Hermetic scholar, remarked, 'is certitude, full and inexhaustible, no matter how the doubting mind … may weave its magic …'[1] The doubting mind, Mead tells us, knows 'discursive knowledge', the 'noise of words', and 'the appearance of things'. This, Mead continues, 'the followers of Hermes left to the "Greeks." For the Hermeticist 'only "wisdom" would do'.[2] And that wisdom was Egyptian.

The 'Greeks' in this instance stand for the dialectical reasoning of the Platonic dialogues. By the time the *Corpus Hermeticum* was being written, this had reached, as Frances Yates argued, a standstill from which nothing new could be expected. Although initially driven by Plato's original and searching mind, it had hardened into a kind of empty exercise, a wheel of arguments that led nowhere. Egyptian wisdom, gnosis, was a way of escaping this dead end and arriving at a direct apprehension of reality. Not the reality of the senses, which was shifting, changing, and unreliable, but the true, eternal, and living reality that lay beneath appearances. Its essence was the irrefutable insight that 'the individual is fundamentally no different from the Supreme',[3] a realization common to many forms of mysticism. For example, it is the *Tat tvam asi*, 'Thou art that', of Vedantic Hinduism, the recognition that the Self, in its fundamental form, is identical with the ultimate reality, the ground of all phenomena. In both Vedanta and Hermeticism, this knowledge, this gnosis, is a form of liberation and salvation. It was this identification of the human self and the divine, found in Christian mystics such as Meister Eckhart, that the Church balked at, even though for some time Hermes Trismegistus was considered an important precursor of and fellow-traveller with Christianity.

Neither faith nor belief

Although Mead remarks that ‘the very essence of gnosis is the faith that man can transcend the limits of the duality that makes him man, and become a consciously divine being’, Gnosis has really little to do with faith or belief, except the faith and belief that gnosis is possible, which is the same faith and belief we have about any knowledge.[4] The gnosis itself is neither an expression of faith nor an assertion of belief. In an interview given to the BBC in his last years, the psychologist C.G. Jung, one of the great gnostic thinkers of the modern age, was asked whether he believed in God.[5] ‘Believe?’ Jung replied. ‘Hard to say. I *know*. I don’t need to believe.’[6] Jung had had an experience that convinced him of the reality of God. He didn’t *believe* in God. He knew God. Jung, Mead would say, had gnosis. I should point out that by ‘God’ Jung didn’t mean the traditional bearded patriarch on a throne; ‘spiritual reality’, although more abstract is a less contentious term which nevertheless conveys the same meaning. The point isn’t what Jung meant by God but the fact that he had passed from belief to knowledge. Earlier in the interview, Jung asserts that, as a scientist, he never had any use for belief. This was exactly what the devotees of the Hermetic gnosis wanted to do.

The content of the gnosis, what the Hermeticists were gaining knowledge of, were the true relations between man, the cosmos, and the divine. Again, this is the essence of most mystical or esoteric teachings. We live in ignorance, unaware of the true nature of reality and of our place in it. For many people, perhaps most, this isn’t a problem. They accept day-to-day life and do not ask why we are here and what we are supposed to do now that we are. The seekers of gnosis, however, are unsatisfied with this. They neither accept the ignorance of the many nor the a-gnosis — not knowing — of those who claim that we cannot know the answers to these questions. These agnostics — the word was coined by T.H. Huxley in 1860 — argue that gnostics cannot know what they want to know, defining knowledge in the sense of *episteme*. The knowledge the gnostics seek isn’t amenable to discursive reasoning — Mead’s ‘noise of words’ — nor empirical observation, and hence for agnostics isn’t knowledge. The seekers of gnosis disagree. It’s an argument that’s gone on for some time and won’t be settled here, although as this book progresses I hope to throw some light on it.

The Hermetic teaching tells us that the man of gnosis ‘does not speak much nor gives heed to many things’, because ‘God … and the Supreme Good cannot be spoken of or heard’.[7] The impossibility of speaking of the divine is a common theme in spiritual literature, whether of the East, where it can be found in the *Tao Te Ching* — ‘The Tao that can be spoken of is not the real Tao’ — or the West, where it emerged in the ‘negative theology’ of Nicolas of Cusa, whose philosophy was deeply influenced by Hermetic thought. This being so, many of the Hermetic treatises end either in an ecstatic song of praise or a mystical silence. This is the same silence that follows listening to great works of music, which seem to stir feelings and emotions which words cannot express. Whether this is an immutable characteristic of gnosis is a debatable question, but before the Hermeticist arrives at that pregnant silence or ecstatic song, the Hermetic treatises do indeed speak of many things.

When Trismegistus speaks

The treatises of the *Corpus Hermeticum* are generally structured as a kind of conversation or question and answer session between Hermes Trismegistus or other initiate and a student, or between Hermes and Nous, the Divine Mind.[8] They are some of the earliest examples of a form that will become very familiar in esoteric literature, in which 'one who knows' passes on his knowledge to one who wants to know, Ficino's 'special wisdom handed down from sage to sage'. As Clement Salaman remarks, in the Introduction to his translation of the *Asclepius*, 'the setting … is one where disciples wait expectantly to hear mysterious secrets from their teacher which they hope will transform their lives'.[9] A more recent example of this form is P.D. Ouspensky's account of his years as a student of the Greek-Armenian esoteric teacher G.I. Gurdjieff, *In Search of the Miraculous*, where Ouspensky, who wants to know, sits at the feet of Gurdjieff, who does.

In the first treatise of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, Book I, the *Poimandres*, for example, Poimandres or Nous reveals to Hermes the nature of reality. In Book II, Hermes relates some of what he has learned to his student, Asclepius, the name of the Greek god of healing who was associated with the Egyptian god Imhotep. Other figures like Ammon, and Agathodaimon, who were familiar to Greco-Egyptian mythology, take part in the conversations, as do characters named Tat and Bitys, who are unique to the treatises. The conversations have a dramatic character that most likely was modelled on the Platonic dialogues and which helped to create and maintain the impression that the individuals involved in them are real people, a literary tactic that allows for greater identification on the part of the reader. He or she could identify with the students and go through the same process of gnosis as they do, rather as readers of fiction can experience the emotional ups and downs of the characters in novels.

But unlike the Platonic dialogues, which bring their reader to an understanding of things through a process of reason and argument, the aim of the Hermetic treatises isn't to argue their propositions. 'Their meaning,' Clement Salaman writes, 'is the change they effect in the hearts of their readers or listeners in awakening them to the truth.'[10] And unlike characters in novels, whose day to day lives we enter, what the participants in the Hermetic treatises discuss is somewhat more fundamental. The creation of the universe and our

place in it; the dual nature of mankind; the living cosmos; the essential unity of being; destiny and freedom; the means of actualizing our spiritual nature; the divine mind; spiritual rebirth; the cyclic character of history; immortality; the power of magic: these are some of the things knowledge of which Hermes Trismegistus and his disciples pass on to their eager audience. Although I won't discuss all of the individual treatises that make up the *Corpus Hermeticum*, excellent, readable translations of these are available, and the reader is urged to take the time and read them for himself.[11] The treatises are short, often aphoristic — the *Asclepius* is one of the longer ones, but even it is no longer than a chapter in an average book — and what they sometimes lack in literary finesse they make up for in spiritual and mental stimulation. They are, as one of their translators remarks, 'spiritual exercises aimed at developing the mental faculties of the subject', whose 'Hermetic sentences get mysteriously carved in your memory'.[12]

The world according to Hermes

The *Poimandres* or *Divine Pymander*, or *Pimander* as Marsilio Ficino's translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* was called — and which is still retained as the title in some editions — is the most well known Hermetic treatise, aside, that is, from the *Emerald Tablet*, which is not a part of the *Corpus*. As might be expected, like the *Emerald Tablet*, the *Corpus Hermeticum*, and especially the *Poimandres*, has been adopted by a variety of occult writers and schools, whose use and understanding of it is often at odds with that of more serious students of esotericism, and certainly with the academic/historical study of these works. One work of this class is the *Kybalion*, which purports to contain the essence of 'Hermetic Philosophy'. First published in 1908 — the book is now in the public domain and is available on the internet — its authors were the anonymous 'Three Initiates', but there is good reason to believe it was written by William Walker Atkinson, a prolific writer of pseudo-occult and self-help books, who used a number of pseudonyms; Atkinson also owned the 'Yogi Publication Society of Chicago' which published the *Kybalion*. Central to the *Kybalion's* 'philosophy' is the teaching of the 'Seven Principles', which are based on the Hermetic idea of the individual's identity with the divine mind. No record of any work, Hermetic or otherwise, with this name — which one suspects it is derived from the Kabbala, the Jewish mystical tradition — exists prior to the *Kybalion's* publication, and no recognized authority on Hermeticism includes it in the canon. A more recent book, *The Secret* (2006), by Rhonda Byrnes, a bestselling rehash of the 'mental science' promoted in the *Kybalion* and other similar self-help books of the early twentieth century, makes much use of one of these 'principles', 'the Law of Attraction', which it employs to guarantee its readers the wealth and happiness they deserve. Needless to say, neither the Seven Principles nor the Law of Attraction make any appearance in the *Corpus Hermeticum*, or in any other part of the *Hermetica*, and the kind of wealth and happiness both the Three Initiates and Rhonda Byrnes have in mind was not part of the Hermetic program.

The fame of the *Poimandres* is understandable, given that it speaks of 'first things'. It's an account of the creation of the universe and our place in it. It begins with Hermes Trismegistus focusing his mind on the question of 'the things which are' — a topic that had troubled Greek philosophers since

Parmenides — while his senses are quiet and his understanding is ‘raised to a great height’. He is, that is, in a contemplative, meditative state, detached from the world, when the harangue of the senses has stilled and he is deeply aware of his inner life. This is the key theme of the treatises and of all esoteric, or inner work: the need to quiet the body to allow the mind to become aware of itself. Man, as Hermes Trismegistus will discover, is an inhabitant of two worlds, the outer world of matter and the senses, and an inner world of consciousness. The Hermetic path is the path to greater consciousness, and one sets out on it by withdrawing consciousness from the activity of the body and directing it inward.

While in this quiet state, Hermes becomes aware of ‘someone great of infinite dimensions’ calling his name and asking him what he wishes to hear and see and what he wishes to know. The divine mind, Poimandres, appears to Hermes as a Great Man, like the Anthropos of the Gnostics, or Adam Kadmon of the Kabbala. Later sages, like the Scandinavian philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg and the poet William Blake will also see the divine in human form; in fact for them, as for the Hermeticists, the entire creation itself has a human form. Poimandres or Pymander is often translated as ‘Shepherd of Men’, a reading that helped Christian Hermeticists square their Hermeticism with their Christianity; Christ, of course, was a ‘fisher of men’. But another translation offers ‘mind of authority’ or ‘mind of sovereignty’, which suggests the *power* of the experience.[13] This tells us that Hermes is in the presence of something unmistakably *real*.

Poimandres tells Hermes that he knows what he wishes and that he is with him everywhere; that is to say, he, Poimandres, is Hermes’ own mind and that he himself has the answers to his own questions. Hermes wants to know ‘the things that are and to understand their nature and to know God’. Poimandres tells Hermes to hold these questions firmly in his mind and he will teach him.

What happens next is the creation myth according to Nous. Suddenly, ‘all things opened up’ before Hermes and he looks out on a ‘boundless view’. Then Hermes sees light, filling his view.[14] After a short while, out of this light darkness appears in the form of a kind of spiral or curling, curving motion leading downwards, which fills Hermes with fear and loathing. Then the darkness turns to water which churns and gives out smoke and a sorrowful cry, which Hermes believes comes from the light. From the light the Holy Word or Logos emerges and enters the churning water — which is also mixed with earth — and which then emits a flame. The flame rises up and brings with it air, leaving behind the watery earth. Fire and air separate but the water and earth remain mixed for a time, although they too will soon drift apart. Here is the

separation of the classical elements, fire, water, air, and earth, from the primal chaos.

Poimandres explains that the light is Nous, himself, who existed before the dark waters. The ‘word’ that appeared out of Nous Poimandres calls ‘the Son of God’. The expressions ‘Son of God’, and also ‘Father’, with which the Hermetic treatises sometimes refers to Nous, were seen by Lactantius and other church figures as evidence that Hermes Trismegistus was a prophet of Christianity: his thrice-greatness, for example, was seen as his recognition of the Trinity. While some church figures saw this as a reason to include Hermes Trismegistus among the precursors of Christianity, others argued that the Hermeticists had stolen these and other ideas. The most recent scholarship suggests the opposite. The Hermetic reference to a trinity, a ‘Son of God’ and a ‘God the Father’ seems to predate the Christian use of these terms; so the Christians may have borrowed from Hermes. Whatever the case, Poimandres tells Hermes that Nous, or mind, existed before the creation, and explains to him that what in him ‘sees and hears’ is ‘the Word of the Lord’, and that this isn’t separate from Nous. So Poimandres seems to be saying that something in Hermes existed before the creation.

Poimandres then looks at Hermes in a way that makes him tremble and Hermes then sees in his own Nous, or mind, that the light had become an ‘infinite world’ — the cosmos — and he sees a fire ‘encompassed by a mighty power’. After Poimandres explains that Hermes has seen Nous in its primal form, a kind of absolute archetype that precedes beginning or end (the state of things, say, before the Big Bang), he tells Hermes that the elements originated in another Nous, created by the first one through the power of the Word, another theme found in Christianity. The androgynous Nous creates a second Nous, who becomes the craftsman, the creator of the world. The second Nous or craftsman forms seven powers who encircle the sensory world (what will become Earth) in seven spheres which govern it; their control over the sensory world is what we know of as destiny. These seven spheres are the seven ancient planets: Moon, Sun, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. Those who remain subject to their rule are called ‘processions of fate’.[15] As Hermes will discover, the aim of the Hermetic work is to transcend these spheres, in order to reach an ‘Eighth sphere’, beyond the planets, and further, to reach a ‘Ninth sphere’, where those who have awakened to Nous rejoice in their gnosis. Seeing the pure world of the creator — the world beyond the seven governors — the Word or Logos rises up from the watery sphere (Earth) and joins the creator Nous — they are in some way the same thing — and the Earth is left behind, bereft of the Logos, mere matter.

Hermetic Man

Now the craftsman Nous puts the cosmic wheels in motion, causing the seven spheres to turn. Because of this motion, living things begin to emerge out of the watery earth, but because they lack the Word, being formed only of earthly elements, they had no speech. Speech, language, and mind are all related in the Hermetic vision, and it is not until Man is created that the Word reaches the Earth.

Now, having created the creator, and the creator having created a world, the first Nous, the Father, thought it good to create a being like himself to witness and enjoy this creation. So he brought forth Man, who Poimandres says is the ‘same as himself’, the Father Nous. Nous the Father loved Man as he would his child, but we can’t ignore the element of narcissism that plays a great role in the Hermetic creation myth. Nous loves Man because he is very beautiful, ‘bearing the image of his Father’. The Judeo-Christian resonance here is unmistakable; in that myth too, God creates Man in his own image. Nous the Father so loves Man that he hands creation over to him.

Seeing the beauty of creation, Man himself wished to create. Nous the Father agrees and the craftsman, his brother, gives Man of his power, sharing with him the forces of the seven spheres. Man becomes curious about activities on the Earth, and wishes to see how his brother, the craftsman, is handling things there. He pierces the seven planetary spheres and looks down upon the Earth, allowing Nature to see him, and in him, the form of Nous. Thus seeing Man, Nature falls in love with him. Seeing his reflection on Earth’s waters (Narcissus again), Man falls in love with Nature, and wishes to be with Her. No sooner did Man wish this than it was done, and he descended through the spheres and entered a form without the Word: in other words, a body. Nature wrapped her arms around him and, to be brief, they made love, and have been doing so ever since. It was through this love that Man became, as mentioned earlier, a dweller of two worlds: the earthly world of nature, matter and the senses (the body), and the heavenly world of Nous (mind).

Depending on how you look at it, this ‘fall’ was either a mistake or inevitable. Either way, it accounts for the fact, which we all experience in one way or another, that no matter how much we would like to ‘get back to nature’ and embrace our animal heritage, there is a part of us that is of the stars, that is, the

mind. Hence it is that man/Man is both mortal and immortal, of the Earth and not of it, subject to fate (the seven governors) but able to transcend their rule. For better or for worse, one part of us is beyond the cosmos, another is slave to it. Hence the ancient interest in astrology was centred around the possibility of *escaping* the influence of the stars, and becoming free of it, and not, as it is today, with gaining insight into our personalities or divining our future. Yet for the Hermeticists, unlike their contemporaries the Gnostics, our earthly inheritance is not an evil to be shunned, but a responsibility to be embraced. Because of our dual nature, as Hermes Trismegistus tells Asclepius, man ‘raises his sight to heaven while he takes care of the earth’ and ‘loves those things that are below him and is beloved by the beings above’.[16]

The ascent through the spheres

Now having embraced Man, Nature brought forth seven androgynous beings, who shared in the powers of the seven spheres, and from life and light — the essence of Nous — Man became soul and mind, that is, our emotional, feeling life, which motivates our will, and our intellect. Things remained in this state until the end of a cycle, when all living beings, which had been androgynous, were separated into male and female, including Man, much as happens to the androgynous early humans in Plato's *Symposium*. Nous then commands all living things to go forth and multiply — again, a very Biblical injunction — and admonishes all men endowed with mind to remember their immortality, and to know that desire, which is of the body, is the cause of death. All those who do remember will come to the 'Supreme Good', but all those who prize the body, will remain wanderers in the darkness.

When Hermes Trismegistus asks Poimandres why the ignorant must be deprived of immortality, he is reminded that as the body is formed of the 'grim darkness' that preceded the creation, those who cherish the body must return to it, while those who remember that they are born of light and life — in other words Nous — will 'return to life'. Nous himself helps those who seek the light: the devout, noble, pure, merciful, and pious, who, by dampening the dominance of the body, prepare themselves for the presence of mind. Those who lack Nous, or who abandon it for a life of the senses only, are led deeper into darkness. Then Poimandres informs Hermes that the way back to Nous lies through the ascent through the planetary spheres, during which one surrenders to them those parts of oneself which they control. To the Moon goes growth and diminution; to the Sun the means of evil; to Mercury, deceit; to Venus, avarice; to Mars, daring and reckless audacity; to Jupiter, desire for wealth; and to Saturn, falsehood. Having sloughed off the parts of oneself that fall within the dominance of the governors, one is ready to pass into the realm of the eternal.

There one enters the Eighth sphere, where one sings praises to Nous, and hears the voices of those who occupy the Ninth sphere. Then, having passed beyond the powers, the seekers of gnosis become the powers themselves, and then finally all merge together in God. For, as Hermes tells us, 'This is the end, the Supreme Good, for those who have had the higher knowledge: to become God'.

Hermes' mission

Having explained all this to Hermes, Poimandres asks why he does not, having heard the good news, become the guide of those who are worthy to receive this gnosis? Hermes accepts his mission, and calls out to those who are lost in sleep, drunkenness and ignorance to wake up. Why, he asks, having immortality, do you embrace the mortal? Why, having knowledge, do you remain ignorant? Why, knowing the light, do you remain in darkness? As most prophets and teachers discover, the majority either ignored his words, or laughed at them. Only a few grasped their meaning, and asked him to teach them the way. To these he passed on his knowledge. For them 'the sleep of the body became the sobriety of the soul', and 'the closing of the eyes true vision'.[17] Hermes then gives thanks to Nous in song, and then closes the *Poimandres* with a prayer, that he may not fall from knowledge, and that he may lead others out of their ignorance. He then goes forth to carry out his mission.

Cosmic consciousness

The rest of the *Corpus Hermeticum* concerns itself with spelling out the main themes of the *Poimandres* and with understanding the consequences of the central Hermetic insight, the unity of being, which the Hermeticists express in the formula ‘the One, the All’. As Hermes tells his disciple Asclepius, ‘all things depend upon the one and all things flow from the one’.[18] The entire Hermetic philosophy arises from this fundamental insight; the dictum ‘as above, so below’, which is the basis of the Hermetic doctrine of correspondences, sums up the recognition that everything in the universe (the One) is related to everything else (the All), and that far from a vast, empty space, peppered here and there with lumps of dead matter, the universe is alive, an infinite spiritual being, of which we all are parts. ‘There is nothing,’ the *Corpus Hermeticum* tells us, ‘that comes into being or has come into being anywhere that is not God.’[19]

This, in essence, is what the gnosis is about, and much of the *Corpus Hermeticum* focuses on what is necessary to achieve this vision, because it is only by achieving it that we become truly human. Without this gnosis, human beings are little better than brutes. Worse, in fact, because while the brutes have no possibility of gnosis, it is our birthright, which we forsake only out of indolence and fear, subjecting ourselves to what the Hermeticists called the ‘twelve tormentors’: ignorance, sorrow, intemperance, lust, injustice, greed, deceit, envy, treachery, anger, recklessness, and malice.[20] The perceptions of those without Nous ‘are like those of dumb animals, having a mixture of rage and lust’. They ignore ‘things worthy of attention’ and ‘only parade through the cosmos, led astray by pleasures of the body’, which is the way of ‘death’.[21] But man, Hermes Trismegistus tells us, is a ‘divine being’ and ‘is not to be counted amongst the other creatures on earth’. He really belongs among the gods, or ‘to speak the truth boldly, the true man is above the gods, or at least fully their equal in power’.[22] This is because while the gods are fixed in their place in the great cosmic scheme, man, according to Hermes, is free to rise to the heights, or plunge to the depths, partaking of all the universe offers. Man isn’t limited to one niche in the macrocosm, whether that of the angels or the apes, for the simple reason that he is a microcosm, a little universe himself.

And what gives man this remarkable status in the cosmos? Gnosis.

As you might expect, as I read the treatises in the *Corpus Hermeticum* and struggled with their insights, the question of what exactly gnosis *is* came to me more than once. And while I don't claim to have answered that question entirely, I do believe that some clues to a possible answer can be found in what follows.

In a remarkable passage in Book XI, Nous, or Mind, is again speaking to Hermes, and is trying to explain to him that 'within God everything lies in imagination'. 'Consider this,' Nous tells Hermes:

> Command your soul to go anywhere, and it will be there quicker than your command. Bid it to go to the ocean and again it is there at once … Order it to fly up to heaven and it will need no wings … and if you wish to break through all this and to contemplate what is beyond, it is in your power … If you do not make yourself equal to God you cannot understand him. Like is understood by like. Grow to immeasurable size. Be free from every body, transcend all time. Become eternity and thus you will understand God. Suppose nothing to be impossible for yourself. Consider yourself immortal and able to understand everything: all arts, sciences and the nature of every living creature. Become higher than all heights and lower than all depths. Sense as one within yourself the entire creation … Conceive yourself to be in all places at the same time: in earth, in the sea, in heaven; that you are not yet born, that you are within the womb, that you are young, old, dead; that you are beyond death. Conceive all things at once: times, places, actions, qualities and quantities; then you can understand God.[23]

Again, in the *Asclepius*, Hermes cautions Asclepius and the others present, Tat and Hammon, to 'be entirely present, as far as your mind and ability are capable. For the knowledge of God is to be attained by a godlike concentration of consciousness'. 'Such knowledge,' Hermes informs them, 'comes like a rushing river tumbling in flux from above to the depths beneath. By its headlong rush it outruns any effort we make as hearers, or even as teachers.'[24] And later Hermes again admonishes his disciples to listen to his discourse with 'attentive obedience', otherwise it will 'fly over you and flow round you, or rather it will flow back and mingle again with the waters of its own source'.

The need for 'attentive obedience', 'wakefulness', and 'concentration' will be looked at later. Right now I want to focus on the description of gnosis — 'the knowledge of God' — as a 'rushing river tumbling in flux', and the kind of mystical perception described in Book XI of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, which the academic Florian Ebeling aptly referred to as 'omni-vision'.[25]

While reading Nous' words to Hermes in Book XI, and Hermes' words to Asclepius, I was reminded of a more modern account of an altered state of consciousness that seems remarkably similar to the Hermetic gnosis. In 1873, the Canadian psychologist Richard M. Bucke was visiting London, and while riding in a carriage after an evening reading poetry with friends, he entered a curious state of consciousness unlike anything he had ever experienced. 'His mind' — Bucke tells the story in the third person — 'deeply under the influence of the ideas, images and emotions' stirred by the poetry 'was calm and peaceful' and Bucke found himself in a state of 'quiet, almost passive enjoyment'. Then:

> All at once, without warning of any kind, he found himself wrapped around as it were by a flame-coloured cloud. For an instant he thought of fire, some sudden conflagration in the great city; the next, he knew the light was within himself. Directly afterwards came upon him a sense of exultation, of immense joyousness accompanied or immediately followed by *an intellectual illumination quite impossible to describe* [my italics]. Into his brain streamed one momentary lightning-flash of the Brahmic Splendour which has ever since lightened his life; upon his heart fell one drop of Brahmic bliss, leaving thenceforward for always a taste of heaven. Among other things he did not come to believe, he saw and knew that the Cosmos is no dead matter but a living Presence, that the soul of man is immortal, that the universe is so built and ordered that without any peradventure all things work together for the good of each and all, that the foundation principle of the world is what we call love and that the happiness of everyone is in the long run absolutely certain. He claims that *he learned more*

> *within the few seconds during which the illumination lasted than in the previous months or even years of study, and that he learned much that no study could ever have taught* [my italics].
>
> The illumination itself continued not for more than a few moments but … it was impossible for him ever to forget what he at that time saw and knew … The supreme occurrence of that night was his real and sole initiation to the new and higher order of ideas.[26]

We should note that before his 'illumination', Bucke was in a calm, peaceful, quiet state, much as Hermes is before Nous appears to him at the start of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. And like Hermes, Bucke is suddenly 'raised to a great height' and given a 'boundless view'. And as the passages I've italicized show, Bucke's experience had a powerfully *cognitive* aspect. It was not simply an inordinate rush of feeling or emotion, although, to be sure, powerful emotions did appear, nor was it something necessarily supernatural, in the sense of a vision of a god or angel. Its essence was a *knowing*, a gnosis, which seemed, as Hermes had warned Asclepius, to come to Bucke in a rush 'tumbling in a flux'. Yet in the torrent of insights, Bucke 'saw and knew' and was initiated into a 'new and higher order of ideas'. Some years after this experience, Bucke wrote a book about it, *Cosmic Consciousness*, first published in 1901, in which he argued that human beings were slowly evolving into this higher, expanded form of consciousness, and that examples of it can be found throughout history. Some of Bucke's examples include Buddha, Jesus, and Mohammed; in fact, Bucke argues that the major world religions were all founded upon an experience of 'cosmic consciousness', an idea that seems to chime with Gemistos Plethon's notion of a *prisca theologia*. Bucke also offered some more recent examples of cosmic consciousness, the most prominent of which was the pantheistic poet Walt Whitman, of whom Bucke was a devotee. Curiously, in a literary study of Hermeticism, E.L. Tuveson argues that Whitman was one of the 'avatars of thrice-great Hermes', although Whitman himself seems not to have been familiar with the *Hermetica*, nor does Hermes Trismegistus figure in Bucke's pantheon of those who have experienced cosmic consciousness.[27]

The nitrous oxide experiments

Some readers of Bucke's book were also privy to snippets of cosmic consciousness, and their accounts of it seem to offer some insight into the Hermetic gnosis as well. The philosopher and psychologist William James, who discusses Bucke's ideas in his classic *Varieties of Religious Experiences*, had two experiences similar to Bucke's, one under the influence of nitrous oxide, the other with no apparent stimulus. Both shared in the cognitive quality of Bucke's vision.

Under the effects of the gas, which produced a 'tremendously exciting sense of an intense metaphysical illumination' in which 'truth lies open to view in depth upon depth of almost blinding evidence,' James felt an 'immense emotional sense of reconciliation' as 'every opposition … vanishes in a higher unity in which it is based'. James saw that 'unbroken continuity is of the essence of being' and that 'we are literally in the midst of an infinite, to perceive the existence of which is the utmost we can attain'. And if the prompt for James' insight — nitrous oxide — makes us question its value, consider his other moment of cosmic consciousness, which happened while he was engaged in conversation, with no immediate trigger. While talking, James was suddenly:

> … reminded of a past experience; and this reminiscence, ere I could conceive or name it distinctly, developed into something further that belonged with it, this in turn into something further still, and so on, until the process faded out, leaving me amazed at *the sudden vision of increasing ranges of distant facts of which I could give no articulate account* [my italics]. The mode of consciousness was perceptual, not conceptual — the field expanding so fast that there seemed no time for conception or identification to get in its work. There was a strongly exciting sense that my *knowledge of past (or present?) reality was enlarging pulse by pulse* [my italics], but so rapidly that my intellectual processes could not keep up the pace … The feeling — I will not call it belief — that I had had a sudden opening, had seen through a window, as it were, into distant realities that incomprehensibly belonged with my own life, was so acute that I cannot shake it off today.

Again, there is a distinct cognitive character to the experience. But the cognition came in such a flood — Hermes' 'rushing river tumbling in flux' — that James couldn't hold on to it, recalling Hermes' words to Tat in Book X, that the 'Supreme Good cannot be spoken of or heard'. A similar problem occurred during James' nitrous oxide experiment. Trying to nail down some of the teeming thoughts, James took some notes, only to find afterward that 'to the sober reader' they would seem 'meaningless drivel'. 'Sheet after sheet of phrases dictated or written during the intoxication … which at the moment of transcribing were fused in the fire of infinite rationality' had dwindled to nonsense like 'What's a mistake but a kind of take? What's nausea but a kind of — ausea?'

Another reader of Bucke, and James, was the Russian journalist and writer P.D. Ouspensky, best known as a follower of Gurdjieff, but an important thinker in his own right.[28] Impressed by James' account, and by Bucke's book, Ouspensky repeated James' nitrous oxide experiment, with much the same results. Like James and Bucke, Ouspensky found himself in a world of total unity, in which there was 'nothing separate, that is, nothing that can be named or described separately'.[29] In this new world, which was 'entirely unlike anything that occurs in life', Ouspensky found that *everything* was connected, unified, linked together, and that this insight led to the same difficulties that James had experienced. This new consciousness 'gave at once so much that was new and unexpected, and these new and unexpected experiences came upon me and flashed by so quickly, that I could not find words, could not find forms of speech, could not find concepts, which would enable me to remember what had occurred even for myself, still less to convey it to anyone else'. This last remark is strikingly similar to Hermes' admonition to Asclepius that gnosis in 'its headlong rush outruns any effort we make as hearers, or even as teachers', and Ouspensky learned the truth of it when he tried to talk to a friend about the insights he was having. 'I began to say something,' he wrote, 'but between the first and second words of my sentence such an enormous number of ideas occurred to me and passed before me, that the two words were so widely separated as to make it impossible to find any connection between them.'[30] Like James, Ouspensky took notes of what was happening, and like James he was disappointed in what he read afterward. 'Think in other categories' was the 'key' with which he wished to trigger this new cognition at a later date. More disturbing still was the effect of looking at an ashtray. 'Suddenly,' he writes, 'I felt that I was beginning to understand what the ashtray was, and at the same time, with a certain wonder and almost with fear, I felt that I had never understood it before and that we do not understand the simplest things around us.' The ashtray had 'roused a whirlwind of thoughts and images' and contained an 'infinite number of facts'. Everything connected with smoking and tobacco 'roused thousands of images, pictures, memories'. And the ashtray itself: how had it come into being? What of the materials it was made of? How had they been discovered? Who had made it? These and dozens of other questions tumbled through Ouspensky's mind and he once again tried to capture some of this flux in words. The result was the disquieting insight that 'A man can go mad from one ashtray'. By this Ouspensky had tried to convey the insight that 'in one ashtray it was possible to know *all*'.

Again, if we are inclined to question the significance of Ouspensky's ashtray

because he was observing it while under the influence of nitrous oxide, an earlier, non-drug stimulated experience has a remarkable similarity to the kind of ‘omni-vision’ Florian Ebeling finds at the core of Hermetic philosophy. In 1908, while on a steamer crossing the Sea of Marmora in Turkey, Ouspensky stood on deck, watching the waves, as they crashed against the ship. He felt the waves ‘drawing’ his ‘soul’ to themselves. Then:

> Suddenly I felt it go to them. It was only a moment, maybe less than a moment. But I entered the waves and, with them, with a roar, attacked the ship. And at that moment *I became all* [italics in the original]. The waves — they were myself. The violet mountains in the distance — they were myself. The wind — it was myself. The clouds, hurrying from the north, the rain — were myself. The huge ship, rolling indomitably forward — was myself … The mate on duty and the bridge was I; and two sailors … and the black smoke, billowing from the funnel … everything. It was a moment of extraordinary liberation, joy and expansion.[31]

Talking with angels

Like Bucke, whose moment of cosmic consciousness produced ‘a sense of exultation, of immense joyousness’, Ouspensky’s moment filled him with joy, and a sense of ‘liberation’. James, too, felt an ‘immense emotional sense of reconciliation’, a feeling that everything was good, that all was right, very much like the sense of cosmic unity that end many of the Hermetic books and which often leads to ecstatic songs of praise. Exactly *why* everything was good and all was right, neither Bucke, James, nor Ouspensky could convey in any rational, articulate speech. When considering this I was reminded of something the Scandinavian religious philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg, who often visited heaven and hell, said about the angels: that they ‘can say more in a minute than many can say in half an hour’. Angelic language, Swedenborg wrote, ‘has nothing in common with human language’. Angels, Swedenborg tells us, can ‘set down in a few words the contents of many written pages’, and their speech ‘is so full of wisdom that they with a single word can express things which men could not compass in a thousand words’. And in his conversations with angels, Swedenborg experienced the same inability to *retain* what he had learned that James and Ouspensky had in their moments of cosmic consciousness. ‘On occasion,’ Swedenborg tells us:

> … I have been assigned to the state in which angels were and … have talked with them. At such times *I understood everything* [my italics]. But when I was sent back into my earlier state … and wanted to recall what I had heard, I could not. For there were thousands of things that had no equivalent in concepts of natural thought, that were therefore inexpressible except simply through shiftings of heavenly light — not at all by human words.[32]

In the Introduction, I mentioned that Hermes Trismegistus was said to have written a remarkable number of books; one estimate was twenty thousand (Iamblichus), another thirty-six thousand (Manetho). To the rational mind, this seems absurd, even if some writers do rack up an unusual number of volumes (Georges Simenon, for example, the creator of Inspector Maigret, wrote nearly two hundred novels.) But if we consider Swedenborg’s remarks about angelic language, one wonders if the thrice-great one wrote his works in a similar tongue? A few volumes written in the language of the angels would be equivalent to many dozens in our earthbound speech. In any case, with Swedenborg we get, as we do with Hermes, Bucke, James, and Ouspensky, the idea of a huge amount of information channelled in a short space of time to a consciousness not quite able to assimilate it. Cosmic consciousness occurs in

moments, and Swedenborg's angels say 'more in a minute than many can say in half an hour'. The experience is accompanied by a sense of happiness, of joy, so powerful that it marks for life those who have it, and in the case of the Egyptian Hermeticists circa 200 AD, it leads to either a mystical, thankful silence or to ecstatic songs of praise, triggering the 'yea-saying' faculty that James believed alcohol and other stimulants had the power to release.

What prompts this response? Why should an increase in knowledge lead to ‘exultation’ and an ‘immense sense of reconciliation?’ After all, I am at this moment sitting in the British Library, surrounded by the ‘world’s knowledge’, with immediate access, not only to thousands of books, but also to the global network of electronic sources, the internet and worldwide web, that makes up our planet’s cerebral cortex. I am glad I am here and can use this resource, but I am not overjoyed, although perhaps I should be. Why is the knowledge one gets with gnosis different?

The answer should be obvious. In gnosis, the knowledge one receives is immediate and direct, not filtered through the rational mind. It is not abstract, but *living*. It is *real*. I can sit here and reflect on the thought that ‘all is one’, and consider the arguments of philosophers who have said this, Plotinus, Hegel, Whitehead, and others. But although I can follow their thoughts and even agree with them, and perhaps have brief flashes of this unity, I don’t *feel* it to be true. Yet in gnosis I would.

Considering the experience of Bucke and the others, I was reminded of something Aldous Huxley said in his book *The Doors of Perception*, his account of his experiment with the drug mescaline. Famously, after taking the drug Huxley found himself ‘seeing what Adam had seen on the morning of his creation — the miracle, moment by moment, of naked existence’.[33] Later, Huxley tried to account for the remarkable effects of the drug, which, along with a heightening of perception included the kind of widening of the sense of self that Ouspensky felt on the Sea of Marmora, when he *was* the waves, the mountains, and so on. Huxley speaks of everything shining with an inner light that reflected the infinity of its significance (much like Ouspensky’s ashtray), and when gazing at the bamboo legs of a chair, he felt he had become them. Huxley reflected that an idea first suggested by the philosopher Henri Bergson could possibly explain what had happened. He quotes the philosopher C.D. Broad, who paraphrases Bergson’s idea. ‘The suggestion,’ Broad writes:

> … is that the function of the brain and nervous system and sense organs is in the main *eliminative* and not productive. *Each person is at each moment capable of remembering all that has ever happened to him and of perceiving everything that is happening everywhere in the universe* [my italics]. The function of the brain and nervous system is to protect us from being overwhelmed and confused by this mass of largely useless and irrelevant knowledge, by shutting out most of what we should otherwise perceive or remember at any moment, and leaving only that very small and special selection which is likely to be practically useful.[34]

Mescaline and other psychedelic drugs work, then, by opening up the brain's 'reducing valve', thus allowing more of reality into consciousness. And the same, I think, can be said of moments of cosmic consciousness that aren't triggered by a drug. In them, for some reason, the 'reducing valve' is opened of its own accord.

The Hermetic character of the passage I've quoted is remarkable; Huxley even follows it by commenting that 'according to such a theory, each one of us is potentially Mind at Large', which is more or less what Nous is at pains to teach to Hermes. The statement that 'each person is at each moment capable of remembering all that has ever happened to him and of perceiving everything that is happening everywhere in the universe' is a neat abstract of Nous' command to Hermes to 'conceive yourself to be in all places at the same time: in earth, in the sea, in heaven; that you are not yet born, that you are within the womb, that you are young, old, dead; that you are beyond death. Conceive all things at once: times, places, actions, qualities and quantities'. Broad's remarks, or Bergson's, can't be rejected as airy speculation by hard-nosed scientists demanding proof, as there is some very hard evidence for them. In 1952, the Canadian neurosurgeon Wilder Penfield accidentally stimulated a section of a patient's brain while performing an operation. As the brain has no pain centres, the patient was awake when Penfield did this, and reported experiencing, not merely a memory of a past event, but an absolutely vivid 're-experience' of it, as if the past event was happening then and there. Subsequently, neuroscientists established that the brain retains an acute memory of everything it has experienced, including memories of events that we are not consciously aware of at the time, something the novelist Marcel Proust discovered when he tasted a biscuit dipped in tea and suddenly found himself back in Combray, a part of France where he spent his childhood holidays. The result was Proust's enormous novel *A Remembrance of Things Past*, a work deeply influenced by Bergson's ideas about 'involuntary memory'.

Too much information?

We will return to our remarkable, if generally unknown and unused ability to vividly re-create past events later. For the moment I want to focus on why we aren't aware of 'everything that is happening everywhere in the universe' more often. The basic reason is the one that Huxley points out: we simply don't need to be. 'To make biological survival possible,' Huxley writes, 'Mind at Large has to be funnelled through the reducing valve of the brain and nervous system.' And 'what comes out … is the measly trickle of the kind of consciousness which will help us to stay alive on the surface of this particular planet'.[35] If I am trying to cross a busy street, being aware of what is happening on some planet in a galaxy many light years away is of no immediate use to me. Being overwhelmed by cosmic consciousness will not help me in the day-to-day struggle for survival, and so I — or who or whatever is responsible for human evolution — edit it out. Huxley goes on to make some remarks that refer to the distinction between gnosis and *episteme* discussed at the start of this chapter. 'To formulate and express the contents of this reduced awareness,' Huxley writes:

> … man has invented and endlessly elaborated those symbol-systems and implicit philosophies we call language. Every individual is at once the beneficiary and victim of the linguistic tradition into which he or she has been born — the beneficiary inasmuch as language gives access to the accumulated records of other people's experiences [the 'world's knowledge' I am in the midst of at the British Library], the victim in so far as it confirms him in the belief that reduced awareness is the only awareness and as it bedevils his sense of reality, so that he is all too apt to take his concepts for data, his words for actual things. That which, in the language of religion, is called 'this world' is the universe of reduced awareness, expressed and, as it were, petrified by language. The various 'other worlds', with which human beings erratically make contact are so many elements in the totality of the awareness belonging to Mind at Large.[36]

Episteme, then, is knowledge of the world seen through 'reduced awareness'; gnosis is the knowledge of 'Mind at Large'.

We might think that starting out, as it were, as Mind at Large, Nous, or whoever is responsible, made a mistake by squeezing itself into our pitifully small brains. The loving embrace of Man and Nature, then, would indeed have been a 'fall'. But as Asclepius tells his disciples, in order to care for creation, which is part of our purpose, we need a body, and a body needs a brain. So God gave Man a 'corporeal dwelling place' and 'mixed and blended our two natures into one'. Thus He did justice to our 'twofold origin', and we can 'wonder at and adore the celestial, while caring for and managing the things on earth'.[37] Huxley himself remarked that if everyone took mescaline, there would be no war, but there would be no civilization either: looking at a sink full of dirty dishes, Huxley thought they were too beautiful to bother about. Many a less disciplined psychedelic imbiber felt the same. Under mescaline — and other inebriants —

Huxley recognized that ‘the will suffers a profound change for the worse’ and ‘the mescaline taker sees no reason for doing anything in particular’.[38] Other mental voyagers confirm this. At the end of his essay on his nitrous oxide experiment, James wrote that: ‘*indifferentism* is the true outcome of every view of the world which makes infinity and continuity to be its essence’. If all is one, why do one thing rather another? Why, indeed, wash those dishes? (James, after all, was one of the founders of pragmatism, an eminently practical philosophy.) Being continually awash in cosmic consciousness or psychedelic intoxication, we could hardly fulfil our responsibilities as carers and managers of the Earth. This isn’t to say we necessarily do a good job of it now — that is not the point — but we would do infinitely worse if we were all in a will-less state of bliss.

It strikes me then that, rather than the result of a ‘fall’ or cosmic error, our consciousness is purposefully limited — by whom is unclear — in order for us to get on with our business here, which seems to be the slow, often frustrating process of assimilating gnosis to *episteme*, of grabbing hold of the insights that come ‘like a rushing river tumbling in flux’ and turning them into words, contrary to the common idea that such mystical experiences are ineffable. The point of gnosis, then, is not only to have the experience, but to *communicate* it, and by doing so, to add to our understanding of ourselves and the cosmos, an understanding that Nous, God, or whoever, wants and is engaged in acquiring through us. This is a point we will return to further on.

Life failure and the Goldilocks effect

The reader may think I have come a long way from Hermes Trismegistus, but I must beg his indulgence for a little while longer. Now, although the brain's 'reducing valve' works very well in helping us 'stay alive on the surface of this particular planet', it also produces some unhelpful side effects. One is the curious narrowing of consciousness that we call boredom and its accompanying sense of meaninglessness. We know that in childhood, we all feel something of what Huxley felt under mescaline, that sense of 'seeing as Adam had seen on the morning of his creation', when practically everything we encounter is delightful. And we also know that as time passes, we lose this; 'the glory and the freshness of a dream' fades and we feel the 'shades of the prison house' close in, as Wordsworth tells us ('Intimations of Immortality'). This is the effect of 'growing up' and it leads to the 'been there done that' sensibility so common today. This sense of 'life failure', as Colin Wilson calls it, can be so great that it can even lead to suicide, or to 'living dangerously' (Nietzsche), in order to stimulate the will to life. It can also lead to other undesirable results — alcoholism, drug addiction, violence, sexual perversions — and other ways in which we try to get a more satisfying return on our investment in life. And it can also lead to a broad philosophical belief that life, the universe, is meaningless, a view that much of contemporary science and contemporary culture seems to share.

Gnosis, cosmic consciousness, psychedelic experiences can revive 'the glory and freshness of a dream'. But as we've seen, having too much of this, as seems to happen on these occasions, is equally problematic. We seem to be stuck in the middle between too much meaning and not enough. Too much meaning incapacitates the will. Not enough meaning gives us nothing to will for. Clearly the ideal would be to find some profitable middle ground, that 'just right' condition I have called the 'Goldilocks effect', where we can open the valve and let in more meaning, so that at thirty-five or forty, we aren't asking about life 'Is that all there is?' but not open the tap so wide that we are flooded with more meaning than we can do anything with. I think the Hermeticists were trying to do this, or were at least trying to give the experience of gnosis some structure. That is, they were trying to strengthen their minds, so that who or whatever was responsible for opening the brain's 'reducing valve', would recognize that they were disciplined enough to absorb a greater degree of reality, without

succumbing to the cosmic lethargy symbolized by Huxley’s unwashed dishes.

Reptile brains

Again, talking about the brain may seem to lead the discussion away from Hermeticism, which is, after all, about alchemy and magic and the macrocosm and microcosm. But as we will see in the next chapter, the Egyptian wisdom that Hermeticism is supposed to be based on, is itself concerned with the function of the brain, at least according to one of its interpreters. Here I will note that, in talking about Hermetic philosophy, the esoteric scholar Manly P. Hall remarked that 'when certain areas of the brain are stimulated by the secret processes of the Mysteries, the consciousness of man is extended and he is permitted to behold the Immortals and enter into the presence of superior gods'.[39] Clearly, one reference isn't proof that gnosis has to do with the brain's 'reducing valve', yet the Hermetic books themselves seem to suggest that their authors had an intuition about the brain's evolution and structure. In Book X, Hermes informs Tat that 'human souls which gain immortality are transformed into spirits', and enter the 'choruses of the gods'. But those who do not awake their Nous and 'remain evil' are turned back on their journey (toward God) and move 'towards the reptiles'.[40] In the 1950s, the neuroscientist Paul D. MacLean developed his theory of the triune brain, which argued that the peculiar human brain, the cerebral cortex, grew out of two previous 'brains', what he called the 'R-complex' and the 'limbic system'. The limbic system is our 'old mammalian' inheritance and is something we share with other mammals; it is the seat of our emotions. The R-complex is also called the 'reptilian brain', and is formed of the brain stem and cerebellum. It is the oldest part of the brain and is involved with regulating autonomic functions, like breathing and heartbeat, and is primarily reactive: it has no free will or power of choice. These are associated solely with the cerebral or neo-cortex, which is responsible for reason, speech and cognition — three functions clearly associated with Hermetic man. In saying that those who fail to awaken Nous slip back 'towards the reptiles', did the author of this Hermetic book intuit that by forgoing our peculiar human abilities, we actually do retreat back into our reptile brain? That fact that in world mythology a snake, dragon, or other reptilian creature is often used to symbolize the condition of chaos prior to the world's creation — or the state of unconscious being before the rise of self-consciousness — seems to offer support for this possibility.

Let us leave this question for now. Further on we will have more to say about

the brain and its relation to gnosis. But at this point let us take a look at the land where the Hermetic philosophy was thought to have been born. Let us go, then, to Egypt.

Notes

1. G.R.S. Mead, *Gnosis of the Mind* (Benares: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1906), p. 10. Text available at http://www. gnosis.org/library/grs-mead/grsm_gnosismind.htm 2. Ibid. p. 23.
3. Clement Salaman, Dorine van Oyen and William D. Wharton translators, *The Way of Hermes* (London: Duckworth, 2001), p.13. See also notes 9 and 11 below.
4. Mead 1906, p. 46.
5. As with 'romantic' and 'existential,' 'gnostic' has taken on a usage and meaning that exceeds reference to the religious and spiritual communities and beliefs that arose in the first centuries following Christ and is now often used in a broader sense to mean secret, hidden, or occult, as well as the individuals who pursue knowledge of this kind. For the specific historical groups and teachings that make up Gnosticism, I will use Gnostic. For less specific references, I will use gnostic.
6. *C.G. Jung Speaking*, ed. William McGuire and R.F.C. Hull (London: Pan Books, 1980), p. 428.
7. Salaman 2001, p. 58.
8. There are several definitions and interpretations of the Greek word *Nous*, which in English is sometimes used to mean 'common sense', and which is the probable source of the American slang phrase 'use your noodle', meaning to 'use your head,' to think something through. For different Greek philosophers — Anaxagoras, Plato, Aristotle — it means intellect, mind, logos, reason, either that of the individual or of God. In terms of experience, as I hope will become clear, for the Hermetic thinkers, the sense in which it is understood as a sudden godlike cognition is probably the closest.
9. Clement Salaman, Introduction to *Asclepius The Perfect Discourse of Hermes Trismegistus* (London: Duckworth, 2007), pp. 11–12. Readers who go on to read Salaman's excellent translations may note that some of the language used is remarkably similar to that of the Gurdjieffean 'fourth way'. This is not surprising, given that Salaman is a member of the School of Economic Science, an offshoot of P.D. Ouspensky's London 'fourth way' schools of the 1930s and '40s. This is not to say that Salaman has imported language from one 'esoteric school' to another. 'Wakefulness' and the struggle against 'sleep' that characterizes the 'fourth way' are themes inherent in the *Hermetica*, as well as in other spiritual philosophies. Salaman is also the editor of a translation of *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino* (1999) prepared by the London Language Department of the School of Economic Science.
10. Salaman 2001, p. 15.
11. For this account I have relied on Clement Salaman's translation of the *Asclepius* and, with Dorine van Oyen and William D. Wharton, of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, published as *The Way of Hermes*, above. Both are highly readable and not top-heavy with critical apparatus, although the Introduction to the *Corpus Hermeticum* by Gilles Quispel, and Jean-Pierre Mahé's translation of and Introduction to *The Definitions of Hermes Trismegistus to Asclepius*, included in the book, are essential. I have also consulted Brian Copenhaver's *Hermetica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) and G.R.S. Mead's classic *Thrice Greatest Hermes* (York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, 2001). Timothy Freke's and Peter Gandy's *The Hermetica* (London: Piatkus Books, 1997) is a very readable popular re-interpretation and compilation of the Hermetic writings from different sources.
12. Salaman 2001, pp. 131, 126.
13. Copenhaver, p. 1. *The Way of Hermes* has '*Nous* of the Supreme'.
14. In his fascinating book *The Reflexive Universe* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1976), the philosopher and

inventor Arthur M. Young makes some remarks about light that seem to have an Hermetic cast. 'Light,' Young says, 'is the unitary purposive principle which engenders the universe,' and 'has the nature of a first cause'. (p. 23) 'Light, because it is primary, must be unqualified — impossible to describe — because it is antecedent to the contrasts necessary to description.' (p. 10) 'Light is not an objective thing that can be investigated as can ordinary objects … Light is not seen. It is seeing.' (Ibid.) The history of light as a metaphor for vision and knowledge — illumination, enlightenment — is too long to enter here, but seems to warrant a serious study. See also Arthur Zajonc, *Catching the Light: The Entwined History of Light and Mind* (New York: Bantam, 1993).

15. Mead 1906, p. 11
16. Salaman 2007, p. 58.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid. p. 73.
19. Salaman 2001, p. 79.
20. These twelve tormentors, if one persists on the Hermetic path, are replaced by knowledge, joy, self-control, steadfastness, justice, generosity, truth, Supreme Good, life, and light.
21. Salaman 2001, p.38.
22. Ibid. p. 63
23. Ibid. p. 70
24. Salaman 2007, p. 55.
25. Ebeling, p. 67.
26. Richard M. Bucke, *Cosmic Consciousness* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1966), pp. 9–10. One of the examples Bucke gives of previous experiences of cosmic consciousness is that of the fifteenth century German shoemaker and mystic Jacob Boehme. In one account of his experiences, Boehme speaks of it in a way remarkably similar to Bucke. 'The gate was opened to me,' Boehme wrote, 'that in one quarter of an hour I saw and knew more than if I had been many years together at university.' Again, the profound cognitive character of the experience is clear. In an earlier experience, Boehme looked 'into the principles and deepest foundations of things'. Ibid. pp. 182, 180.
27. Ernest Lee Tuveson, *The Avatars of Thrice Greatest Hermes* (London and Toronto: Associated University Press, 1982), pp. 202–51.
28. See Gary Lachman, *In Search of P.D. Ouspensky* (Wheaton: Quest Books, 2004).
29. P.D. Ouspensky, *A New Model of the Universe* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), p. 278.
30. Ibid. pp. 280–81.
31. P. D. Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), p. 258.
32. Emanuel Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell* (London: Swedenborg Society, 1992), pp. 173, 188, 172, 172–73.
33. Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception* (London: Grafton Books, 1987), p. 15.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid. p. 20.
36. Ibid.
37. Salaman 2007 p. 61.
38. Huxley, p. 21.
39. Manly P. Hall, *The Secret Teachings of All Ages* (New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2003), p. 96.
40. Salaman 2001, p. 58.

2. Out of Egypt

The idea that Egypt is the source of all wisdom is almost as old as Egypt itself. According to the tradition, practically every western wise man or sage went to school in the land of the pyramids and the Sphinx. Probably the most well known example of this is found in Plato's *Timaeus*, in which Solon, one of the Seven Wise Men of Greece, is informed by an Egyptian priest that the Greeks are 'only children'. The same priest told Solon the story of Atlantis and informed him that Egyptian civilization was eight thousand years old. Yet Solon wasn't alone. Plato himself, legend has it, followed in Solon's footsteps, and others took the journey before him, Pythagoras, Orpheus, Thales, Anaximander, not to mention Moses too, to name a few. For Herodotus, the 'father of history', who also made the trip, the Egyptians 'were scrupulous beyond all measure in the matter of religion',[1] and their expertise in questions of life, death and the world beyond, was common knowledge among the ancients. Because of this, going to Egypt to learn the mysteries became a kind of obligatory gesture among the Greeks, much as making a 'journey to the East' to sit at a guru's feet was in the 1960s and 70s, or backpacking among indigenous 'shamans' is today. In fact it became so *de rigueur* for Greek philosophers and wise men to make the trip to Egypt that later historians came to doubt the truth of their journeys, and argued that their biographers included them in the accounts of their lives, simply because this was the expected thing. No self-respecting sage would have missed such a voyage, and so, the argument went, their followers added one to their CV, whether they actually went there or not.

Yet the Greeks weren't the only Egypt-besotted people. The popularity of Egypt as a holy land and site of mysteries was so great that many Romans visited there too, seeking out the hidden secrets, fuelling a busy trade in 'esoteric tourism' that continues today, as the dozens of travel guides and package tours to 'mysterious Egypt' available to modern consumers show. That the Romans, who for us are ancient, saw Egypt as a land of hoary mysteries tells us that Egypt has been old for a very long time — it is, in fact, difficult to think of Egypt as 'young' — and that its reputation as the source of the deepest knowledge and wisdom has been around for awhile.

Small wonder then, that with such a reputation, academic students of the history of Hermeticism began to see Egypt as 'the almost mythically overrated

origin of all divine wisdom and human pious practices’.[2]

The writing on the wall

Such assessments may be too harsh, but for many today, they seem justified. Whether or not Plato, Pythagoras and the others made the trip to Egypt to learn of its dark secrets remains a much debated point, but in one sense it is unimportant. The view of Egypt as a land of esoteric mysteries received a considerably blow in 1822 when Jean-François Champollion, a French scholar of languages, famously cracked one Egyptian mystery: the meaning of the hieroglyphics, which had hitherto baffled linguists. Champollion made his breakthrough by comparing the three inscriptions of the same text, in Greek, demotic (or written Egyptian), and hieroglyphics, carved into the surface of a stele found in Rosetta, Egypt, and which dated to 196 BC. The stele, of course, soon became known as the Rosetta Stone, and because he could read Greek and could work out the demotic through his understanding of Coptic — the late Egyptian language written in the Greek alphabet — Champollion could compare the inscriptions in these languages with the hieroglyphics, and decipher their meaning. Yet what Champollion found was not 'the highest mysteries of the Divinity', as some earlier students of hieroglyphics argued the strange figures and symbols contained, but a 'dull record … of the acts and attributes of kings'.[3] The Rosetta Stone in particular, which is on display in the British Museum, announces a repeal of taxes on certain temples. An interesting addition to our knowledge of ancient Egypt, no doubt, but not a particularly mystical discovery.

Champollion was not the only one to try to uncover the hieroglyphics' secret, and he shares credit for unlocking their mystery with the Englishman Thomas Young. Both Young and Champollion, however, profited by the work of those who came before them, like the French Orientalist Silvestre de Sacy and his student, the Swede Johan David Akerblad. But ironically, one of the most remarkable students of the hieroglyphics was a scholar who did much to promote the idea of Egypt as a land of ancient mysteries and occult secrets. So significant was his early work that he has come to be seen as the founder of Egyptology, a credit that many contemporary Egyptologists wish to ignore. This isn't surprising, given that modern mainstream Egyptology is dead set against the idea that ancient Egypt had anything to do with the kind of mystical, esoteric philosophy that the founder of their discipline believed in wholeheartedly.

The last Renaissance Man

Athanasius Kircher was a seventeenth century German Jesuit priest, scholar and polymath, who devoted his considerable intellect and energies to an astonishingly wide range of interests, from the study of volcanoes and the mathematics of music, to the investigations of microbes and the geography of China. Because of the breadth of Kircher's research, he is rightly known as one of the last of the Renaissance men. He was also one of the last great Hermetic scholars, developing and applying the macrocosmic/microcosmic system he had learned through Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, and the *Corpus Hermeticum* to a number of disciplines. Although by the time Kircher published his massive work on Egypt, *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*, in 1652–54, Isaac Casaubon had already dated the writing of the *Corpus Hermeticum* to the early centuries AD— thereby undermining their authority — Kircher, who believed Hermes Trismegistus and Moses were identical, ignored this, and continued to work in a determined Hermetic tradition. In the history of science he is seen as one of the last, great dinosaurs, working away at his immense Hermetic tomes just at the time when Cartesian rationalism was firmly establishing itself. But for students of less reductive systems of thought, his vision remains thrilling and often inspiring.

Kircher himself is a good advertisement for the Hermetic dictum that, unlike any other being, man has no fixed place in the cosmos, and can ascend to the heights or plunge to the depths at his desire. His studies of music led him to believe that its harmony reflected the proportions of the universe, an ancient idea going back to Pythagoras, and which is the basis for the notion of the 'music of the spheres', the celestial tones made by the revolutions of the planets. Yet although Kircher's head was in the stars, he was very 'down to earth', dangerously so, in fact. His passion for geology was so great that in 1638, during a visit to southern Italy, Kircher had himself lowered into the crater of Mount Vesuvius, then on the point of erupting, in order to observe its interior. His fascination with mechanical marvels also had an Hermetic touch; among his inventions, which included a variation on the 'magic lantern', a magnetic clock, and a 'perpetual motion machine', were automatons, 'talking statues', an idea central to the *Asclepius*, which describes how the ancient Egyptians used magic to draw the gods down into their representations. Indeed, it was this account that

led Augustine to condemn Hermes Trismegistus' 'magic' as 'demonic'. Yet the notion of magically animating statues and images has a long history in the west; it was a speciality of Hero of Alexandria, and even Pope Sylvester II was said to have consulted a mechanical talking head.

Kircher knew Hebrew and Syriac, and was fascinated with languages; at one point he even tried to decipher the mysterious Voynich Manuscript.[4] In 1636 he published *Prodromus Coptus sive Aegyptiacus*, the first western Coptic grammar, which he followed in 1643 with his *Lingua Aegyptiaca Restituta*, which became the basis of all later Coptic studies. Kircher argued rightly that Coptic was intimately related to the language of Pharaonic Egypt, yet when he came to the hieroglyphs, his approach was purely symbolic. He became interested in their mystery in 1638, when he read a book on the Sistine Obelisk. Originally erected in Heliopolis by the Pharaoh Mencares in 1857 BC, the obelisk was brought to Rome by the Emperor Caligula in 37 AD, and later moved to the centre of St Peter's Square by Pope Sixtus V in 1586. Other books on Egypt, like Hörwart von Hohenburg's *Thesaurus*, which contained pictures of hieroglyphics, and which Kircher found in a library in Speyer, Germany, intrigued him. But the real trigger for turning Kircher into the 'founder of Egyptology', was receiving a copy of the Bembine Tablet of Isis, from Nicholaus Claude Fabri de Peiresc, a wealthy patron from Avignon.

Named after Cardinal Bembo, who acquired it after the sack of Rome by the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V in 1527, the Bembine Tablet is believed by official accounts to be of Roman origin, and today rests in the Museum of Antiquities in Turin. Made of bronze, silver, gold, copper, and enamel inlay, the tablet depicts the Egyptian goddess Isis, surrounded by Egyptian stylized figures and symbols — including the god Thoth — in different hieratic and ritual poses, and is considered an important example of ancient metallurgy. Although most Egyptologists consider it an expression of decadent Roman taste for Egyptian mystery, with a possible use at a site of Isis worship, the consensus is that the 'hieroglyphics' it contains are meaningless, rather as if a student of Kabbala, with no knowledge of Hebrew, decorated a tablet in Hebrew letters, which, because of their strange shapes, to the unlearned seem 'mysterious'.

The language of Adam and Eve

Unfortunately, Kircher based his ‘translation’ of the hieroglyphics on those of the Bembine Tablet, and once Champollion had cracked the Rosetta Stone, his interpretations were seen to be nonsense, at least according to the official view. An oft-quoted example of Kircher’s howlers are the hieroglyphics that read ‘dd Wsr’, which means ‘Osiris says’. Kircher’s ‘symbolic’ interpretation gives: ‘The treachery of Typhon ends at the throne of Isis; the moisture of nature is guarded by the vigilance of Anubis’. He also believed that ancient Egyptian was the language of Adam and Eve. Yet although it is easy to use Kircher as anti-esoteric Egypt whipping boy, it is also easy to lose sight of his achievement, which was considerable, given that, as his biographer Joscelyn Godwin points out, he ‘had no Rosetta Stone, no large body of hieroglyphic inscriptions to study, and of the sources available to him many were late, corrupt, or virtually meaningless’.[5]

But Kircher’s symbolic approach can’t be explained purely by less than perfect materials. He had a whole tradition of seeing Egypt and especially the hieroglyphics in this symbolic way behind him. Horapollon, the fourth century Greek grammarian, believed that hieroglyphics were a kind of ‘picture writing’, and that any future interpreter should look for symbolic meaning in them. In *On The Mysteries*, the Neoplatonic philosopher Iamblichus stated that ‘The Egyptian characters were not fortuitously or foolishly made, but with great ingenuity after the example of Nature’ and he argued that their authors ‘imitate the nature of the universe and the god’s work of creator, by producing symbolic images to represent mysterious, occult and invisible meanings’.[6] Kircher also had it on the authority of several scholars before him that Hermes Trismegistus himself had created the hieroglyphics as a means of housing his knowledge of the cosmos and the divine. Kircher himself seems to have had a remarkable intuitive sympathy with these strange figures he found so compelling. In 1666, he was asked to translate the hieroglyphics on a broken obelisk found in Rome during building excavations. He translated the three visible sides, but the fourth, on which the obelisk rested, was hidden by the ground. Kircher proceeded to copy out what he believed would be found on the hidden side, and when the obelisk was raised, he was proved absolutely correct. In the past he had even added new hieroglyphics to effaced portions of a fallen obelisk that Pope Innocent X had

ordered to be re-erected in the Palazzo Pamphili.[7] Had Kircher been alive to witness Champollion's discovery, one would imagine that he would agree with Manly P. Hall's caution that 'a great part of Egyptian literature is cryptic; its true significance was probably unknown in the Ptolemaic period even to the Egytians themselves'. Therefore 'we should […] not be too confident of the accuracy of our translations, realizing that beneath the surface we lighted with the small ray of our knowledge, is a Stygian darkness deeper than Egypt's night'.[8]

This is not, of course, to reject Champollion's and other accepted Egyptologist's interpretations and contributions, but to allow for the possibility that Kircher may have been on to something more than a colossal linguistic blunder, just as many believe that alchemy was something more than the stumbling of amateurs that accidentally gave way to chemistry. If we can accept that 'the chief obstacle to our understanding the Egytian tradition', is 'the current modern incapacity to think analogically',[9] as the esoteric scholar Arthur Versluis believes, then the hieroglyphics that fascinated Kircher and many others may still hold secrets yet to be revealed.

Kircher certainly believed they did. In *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* he wrote that 'a symbol is a notation signifying some arcane mystery … it leads our soul by a certain similarity to the intelligence of something very different from the things of sense-perception'.[10] The mystery at the centre of Egypt, Kircher believed, was the *prisca theologica* that Ficino had inherited from Gemistos Plethon, and which Kircher and others still believed was embodied in the writings of the thrice-great one. Kircher was one of the last to expound this notion, and the pages of *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* show it. Kircher believed that the world's religions came out of Egypt, and the authorities listed on the title page of his magnum opus make this clear. Egyptian wisdom, Phoenician theology, Chaldean astrology, Hebrew Kabbala, Persian magic, Pythagorean mathematics, Greek theosophy, Mythology, Arabian alchemy, Latin philology: as all these emerged out of Egypt's fecund bosom, Kircher looked to all of them for clues to the secret of Egypt's mystic script. This was, of course, putting the cart before the horse: if the great religions of the world *didn't* come out of Egypt, then looking to them for insight into the hieroglyphics was pointless. This possibility, however, was one Kircher didn't consider, and having determined that the hieroglyphics by definition contained deep, philosophical wisdom — which is what the term 'hieroglyph', or 'sacred carving' means — he looked to what he could gather about Egyptian philosophy to understand what they might be saying. In the process, as Joscelyn Godwin points out, he 'restated the entire canon of ancient theology', making *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* a kind of one-stop-

shop of the perennial philosophy, spelling out the teachings of Hermes Trismegistus, Zoroaster, Orpheus, Plato, Pythagoras, and many more. In this sense, whatever we may think of his reading of the hieroglyphics, Kircher's huge work remains a storehouse of primal wisdom, a great well overflowing with the divine knowledge of which the thrice-great one was the essential source.

The shamans of Egypt

Although Kircher's use of the Bembine Tablet puts him beyond the pale for most mainstream Egyptologists, not everyone was convinced that the tablet was mere decoration, or worse, an outright forgery. For the nineteenth century French occultist Eliphas Levi, the Bembine Tablet was a key to the ancient Book of Thoth, the name Levi and others gave to the Tarot deck. Levi wasn't alone in this belief, and among those who agreed with him was W.W. Westcott, co-founder of the celebrated Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, the most famous magical society of modern times. Yet others had a perhaps even more profound idea of the tablet's purpose. Thomas Taylor, the nineteenth century English Neoplatonist, who was the first to translate the complete works of Plato into English, and whose translations of Proclus, Porphyry, and Iamblichus influenced people such as William Blake and Ralph Waldo Emerson, thought the tablet took part in the ancient Egyptian mysteries themselves. Taylor believed that the tablet, which he calls the 'Isiac Table', formed the altar when, at the age of forty-nine, Plato was initiated into the Greater Mysteries, in an underground chamber below the Great Pyramid of Giza. The 'Divine Plato', Taylor tells us, stood before the altar, and the ceremony of the Mysteries 'enkindled and brought from its dormant state' what 'was always his', presumably, his spiritual knowledge. 'After three days in the Great Hall, [Plato] was received by the Hierophant of the Pyramid … and given verbally the Highest Esoteric Teachings, each accompanied with its appropriate symbol.' According to Taylor, Plato remained another three months within the pyramid, before he was sent out into the world, 'to do the work of the Great Order, as Pythagoras and Orpheus had been before him'.[11]

Clearly, Taylor is one of those who believe Egypt was on the travel itineraries for Greek philosophers, yet not everyone agrees that this dramatic account of Plato's initiation is sheer fantasy. In *Plato, Shamanism, and Ancient Egypt*, Jeremy Naydler argues that there is good reason to believe that Plato and the others actually made the trip to Egypt and received some form of initiation there. In Plato's case, according to Naydler, this led to his philosophy — to which, as already mentioned, all subsequent western thought is merely a footnote, which suggests that a book on *The Egyptian Roots of Western Philosophy* remains to be written. Exactly what Plato and the others received may not be absolutely clear,

but Naydler believes that by trying to understand Plato's relationship to Egypt, we can gain a firmer grasp, not only on Plato's ideas, but also on 'that deep current of thought and spiritual practice known as the Hermetic tradition'.[12]

Naydler argues persuasively — to my mind at least — that some form of shamanism was involved in ancient Egyptian spiritual practice. Naydler points out that the central narrative in Egyptian mythology is the story of Osiris' dismemberment at the hands of his evil brother Set and his resurrection by his consort Isis, and argues that this is paralleled in the dismemberment motifs in shamanic initiation rituals.[13] He also argues that the journey of the soul through the underworld — what the Egyptians called the Duat — as described in the *Book of the Going Forth By Day*, otherwise known as *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, can be found in shamanic ritual, as can be the idea of a spiritual ascent, which is another Egyptian theme. In both shamanic and Egyptian religious accounts, this ascent to the sky takes place via wings or a kind of ladder, and it should come as no surprise that a parallel idea appears in the Hermetic notion of a journey through the planets to the 'Eighth sphere'. That Plato described a version of this stellar ascent too, suggests for Naydler that his version and the Hermetic one stem from the same source.

Predictably, Naydler's ideas put him in the Kircher camp, as most mainstream Egyptologists reject the notion of Egyptian shamanism. They reject it because, Naydler argues, they are fixated on the funerary interpretation of Egyptian religious texts, such as the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*. Like the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* is a collection of hymns, spells, incantations, magical 'power words', and instructions used to guide the soul of the deceased in the after-world. Unlike the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, however, the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, which is much older, is an often wildly heterogeneous assembly of writings, gathered over millennia, and is not really a book at all, at least not in the modern sense. Its earliest 'chapters', known as the Pyramid Texts, were written on the walls of the tombs of the pharaohs circa 2350–2175 BC, but originated in sources much earlier; the practice of mummification and concern for the afterlife can be dated to at least 3100 BC, and according to the occult scholar Lewis Spence, an inscription on the sarcophagus of Queen Khnem-Nefert of the 11th Dynasty (circa 2500 BC) states that a chapter of the *Book of the Dead* was discovered in the reign of Hosep-ti, the fifth king of the 1st Dynasty, 'who flourished about 4266 BC'.[14]

We may take Spence's remark with a grain of salt, but the fact remains that the material making up the *Book of the Dead* is at least five thousand years old. Later parts of it, circa 1700 BC, came from what are known as the Coffin Texts,

writings found on the sides of wooden coffins, or contained in scrolls placed with the dead. Although originally reserved for the pharaohs, this sort of *Rough Guide* to the afterlife gradually became available to anyone who could afford a scribe to copy it out. Perhaps the most well known version is the *Papyrus of Ani*, a copy of the *Book of the Dead* made for the scribe Ani circa 1240 BC, which contains the famous illustration of the god Anubis weighing Ani's heart on the scale of Ma'at, the goddess of justice. Late versions appeared with blank spaces for the names of individuals not yet dead. Initially the privilege of an elite, the spiritual rebirth associated with the journey through the underworld became over time something more democratic.

Yet while the funerary aspect of the *Book of the Dead* was certainly made use of, Naydler argues that the text had another, more central use. It was, he believes, a manual on how to 'practise dying', a method of learning how to experience the separation of the soul from the body, which normally happens only in physical death, while still alive. Naydler argues that as this was also the aim of Plato's philosophy — the *Phaedo* famously argues that philosophy is a 'preparation for death' — there is good reason to believe that rather than merely picking up an idea that was 'in the air', Plato learned it at first hand from the priests at Heliopolis. The belief that one's nous was immortal while one's body was subject to death and decay was, as we've seen, a central theme of the Hermetic books, and this suggests that, rather than repackaging Platonic ideas — as some have argued the *Corpus Hermeticum* does — both it and Plato's philosophy originated from the same source.

Body and soul

As anyone who has studied them knows, ancient Egyptian religious ideas are complex and often seemingly contradictory, with gods appearing in multiple forms and new gods often being worshipped alongside old. Creation myths, for example, vary and often seem the result of competing priesthoods vying for ascendancy.[15] And it's understandable that a reading of the *Book of the Dead*, with its many demons and monsters that the soul must overcome, can give the impression that the Egyptians were a morbid, superstitious people. Yet what may seem contradictory on the surface can present a different aspect when viewed as the Egyptians themselves may have viewed it, that is, symbolically. If, as R.T. Rundle Clark, an Egypt scholar with a broader perspective, remarks, 'it has come to be realized that Egyptian art is nearly all symbolism', one can expand this and say that for these 'deeply God-conscious people', their myths were symbolic too.[16] The Egyptians, Rundle Clark argues, 'used their myths to convey their insights into the workings of nature and the ultimately indescribable realities of the soul', and were not, as some more mainstream Egyptologists suggest, a superstitious people who believed in animal-headed deities, although, to be sure, the common people may have had rather simple ideas about religion, just as some Christians might still believe that God is a white-bearded old gentleman on a throne. That is, the Egyptians used myths and symbols to express ideas. And according to Rundle Clark, they seemed to concentrate on two central themes: to explain the structure of the universe and how it came into being, and to describe the origin and development of consciousness. It is this second theme which will chiefly concern us.

One of the most complex aspects of Egyptian religion is their notion of the soul, or, put more precisely, the physical and non-physical components making up a human being. According to the Egyptians, human beings are made up of nine different but related entities, each of which has its own form of afterlife. The *khat* is the physical body, which must be kept secure after death, hence mummification. The *ka* is a kind of 'astral' double, that inhabits the body during life, but which is freed in death, and can enter other forms, like statues or representations of the deceased. The *ba* is what we would consider the soul, or inner identity or consciousness. The *sekhem* is a kind of life force, what in theosophical terms we can call the 'etheric' body, which animates the matter of

the *khat*. The *ab* is one's moral consciousness, the *sahu* the intellect and will, and the *khabit* is a kind of shadow, like the *ka* but different. But perhaps the most important part of the soul is what the Egyptians called the *akh*. This is our divine essence, an incorruptible spiritual body which has the potential to escape from the earthly realm entirely and dwell among the stars, and even to pass beyond them. While each of the other parts are subject to certain limitation, the *akh*, which is also the means by which we acquired divine insight and wisdom, is likened to the gods. So, in essence, in our *akh*, we too are gods.

The *ba* is usually depicted as a bird with a human head, hovering over the body of the deceased; to modern eyes these depictions resemble accounts of 'out-of-the-body-experiences', which suggests that the body depicted may not be dead at all. The human headed bird symbolized the idea that for the Egyptians the soul resided in the head — an idea, Naydler points out, that they shared with the Greeks — and that it could rise above the body, that is, could be separated from it. Naydler remarks that this notion of the *ba* was not, as most Egyptologists believe, a common belief, but was reserved for the priests; that is, it formed part of the esoteric, rather than exoteric, religious teachings. The *ba* can separate from the body during sleep or at death, but it could also be separated during a third state, of trance, or deep relaxation. For the *ba* to rise above the body, Naydler argues, 'the central requirement was that the psycho-physical organism be stilled'. 'The *ba* only comes into its own,' he writes, 'when the body is inactive and inert.'[17] This is strikingly similar to the state Hermes Trismegistus was in when he received gnosis from Poimandres.

Naydler points out that for the ancient Egyptians, as for the Greeks, consciousness wasn't, as it is for us, located solely in the brain. For both the Egyptians and the Greeks, consciousness was located in different forms in different parts of the body. Naydler refers to Homer's account in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, where he speaks of waking consciousness being located in the chest, and of other forms of consciousness being dispersed throughout the rest of the body, in the limbs, heart, hands, *etc*.[18] This suggests that for the Homeric Greeks, the body wasn't perceived as a unity, but as an association of different parts, each with their own consciousness. Naydler points out that these Greeks had no singular word for the living body, but usually referred to it in the plural, and that *soma*, which means 'body' in our sense, was used to refer to a corpse. While the Egyptians shared this notion of a multiple bodily consciousness with the Greeks of Homer's epics, they had a very different idea of the soul, or *psyche*, than the Greeks. For the early Greeks, the *psyche* was rather more like our modern idea of a ghost, a kind of insubstantial wraith or *eidola*, a faint image

of the deceased that is released on death, and that has a reduced form of existence in the underworld, as Ulysses discovered during his sojourn there. The dead Ulysses meets are like vapours rising from a swamp, and long to return to life. When we speak of someone being ‘a shadow of their former self’, we are speaking of them as early Greeks did the soul. For these Greeks, physical reality was paramount, and any kind of afterlife was an unsatisfying shadowy affair.

For the Egyptians the *ba* had a more ‘concrete’ existence, to speak metaphorically about something purely spiritual. While the body was active, its noise and demands obscured the *ba*. But when the body was silent, the *ba* could be known. In order to experience the *ba* consciously — that is, while awake and alive — it was necessary to *withdraw* consciousness from the limbs and inner organs, and to concentrate it, to *gather* it into a unity in the head, which seems rather like the ‘godlike concentration of consciousness’ that Hermes tells Asclepius and the others must be attained before they can receive the ‘knowledge of God’. When the soul forces were thus concentrated and the body quiet, the *ba* could awaken, and the ‘I’ could feel itself to be an independent entity, not dependent on or restricted to the body’s limitations. As the *ba* is our inner self, our sense of identity, what this means is that we, who usually associate our self with our body, become directly aware of our independence of it. We inhabit a body, but during these states of profound physical relaxation and inner concentration, we realize that ‘we’ are not ‘it’.

Practise dying

One result of experiencing the *ba's* independence is the recognition that consciousness can exist outside of a physical body and brain, which suggests that it is not necessarily subject to the body's decay.[19] Or, to put it another way, that a part of us isn't subject to death. Yet, paradoxically, to arrive at this insight, one must 'practise dying'. Naydler suggests that this was the secret of the Egyptian Mysteries, or one of them at least, and given that, as is the case with the Eleusinian and Orphic Mysteries of Greece, we have very little information about exactly what went on in these, he may very well be right. The Greek historian Herodotus, who tells us he witnessed the Egyptian mysteries at Sais, is infuriatingly coy, and after keenly piquing our interest about them, decides to keep mum. Naydler argues that after his initiation, Plato developed these ideas into his own philosophy, and that dialogues like the *Cratylus*, the *Phaedo*, the *Phaedrus*, and the *Republic* all contain important elements of the Egyptian mysteries, elements that can also be found in the *Corpus Hermeticum*. One is that, with the recognition that the *ba* or soul can exist independently of the body, and that the way of realizing this is to 'practise dying', paradoxically, the body itself is seen to be a kind of tomb. As Plato says in the *Cratylus*, the body (*soma*) 'is the tomb (*sema*) of the soul, which may be thought to be buried in our present life'. That Plato refers to the Pythagoreans as the source of this knowledge is for Naydler strong evidence that its origin is Egyptian; Pythagoras, too, tradition has it, went to school in Egypt. That the authors of the *Corpus Hermeticum* may have had the same teacher — or at least the same lesson — is suggested by Book VII, where it is said that in order not to be carried away by the great flood of ignorance, the seeker of gnosis must 'strip off the garment' he is wearing, the body, which is referred to as the 'sentient corpse' and 'portable tomb'.[20] It is in this sense that Socrates, in the *Phaedo*, declares that 'true philosophers practise dying', and it is in this sense that the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, Naydler argues, is concerned with dying, and not solely in the literal way that proponents of its funerary use argue.

Another Egyptian idea that Naydler finds in Plato, and which can also be found in the Hermetic books, is the notion of the *akh*. The *akh*, as mentioned, is that part of our inner being that can be considered divine. It has the potential to escape entirely from earthly and even cosmic limitations, and it is through the

akh that we can receive divine wisdom and insight. Once the *ba* is seen to be independent of the body, then it is possible to come to know the *akh*, which was seen by the Egyptians as luminous and associated with the sun, and which, after death or through the ritual of the mysteries, found its place among the stars. Naydler argues that the *akh* found its equivalent in Plato's philosophy in the form of the *daimon*, or, as Plato sometimes refers to it, nous. And as for the Egyptians, one who has realized his *akh*, or, more accurately, become *akh*, is filled with divine wisdom and can find his place as a star in the cosmos, for Plato, the philosopher who comes to know the Form of the Good — the highest knowledge possible — also rises to the stars. From this vantage point, Plato writes in the *Phaedrus*, he 'stands on the back of the universe' and can perceive through nous — not his senses — the unmanifest Reality 'behind' or 'before' the cosmos. Naydler suggests that an illustration from the tomb of Ramses III of the pharaoh looking out beyond the stars while standing on two entwined serpents that encircle the cosmos, is a depiction of Plato's account of 'standing on the back of the universe'. The similarity between these two ideas and that of the Hermetic ascent to the Eighth and Ninth spheres should be apparent, and in the *Asclepius*, Hermes Trismegistus tells his students that 'there is a place beyond heaven where there are no stars'.[21]

The Duat

Another aspect of Egyptian religion that seems to have found its way into Plato's philosophy, and also into the Hermetic books, is the Duat, the name the Egyptians gave to the spirit world. Although it is usually presented as an 'underworld' one arrives at in the 'afterlife', the Duat is really just as much an 'overworld' and a 'beforelife'. Unlike the hell of Christianity, the Duat is not really a place of punishment or torture, nor is it like the shadowy realm of the dead of the Homeric Greeks, although, to be sure, it is a dangerous place and one is judged there. Yet although it is the 'destination of all that is old and worn out', it is also the 'origin of all that is fresh and new'.[22] It contains all the forms which belong to the past or the future, and in this sense, Naydler argues, it is more like Plato's world of archetypal Forms; thus, by studying philosophy — which for Plato and his followers was not, as it is today, a circumscribed academic exercise, but more like a transformational path — one could enter the spirit world while still living. But the Duat is also similar to Jung's collective unconscious, the Akashic Record of Madame Blavatsky and Rudolf Steiner, the Astral Light of the occult philosopher Eliphas Levi, or the Pleroma of the Gnostics. I would also add that it is equivalent to the non-temporal realm accessed through the Hermetic gnosis, the source of the infinite significance P.D. Ouspensky saw in an ashtray during his experience of cosmic consciousness, and on a more immediate, physical level, the brain's 'total recall' that the neuroscientist Wilder Penfield discovered while operating on a patient and the novelist Marcel Proust triggered while tasting a biscuit dipped in tea.

Knowledge of and passage through the Duat was a central theme in Egyptian religion, and if proponents of the Egyptian Mysteries are correct, there were two ways to experience these. One of these, physical death, was unavoidable. The problem with this was that entering the Duat unprepared could have undesirable consequences; at any rate, you were taking your chances. This highlighted the attractiveness of the second way: through the mysteries. By undergoing the initiation into the Duat, by 'dying' while still alive, one had the chance to become *akh*, to identify with the divine, to gain gnosis and lose the fear of physical death. This was the non-funerary purpose of the *Book of the Dead*. And while it is true that the *Book of the Dead* is an often dizzying collection of at times contradictory texts — unavoidable, perhaps, given its age and the Egyptian

habit of hanging on to everything old — two central Duat narratives emerge through the welter of material.

One we have already touched on, the story of Osiris, his death and dismemberment at the hand of his brother Set, and his resurrection as lord of the underworld through his sister and consort Isis. Osiris' followers believed that after death they would join him in Sekhet Hetepet, the 'Happy Fields', where they would enjoy an eternal life, much like the one they had known, only better. To reach Sekhet Hetepet, however, one's heart or *ab* was placed on the balance of Ma'at, the goddess of order, and weighed against a feather. If found heavy with sin, one's soul was devoured by Amenet, a crocodile-headed creature, but if found equal to the 'feather of Ma'at', one was taken by Horus, the son of Osiris, to the happy lands.

Another Duat narrative involved the sun god Ra. Ra was believed to sail in his barque across the sky from east to west during the day, but at sunset he sank below the horizon, in the Western Lands, and entered the Duat. There, accompanied by his divine retinue, he continued his voyage, but this time through the dark and dangerous waters of the Duat, where, among other perils, he encountered the demon Apophis (Apep), a serpent or dragon-like entity that was believed to be the source of chaos and evil. Ra's voyage was segmented into twelve hours, each with its own challenge and trial, and at the end of it he emerged once again in the east, renewing the day, and bringing life and light again to the land.

Over time, Apophis became associated with Osiris' enemy Set, who was later associated with the Greek monster Typhon, who in some accounts is defeated by Hermes Trismegistus. Typhon, too, is like Apophis another reptilian enemy, and I remind the reader of my comments on the reptilian brain in Chapter 1 above; here seems another suggestion that consciousness or gnosis is in a perpetual struggle against atavistic chaos, or the cerebral cortex in battle with the old brain. As Ra is the sun god, the source of light and life, and as Apophis is the primeval chaos, Ra's defeat of Apophis re-enacts the original creation myth, in which 'the positive region of light and form was generated amid the indefinite watery nothingness of the timeless night'.[23] In this sense, the original creation myths, and Ra's defeat of Apophis, can be seen as an account of the rise of self-consciousness out of the darkness of the unconscious, and their similarity to the account of creation in the *Poimandres* seems clear. In some way, the Egyptian Mysteries seemed to have embodied elements of both the Osiris and Ra narratives into rituals and practices that took the initiate into the Duat, in order to confront the trials necessary to awaken his or her *akh*, and so experience his identity with the divine and eternal, while still physically alive. By doing this,

the initiate understood his real nature and no longer feared the ravages of physical death. These trials encountered in the Egyptian Mysteries found a more modern vehicle when they became part of the initiatory rituals of Freemasonry.

The intelligence of the heart

One modern scholar of ancient Egypt who believed that its hieroglyphics, and indeed, all of its culture, should be understood symbolically, and that its rituals and mysteries were aimed at a transformation of consciousness, was the alchemist and esoteric philosopher R.A Schwaller de Lubicz. I have written about Schwaller de Lubicz's life and work in my book *A Secret History of Consciousness*; here I want to focus on his ideas about the kind of consciousness he believed the ancient Egyptians possessed, a consciousness that seems remarkably similar to that portrayed in the *Corpus Hermeticum*.

As mentioned earlier the Egyptians believed that consciousness wasn't located solely in the head. Along with the 'head' consciousness that we are familiar with — the reason and logic we associate with the cerebral cortex, or 'new brain' — Schwaller de Lubicz argued that the Egyptians recognized another kind of consciousness, what they called 'the intelligence of the heart'. In a series of demanding but illuminating books, Schwaller de Lubicz explored the meaning of this 'intelligence of the heart', and came to conclusions that seem to echo many of the insights of the Hermetic books, suggesting that the insights of Hermes Trismegistus may have been born of a similar consciousness.

To understand Schwaller de Lubicz's ideas, it may help to backtrack a bit and consider again the work of the philosopher Bergson, discussed in the previous chapter. Bergson, we remember, suggested that the brain and nervous system serve an eliminative function; that is, they are designed to keep information *out* of consciousness, and to allow only as much of it to reach awareness as is necessary to help us survive. This 'reduced' consciousness provides a highly edited version of reality, and presents us with the solid, stable, three-dimensional world we are familiar with. Yet while this edited reality enables us to get on in life admirably, the picture of the world it supplies us with is incomplete. Basically, what it shows us is the *surface* of things. It is unable to give us a glimpse of their *inside*. In order to get some idea of this we need to take a psychedelic drug, as Aldous Huxley did, or hope for a spontaneous 'mystical experience', as Ouspensky had on the sea of Marmora. Yet, poets and artists do seem to be able to see below the surface of things and to reach their essence. To risk a generalization, we can say that poetry is the language of the interior, while prose is that of the exterior. Poets and artists are able to do this, Bergson tells us,

because they possess a mode of cognition that can pierce the ‘dead’ surface of things provided by ‘survival’ consciousness, and enter into their ‘living’ interiors. We all possess it in fact, but in poets and artists, and others of a similar sensibility, it functions to a high degree.

Bergson calls this mode of cognition *intuition.* In his early career, Schwaller de Lubicz was a student of the painter Henri Matisse, who was himself a student of Bergson, and as I’ve suggested elsewhere, Schwaller de Lubicz’s intelligence of the heart seems to me a version of Bergson’s intuition.[24] This is not to reduce Schwaller de Lubicz’s idea to a variation of Bergson’s, but to show that the kind of questions posed by esoteric thought can also be found in mainstream philosophy, and are not as marginal as its critics believe.

Schwaller de Lubicz’s intelligence of the heart is essentially a *participatory* mode of consciousness.[25] In ‘survival consciousness’ the distinction between ourselves and the world ‘outside’ is rigorously maintained. In order to deal with the world, we need to be able to hold it at arms length, and have a clear sense of what is ‘I’ and what is ‘not-I’. Yet, as Ouspensky experienced on the sea of Marmora and Huxley did after taking mescaline, there are moments when this distinction dissipates, the invisible wall separating ourselves from the world vanishes, and ‘I’ and ‘not-I’ seem to meld. In these moments, which happen more often than we suspect, but not always in such dramatic form as Huxley or Ouspensky experienced, we, our consciousness, *participates* in the world. ‘I’ and ‘not-I’ seem to be one. This is the ‘intelligence of the heart’, and Schwaller de Lubicz believed it was the key to understanding the secret of ancient Egypt. As he wrote in *Esotericism and Symbol* ‘Reason’, not rationalism, but the kind of reason associated with nous, ‘is the intelligence of the heart which allows us, in love, to be the thing, to be inside the thing, to grow with the plant, to fly with the bird, to glide with the serpent, to be that ‘way of a man with a maid’ which the Proverbs say cannot be known; to become cubic space with the cube. It is to this Reason that esotericism addresses itself’.[26]

Schwaller de Lubicz made the same point in his deeply Hermetic work *Nature Word* when he wrote that by knowing through the ‘intelligence of the heart’ we can:

> Tumble with the rock which falls from the mountain.
> Seek light and rejoice with the rosebud about to open:
> labour with the parsimonious ant;
> gather honey with the bee;
> expand in space with the ripening fruit.[27]

Compare this to Tat’s remarks to Hermes Trismegistus in Book XIII, where he says that:

> O father, I have been made steadfast through God; I now see not with the eyes, but by the operation of spiritual energy in the powers. I am in heaven, in earth, in water, in the air; I am in

living creatures and plants; I am in the womb, before the womb, after the womb. I am present everywhere.[28]

It is interesting to note that in his commentary on Book XIII, G.R.S. Mead refers to this section as ‘The Dawn of Cosmic Consciousness’, and remarks that ‘this consciousness, whatever else it may be, is a transcending of our three-dimensional limitation of consciousness’.[29] Mead’s *Thrice Greatest Hermes* was published in 1906, and although there is no mention of R.M. Bucke in the index, Mead would certainly have been aware of his book, *Cosmic Consciousness*, published in 1901.

This kind of participatory consciousness, Schwaller de Lubicz believed, was at work in the hieroglyphics, and his ideas about them put him, along with Jeremy Naydler, in the Kircher school of Egyptology. Modern readings of the hieroglyphics and other Egyptian works, like the *Book of the Dead*, Schwaller de Lubicz argued, are fixated on a literal interpretation, and are as limited as a consciousness unable to understand metaphor would be when confronted with poetry: for it, a rose is a rose, and nothing else. Modern consciousness, Schwaller de Lubicz believed, suffered from what he called ‘cerebral consciousness’, which functions by ‘granulating’ reality, turning it into discreet bits and pieces, severing the connections that run through it like the fibres of a spider’s web. ‘All in the universe,’ Schwaller de Lubicz wrote, ‘is in interdependent connection with all’, an Hermetic remark if there ever was one.[30]

Like Bergson’s ‘survival’ consciousness, ‘cerebral consciousness’ has its function and is absolutely indispensable (otherwise we would not have evolved it), but when it dominates, as it does in some reductionist, scientistic world views, it leads to disastrous results. Because our science ‘wants to penetrate the mysteries of life through its ordinary means of comprehension’, it arrives at remarks like that of the astrophysicist Steven Weinberg, who famous announced that ‘the more the universe seems comprehensible the more it also seems pointless’.[31] This is precisely the opposite of what Hermetic science discovers as it seeks to understand the cosmos. For it, with each new gnosis, the universe, and everything in it — even an ashtray — becomes the locus of an almost overwhelming meaning. For a Steven Weinberg a grain of sand is just a grain of sand, and galaxies and planets are, essentially, merely large accumulations of them. But for a William Blake — schooled in Hermetic science by Thomas Taylor, and equipped with his own natural predilection for it — a grain of sand is a world, and heaven can be found in a wild flower. But this meaning can only be recognized in that *other* mode of cognition, what Schwaller de Lubicz calls the ‘intelligence of the heart’ and which is also, he tells us, the ‘intelligence of

the universe', which 'will tell us everything'.[32]

Simultaneity of opposite states

This unity, in which we are told ‘everything’, is reminiscent of the knowledge R.M. Bucke, William James, and P.D. Ouspensky received in their moments of ‘cosmic consciousness’. Like cosmic consciousness, it’s beyond our usual comprehension. In this unity, ‘our cerebral intelligence can no longer discern anything, and so has no further role to play’, something, we’ve seen, that Bucke, James, Ouspensky, and even Hermes Trismegistus himself quickly discovered.[33] In order to grasp something of the reality of this unity we need, as Schwaller de Lubicz argues, that other mode of cognition, a mode, he believes, the ancient Egyptians were familiar with, so familiar, indeed, that they based their entire religion upon it.

Why were the Egyptians more familiar with this mode? The reason, I believe, is that consciousness in general was different then, and less dominated by ‘cerebral consciousness’ than our consciousness is today. For brevity’s sake, we can say that the consciousness of ancient Egypt was more ‘right brained’, geared toward pattern and meaning, than our modern, ego-based, analytical left brain consciousness is. This indeed was something that Schwaller de Lubicz himself recognized. The ‘two qualitatively different minds inhabiting the human psyche’ that Schwaller de Lubicz explored, can be relegated to the two cerebral hemispheres, and, as Robert Lawlor, Schwaller de Lubicz’s translator, remarks ‘localization in the right hemisphere of the highly intuitive aspects of thought together with the capacity for non-verbal pattern recognition, is consistent with the dominant quality of mind which, in Schwaller de Lubicz’s view, could have produced the temple architecture and hieroglyphic writings of the ancient Egyptians’.[34]

Allowing this speculation permits some interesting suggestions. If ‘the belief in a solid world, understood as hard, dense, physical substance’ is ‘what really defines the western mentality’, as Naydler argues, then it is possible that for ancient Egypt ‘the world was still permeable’ and that in it a ‘spiritual light shone, illuminating it with a divine radiance’.[35] If we think of that ‘spiritual light’ and ‘radiance’ as *meaning*, then this begins to make sense. Something along the lines of a ‘right brain consciousness’ would need to be at work, I think, in order for us to recognize that, along with their literal, ‘cerebral’ meaning, the hieroglyphics can also be understood symbolically.

This was certainly what Schwaller de Lubicz believed when he developed his notion of *symbolique*. Along with Bergson, in his early years, Schwaller de Lubicz was influenced by the rise of the 'new physics', especially by Niels Bohr's ideas about light, and Werner Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle. As most readers probably know, Bohr ended the debate over the nature of light, which had been raging since Christian Huygens and Isaac Newton, about whether it was best described as a wave or as a particle, by developing his notion of 'complementarity', which states that it is both. In some contexts, light behaves as a wave, in others, as a particle, hence the portmanteau term 'wavicle'. Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle declares that we can't know both the position and the speed of an elementary particle, but only one or the other: by observing one, we obscure the other, hence the 'uncertainty'. In both cases what Schwaller de Lubicz took from this was the idea that reality could exist in two seemingly mutually exclusive states, a notion that our mundane, 'cerebral consciousness' finds disorienting, but which can be accommodated by the 'intelligence of the heart'.

This 'simultaneity of opposite states', as Schwaller de Lubicz called it, plays a great part in his understanding of the hieroglyphics. It is the essence of what he calls *symbolique*, which is a way of holding together the object of sense perception (given by cerebral consciousness) *and* the content of inner knowing (Bergson's intuition and the intelligence of the heart) in a creative polarity. Seeing the hieroglyphic of a bird, Schwaller de Lubicz argued, the Egyptians knew it was a *sign* for the actual, individual creature, but they also knew it was a *symbol* of what he called its 'cosmic function', flight, as well as all the other characteristics associated with it. To put this in a neat formula, for Schwaller de Lubicz, hieroglyphics not only *designated*, they *evoked*, which is reminiscent of Athanasius Kircher's remark that I quoted earlier: 'a symbol is a notation signifying some arcane mystery … it leads our soul by a certain similarity to the intelligence of something very different from the things of sense-perception'.

This, I would say, is the essence of the Hermetic notion of correspondence, the idea that realities of the 'higher world' — as above — correspond with those of the 'lower' one — so below. It is also, on another level, the essence of metaphor, the trick of speech in which one thing stands for another, something I have written about elsewhere.[36] The notion of correspondences is so crucial to Hermetic and esoteric thought, that it is difficult to contemplate an Hermeticism or esotericism without it. It takes pride of place in the esoteric scholar Antoine Faivre's 'fundamental elements' of esotericism. For Faivre, these 'correspondences … are intended to be read and deciphered'. 'The entire universe,' he tells us, 'is a huge theatre of mirrors, an ensemble of hieroglyphics

to be decoded. Everything is a sign, everything conceals and exudes mystery; every object hides a secret.' And, in what seems a nod to Schwaller de Lubicz, he continues: 'The principles of noncontradiction and the excluded middle of linear causality [i.e. cerebral consciousness] are replaced by those of the included middle and synchronicity.'[37]

The idea that the entire universe is an 'ensemble of hieroglyphics' waiting to be decoded, or, as many have said before, a vast book waiting to be read, suggests that the method of *symbolique*, the simultaneous consciousness of opposite states, is not limited to an understanding of the hieroglyphics. As many poets and thinkers have done, without calling it such, it can be applied to everything. As we've seen, Ouspensky saw what wonders were hidden in a simple ashtray. The world, then, becomes a kind of language, or better, a poem; in any case, something that presents us with the challenge of discovering *what it means*. And just as a book or a poem does not give up its meaning unless I devote the requisite attention to it, so too the book of nature, the cosmos, the whole, will not communicate much to me unless I focus my attention on it, concentrate my mind, as Hermes advises, and try to grasp what its author — whoever that may be — is trying to say. As Christopher Bamford writes in his important Foreword to *Nature Word*, 'The world only lives because it speaks to us in a language we can understand', and its 'meaning becomes alive for us to the extent that we can assimilate it'.[38] And as Bamford and so many others have pointed out, we grasp that meaning *through* the senses, but *with* the mind, just as we see through a window but with our eyes. As Book X of the *Corpus Hermeticum* makes clear: 'knowledge is incorporeal; the organ which it uses is the mind itself'. The meaning of a book, then, is not the book, it seems, but the strange alchemy it triggers in your mind.

We have, perhaps, come a long way from Plato and other western sages receiving initiation in subterranean chambers below the pyramids. What I've tried to do in this chapter is give some idea of what the Egyptian wisdom, thought to be at the root of the Hermetic tradition, may have been about. These speculations are, of course, not exhaustive, but I believe they are suggestive. In the next chapter we will stay in Egypt, although we will move on a millennia or two, to see if we can get an idea of what the world that Hermes Trismegistus and his followers knew was like.

Notes

1. Quoted in Arthur Versluis, *The Egyptian Mysteries* (London: Arkana, 1989), p. 3.
2. Ebeling, p. 29.
3. Joscelyn Godwin, *Athanasius Kircher* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1979), p. 6.
4. The *Voynich Manuscript* is a strange, illustrated text, believed to have been written in the fifteenth or sixteenth century. It is written in an unknown script, and its author is unknown, although some suggested candidates include the Franciscan friar and scholar Roger Bacon and the Elizabethan magician John Dee. It features illustrations covering biology, botany, cosmology, and astronomy. Although many have tried, including some renowned WWII code breakers, to this day it is undeciphered. Images from the *Voynich Manuscript* can be seen at: http://beinecke.library.yale.edu/digitallibrary/voynich.html 5. Godwin 1979, p. 56.
6. Quoted in John Gregory, *The Neoplatonists* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1999), p. 150.
7. Godwin 1979, p. 56.
8. Manly P. Hall, *The Lost Keys of Freemasonry* (New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2006), p. 108.
9. Versluis, p. 5.
10. Godwin 1979, p. 21.
11. Quoted in Hall, 2003, p. 162.
12. Jeremy Naydler, *Plato, Shamanism, and Ancient Egypt* (Oxford: Abzu Press, 2005), p. 1.
13. See for example Mircea Eliade *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (London: Arkana, 1989).
14. Lewis Spence, *Ancient Egyptian Myths and Legends* (Minneola: Dover, 1990; originally published 1915), p. 174.
15. See R.T. Rundle Clark, *Myth and Symbol in Ancient Egypt* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1993), pp. 35–67.
16. Ibid. p. 12.
17. Naydler 2005 p. 22.
18. Naydler remarks that Homer speaks of *thumos*, located in the chest, as the centre of man's emotional life, and says that Homer's characters 'conduct an inner dialogue with their *thumos*, and come to decisions about what to do, and how best to act'. (p.16), A similar idea was presented in Julian Jaynes *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1977). Briefly, Jaynes argues that Homeric man lacked the kind of interior space we possess and did not, as we do, 'ask ourselves' what we intend to do about something and come to decisions about it. Rather, Homeric man possessed two consciousnesses, housed in different sides of the brain (hence, 'bicameral,' which means 'two chambered'). He felt the left side of the brain as 'I' — as we do — and the consciousness on the right side came to him as 'voices'. When Homeric man heard 'messages' from the gods, Jaynes argues, he was really receiving instructions from the right side of the brain. Jaynes argues that a series of catastrophes and upheavals forced Homeric man to fuse the two consciousnesses together, to arrive at the kind of ego-consciousness familiar to ourselves. The right brain, however, continues to posses a consciousness of its own, as experiments with split-brain subjects have shown, although for the most part it remains 'unconscious' for its left brain counterpart.
19. This, of course, flies in the face of all modern ideas about consciousness and its relation to the brain, which can be summed up in the philosopher John Searle's remark that 'the brain causes consciousness'. Yet how much brain is actually necessary for not only consciousness, but a high level of intelligence, is debatable. See Gary Lachman *A Secret History of Consciousness* (Great Barrington: Lindisfarne, 2003), pp. xxv–xxvi.
20. Salaman 2001, p. 48.
21. Salaman 2007, p. 82.
22. Naydler 2005, p. 30.
23. Rundle Clark, 1993, p. 36.
24. See my article 'René Schwaller de Lubicz and the Intelligence of the Heart' at

http://www.unitedearth.com.au/lubicz.html. In it I point out the links between Schwaller de Lubicz's two modes of cognition and Alfred North Whitehead's similar ideas presented in his short book *Symbolism, Its Meaning and Effect* (New York: G.P. Putnam & Sons, 1959).

25. For more on 'participatory epistemology' see Lachman, *A Secret History of Consciousness* 2003 pp. 153–78.
26. R.A. Schwaller de Lubicz, *Esotericism and Symbol* (New York: Inner Traditions, 1985), p. 49.
27. R.A Schwaller de Lubicz, *Nature Word* (Lindisfarne Press: West Stockbridge, 1982), p. 135.
28. Salaman 2001, p. 84.
29. G.R.S. Mead, *Thrice Greatest Hermes* (York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser 2001), Book Two, p. 158.
30. Schwaller de Lubicz, 1985 p. 49.
31. Steven Weinberg, *The First Three Minutes* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), p. 154.
32. Schwaller de Lubicz, 1985, p. 55.
33. Ibid. p. 5.
34. R. A. Schwaller de Lubicz, *Symbol and the Symbolic* (Brookline, Mass: Autumn Press, 1978), p. 8.
35. Jeremy Naydler, *Ancient Egypt and the Soul of the West* (Oxford: Abzu Press, 1996), p. 3.
36. See my essay: 'The Spiritual Detective: How Baudelaire invented Symbolism, by way of Swedenborg, E.T.A. Hoffmann and Edgar Allan Poe' in *Between Method and Madness: Essays on Swedenborg and Literature* ed. Stephen McNeilly (London: Swedenborg Society, 2005), pp. 31–44. Also Lachman, *A Secret History of Consciousness*, 2003 pp. 153–61.
37. Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), p. 10. It should go without saying that Faivre's three other *sine qua nons* of esotericism, 'Living Nature,' 'Imagination and Mediation,' and 'Experience of Transmutation,' are all found in the Hermetic tradition.
38. Christopher Bamford, '*Nature Word*, the Hermetic Tradition, and Today,' in Schwaller de Lubicz 1982, pp. 27–28.

3. When Thoth Met Hermes

In 332 BC, Alexander the Great, king of Macedon, student of Aristotle, and up-and-coming ruler of one of largest empires in the ancient world, began his conquest of the Phoenician city of Tyre, which was then under Persian rule. Seven months later, after a long and brutal siege, Tyre capitulated. Alexander had all the men of military age of the defeated city slaughtered, and he sold their women and children into slavery. Not long after this he repeated this victory in Gaza, again slaughtering the men and sending the women and children to the slave market. Whatever philosophy Alexander may have learned from Aristotle, it took second place to the practical wisdom of creating an empire.

Alexander is hailed today because the empire he created, which at one point stretched to India, brought Greek culture to the rest of the known world. After his father Philip's assassination Alexander consolidated the power he inherited by murdering potential rivals, and after gaining control of the Balkans, Syria, Persia, and much else, not knowing what to do with himself, he famously cried for new worlds to conquer. He died in 323 BC at the age of 32, ostensibly from a fever, although he may have been poisoned. Either way, there seemed little reason for him to go on living, and what he may have learned from Aristotle seemed not enough to compensate the loss of further conquest. Had more of Aristotle's learning rubbed off on his most famous pupil, he may have found more interior territory to lay claim to.

Alexander's reputation and invincibility preceded him in many places, and some cities he conquered without lifting a sword. In Jerusalem, for example, hearing of the fates of Tyre and Gaza, the leaders of the city welcomed him with open arms, seeing in him the fulfilment of a Biblical prophecy that a great Greek king would defeat the Persian tyrants. Alexander agreed with them and the city was spared. And in Egypt, in 331, the response was the same. The people there saw him as a liberator, as Egypt had been under Persian rule since the defeat of King Nectanebo II, the last native Egyptian ruler, by Artaxerxes III in 343 BC. Hailed as the 'master of the universe', and proclaimed the son of Ammon (Greek for Amun, greatest of the Egyptian creator deities) at the god's oracle in Siwa, Alexander must have felt gratified at his welcome, and at the divine lineage his new subjects recognized in him. Subsequently he referred to Zeus-Ammon as his true father, conveniently forgetting Philip. But Alexander himself, however great

he may have been, has really only a walk-on part in the story of one even greater, two times greater in fact. Because it was not Alexander, but the city he founded and named after himself, that provided the milieu for Hermes Trismegistus to arrive, even if, as legend has it, Alexander was said to have discovered the Emerald Tablet in the thrice-great one's tomb in Hebron.

Alexander founded Alexandria in 331, and after a few months stay, left, never to return — alive, that is. After Alexander's death in the palace of Nebuchadnezzar II in Babylon, Ptolemy Soter I, one of Alexander's generals and founder of Egypt's Ptolemaic Dynasty, took his body to Memphis, where it was entombed among the pharaohs, and some years later, during the reign of Ptolemy's successor, Ptolemy II Philadelphus, the golden sarcophagus containing the great king was brought back to his eponymous city. The Ptolemaic dynasty would rule Egypt for nearly three centuries, finally coming to an end in 30 BC, when Cleopatra VII, the last of the Ptolemies, committed suicide with her lover Mark Antony, when Caesar Augustus had defeated their army and captured them. After this, Egypt would be under Roman rule, and then Byzantine, until its conquest by Muslim Arabs in 639 AD. It was during this Roman Egypt that the writings making up the *Corpus Hermeticum* and the people who followed their teachings, seem to have first appeared.

City of sects and gospels

The Hellenistic Age, the name given to the time following the death of Alexander to the death of Cleopatra VII, is considered the period when Greek dominance in the world reached its peak. With Alexander's conquests reaching into the Near and Middle East and North Africa, the time was characterized as a period of fusion between Greek culture and that of these exotic, formerly 'barbaric' lands. One place above all symbolized the cultural, religious, and intellectual syncretism that characterized the Hellenistic Age, and that was Alexandria. Even after the Roman conquest of Egypt, Greek learning, thought, and language was the dominant cultural force, and the Roman Egypt that saw the emergence of Hermeticism was in many ways Greek.

Today ancient Alexandria is known for its fabled lost lighthouse, on the island of Pharos, off the city's coast, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, and for its library, which is believed to have been the largest in ancient times. Both the lighthouse and the library — twin sources of illumination — rose to prominence under the Ptolemies, and both were lost to the ravages of time. The lighthouse succumbed to earthquakes, the last, in 1323, reducing it to rubble. The library, which suffered fire on several occasions, has remained a symbol of learning and the mandarin seclusion of scholars. Accounts of the number of books — scrolls, actually — housed within it differ, as do the accounts of its destruction. Estimates of the number of works collected within the library of Alexandria range from 500,000, to more than a million, but as no list or catalogue of the library's contents has ever come to light, these figures must remain possibilities. The number of scrolls, however, must have been great, as the library was founded by Ptolemy I Soter, and continued to exist in some form until the sack of Alexandria by the Arab leader Amr ibn al'Aas in 639 AD. Asked what should be done with the library, Amr ibn al'Aas is reported to have said that the books 'either contradict the Koran, in which case they are heresy, or they agree with it, in which case they are superfluous', and ordered they be burned to heat the baths for his soldiers. Debate remains over the truth of this, as it does over much that is said about the library, but by this time it had been accidentally burned by Julius Caesar, when he inadvertently set fire to it while trying to prevent Ptolemy III from reaching his ships (48 BC); suffered pillage by the Emperor Aurelian (273 AD); and was destroyed by the Christian Patriarch

Theophilus in 391, when the Christian Emperor Theodosius ordered the destruction of all pagan temples. On this occasion, the Serapeum, dedicated to the worship of the syncretic god Serapis, was also destroyed, as were temples to Mithras and other heathen deities.

Alexandria had been a remarkably tolerant city under Greek and pagan Roman rule, but by the time the Christians had control, this liberal attitude had vanished, and Theodosius is credited with inaugurating the practice of burning books on purpose (unlike Julius Caesar, who only did it by accident.) Not long after Theophilus started scouring Alexandria clean of heathens, the pagan philosopher Hypatia, one of the most brilliant women of the ancient world, was attacked by a mob of Christian fanatics, who skinned her alive with oyster shells and burned her remains. They were encouraged in this by Cyril, the Christian patriarch who followed Theophilus, and who was later canonized. Although the Platonic Academy would carry on for another century or so, to all intents and purposes, the pagan world ended with Hypatia's death.

As the library housed most of the world's great knowledge it understandably attracted the world's thinkers and scholars. We can only surmise what other writings could be found in this lost treasure — many, no doubt, that we have never heard of — but known to have been contained in its shelves were the works of Euclid, Archimedes, and the astronomer Ptolemy, whose view of the cosmos would remain dominant until Copernicus pointed out its discrepancies in 1543. Among others whose work could be found in the library were Eratosthenes, who knew the circumference of the Earth, and Aristarchus, who argued that the planets orbit the sun, centuries before Copernicus did. The forty-two books that Clement of Alexandria attributed to Hermes Trismegistus were, he believed, available at the library. These, alas, he also believed had been destroyed by Julius Caesar's clumsiness, although the esoteric scholar Manly P. Hall maintains that some books escaped the fire and were secretly buried in the desert, a suggestion bolstered in 1945 by the discovery of some Hermetic texts among the Gnostic scrolls unearthed at Nag Hammadi.[1] As Justin Pollard and Howard Reid write in *The Rise and Fall of Alexandria*, the city was 'the greatest mental crucible the world has ever known', and that with the loss of its library 'most of the knowledge of the first thousand years of Western civilization is missing'.[2] That the human mind recovered from this damage is testament to the resiliency of its spirit.

But Alexandria attracted more than scientists and philosophers, those keepers of *episteme*, and it quickly developed a reputation for being open to religious, mystical, and esoteric teachings of all sorts. Among the many preachers of

different faiths that flocked to the great world city were Pythagoreans, followers of the Chaldean oracles, readers of the Greek myths, and Platonic and Stoic philosophers. Judaism, the Greek Mystery schools, Zoroastrianism, astrology, Buddhism, and later Christianity and alchemy, all had their advocates in Alexandria, sharing philosophical space with the city's native dwellers, who still kept the old Egyptian spirit alive. Along with the Greeks, Babylonians, Persians, Phoenicians, and others who came to populate Alexandria (which, until the rise of Rome, was the largest city in the ancient world, and after Rome remained the second largest), there was also a large Jewish population. The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, emerged from Alexandria. And there were, of course, the Egyptians themselves, who dominated an area known as Rhakotis, the name of the original Egyptian city on the site, which was quickly overrun by its new Greek immigrants. In many ways Alexandria was much like many major cities today, a sometimes unwieldy mix of differing peoples, beliefs, and cultures, and like today, it offered an often dizzying range of philosophies and belief systems to its inhabitants. If today we think of the New Age as a 'spiritual marketplace', the epithet would fit Roman Alexandria to a tee.

The Greeks and later the Romans were the dominant social and political force in Alexandria, leaving the native Egyptians and the Jewish population as second class citizens. Spiritually, however, Egypt remained in control, as the historian Garth Fowden makes clear.[3] For the Greeks, as for the Romans who followed, Egypt was, as noted in the last chapter, a holy land, a land of mysteries and secrets, and the Egyptian priests enjoyed the kind of prestige that the Greeks awarded more exotic sages like the Brahmins and Gymnosophists (fakirs) of India. Alexandria was, as the novelist Lawrence Durrell in *The Alexandria Quartet*, remarked, a 'town of sects and gospels', and if this was true of the Alexandria of Durrell's quartet — post WWII — it was even more true of the Hermetic Alexandria. Unlike Christianity which, when it conquered, worked to eradicate or at least to erase as much of the previous pantheon as possible, the Greeks and Romans were happy to accommodate their own gods to those of the Egyptians. Serapis, as we've seen, was one result of this creative fusion. Another was the seemingly fated pairing of Hermes and Thoth.

A match made in heaven

As more Greeks and Greek-speaking people came to Egypt, they began to see a resemblance between some of their gods and those of the Egyptians. Unlike the Jews, who had contempt for the dominant idolaters, and the later Christians, who demonized the heathen deities, the Greeks thought it made perfect sense that some of their gods shared characteristics with those of other peoples. And when it came to the Egyptian gods, tradition maintained that they take a certain precedence. Egypt was after all *the* land of religion, and the idea that its gods and goddess were archetypal (Greek *arkhaios*) did not lessen the reverence the Greeks felt for their own deities. There was also the fact that although the Greek population enjoyed privileges not shared by the native Egyptians, and in many ways segregated themselves from them, there was a certain tendency to 'go native', especially in religious and spiritual matters, and it was in these that the ancient Egyptian wisdom took prominence.

Thoth, one of the major Egyptian deities, had been worshipped for millennia. The origins of that worship are aptly shrouded in mystery, but there is evidence that Thoth was venerated in Egypt from at least 3000 BC, although this may be a conservative estimate. Originally a creator god, a demiurge similar to the one portrayed in the *Poimandres*, this creative power was later recognized in his mastery of speech, language, writing, and magic, and it was through his words that the will of Ra, the sun god, was made manifest. Along with Ma'at, the goddess of order, Thoth stood with Ra on his solar barque, and it was he who recorded the outcome of the weighing of the soul when the dead were judged in the Duat. His main centre of worship was the city Khemennu (Greek Hermopolis), in Upper Egypt, thought to be the oldest city on earth, where he was the head of a group of eight deities called the Ogdoad, rivalling the pantheons of Heliopolis and Memphis, which were ruled by Ra and Ptah.[4]

In the earliest monuments, Thoth is symbolised by an ibis, a bird once so common in Egypt that thousands of ibis mummies were made as offerings to Thoth each year. At Sakkara, site of the ancient Memphis necropolis, buildings were discovered that served as hatcheries for the sacred bird, and an estimated four million ibis mummies are believed to have been laid to rest here. As Brian Copenhaver remarks, this suggests that 'ten thousand dead ibises were stacked in these corridors in each year of the four centuries when the Sakkara complex was

active', a morbid testament, perhaps, to the devotion of Thoth's followers.[5]

Often depicted as an ibis-headed man holding a pen and tablet, Thoth's name, the Egyptian *Tehuti*, may have originated in an old name for the bird sacred to him; in later times he was also associated with the baboon. In the Pyramid Texts, Thoth is closely associated with Osiris, and he is believed to have written parts of the *Book of the Dead*, not surprising for a god who is also a guide to the underworld.[6] Self-begotten, self-produced, as many of the Egyptian deities are, it was Thoth who made the calculations that kept the cosmos in order, regulating the movements of the stars, the sun, and the moon, with which he was associated. As a moon god he was also, as said, the god of magic, and as master of writing and creator of the hieroglyphics, Thoth is the god who embodies the link between writing and magic that is at the heart of occultism; hence the tarot has been called the *Book of Thoth*. Spells, words of power, and incantations are essential in practically all forms of magic and it is Thoth who is responsible for them. It was through Thoth's magic that Isis was able to restore the dismembered Osiris and conceive through him the child saviour Horus.

Thoth was also the god of intelligence, both of a cosmic and spiritual kind, but also of wit and cleverness. A legend has it that Thoth is responsible for a year being 365 days; originally it was only 360. Ra had put a curse on Nut, goddess of the night sky, making her sterile. To help her avoid this fate, Thoth gambled with Khonsu, the moon, and was so clever that he won $^{1}/_{72}$ of its light. $^{1}/_{72}$ of 360 is 5, and during these five new days, Nut was free of Ra's curse, and quickly gave birth to Horus, Osiris, Set, Isis, and Nepthys. Thoth was also seen as a mediator, keeping the balance of power stable, whether it was between the gods, the gods and man, or between order and chaos. In the war between Ra and Apophis, he is said to help each side when necessary, so that neither one nor the other is dominant. In a sense he could be seen as the great cosmic go-between and reconciler of opposites.

The Greek god Hermes shares many of Thoth's characteristics, so it shouldn't be surprising that the Greeks living in Egypt began to associate the two. Hermes is a messenger god, a god of writing, of speech and eloquence; he is also a psychopomp, and like Thoth, he guides the dead to the underworld. Unlike Thoth, however, Hermes' origins are somewhat more humble, and they are thought to lie in the stone piles, or cairns, left by travellers at crossroads. These stone piles, or *herms* in Greek, which date to 600 BC, later developed into pillars topped by a bearded head of Hermes, with an erect phallus at the base. Although later rendered as a young god, Hermes began as a more Priapic deity. Because of his roots in the *herms*, Hermes is a god of crossroads and boundaries, and he is

the patron god of people on the move, of shepherds, cowherds, travellers, but also thieves, who cross boundaries of a different kind. Like Thoth he is a mediator, bringing the earthly souls to the spirit worlds, but also bringing dreams, or messages from the gods, to men. His intermediary and interpretative function — he not only conveys the messages of the gods but explains them — leads to the modern discipline of hermeneutics, the art or science (depending on your perspective) of discovering and understanding meaning. That luck or chance is often involved in this discovery links this hermetic pursuit with the Greek *hermaion*, which is a 'lucky find'. And that one does not always find what one wants is an expression of Hermes' character as a trickster, the Roman Mercurius, about whom Jung wrote an important essay.[7] That Mercury/mercury moves too quickly to be caught (quicksilver), slips through your fingers, changes shape, is unstable, flighty, and unreliable, may not seem qualities associated with Thoth, yet we must recall the older deity's conniving on behalf of barren Nut.

Hermes association with thieves seems disreputable, but it was with him from the start. Soon after his birth he stole Apollo's cattle. Apollo, god of prophecy, discovered the theft and brought Hermes before Zeus for retribution. Hermes at first denied the act, but then confessed, but when he brought Apollo to the cave where he had hidden the herd, Apollo saw the lyre Hermes had just invented, using a tortoise shell and sheep gut. Hermes strummed the lyre — he had just invented the plectrum too — and Apollo was so enchanted that he quickly agreed to take the lyre in lieu of the cattle. Although not a god of magic, Hermes was a god of astrology and astronomy, of diplomacy, cunning, and persuasion. Like Thoth's ibis head, pen, and writing tablet, he had accoutrements that were unmistakable. His winged sandals — with which he moved swiftly and unheard — winged helmet (more an emblem of Mercury than of his Greek counterpart), and chlamys cloak were recognizably Hermesian, but perhaps even more Hermetic was his caduceus staff or *kerykeion*.

The caduceus

Accounts vary for the origins of the caduceus, which is usually depicted as a winged staff with twin serpents curled around it in a double helix, suggestive of the DNA molecule. The staff was first born by Iris, messenger of Hera, but was later handed to Hermes. One account says it was Apollo who gave it to him, when appointing him as messenger after receiving the lyre as payment for this cattle. One myth of the caduceus' origin says that the prophet Tiresias, coming upon two mating snakes, killed the female with his staff and was himself instantly turned into a woman. He remained so for seven years, until he found two more mating snakes, and this time killed the male. He is said to have then passed the staff and its transformative powers on to Hermes. Other accounts suggest a possible Mesopotamian origin of both Hermes and the caduceus in the Sumerian underworld god Ningishzida, who is often depicted as a serpent with a man's head and whose symbol — two snakes curled around a rod — is the earliest of its kind, dating to 3000–4000 BC.

Other accounts have Hermes himself creating the caduceus. Like Tiresias Hermes came upon two snakes, although this time they were wrapped in mortal combat. Hermes separated them with his staff, and brought peace between them, thus acting as mediator, god of boundaries, and also suggesting the alchemical *reconciliatio*. That serpents and staffs seem to go together is suggested by the magical powers of both Moses and Aaron's rod, which are able to turn their opponents' staffs into serpents. That snakes shed their skin and appear reborn may account for their link to both magic and medicine. The caduceus is said to be often confused with the rod of Asclepius, a symbol of the Greek god of healing, yet the fact that Asclepius (the Egyptian Imhotep) appears in the *Corpus Hermeticum* as a student of Hermes Trismegistus suggests that the confusion may only be apparent.

Enter Trismegistus

Exactly when Hermes Trismegistus emerged from the union of Thoth and Hermes is unclear. Herodotus, in the fifth century BC, identified the two in his *Histories*, and there is a suggestion that Thoth was called 'very, very, very great' as early as the Egyptian Late Period (664–332 BC).[8] A reference to a TI-RI-SE-RO-E, or 'three times hero', on a Greek Linear B tablet from Pylos — the form of Greek used by the Mycenean civilization (sixteenth to eleventh century BC) — may be an early form of 'thrice-great', and although a reference to an early form of Hermes appears on the tablet as well, it is not clear if it is linked in any way to the 'triple hero'.[9] Thoth is spoken of as 'great, great, great' in an inscription on the Temple of Esna, which may date to the Ptolemaic period (Ptolemy III Euergetes, third ruler in the Ptolemaic dynasty, who reigned 246–222 BC, may have been responsible for the temple), and the forty-two books of Hermes Trismegistus that Clement of Alexandria spoke of may be the same as some sacred writings inscribed in the second century BC in a temple in Edfu.[10]

Brian Copenhaver suggests that the earliest surviving instance of the epithet 'three times great' appears in the minutes of a meeting of the ibis cult of Sakkara, mentioned above, concerning irregularities in the cult's duties, and dating to 172 BC. It appears that for some time the birds were mistreated, and that burial jars which patrons had paid for to be interred containing a mummified ibis, were actually empty. Potsherds recording the meeting spoke of the decades long decline of the cult, and of the arrest of six of its members. It also contained a warning that 'no man shall lapse from a matter which concerns Thoth … who holds sway in the temple in Memphis' and speaks of 'the benefit which is performed for the ibis, the soul of Thoth, *the three times great*'.[11] Garth Fowden, however, argues that a reference in Athenagoras of Athens (133–190 AD), a Greek philosopher who converted to Christianity, or possibly Philo of Byblos (64–141 AD), a Phoenician scholar, constitute the earliest application of 'thrice-great' to Hermes.[12]

As in so much regarding the ancient world, exact knowledge in this matter escapes us. Yet the scholarly debate over Hermes Trismegistus' origins, fascinating as it is, won't bring us any closer to the people for whom the thrice-great one was something more than a novel way of referring to the amalgam of

Thoth and Hermes. By the time the *Corpus Hermeticum* was being put together, the figure of Hermes Trismegistus — man, sage, god, philosopher — had acquired an identity of its own. He didn't replace either Thoth or Hermes, but his qualities and attributes grew out of them. What was more important, however, was his function as an embodiment of the old Egyptian religion, the *prisca theologia* that dazzled Marsilio Ficino when he rediscovered it more than a millennium later. When Thoth or Hermes or their fused selves were first called 'thrice-great' may remain a mystery. What is certain is that by the first centuries of the common era, there were groups who followed the teachings and practices of the thrice-great one, whether he ever existed or not.

Hermetic prejudices

The Dominican André-Jean Festugière, whose translation of and commentary on the *Corpus Hermeticum* dominated scholarly study of it in the first half of the last century, made three claims about the Hermetic writings that have subsequently been strongly challenged. One is that the Hermetic books can be separated into 'philosophical' and 'magical' works, appealing to a learned and a popular audience respectively, and that the philosophical ones warrant critical attention, while the popular ones were occult rubbish. In voicing this Festugière was echoing the sentiments of an earlier Hermetic scholar, Walter Scott, who also dismissed the magical Hermetica as junk. Another is that the Egyptian elements in the books are strictly decorative and rhetorical, and that their origins lie solely in Greek philosophy. The Egyptian tropes in the *Asclepius*, it argues, are a kind of window dressing, lending the text an exotic allure, but the ideas can be found in Plato, and were more than likely taken from him. A third is that there were no 'Hermetic communities'. The books of the *Corpus Hermeticum* were solely literary works, read by interested individuals with a taste for philosophy, and were not, that is, part of a Hermetic curriculum, aimed at producing gnosis within the context of a spiritual practice.

Most scholars today challenge these conclusions. Indeed, the Gnostic scholar Gilles Quispel goes so far as to assert that 'it is now completely certain that there existed before and after the beginning of the Christian era in Alexandria a secret society, akin to a Masonic lodge'. 'The members of this group,' Quispel continues, 'called themselves "brethren", were initiated through a baptism of the Spirit, greeted each other with a sacred kiss, celebrated a sacred meal and read the Hermetic writings as edifying treatises for their spiritual progress.' And as for the pseudo-Egyptianism that Festugière argued for, 'even if the *Corpus Hermeticum* was written down rather late, its concepts could easily be very old and Egyptian'. 'And in fact,' Quispel goes on, 'the basic principles of emanation, of the world as an overflow from God, and of man as a ray of sunlight ("All is one, all is from the One") are typically ancient Egyptian.'[13]

No one, except die hard occultists, argues that the Hermetic texts were really written before the flood, but the discovery in 1945 of some Hermetica among the Gnostic writings found in Nag Hammadi argues in favour of a 'spiritually' Egyptian origin of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. It also suggests that there were

indeed Hermetic communities, like those of the Gnostics, which gathered in order to study and put into practice the ideas presented in the Hermetic books. The ‘learned’ and ‘popular’ distinction, many now believe, may be the result of the tastes of the Byzantine editors who first collected the Hermetic writings into a single anthology, a literary segregation that helped to keep the philosophical Hermetica alive for a time in the Christian world, at the expense of their magical brothers. That scholars in the early twentieth century would eschew anything to do with magic may go without saying, but in recent years, magic, the occult, and the esoteric have become popular items in academia, and so what was once considered unacceptable now turns up in dozens of thesis projects.

Yet more important than the new academic tolerance of the occult, which allows for a broader understanding of the Hermetica, is what the ‘brethren’ who read the Hermetic texts were aiming at in the first place.

Egypt's dark days

Among the tales of magic and expositions of Hermetic cosmology contained in the *Asclepius* can be found a saddening account of the demise of ancient Egypt. 'A time will come,' Hermes tells Asclepius, 'when it appears that the Egyptians have worshipped God with pure mind and sincere devotion in vain. All their holy worship will turn out to be without effect and will bear no fruit. For the gods will withdraw from earth to heaven and Egypt will be deserted.'[14] Hermes goes on to tell Asclepius that when the gods abandon Egypt, foreigners will overrun the land, and religion itself will become prohibited. Egypt will then become a true land of the dead, and only stories and myths will remain to tell of its former glory. The Nile will run with blood, the dead will outnumber the living, all the ancient customs will be lost, and the only thing that will show that one is Egyptian is the ancient language. Cruelty will reign. Men, tired of living, will no longer observe the cosmos with wonder and reverence, but come to despise it. Darkness will be preferable to light and death to life. Spiritual people will be called mad and materialists wise. The immortality of the soul will be laughed at, and worse, its pursuit will become a crime. Only evil spirits will remain, leading men into war, robbery, and other vile acts. 'Every divine voice will of necessity be stopped. The fruits of the earth will wither, and the land will no longer be fertile. The very air' Trismegistus tells us, 'will hang heavy in lifeless torpor.'[15]

A sorry picture indeed. Yet it is not all bad, and Trismegistus holds out hope. He counsels Asclepius that a time will come when the ancient ways will be restored, that when things have reached rock bottom — 'the old age of the world' — God will take a stand against corruption, and set things to rights, after a purging cataclysm or plague. Then the world will once again become worthy of wonder and reverence, and all that is good will return, and men will once again sing hymns of praise and thanks for its beauty. At that time Egypt, which had once been 'the temple of the whole cosmos', will once again become 'an image of heaven.'[16]

This dark scenario can be read in two ways. One is as a general account of things when the understanding of the spiritual has been lost and the lower, material values dominate, a situation that can happen at any time and which is a recurring danger, and which, for many people, would seem to be the case today

(the zeal with which atheist thinkers like Richard Dawkins decry religion seems suggestive). The other is as an account of the state that Egypt specifically found itself in under the Romans.[17] The idea of a spiritual decadence that is wiped out through some apocalypse which restores the original Golden Age is a common theme in many cultures; yet Egypt itself was clearly in danger of losing its identity under the rule of foreigners, which, by the time the *Corpus Hermeticum* was being written, had been the case for centuries. Trismegistus' dire predictions, then, can be read as a warning applicable at any time, and as a jeremiad specific to Egypt circa 100–200 AD. I would suggest that the people who first encountered this prophecy understood it in this way, and were especially moved by its message, as it seemed that the warning of spiritual decay clearly applied to their time. One possible result was that they formed groups and even large communities in order to maintain the old spiritual traditions and to aid each other in achieving the gnosis that would help deflect the catastrophe from its course.

Gnosis in the desert

To be sure, many drawn to the Hermetic ideas may have remained in cities like Alexandria, and, while leading ordinary lives, followed the Hermetic disciplines, perhaps even acting as instructors and recruiting agents for the teaching, distributing copies of the Hermetic texts, or reading or speaking about them in public spaces. Many others, however, very likely abandoned the city, in order to pursue their spiritual path free from the distractions and constraints of urban life, and also, perhaps, of the observation and censure of others. One clear attraction of leaving the urban centres was the unobstructed view of the heavens the desert could offer. Throughout the Hermetic texts we are often told that in order to know God, we should observe the cosmos. 'If you wish to see Him,' Hermes tells his son Tat in Book V, 'consider the sun, the course of the moon, the order of the stars.'[18] This gives a very concrete sense to the idea of 'cosmic consciousness.' By observing the stars and their celestial order, one would come to understand the mind behind them, and also stimulate one's own mind to encompass them. Standing beneath the night sky on the Egyptian sands would facilitate this practice, and also, one would think, make it difficult to argue with its conclusions.

The Hermeticists who did go out to the desert wouldn't have been alone. Other groups withdrew there as well. One were the Essenes, a Jewish ascetic community who flourished circa 200 BC–100 AD, and who are thought to be responsible for the famous Dead Sea Scrolls discovered in Qumran, on the West Bank, in 1947. As with so much else pertaining to this time, there is still debate about this, as there is about the claim that Jesus himself may have been a member of their sect. The Essenes, who came from different cities, lived communally. They were celibate and pious, rejected animal sacrifice, abstained from sensual pleasure, believed in a god they called the Deity and in the immortality of the soul, and practised baptism or 'purification by water.' They were forbidden to swear oaths, were against violence, practised righteousness toward others, were obliged to maintain and transmit their teachings, and anticipated the coming of a Messiah figure, the Teacher of Righteousness. The Essenes considered themselves the true carriers of the Judaic faith and referred to other Jews as the 'breakers of the covenant', and many of their practices, such as baptism, seemed to have been shared by the Hermeticists.

The other desert mystics with whom the Hermeticists are often closely associated were the Gnostics. As both the Gnostics and the Hermeticists pursued gnosis, this is understandable. Yet while there is much in common between the two communities, and while the inclusion of some Hermetic texts among the Gnostic Gospels found in Nag Hammadi suggests a close relationship between them, there are also profound differences. One is that the Gnostics worked within a Judeo-Christian framework, seeing Jesus as one of their teachers. The Hermeticists stayed within an Egyptian narrative and do not refer to Christ. Another is that while we know who some of the great Gnostic teachers were — Carpocrates, Valentinus, Basilides — no comparable Hermetic names have come down to us. The Hermetic masters were all anonymous, and while the Renaissance Hermeticists who rediscovered the *Corpus Hermeticum* believed that Hermes Trismegistus was a real person, it seems clear that the true authors of the Hermetic books assigned their works to him as a sign of the devotion and respect warranted by the wisdom responsible for them. It was common practice in the ancient world to assign the authorship of a work to a respected predecessor, not out of ego or pride, but out of humility. In the case of the Hermetic books, it was to show that an individual mind wasn't responsible for them, but the great Mind.

Another important difference between the Gnostics and the Hermeticists was in their conception of gnosis. Anyone who has studied the Gnostic writings can't be blamed for coming away from them dizzied by the scores of demons, hierarchical aeons, and levels of spiritual reality that the Gnostic aspirant to higher knowledge has to struggle with. For example, there are the 'Orders of the Three Amens, Child of the Child, Twin Saviours, Great Sabaoth, Great Iao the Good, Seven Amens', as well as the 'Orders of the Uncontainables, Unpassables, and the Orders of those who are before and beyond these'.[19] These are only some of the many spiritual realities the Gnostic had to encounter on his path to spiritual freedom. The Hermeticist, by comparison, had a simpler, purer challenge: to raise his individual mind to the level of the Great Mind and to achieve cosmic consciousness. And while the Gnostic achieved liberation by soaring into 'transcendent heights of vision and apocalypse', the Hermeticist, though also experiencing ecstasy, worked to anchor this in the rigours of Platonic logic, 'so that,' as G.R.S. Mead wrote, 'the vital substance received from above may be rightly digested by the pure mind and fitly used to nourish the nature below'.[20]

As Claire and Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke remark, this distinction highlights the central difference between Gnosticism and Hermeticism.[21] While both

recognize that man has in some way ‘fallen’ from a spiritual state to the material world (i.e., that our consciousness operates on a level far lower than its potential), and both work to ignite the spark of spirit locked within the physical body, the similarities, for the most part, stop there. For the Gnostics, the world itself is evil, the product of an idiot demiurge who suffers from the delusion that he is the real god. For them we remain trapped within his creation, slaves to the malevolent Archons, or ‘rulers’, who block our path to the true transcendent God beyond. (Shakespeare captures this feeling in *Macbeth*, where he says that life is ‘a tale told by an idiot … signifying nothing’. The Hermeticists would not agree.) The Gnostic aimed to escape this ‘prison’, and it isn’t surprising that Gnosticism has been associated with existentialism, with its sense, in Martin Heidegger’s phrase, of being ‘thrown’ into the world, and that postmodern ‘conspiracy consciousness’, exemplified in the writings of Philip K. Dick and Thomas Pynchon, has been labelled gnostic. An atmosphere of paranoia permeates the Gnostic cosmos that is absent in the Hermetic world. Some Hermetic books do focus on the limitations of the physical world, speaking of it as ‘evil’, but this is also qualified, specifying that the ‘earth’ is the ‘country’ of evil, but ‘not the cosmos as some blasphemously affirm’, raising the question of who those ‘some’ might be.[22] One possibility is that this is a reference to the Gnostics, who the Hermeticists must have been aware of. In any case, the ‘evil’ of the earth is further qualified, in the remark that ‘the man who fears God will support all since he has realised true knowledge; for to such a man all things are good, even those that are evil for others’. ‘When entangled with difficulties’, such a one ‘refers all things to true knowledge; he alone turns evil into good.’[23]

But most of the Hermetic books do not emphasize the evil of the world, and indeed many celebrate the cosmos as evidence of divine order and beauty. The difference between the Gnostics and the Hermeticists is that Hermetic man doesn’t want to *escape* from the world, but to realize his full potential within it, in order to embrace his *obligations*, so that, as Hermes tells Asclepius, he can ‘raise his sight to heaven while he takes care of the earth’. He cannot take care of the earth if he escapes from it. As Glenn Alexander Magee writes, ‘The Hermeticist does not need to escape from the world in order to save himself; he wants to gain knowledge of the world in order to expand his own self, and utilize this knowledge to penetrate into the self of God’. ‘Hermeticism,’ Magee writes, ‘is a positive gnosis, devoted to the world.’[24] And while the body is seen as a ‘portable tomb’ it is also celebrated. Poimandres, we remember, tells Hermes to multiply, and in Book II, Hermes explains that ‘the raising of children is … most blessed by right-thinking people’ and that if someone dies childless, it is the

‘greatest misfortune and impiety’.[25]

And not only children, but the means of creating them is sacred. In the *Asclepius*, Hermes speaks of the ‘sweet and vital mystery’ of sex, and explains that in the mutual orgasm of sexual intercourse, ‘the woman acquires the strength of man and the man relaxes in the female passivity’. This exchange, Hermes tells Asclepius, in which the divinity of both arises from their mutual embrace, embodies the ‘greatest tenderness, joy, gladness, longing and divine love’, and its mystery was bestowed upon all creatures by God.[26] The Gnostics, on the other hand, often held the body and procreation in contempt, and saw giving birth as a sign of the demiurge’s triumph, one more soul caught in the snares of the Archons. So, although Hermetic man must struggle to free himself from the limitations of the body, and must work to liberate himself from his slavery to the planetary spheres, this is in order for him to take his true place in the cosmos, not to reject it.

But perhaps the clearest sign that the followers of Hermes had an attitude toward the world different than the Gnostics, is that many of the Hermetic texts end in praise. When, after his spiritual labours, the initiate reaches the eighth sphere, he hears the voices of those who have gone before, singing in thanksgiving, a sentiment the poet Rilke captured in his notion of *dennoch preisen*, ‘praise in spite of’. In his *Sonnets to Orpheus*, Rilke says the mythical Greek poet’s mission was ‘praising, that’s it/Praise was his mission’. One characteristic of cosmic consciousness is the recognition that ‘all is good’, as R.M. Bucke found when he saw that ‘the universe is so built and ordered that without any peradventure all things work together for the good of each and all, that the foundation principle of the world is what we call love’. As far as I can tell, this is not a vision given to many Gnostics.

The Hermetic work

Although many modern scholars of the *Hermetica* believe that there were Hermetic communities, the nature of those communities and the practices they may have engaged in remain a matter for debate. While the singing of hymns seems to be have been part of their practice, the notion and character of Hermetic ‘sacraments’, such as baptism, is unclear, with some scholars suggesting that an actual physical immersion took place, and others suggesting that the idea had been ‘spiritualized’ into a more metaphorical act. The same is true for notions of, say, sacrifice. My own feeling is that, as Hermeticism is, in Frances Yates’ words, a religion ‘without temples or liturgy, followed in the mind alone’, the idea of a set ritual, with sacraments, a priest and so on, seems unnecessary. Yet, while the available material doesn’t allow for a clear cut assertion, we can, I think, permit ourselves some speculation, or at least the pleasure of considering others’ speculations.

In his important Introduction to G.R.S. Mead’s *Hymns of Hermes*, the Gnostic thinker Stephan A. Hoeller suggests what being involved in one of the Hermetic communities may have entailed.[27] Hoeller suggests that a follower of Hermes Trismegistus began by reading some of the Hermetic books, or possibly by hearing them read or discussed in one of the public squares in places like Alexandria. As Alexandria was a city of sects and gospels, the Hermetic philosophy had competition, and as a degree of thought, logic and argument was involved in understanding it, we can assume that it attracted only a small number of people, the majority finding devotional or sacrificial beliefs more to their liking. After reading and hearing about the Hermetic path, following a probationary period, the few who felt drawn to it would continue their studies and be led to the next stage. This would have involved joining with others in a small group, within which rituals and guided meditations would have been practised, the idea being to acclimatize the aspirant to the spiritual atmosphere conducive to gnosis. This stage would act as a preparation for the ascent through the planetary spheres, and during it, the aspirant would have to master some basic principles, something perhaps along the lines of recognizing the independence of the *ba* from the body, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Journey beyond the planets

Next came what Hoeller calls the ‘progress through the Hebdomad’, or the journey through the seven planets. As Hoeller writes, ‘as the initiate’s interior powers increase, the stranglehold of the cosmos and the planets decreases’.[28] We must remember that for the Hermeticist, man, as a being of two natures, is subject to planetary, stellar and cosmic forces, and the idea is to become free of them. Increasingly, as one mastered the Hermetic vision, one became less dominated by necessity and fate and more able to act independently, to be motivated by self-consciousness and conscious decision, and not pushed and pulled by either cosmic or corporeal forces. This stage would probably involve both some kind of guided ecstatic inner ‘ascent’ through imaginal planetary realms — perhaps something along the lines of the Kabbalistic ‘path work’ — and an ethical discipline in which the limitations associated with the planets are jettisoned. One would imagine that this would be an ongoing process, with the passage through each planetary sphere — bringing one’s consciousness closer to Nous — being accompanied by a comparable conquest of personal limitation, an overcoming of impatience, let’s say, or of indolence, or other personal faults. As mentioned, for the Alexandrian and Renaissance Hermeticist, astrology was a means of understanding stellar or astral (Latin *astra* = stars) forces in order to avoid them. Unlike today, they read their horoscopes, not in order to predict their future, but in order to *master* it.

This notion of both movement through the planets and escape from their influence (our word ‘influence’ itself has its roots in the idea that a force or fluid flowed into us from the stars) would remain as central themes in modern esotericism. In Rudolf Steiner’s anthroposophy, for example, as a soul descends to earth, it acquires characteristics from planetary angels, which it gives up in its passage from life to rebirth, and his scheme of an ‘evolution of consciousness’ entails a movement from earlier planetary levels — for example, Old Sun, Old Moon — to later ones — Jupiter, Venus, and beyond.

Perhaps more clear is the use of this theme in the work of the enigmatic esoteric teacher G.I. Gurdjieff. According to Gurdjieff, the universe is structured along the lines of what he calls the ‘Ray of Creation’, reaching from the Absolute to the moon. At each ‘octave’ of this ray, certain cosmic ‘laws’ dominate. The aim of Gurdjieff’s ‘work’ is to free oneself from as many of these

laws as possible. The moon, the lowest level in the Ray of Creation, is subject to 96 laws. The earth, the next lowest, is subject to 48 laws, and that is where man finds himself. Through ‘working on himself’, man can raise himself to the next level, that of the planets, which is subject to only 24 laws. By working on himself further still, he can reach the next level, that of the sun, which is subject to only 12 laws, and so on, until we reach ‘the Absolute’, which seems quite similar to the Hermetic ‘the One, the All’.[29] The whole system of Gurdjieff’s Ray of Creation is a more or less modernized version of the emanationist cosmology associated with Hermeticism and, earlier, with ancient Egyptian religion, in which creation is the result, not of a arbitrary act of a creator God (*creatio ex nihilo*), but of an ‘overflow’ or emanation from the divine. This is not to say that Gurdjieff ‘stole’ the idea, although he wouldn’t have been bothered by the accusation, but that it is so central to esoteric thought that it has remained in it, practically unchanged, aside from surface variations, for centuries.

The eighth sphere

Having passed through the planetary spheres, the Hermeticist was now able to join the Brotherhood of the Ogdoad, the earlier voyagers who have reached the Eighth sphere, where they have freed themselves of their cosmic limitations. They have, in other words, achieved gnosis and experienced cosmic consciousness. Here they rejoice in their freedom and sing praises to the One. In practice, it seems that a kind of baptism may have been part of the ritual, recognizing a new initiate in the mysteries, and in the *Asclepius*, a communal meal is also mentioned. The ecstasy of the voyage was, as mentioned, often given voice through hymns of praise, in which the new, transcendent consciousness was celebrated. In his *Hymns of Hermes* G.R.S. Mead gives several examples of these ecstatic songs. In 'The Secret Hymnody' that ends the *Poimandres*, Hermes sings:

> Let every nature of the world receive the utterance of my hymn!
> Open, thou Earth! Let every bolt of the Abyss be drawn for me! Stir not, ye Trees! I am about to hymn creation's Lord, both All and One. Ye heavens open, and ye Winds stay still, and let God's Deathless Sphere receive my word! For I will sing the praise of Him who founded all; who fixed the Earth and hung up Heaven …[30]

Again, in *The Eighth Reveals the Ninth*, one of the Hermetic texts found in Nag Hammadi, we find a long string of vowels and what seem 'magical' words, such as 'Zoxathazo a oo' ee Zozazoth', which, while similar to some Gnostic 'power words' are also reminiscent of the 'barbarous words of evocation' associated with ceremonial magic. The sense is that on achieving gnosis, the rational mind, responsible for ordered speech, is short-circuited, so that no logical account of the experience is possible, a problem, as we've seen, encountered by more modern pursuers of cosmic consciousness. What these 'words' may have meant to the Hermeticists is unclear, as is whether they were used to trigger an altered state, as chanting is in shamanistic practice, or were a sign that one had been achieved. As Hoeller rightly remarks, 'this heavenly mystery is not profitably approached in rational terms', and 'the utterance ensuing from such extraordinary states of consciousness also must be of an other than ordinary kind'.[31]

Language and silence

Although the *Corpus Hermeticum* was written in Greek, another important part of the Hermetic ritual was the use of the Egyptian language. Just as the hieroglyphics were, the Egyptian language was considered magical and sacred. Its sounds had a power of their own, aside from the meaning of the words, which could not be translated into another language, and certainly not into Greek, which was the language of 'distortion and unclarity' (Book XVI). The power of speech sets man apart from the animals, but the power of the Egyptian language is that of God. As Asclepius tells King Ammon in Book XVI, 'the very quality of the speech and the sound of the Egyptian words have in themselves the energy of the objects they speak of', and 'the energetic idiom of Egyptian' employs not 'speeches (i.e. the Greek dialectic of G.R.S. Mead's 'doubting mind') but sounds that are full of action'. This aspect of the ancient Egyptian language was later emphasized by the Neoplatonic philosopher-magician Iamblichus in his work *On The Mysteries*, in which he argued that the 'performance of mysterious acts which surpass all understanding' and the 'power of unutterable symbols, intelligible to the gods alone' effect 'the theurgic union'.[32] For Iamblichus, the correct words said in the correct way should transcend logic, and have a real, palpable effect, capable of drawing the gods down to concrete manifestation.

Yet along with hymns, words of power, and other evocative sounds, the Hermetic books also often emphasize that silence is the best way to praise the godhead. In this they are oddly reminiscent of the philosopher Wittgenstein's famous remark 'What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.' Yet this Hermetic silence is not the mere absence of sound; it is filled with the intelligible songs of the mind, the wordless recognition of the reality of Nous. As Hermes says at the end of the *Poimandres* 'You whom we address in silence, the unspeakable, the unsayable, accept pure speech offerings from a heart and soul that reach up to you'. In *The Eighth Reveals the Ninth* the point is made more clearly. On achieving gnosis, an initiate declares, 'I am Mind. I have seen! Language is not able to reveal this. For the entire eighth, my son, and the souls that are in it, and the angels, sing a hymn in silence. And I, Mind, understand'. And when the aspirant asks instruction in how to sing the silent hymn, this curious question and answer sequence occurs:

> What is the way to sing a hymn through it (silence)?

> What is the way to sing a hymn through it (silence)?
> Have you become such that cannot be spoken to?
> I am silent, my father. I want to sing a hymn to you while I am silent.
> Then sing it, for I am Mind.[33]

And when, at the end of the *Asclepius*, Tat asks Asclepius if, in giving thanks to God, they should also burn incense, Hermes replies that doing so would be an act of sacrilege, as silent thanksgiving is, in God's eyes, already the best incense.

Becoming Aion

Another way of expressing that the initiate had achieved gnosis was that he had 'become Aion'. Our word 'aeon' means an immense period of time, but for the Hermeticist 'Aion' meant that he had achieved an existence *outside* of space and time. This state, in which one imagined 'the dawn of existence in the womb' or that of 'the soul before entering the body' and 'after leaving it', was not mere fantasy but a way of 'seeing the invisible, of anticipating the Great Beyond, a real training for immortality'.[34] As Maurice Nicoll, a student of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky, writes, the Hermetic practice of 'living at all points of the life' — that is, being vividly aware of the *reality* of one's past and future — leads to our transformation into 'eternal substance', and makes 'the *invisible* side of thing real'.[35] This power to concretely grasp, in Colin Wilson's phrase, 'the reality of other times and places', was proof that the Hermeticist had escaped the constraints of the cosmos, which kept him trapped in the *present moment*. For 'becoming Aion' is nothing other than actualizing the power of the imagination, which is essentially the ability to grasp realities that are not immediately present.

Yet while the Hermetic initiate and his modern counterpart may 'become Aion' and escape the limitations of time, the *Corpus Hermeticum*, sadly, could not. Some time after their writing and before their rediscovery in the Renaissance, the Hermetic books fell into obscurity and were lost. And before Cosimo de' Medici's literary scout found them again, a different Hermes Trismegistus made his appearance on the scene.

Notes

1. Hall 2003, p. 96.
2. Justin Pollard and Howard Reid, *The Rise and Fall of Alexandria* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), p. xvii.
3. Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 14.
4. Fowden, p. 23.
5. ", pp. xiii–xiv.
6. Fowden, p. 22.
7. See 'The Spirit Mercurius' in C.G. Jung *Collected Works Vol. 13, Alchemical Studies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968).
8. See http://encyclopedia.jrank.org/articles/pages/94/ Secret-Knowledge.html 9. See

http://projectsx.dartmouth.edu/history/bronze_age/lessons/ les/26.html 10. Fowden, pp. 57–59.
11. Copenhaver, p. xiv.
12. Fowden, p. 213.
13. Gilles Quispel, Preface Salaman 2001, pp. 12–13. See also Quispel's essay 'The *Asclepius*: From the Hermetic Lodge in Alexandria to the Greek Eucharist and the Roman Mass' in *Gnosis and Hermeticism: From Antiquity to Modern Times*, ed. Roelof van den Broeck and Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Albany: Suny Press, 1998), pp. 69–77 in which he speaks of a 'ritual of initiation that originated in Alexandria and presupposes a mystery religion there that focused on the heavenly journey of the soul' (p.73).
14. Salaman 2007, pp. 78–79.
15. Ibid. p. 81.
16. Ibid. p. 78.
17. See Fowden, pp. 38–44.
18. Salaman 2001, p. 42.
19. Claire Goodrick-Clarke and Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, Introduction to *G.R.S Mead and the Gnostic Quest* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2005), p. 15.
20. Ibid. p. 118.
21. Ibid.
22. See, for example, Salaman 2001, p. 47.
23. Ibid. p. 52.
24. Glenn Alexander Magee, *Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), p. 12.
25. Salaman 2001, p. 34.
26. Salaman 2007, pp. 74–75.
27. Hoeller bases his account on Lewis S. Keizer's commentaries on the Hermetic text, *The Eighth Reveals the Ninth*, found among the Gnostic works discovered in Nag Hammadi. See *The Eighth Reveals the Ninth: A New Hermetic Initiation Discourse* (Seaside: Academy of Arts and Humanities, CA, 1974), pp. 58–63. However, William C. Geese, in *Corpus Hermeticum XIII and Early Christian Literature* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, Netherlands, 1979), p. 42, note 43, questions Keizer's conclusions.
28. Stephan Hoeller, Introduction to G.R.S. Mead *Hymns to Hermes* (Boston: Weiser Books, 2006), p. 15.
29. P.D. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), pp. 82–84.
30. Mead 2006, p.63.
31. Ibid. p. 18.
32. Gregory, 1999, p. 149.
33. James M. Robinson, ed. *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996), pp. 324–25.
34. Salaman 2001, pp 129–30.
35. Maurice Nicoll, *Living Time* (London: Watkins, 1981), pp. 103, 119.

4. Emerald Tablets

Between the time when it is believed to have been written — from 100 BC to 300 AD— and its rediscovery by Leonardo of Pistoia in 1460, the *Corpus Hermeticum* entered a literary limbo. All we know of it throughout this period comes from scattered references in other philosophers and scholars. These few remarks, however, show us that Hermes Trismegistus' prestige had in no way dimmed. In fact, the truth seems to be quite the opposite. The thrice-great one was taken up by two streams of spiritual thought that used his authority in rather different ways. For the church fathers Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, and Lactantius, the Hermetic works were heralds of a triumphant Christianity. The only major anti-Hermetic voice among Christian writers was Augustine, who, in the *City of God*, condemns Hermes as a heathen and the *Asclepius* as a work of idolatry. (We remember that he singled out the account of the Egyptian statues animated by the gods as especially demonic.) Yet for all his disdain Augustine nevertheless concedes Hermes' importance, and it was in him that later Hermeticists sought authority for their belief that the thrice-great one was a contemporary of Moses. As we will see, Hermes' importance as a Christian herald and fellow-traveller continued well into the Renaissance, and Hermetic ideas powerfully influenced Christian thinkers such as pseudo-Dionysius, Meister Eckhart, and Nicolas of Cusa.

The other spiritual tradition that made great use of Hermes was alchemy.Alchemy is so closely associated with Hermeticism that the two are often considered synonymous. When one speaks of the 'Hermetic Art', one is usually referring to alchemy, and it wouldn't be surprising for a reader of this book to wonder why, so far, there has been barely a mention of it. Yet in the tracts making up the *Corpus Hermeticum*, and also in the *Asclepius*, alchemy makes no appearance. The Hermetic work in which the link between Hermeticism and alchemy is most clear, the fabled *Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus*, was by all accounts unknown to the Alexandrian Hermeticists, although alchemy itself may not have been unknown to them, nor they to the alchemists. Although it is believed to have been written by Hermes Trismegistus, the earliest reference to the *Emerald Tablet* — or, as it is also known, the *Tabula Smaragdina* — appears in the work of the Arabic alchemist Jabir ibn Hayyan, otherwise known by his Latinized name Geber, and dates to

the eighth century. Another early Arabic version appears in a ninth century work entitled *The Secret of Creation*, and is wrongly attributed to the Greek philosopher-magician Apollonius of Tyana. Both Arabic versions are believed to have been translated from Syriac.

No Greek original of the *Emerald Tablet* has ever been found, although its most famous aphorism, ‘as above, so below’, seems to be echoed in an alchemical work of the second century AD, *The Dialogue of Cleopatra and the Philosophers*. Cleopatra of Alexandria (not the queen who died with Mark Antony) is one of the earliest known alchemists, and in this dialogue, among other things, ‘the philosophers’ ask her to ‘Tell us how the highest descends to the lowest and how the lowest rises to the highest’.

Accompanying the text, which is only a fragment, is a page of symbolic drawings known as *The Gold-Making of Cleopatra*. Among images of alchemical apparatuses, there is one of the Ouroboros, the serpent swallowing its own tail, an ancient Egyptian symbol of infinity dating to nearly 1500 BC. The oldest known representation of the Ouroboros is found on the northern wall of the burial chambers of Tuthmosis III (1479–25 BC), which also contain a complete version of *The Book of What is in the Duat*.[1] Within Cleopatra’s Ouroboros are the words ‘One is All’, written in Greek. Another drawing shows the alchemical symbols for gold, silver, and mercury enclosed in two concentric circles. In the circles can be read, also in Greek, ‘One is All and through it is All and by it is All, and if you have not All, All in Nothing’. ‘The One, the All’, is the central Hermetic teaching. Whether there is any direct relation between *The Dialogue of Cleopatra and the Philosophers* and the *Emerald Tablet* is unknown, but the parallel concern with ‘the highest’ and ‘the lowest’ and the ‘above’ and the ‘below’, as well as the celebration of ‘the One, the All’, suggest some kind of connection.

Undoubtedly, the *Emerald Tablet* is the most famous work of alchemical literature. Even the father of modern science, Isaac Newton, translated it from Latin into English, and the phrase ‘as above, so below’, a concentrate of its opening statement, has drifted into common parlance.[2] There are many translations of it, but all more or less present the same concise and somewhat gnomic dictums. Here is one version:

1. True it is, without falsehood, certain and most true. That which is above is like to that which is below, and that which is below is like to that which is above, to accomplish the miracles of the one thing.
2. And as all things were by the contemplation of the one, so all things arose from this one by a single act of adaptation.
3. The father thereof is the Sun, the mother the Moon.
4. The wind carried it in its womb, the Earth is the nurse thereof.
5. It is the father of all the works of wonder throughout the whole world.
6. The power thereof is perfect.
7. If it be cast on to the Earth, it will separate the element of the Earth from that of Fire, the subtle from the gross.
8. With great sagacity it doth ascend gently from Earth to Heaven.
9. Again it doth descend to the Earth, and uniteth in itself the force from things superior and things inferior.
10. Thus thou wilt possess the glory of the brightness of the whole world, and all obscurity will fly from thee.
11. This thing is the strong fortitude of all strength, for it overcometh every subtle thing and doth penetrate every solid substance.
12. Thus was the world created.

13. Hence there will be marvellous adaptations achieved, of which the manner is this.
14. For this reason I am called Hermes Trismegistus, because I hold three parts of the wisdom of the whole world.
15. That which I had to say about the operation of the Sol is completed.[3]

Probably more books have been written trying to unpack this brief tract than about any other occult, alchemical, or esoteric work, and it is still, I think, anybody's guess exactly what it's about. Which isn't to say that it's a complete mystery. In his classic work on the history of alchemy, E.J. Holmyard suggests that the *Emerald Tablet* speaks of 'a correspondence or interaction between celestial and terrestrial affairs', and that its central insight is that 'all the manifold forms in which matter occurs have but a single origin'. 'A universal soul or spirit,' Holmyard writes, 'permeates both macrocosm and microcosm, and this unity in diversity implies the possibility of transmutation.'[4]

There's nothing to argue with here, and everything certainly fits the Hermetic view. (My own take is that the 'thing' referred to in the *Emerald Tablet* is consciousness itself, but *how* it 'accomplishes miracles' is another story.) But the first thing a reader of the *Corpus Hermeticum* and the *Asclepius* notices is that the *Emerald Tablet* isn't written in the style of either of these works. Granted that the Hermetic books were most likely written by different individuals at different times, they nevertheless share certain stylistic traits. As mentioned, the most obvious is the 'teacher-student' format. Practically all of the Hermetic books have 'one who knows' conferring his knowledge onto one who 'wants to know'. The *Emerald Tablet* isn't in this form. The writer is supposed to be Hermes Trismegistus, but he isn't addressing anyone in particular, nor are the other Hermetic books as obscure as the *Emerald Tablet* is. The Hermetic texts borrow not only ideas from Plato — or reiterate ideas Plato himself borrowed from the Egyptians — they also adopt his didactic style, and the teacher in the texts is often at pains to make clear that the student understands exactly what he is teaching, sometimes at tedious length. The *Emerald Tablet* seems to be written in that 'esoteric' style so common to alchemical writings, meaning it employs a language that deliberately hides its significance from those not privy to it. What this means is that a reader coming to the *Poimandres* or the *Asclepius* for the first time may find the writing difficult, in that the style is very different from modern writing, but the author of these works is not going out of his (or her) way to be obscure. The same modern reader could find the same difficulty in Plato or any other philosopher of antiquity. But with a little effort and diligence, something could be got out of it.

The same can't be said for alchemical literature, which is generally and purposefully enigmatic. Alchemical writing wants to hide something from those outside the alchemical community. The Hermetic books want to convey insights

to anyone who is interested in grasping them. The result is that an average reader can pick up the *Asclepius* and, while he may not find it gripping, can still make some sense of it, while the *Emerald Tablet* would leave him scratching his head.

Yet while the *Emerald Tablet* doesn't seem to be of a piece with the other Hermetic texts, its impact on western consciousness was certainly as powerful as that of the other Hermetic books. And while alchemy doesn't turn up in the *Corpus Hermeticum*, it arose from the same milieu as Hermes Trismegistus did, and clearly shares much with the thrice-great one. A work on Hermeticism without some account of alchemy seems somehow criminal. Let's take a look then at the origins of the 'Hermetic art'.

All that glitters

Again, as with so much in this book, the origins of alchemy lie deep in the past, and its earliest mention is unclear. Even the origin of the name is debatable. Some, like R.A. Schwaller de Lubicz, argue that it originates in the Arabic *al-kemi*, 'out of Egypt'. Others suggest *al-kimia*, Greek for 'transmuting gold and silver'. Other scholars offer other suggestions.[5] Yet one of the curious things about alchemy is that it seems to have had a parallel development in the west and in the east. One of the earliest extant references to alchemy in China occurs around the same time as one of the earliest extant references in the west, a coincidence that C.G. Jung, who wrote a great deal about alchemy, may have considered a synchronicity. A Chinese edict of 144 BC mentions it, and roughly around the same time, Bolos of Mendes — a Greek alchemist often confused with Democritus, the pre-Socratic philosopher who lived circa 460–370 BC— wrote a book about it. There is an Indian alchemy tradition as well, originating in the mythical figure of Agastyar, a kind of Hindu Hermes Trismegistus. The earliest extant Indian alchemical references appear in the *Artha-Sastra*, which dates from the fourth to the third centuries BC, roughly contemporaneous with its Chinese and western counterparts. Although emerging at around the same time, alchemy in the east pursued a different goal, that of long life, or immortality, than that which occupied early western alchemists, namely, the making of gold. Yet, over time, eastern influences informed western alchemy, and the pursuit of alchemical gold, the philosopher's stone and the elixir of life became more or less synonymous.

The roots of western alchemy seem to lie in Egyptian gold working, in the secrets of metallurgy, the crucible, and the forge.[6] These themselves most likely emerged out of prehistoric metalworking and smithcraft. The mysteries of gold were the concern of a priestly order centred in the temple of Ptah, one of the great creator gods, at Memphis, where the art of producing gold substitutes or of increasing amounts of gold by skilfully blending it with other metals was carefully guarded. Exactly when this began is again unclear. The famous Leyden and Stockholm papyri, which contain recipes for making 'false gold' or for increasing the amount of gold by adulterating it with other metals, date to the third century AD, but the recipes themselves date to several centuries earlier.[7] The idea of alchemy as a spiritual pursuit, which is how it is most seen today,

seems to have arisen at a later date, and in this ‘spiritual alchemy’ bears the same relation to metallurgy as ‘speculative masonry’ does to ‘operative masonry’. Sometime between 1550 and 1700, ‘operative masonry’ — the actual working with stone — was transformed into ‘speculative masonry’ — Freemasonry — a philosophical concern with the meaning of architecture, with ideas about ‘sacred geometry’ and the symbols decorating cathedrals. Likewise, at some point, the gold-making that the early alchemists concerned themselves with was itself transformed into a concern with *self*-transformation, with making *alchemical gold*, which was not the same as the metal. (*Aurum nostrum non est aurum vulgi*, the sixteenth century Paracelsian alchemist Gerhard Dorn said.) Yet, in its early days, although it later became the butt of many jokes, making gold is exactly what alchemy was about.

This gold however, was not gold as we understand it. ‘Gold’ was the shine associated with polished metal, and any metal that had some glitter was, contrary to the old adage, considered to be to some degree golden. The alchemist’s job was to increase this, and he did the same with silver, gems, and other rare materials, using a number of methods, including dyes. This was not necessarily a shady operation, as the effect and not the purity of the material was the central point. To be sure, over time, how to detect if some other metal had been substituted for gold became a problem, and it was a one-time resident of Alexandria who discovered one way to do this. Archimedes’ famous cry of *Eureka* — ‘I’ve found it’ — allegedly occurred, circa 270 BC, when he realized that when he entered a bath, a specific volume of water was displaced, because of the volume of his body.[8] Hiero II of Syracuse had asked Archimedes to discover whether a gold crown he had ordered from a goldsmith was true gold, or made of some alloy. Archimedes took a piece of gold the same weight as the crown, placed it in a bowl of water, and noted how much of it was displaced. He then did the same with a piece of silver of the same weight. Because silver is less dense than gold, it occupies a greater volume, and more water was displaced. Archimedes then placed the crown itself in the bowl, and saw that the amount of water it displaced was somewhere between that displaced by the pure gold and the silver. The crown, he discovered, was adulterated, and the goldsmith no doubt suffered Hiero II’s wrath.

This early stage of alchemy is represented by Bolos of Mendes, whose book, *Physika kai Mystika*, which can be translated as ‘Nature and Initiation’, collected a number of instructions on making gold, silver, gems, as well as on mastering the art of dyeing, especially the colour purple, which was and is associated with royalty. The concern with dyeing highlights the importance that colour had for the early alchemists, and the changes that stone underwent when subject to

intense heat led to the fascination later alchemists had with the changes in colour that the *prima materia*, or basic matter, endured during the alchemical process. Along with its purely ‘craft’ aspects, Bolos’ book also dealt with the more mystical or initiatory aspects of alchemy, and is famous for supplying one of the classic alchemical aphorisms: ‘Nature rejoices in Nature, Nature conquers Nature, Nature masters Nature’. The alchemist was one who, discovering the secrets of nature, used these to surpass nature itself, to, in effect, improve on it. In this alchemy shares with science the notion that man can employ the ‘laws’ of nature in order to go beyond it. Bolos wrote on a number of other topics, including magic, agriculture, hieroglyphics, astrology, chemistry, and medicine. Although Bolos is the earliest source for information about alchemy, he more than likely inherited his knowledge from earlier, still unknown alchemists, and, as mentioned, some of his writings are attributed to Democritus, who developed one of the earliest versions of atomic theory.

The fifth essence

From Mendes, the Greek name for the ancient Egyptian city of Djedet, in the eastern Nile delta, the alchemical trail led to Alexandria. Here the notion of an actual transformation of matter, rather than the art of increasing a metal's allure, seems to have entered the mix. The notion that 'Nature masters Nature', echoed Aristotle's belief that all things seek perfection; in trying to transform a base metal to a more noble one, alchemy was merely speeding up a process already at work. The idea, too, that metals somehow 'grew' in the earth, suggested that they were amenable to change. Another important influence was the belief that all matter was a result of the operations of the four classical 'elements', fire, water, air, and earth — first proposed by the pre-Socratic philosopher Empedocles (circa 490–430 BC) — and that these could change into one another. To these four elements was also added a fifth, the 'quintessence', the 'universal soul or spirit' that 'permeates both macrocosm and microcosm', as E.J. Holmyard wrote of the *Emerald Tablet*. By getting at this 'fifth essence' — which is what 'quintessence' means — the alchemist could transform one expression of this 'universal spirit' into another.

After Bolos of Mendes, two women alchemists appear, Maria Prophetissa and the aforementioned Cleopatra. Maria Prophetissa is known for developing alchemical apparatus like the *bain marie*, a bath that kept water heated at a constant temperature, and the *tribikos*, an alembic or still, used for distillation. She is also credited with the saying 'One becomes two, two becomes three, and out of the third comes the one as the fourth', an example of the increasing obscurity in alchemical prose.[9] Yet it is unclear if Maria was an actual woman, or even an actual and not mythical individual. During her time alchemy entered the strange brew of Egyptian magic, Greek philosophy, Gnosticism, Neoplatonism, Babylonian astrology, Christian theology, and pagan mythology familiar to the denizens of Alexandria. At the same time it also developed the enigmatic language that makes its interpretation so difficult. How much Zosimos of Panopolis, who flourished circa 300 AD, contributed to this is unclear, but, as mentioned, he is known today to a great degree because of a series of visions he recorded and on which C.G. Jung wrote an important commentary.[10]

The Hermetic connection

Zosimos was called the ‘Crown of Philosophers’ by the later Olympiodorus, and he is seen as the ‘father’ of alchemy proper. Born in Panopolis (Akhmim) in Upper Egypt, he later moved to Alexandria, where he came into contact with both Hermetic and Gnostic ideas. Some commentators suggest that he actually belonged to either a Gnostic or Hermetic community, or to some combination of both. He equated Thoth with Adam, and remarked that Jewish alchemists, like Maria Prophetissa — who was also known as Maria the Jewess — could write openly about alchemical secrets; he, as an Egyptian, was bound to oaths of secrecy. He saw the Egyptian priests as the guardians of the alchemical art, and is one of the first alchemists to credit Hermes as the originator of the work.

If alchemy began as a means of making gold, with Zosimos it clearly moved into more interior territory. In his account of his strange vision, he speaks of a bowl-shaped altar, which was guarded by an Egyptian priest. In Book IV of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, Hermes explains to Tat why, while giving all men ‘reason’ — the ability to ‘figure things out’ — God did not give everyone an equal share of ‘mind’, nous. Hermes tells Tat that God put mind in a great bowl, or *krater*, as a prize to be sought. He then had his herald announce that whoever recognizes that his true nature is beyond the earthly can immerse themselves in the *krater*. Those who did received gnosis and perfected themselves, while the many who ignored the call remained obsessed with physical gratification. Zosimos’ vision seems to be a version of the Hermetic call, to which he added an alchemical flourish, bringing in elements of dismemberment — reminiscent of the ‘shamans of Egypt’ — fire, and painful self-transformation. In one part of his vision he encounters Agathodaimon, a figure in the Hermetic books.

Zosimos worked with a woman partner, Theosebeia — it’s unclear if she was his actual sister or his *soror mystica*, ‘mystical sister’ — and himself complained about the increasing obscurity of alchemical writing. ‘If the mysteries are necessary,’ he argued in his alchemical memoir *Final Quittance*, ‘it is all the more important that everybody should possess a book of chemistry, which should not be hidden away.’[11] Theosebeia, it seems, was partial to keeping the teachings secret, discussing them only with a small, select group, and Zosimos railed against this, as he did against the selfishness and vanity of who those who set themselves up as some kind of elite. But as his dream narrative shows,

Zosimos himself wasn't averse to using symbolic language, and in the same memoir he refers directly to the *Poimandres* and Book IV, when he urges Theosebeia, who seemed more turned toward 'material' alchemy, to follow their spiritual philosophy.[12]

Love of fate

But what is most fascinating about Zosimos is his attitude toward ‘fate’, the necessities inflicted upon men by the edicts of the cosmos. While the Hermetic path is a way of transcending fate, Zosimos argued against the idea of using magic to avoid or alter that which the cosmos brought his way. Zosimos criticized those who, by identifying solely with the body, become nothing but ‘marchers in the procession of fate’, a clear allusion to Book IV.[13] Yet in his own attitude toward fate, he adopted an almost Taoist approach of ‘not-doing’, *wu wei*. Zosimos argues that ‘the spiritual man, one who has come to know himself, need not rectify anything through the use of magic …nor must he use force upon necessity; but rather he should allow necessity to work in accordance with her own nature and judgment’.[14] And to Theosebeia he advised that ‘being calm in body, calm also your passions, desire and pleasure and anger and grief and the twelve portions of death. In this way, taking control of yourself, you will summon the divine to you, and truly it will come, that which is everywhere and nowhere’.[15]

As Garth Fowden comments, Zosimos argues that ‘the philosopher should be sensitive to the personal significance of what happens to him by unavoidable necessity, rather than seeking to subvert or transcend by magic the divine powers inherent in the universe’.[16] This sense of what we can call ‘karmic wisdom’ is reminiscent of the process of personal transformation that C.G. Jung remarks on in his commentary to the classic of Chinese alchemy, *The Secret of the Golden Flower*. Relating the alchemical art to his own notion of ‘individuation’, the lifelong process of psychological and spiritual maturity, Jung speaks of patients who, by accepting what came to them, instead of desperately trying to avoid it, *outgrew* the problems that had almost wrecked them. ‘Some higher or wider interest arose on the person’s horizon,’ Jung writes, ‘and through this widening of his view the insoluble problem lost its urgency.’ ‘What, on a lower level, had led to the wildest conflicts and panicky outbursts of emotion, viewed from the higher level of the personality, now seemed like a storm in the valley seen from a high mountain-top.’[17] From this perspective, the problems and complexities of life have a purpose: we learn about ourselves from them, and trying to avoid them is the same as avoiding self-knowledge. A similar view was expressed by

the philosopher Jean Gebser when he wrote that ‘Everything that is happening to me is a challenge to have insight into it’.[18] And another philosopher, very different from Gebser and Zosimos, Friedrich Nietzsche, summed up this attitude in a concise formula: *amor fati*, ‘love of fate’.[19]

Alchemy's decline

Zosimos' writings on alchemy were collected in a huge, twenty-eight volume encyclopedia, *Alchemical Matters*, most of which, sadly, is lost to us. One important saying that has survived concerns the alchemist's perpetual goal: the philosopher's stone. Zosimos called it 'a stone which is no stone, this precious thing which has no value, this polymorphous thing which has no form, this unknown thing which is known to all', thus contributing to the very obscurity he complained about to, while adding a Christian element to the alchemical brew.[20] Psalm 118:22 says: 'The stone the builders rejected has become the corner stone.' Exactly when talk of the philosopher's stone first began is, as with so much else in this context, unclear. Some suggest Bolos speaks of it, but this reference comes from an account by Synesius, an alchemist who followed Bolos, and who claims that Bolos was taught by Ostanes, a mythical figure who was said to be Alexander the Great's personal alchemist.[21] Zosimos, however, seems to have known of it.

Alchemy continued in Alexandria after Zosimos, but by this time it, like Egypt itself, was in decline. Stephanus, an alchemist who lived in the seventh century, carried on the tradition, but added nothing new, and he eventually left Alexandria for Constantinople. The decline of Egypt, prophesized in the *Asclepius*, may even have prompted alchemy's rise, in the same way that it may have acted on the Hermeticists. It's possible that the alchemists, wanting to salvage some of Egypt's ancient wisdom, collected it in their art. It's even possible that the notorious obscurity of alchemical texts is based in an attempt to keep this wisdom from prying, foreign eyes. Ironically, alchemy's survival was the result of the philosophical and spiritual interests of Egypt's last conquerors, the Arabs.

Hermetic Harran

When Amr ibn al'Aas conquered Alexandria in 639, he more than likely didn't realize that he would be helping alchemy and Hermeticism reach the Muslim world. But like every other conquering people that had entered Alexandria's gates, the Arabs soon recognized the wealth of learning they had captured by gaining control of the city. Soon Arab scholars and philosophers were clamouring for translations of the Greek and Latin texts they had inherited, as well as for those in other languages. And along with the many works of mathematics, philosophy, medicine, and other sciences that survived the conquering army's baths (see p.76), were works of alchemy. It's true that the Arabs had already shown an interest in alchemy prior to the capture of Alexandria. But this interest became something of an obsession when Egypt's ancient knowledge came into their hands.

It's very likely that the meeting between Greco-Egyptian and Chinese alchemy happened through an Arab broker. Arab sailors reached Canton in 627, the first known direct contact between the two people, and the Arabs actually built a mosque there which remains today.[22] It is after this that the different pursuits of eastern and western alchemy — immortality and the philosopher's stone — seem to have merged. The elixir of life, as the magic potion of alchemical longevity was called, was first known to the Chinese as a kind of 'pill of immortality'.[23] A pill is not too far from a stone, and both the pill and the stone were believed to be miraculously effective in miniscule quantities. The term elixir itself comes from the Arabic *al-ixsir*, which means 'essence', Aristotle's 'fifth element'.

Unlike the Alexandrian Christians, the Arabs were at first tolerant toward the followers of Hermes, whom they associated with the prophet Idris, much as the Greeks associated Hermes with Thoth. One example of this tolerance is the mysterious city of Harran, in northern Mesopotamia, now Anatolia (Turkey), centre of an ancient copper industry. Once the site of perhaps the world's oldest university, Harran has been a ruin for nearly a millennium, following its destruction by the Mongols in 1271 AD. It was founded around 2000 BC, but the area in which Harran rose is home to possibly the oldest artefacts of civilization. Temples dating to 9,500 BC were discovered there in 1995, and a statue, the world's oldest, dating to 11,500 BC, was discovered in a nearby area in 1993.[24]

Both finds are much earlier than Catal Huyuk, also in Anatolia, previously considered the world's oldest Neolithic site. Harran means 'crossroads' or 'caravan', suggesting that the site was on many trade routes, an apt name for a city that would be associated with Hermes. Among the ancient figures that passed through the city is Abraham, who the Bible tells us stayed in Harran after leaving Ur.

Harran's university attracted many thinkers and scholars, and as the Christians rose to power in Alexandria, many of its pagan philosophers went there. With them they brought knowledge and wisdom from many sources: the Chaldeans, the Magi, the Greeks, the Jews, even the Christians. But the most important wisdom school in Harran was that of Hermes Trismegistus, whom the Harranians revered as a great teacher and sage. At least some of what we know as the *Corpus Hermeticum* is thought to have been their most sacred text, and it's possible that the copy of the Hermetic books that reached Marsilio Ficino may have arrived in Constantinople and then Macedonia via Harran.

That Harran was a city devoted to Hermetic thought has prompted much speculation about it. Some suggest that the mysterious city of Damcar, mentioned in the enigmatic Rosicrucian manifestoes of the early seventeenth century (as the source of their founder Christian Rosenkreutz's esoteric knowledge), may indeed have been Harran, although the dates don't coincide.[25] Whether or not Harran and Damcar are the same, what is clear is that Harran was one of the last outposts of pagan, Hermetic, and Neoplatonic thought, perhaps *the* last. When Christianity reached the city, many Harranians refused to be converted. This led to Harran being known as 'the city of pagans' among Christians. In 633–43 Syria and Mesopotamia came under Arab rule, and in 744 the Umayyad Caliph Marwan II established his capital in Harran. Marwan II's reign, however, was short-lived, and when he was defeated by the Abbasids in 750, they soon moved the capital to Baghdad. In 830, en route to his campaign against the Byzantines, the Abbasid Caliph al-Ma'mūn passed through the city of pagans. He asked the Harranians what their religion was. They answered: 'We are Harranians.' Not satisfied with this, al-Ma'm?n asked if they were Christians, Jews, Magians, or Muslims, to which the people answered: 'No.' When he asked about their holy scripture and prophet, they equivocated. Al-Ma'm?n then informed them that they were idolaters, and that if, by the time he returned, they had not converted to Islam or to some other belief sanctioned by the Koran, he would be forced to kill them.

Al-Ma'm?n died during his campaign, but before hearing of this, some Harranians converted to Islam, others to Christianity. Many, however, remained pagans, that is, Neoplatonic and Hermetic philosophers, seekers of gnosis.

Realizing their precarious position, they consulted a Muslim jurist, who suggested that they call themselves Sabians, one of the religions protected by the Koran. It was not enough, however, to merely choose a name; they also had to produce a sacred text and a prophet. For their prophets they chose Hermes Trismegistus and Agathodaimon, and as a sacred text the Hermetic books. To make their acceptance even easier, they suggested that Hermes was the same person as Idris, who the Muslims associated with Enoch, one of the prophets named in the Koran; Agathodaimon they equated with Seth, a son of Adam.[26] The Harranian Hermeticists — henceforth called Sabians — were thus allowed to live and study in peace, and Harran continued as a centre for philosophical thought for many years.

The pagans of Baghdad

One of Harran's pagans was the famous Arabic scholar Thabit ibn Qurra (835–901). A student at Harran's university, Thabit and his party moved to Baghdad following a schism among Harran's Sabians. Here he was introduced to the caliph, and received high favour in court, and he was invited to study at the House of Wisdom. This had been established in 750 by the Abbasid Caliph Harun al-Rashid, of *Arabian Nights* fame, as a great seat of learning. Indeed, the Abbasid Caliphate is recognized as a golden age of science and culture, and during this time the Arabic world was the unrivalled centre of civilization. With his companions Thabit founded an independent pagan/Hermetic community in Baghdad, who were also known as Sabians. Hearing of this, many of the Hermeticists in Harran came to Baghdad to join him, and a kind of Neoplatonic academy rose up, with the Hermetic books as its central texts. Thabit wrote numerous books on a variety of subjects, including mathematics, medicine, logic, astronomy, as well as astrology and magic. He also made many translations from Greek to Arabic. The Harranian Hermeticists as a whole were highly regarded as translators, an accolade that was later ascribed to the Brethren of Purity, a community of Hermetic scholars in tenth century Basra (Iraq), responsible for an encyclopedia of esoteric science which deeply influenced Sufism. Thabit's central work, however, was philosophy. His passion for Hermetic and Neoplatonic ideas, and his belief in their value, can be seen in this passage:

> We are the heirs and propagators of Paganism … Happy is he who, for the sake of Paganism, bears the burden of persecution with firm hope. Who else have civilized the world, and built the cities if not the nobles and kings of Paganism? Who else have set in order the harbours and rivers? And who else have taught the hidden wisdom? To whom else has the Deity revealed itself, given oracles, and told about the future, if not to the famous men among the pagans? The pagans have made known all this. They have discovered the art of healing the soul. They have also made known the art of healing the body. They have filled the earth with settled forms of government, and with wisdom, which is the highest good. Without Paganism the world would be empty and miserable.[27]

For Thabit to write this while living in Baghdad is testament to the breadth of thought which, for a time at least, was tolerated, even encouraged, in the Muslim world. If nothing else, to claim that the Deity revealed itself to the pagans — that is, to the philosophers, a term of abuse for orthodox Muslims — was heresy. And considering the religious wars and persecution associated with both Christianity and Islam, the paganism of the Greek philosophers clearly warrants Thabit's praise. I don't recall many pagan philosophers warring on each other, or persecuting different schools.

Thabit's paganism continued in Baghdad for a century and a half after his death, and the work of his followers informed a great deal of the intellectual life of the capital. By 1050, however, this liberality of thought had succumbed to a growing orthodoxy, and the Baghdad pagans soon faded from view. One exception to the rising fundamentalism was the Persian theosopher Suhrawardi, known as 'the Martyr', because of his execution by the religious authorities in Aleppo in 1191, charged with heresy. Taking Hermetic philosophy and combining it with Shi'ite Islam, Suhrawardi developed the idea of *Hūrqalyā*. This is an *objective* inner world that, through prayer and meditation, one can 'travel' in and within which one can encounter equally objective sūpiritual beings, much as the Hermeticists could journey inwardly through the planetary spheres, or the Egyptian initiate could travel through the underworld. *Hūrqalyā* is in essence identical to the realm of the Duat, and also to the inner realm within which the author of the *Poimandres* encountered Nous. *Hūrqalyā* is also striking similar to the interior worlds explored in different ways by seers such as Swedenborg, Rudolf Steiner, and C.G. Jung. Swedenborg's heaven, hell, and 'spirit world', Steiner's 'Akashic Record', and Jung's 'collective unconscious' are all interior spaces which are nonetheless *objective*. Although *imaginal* they have an existence *independent* of the psyche exploring them, and although not material, they are nevertheless 'real'.

Suhrawardi's modern interpreter, the French philosopher Henry Corbin, refers to *Hūrqalyā* as the *mundus imaginalis*, the Imaginal World, which is not to be confused with the 'imaginary worlds' we find in science fiction and fantasy.[28] It is 'imaginal' in the sense that we enter it *through* the imagination, but the imagination in the sense that I speak of in Chapter 3, in the context of 'becoming Aion', as the ability to grasp realities not immediately present. Brought up on the limited, rationalistic sense of imagination as something 'false' or 'not real' ('That's just your imagination', we say) we find it difficult to appreciate that Suhrawardi, as well as the Hermeticists, could explore an imaginal realm that had its own laws, its own necessities, and also its own inhabitants, something Aldous Huxley discovered during his own inner voyages, facilitated, in his case, by psychedelic drugs.[29] Yet the notion of man as microcosm argues that an entire world exists *within* us, and, as we've seen in Chapter 1, something as 'hard' and unimaginative as neuroscience to some degree supports this.

Suhrawardi paid the price for his Hermetic beliefs. But it's possible that earlier, some of Baghdad's pagans, escaping persecution, headed for Constantinople, which in many ways had become the new Alexandria. Among other items they may have brought with them the *Corpus Hermeticum*, and it is

in this way, perhaps, that it eventually reached Michael Psellus, with whom the *Corpus Hermeticum* takes on the form in which we know it.[30] In Constantinople Psellus himself seems to have acted as Gemistos Plethon did four centuries later in Florence, gathering a group of scholars interested in Hermetic and pagan thought, some of whom may have been the pagans of Baghdad. The collection of Hermetic texts they studied may well have been the one that some Christian scholar, fleeing the approach of the Turk in 1453, took with him and deposited somewhere in Macedonia, later to be found by Cosimo de' Medici's agent.

Jabirish

It's unclear to what extent, if any, Thabit ibn Qurra was interested in alchemy. As he was interested in magic and other areas of occult science, he may very well have been, although there is no record of any alchemical work by him. Other Arab scholars, however, certainly were. The first Arab alchemist we know of is Khalid ibn Yazid of Damascus, an Umayyad prince who lived from 660 to 704. Khalid is said to have studied with Morienus, a Byzantine hermit who lived near Jerusalem, and who had himself studied under Stephanus, one of the last alchemists of Alexandria. Morienus agreed to teach Khalid because he hoped to convert him to Christianity. But when Morienus successfully transmuted some base metal into gold, and Khalid, angered at the failure of his Arab alchemists to do so, had them executed, Morienus understandably fled. Khalid had Greek scholars from Egypt translate alchemical texts from Greek to Arabic — the first translation of a foreign language into Arabic, at least according to Khalid's biographer[31] — and is himself responsible for at least two works: *The Paradise of Wisdom* and *The Great and Small Books of the Scroll*. But the real name that put Arabic alchemy on the map was Jabir ibn Hayyan, known to the west as Geber, from which our word 'gibberish' derives.

Jabir was born in Tus, Khurasan, a province of Iran, in 721. His father, a chemist, was involved in the revolt against the Umayyad Caliphate, and was arrested and executed. Jabir's family fled to Yemen, where he studied the Koran, mathematics and other subjects. When the Umayyads were overthrown and the Abbasids gained power, Jabir went to Kufa (in present-day Iraq), where he began his studies in chemistry and alchemy. He later became a student and disciple of the sixth Imam, Ja'far al-Sadiq, an Islamic teacher, esoteric philosopher, and Sufi. He is also said to have studied with Prince Khalid ibn Yazid, although their dates don't seem to coincide.[32] Sufism, the mystical branch of Islam, was deeply influenced by Hermetic and Neoplatonic thought, to a great degree through the work of Basra's Brethren of Purity. Their name is said to come from *suf*, Arabic for wool, reference to the coarse garments the ascetic Sufis wore as a criticism of the lush fineries of the court. The Sufis sought *tawhid*, 'unity of being', the essence of Islam, through meditation, ritual, prayer, spiritual disciplines and, most famously, dance. In the thirteenth century, Rumi, the Sufi mystical poet, founded the celebrated order of the Mevlevi dervishes,

whose hypnotic whirling mirrored the perpetual circling of the stars.

Jabir became an alchemist in the Baghdad court of Harun al-Rashid and came under the protection of his Barmacides vizier, Ja'far. (The Barmacides were a family that came to political power under the Abbasids, much like the Florentine de Medicis of Marsilio Ficino's time.) Although by training an Aristotelian scientist — his contributions to chemistry are what he is most remembered for today — Jabir held the ancient Egyptian view that man's real seat of intelligence was the heart, a belief he shared with the Sufis (and R.A. Schwaller de Lubicz), and which led to his being called 'Al-Sufi'. Jabir wrote one of his alchemical books, *The Book of Venus* (*Kitab al-Zuhra*), on 'the noble art of alchemy' for Harun, and when one of the favourite concubines of a minister fell ill, Jabir gave her a small taste of an elixir, which cured her on the spot. The minister was so impressed that he fell to Jabir's feet and kissed them. Jabir gave him the rest of the elixir and encouraged the minister to pursue alchemical studies himself, which he did.[33]

In 803, the Barmacides family fell out of favour — badly, as Harun had one of them executed — and Jabir's links to them led to his leaving Baghdad and returning to Kufa, where he established a laboratory. Two centuries after his death, a golden mortar was discovered on the site, but it is unclear if it was made of *vulgi* or alchemical *aurum*. He died in Tus in 815, allegedly with the manuscript of his *Book of Mercy* under his pillow, although some accounts say he lived until 833.[34] Although some two hundred books are attributed to him, it is debatable how many are actually by his hand. One group of works, known as 'The 112 Books', contains, as mentioned, what is considered the earliest known version of the *Emerald Tablet*. Jabir cites as the principal sources of his alchemical knowledge the Egyptian and Greek gods, Pythagoras, Socrates — an unlikely candidate — and Agathodaimon and Hermes, of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. (As the *Corpus Hermeticum* is not known to have been available to Jabir, he may have taken a leaf from Zosimos' book — literally — by including Hermes and Agathodaimon in his list of predecessors; Thabit ibn Qurra, who *could* have known of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, came after Jabir.) He also makes the curious assertion that Arius, a precursor of Hermes, was the actual founder of the art, and that 'it was he who applied to the Stone the first treatment…'[35] Exactly who Arius might be is unknown; he is not the Christian priest from Alexandria (250–336 AD) responsible for the Arian heresy.[36] But Jabir's remark reminds us that, among his many alchemical interests — which included *takwin*, or the creation of artificial life (the homunculus of western alchemy); number mysticism; and adding the qualities of hotness, dryness, wetness, and coldness to

the four classical elements — the pursuit of the philosopher’s stone remained paramount.

Holy stones and philosophers' Grails

Yet Jabir's own contribution to this quest is, if anything, more obscure than Zosimos', and his books are written in so oblique and mysterious a style that it is understandable many readers considered them gibberish — the word, as mentioned, derived from his name for precisely this reason.[37] Of the qualities of the philosopher's stone, Jabir speaks of 'oleaginy (oiliness), affinity, tenuity of matter (that it can be liquefied), clearness of purity, radical humidity, fixing earth, and tincture'. The stone can bring alchemical mercury and sulphur to perfection, and it is formed from different substances using different techniques. But what it is exactly and how to find or make it, remains unclear. In his *Book of Stones* (*Kitab Al-Ahjar*) Jabir explains why he is less than forthright about this problem. 'The purpose,' he says, 'is to baffle and lead into error everyone except those whom God loves and provides for.'[38] The small number of those who have discovered the philosopher's stone suggests that God loves and provides for some precious few. Many have sought the stone without success, just as many have read Jabir's labyrinthine writings, and come away from them knowing no more than they did beforehand, possibly even less.

Yet, although it may have been known to Bolos and Zosimos, when Jabir's works reached Europe, in Latin translations in the twelfth century — most notably Hugh of Santillana's rendition of the *Emerald Tablet* — the search for the philosopher's stone rivalled that for the Holy Grail. There is even good reason to suspect that the stone and the Grail may be the same thing. Sometime between 1200 and 1210, Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, his account of the Grail story, appeared in Europe. Wolfram is a mysterious character, about whom we know very little. In his account of how he came to write *Parsifal*, Wolfram claimed that Chrétien de Troyes' earlier version of the Grail story, *Perceval*, left unfinished in 1190, was inaccurate, and that he had learned the true account from a 'Kyot of Provence', who had himself received it from someone named Flegetanis, a Jewish astrologer who had converted to Christianity. Wolfram writes of the valorous knights who 'reside by the Grail at Munsalvaesche', and remarks that they 'live by a stone whose nature is the most pure'. The stone is called *lapsit exillis*, and 'by that stone's power the phoenix burns away, turning to ashes, yet those ashes bring it back to life'. 'Never,' Wolfram tells us:

> … was a man in such pain but from that day he beholds the stone, he cannot die in the week that follows … Nor will his complexion ever decline. He will be averred to have such colour as he possessed when he saw the stone … If that person saw that stone for two hundred years, his hair would never turn grey. Such power does the stone bestow upon man that his flesh

and bone immediately acquire youth. That stone is also called the Grail.[39]

The Grail is often depicted as a cup, or goblet, but equally as a bowl. We remember that in Zosimos' vision recounted earlier in this chapter, he saw a bowl-shaped altar, protected by an Egyptian priest, and that this seems to be a reference to Book IV of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, in which Hermes tells Tat of 'the bowl of mind' which God put forth in order for the worthy to immerse themselves in it. 'Bowl' in Greek is *krater*, and if, as Wolfram says, 'the stone is also called the Grail', then the Grail, conversely, is also a stone, and we seem here to have a direct link between Hermeticism, alchemy, and the Grail mysteries. *Lapsit exillis* can be read as *lapsit ex caelis*, 'the stone from the heavens', yet its ability to heal, to preserve youth and to prolong life, makes the *lapsit exillis* very much like the Chinese 'pill of immortality', which, as we've already seen, bears more than a slight resemblance to the philosopher's stone. It is possible then that *lapsit exillis* is a corruption of *lapis elixir*, 'the stone of the quintessence', or 'the stone of the fifth element', the element necessary for the kinds of transmutation associated with the philosopher's stone. This suggests a fascinating possibility. It leads us to ask whether, in their pursuit of some physical object, either the stone or the Grail, alchemists and Grail hunters have been missing the point for centuries, as both appear to be metaphors for the Hermetic realization of mind, in other words, cosmic consciousness. The Hermetic link is even evident in Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval*, in which the monk Trevizrent — 'threefold knowledge' — tells the history of the Grail.[40] If Wolfram was aware of this, he seems to have made no mention of it.

Another possible link between the Grail, alchemy, and the Hermetic gnosis, is that Wolfram calls the knights of the Grail 'Templars'.[41] The Order of the Knights Templar was established in 1118 to ensure the safe passage of Christians in the holy lands during the Crusades. Among the legends surrounding the Templars is one of a 'treasure' discovered during excavations carried out on Temple Mount in Jerusalem; it was from their association with this sacred site that the Templars got their name. Some suggest that the 'treasure' was a collection of scrolls written by the Essenes, which housed revelations concerning the origins of the Christian faith. Another possibility is that the 'treasure' wasn't a physical object, but a teaching: the Hermetic philosophy contained in the works of Hermes Trismegistus. As the Hermetic teachings were preserved by Arab philosophers and alchemists following the decline of Egypt, the suggestion is that Templars were introduced to them during their time in the Holy Land. That the Templars are also associated with the rise of Freemasonry, and that Freemasonry itself, according to Joscelyn Godwin, is considered the

‘most lasting creation of the Hermetic tradition in the West’, makes this possible link even more intriguing.[42] If nothing else this bears considering, as does the fact that Jabir, one of the many who pursued the philosopher’s stone, has a *krater* of his own, on the moon.[43] The moon, we remember, was associated with the Egyptian god Thoth.

Paracelsus: Hermes of the north

One consequence of the *Emerald Tablet* and the search for the philosopher's stone is that it led to an Hermeticism very different from the kind associated with Renaissance humanism or with the Hermeticists of Alexandria. As Florian Ebeling has argued, the alchemical tradition makes little use of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, although it does see Hermes Trismegistus as one of its founders.[44] Likewise, the Platonic Hermeticism associated with Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, which we will discuss in the next chapter, doesn't refer to either the *Emerald Tablet* or the philosopher's stone. Nor, as already mentioned, did the Hermeticism responsible for the *Corpus Hermeticum*. And if, in the Italian Renaissance tradition, Plato seemed to be the culmination of a long lineage of sages reaching back to the thrice-great one — the Hermetic or Golden Chain — for this 'alchemical Hermeticism', the major modern (that is, Renaissance) figure was Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim (1493–1541), otherwise known as Paracelsus. Paracelsus was an alchemist, natural philosopher, and healer, and he can be seen as the founder of 'alternative medicine', at least in the west.[45] His prestige was so great that Paracelsus was considered a veritable 'Hermes of the North', the north being, for Italian humanists, the land beyond the Alps, specifically Germany, although Paracelsus himself was Swiss.

Although Hermes, too, was at the fount of this alchemical tradition, it did not include important exponents of the *prisca theologia* such as Plato or Pythagoras. The *prisca theologia* itself played no part in it. Nevertheless, until the re-emergence of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, it was alchemical Hermeticism that kept at least one version of Hermetic thought alive during the Middle Ages.[46] This 'alchemo-Paracelsianism'[47] seems not directly concerned with gnosis or the experience of cosmic consciousness in the way that the Alexandrian Hermeticists, or those of the Italian Renaissance were, although, to be sure, there is no reason to believe that some of its practitioners did not experience it. A handy though not absolutely adequate way to differentiate 'alchemical' Hermeticism from 'gnostic' or 'cosmic consciousness' Hermeticism, is to say that this Hermeticism of the North was more geared toward practical results; in Paracelsus' case, these were of a medical nature. In Chapter 2, I remarked that the notion of 'correspondences' was of such importance that Antoine Faivre

makes it a *sine qua non* of Hermetic or esoteric thought. Another of Faivre's essentials is the notion of a 'living nature'.[48] With Paracelsus and the alchemical tradition, we can say that this aspect of Hermetic thought comes to the fore, although, again, correspondence plays a central role in alchemical thought as well. If nothing else, this tells us that it is exceedingly difficult to pry apart these basic requirements of Hermetic or esoteric thinking.

Nevertheless, in the centuries before the rediscovery of the *Corpus Hermeticum* — the thirteenth and fourteenth, often considered alchemy's heyday — it was the alchemical Hermes who carried the torch, or, more accurately, the caduceus. These two Hermetic currents would soon come together and with other esoteric traditions unite to form the basis of modern occultism. Strangely, the idea of a primordial tradition, of a *prisca theologia*, of a wisdom unfathomably *ancient* — an essential of esoteric belief — would emerge from the same shift in western consciousness that gave birth to our modern world: the Renaissance.

Notes

1. Peter Marshall, *The Philosopher's Stone* (London: Macmillan, 2001), pp. 153–54.
2. It can be found at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emerald_ Tablet#Newton.27s_translation 3. Quoted in Marshall, 2001, pp. 250–51.
4. E.J. Holmyard, *Alchemy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 98.
5. Sean Martin, *Alchemy and Alchemists* (Harpenden: Pocket Essentials, 2006), p. 39.
6. The title of a classic work on the subject by Mircea Eliade, *The Crucible and the Forge*.
7. Holmyard, p. 27.
8. Archimedes was born in Syracuse in Sicily, but came to Alexandria as a young man. At the time of his 'Eureka' experience, he had returned to the city of his birth.
9. Martin, p. 45.
10. Jung 1968, pp. 57–65.
11. Quoted in Fowden, p. 125.
12. Ibid. p. 122.
13. Salaman 2001, p. 39.
14. Fowden, p. 124.
15. Ibid. p. 122.
16. Ibid. p. 124.
17. C.G. Jung, *The Secret of the Golden Flower* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1962), p. 91.
18. Quoted in Georg Feuerstein, *Structures of Consciousness* (Lower Lake, CA: Integral Publishing,1987), p. 205.
19. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, translator William Kaufmann (Vintage Books: New York, 1974), p. 223.
20. Quoted in Marshall, 2001, p. 208.
21. Ibid. p. 191.
22. H.G. Wells *A Short History of the World* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 192.

23. Holmyard, p. 36.
24. http://www.hermetics.org/Sabians_of_Harran.html 25. http://www.hermetics.org/Sabians_of_Harran.html Whether Christian Rosenkreutz was an actual person or an allegorical figure remains unclear. No exact dates for his birth are given, although in the second Rosicrucian Manifesto (1615), the year 1378 is mentioned. He was supposed to live for 106 years, which would place his death in 1484. As Harran was levelled in 1271 there would have been nothing but ruins at the time of any possible visit. There has been some suggestion of a possible link between Christian Rosenkreutz — who or whatever he may have been — and Gemisthos Plethon, although aside from the fact that both were connoisseurs of ancient wisdom, there is nothing concrete connecting the two. However see Christopher Bamford's essay 'The Meaning of the Rose Cross' at:

http://rosicrucianzine.tripod.com/cb_tmotrc.htm 26. Walter Scott, Introduction *Hermetica* (Boston: Shambhala, 2001), pp. 98–101. Exactly which Hermetic books the Harranians possessed is unclear, although Scott believes they had the whole *Hermetica*, including books that are since lost to us. Ibid. p. 108.
27. Ibid. p. 105.
28. See Henry Corbin *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth from Mazdean Iran to Shi'ite Iran* (Princeton: Princeton/Bollingen, 1977).
29. In *Heaven and Hell*, a titled borrowed from Swedenborg, Huxley wrote that 'Like the earth of a hundred years ago our mind still has its darkest Africas, its unmapped Borneos and Amazonian basins'. And while the creatures that inhabit these 'far continents' of the mind seem 'improbable,' they are nevertheless 'facts of observation,' which argues for their 'complete autonomy' and 'self-sufficiency'. Huxley, p. 69–70.
30. Scott, p. 108.
31. Holmyard, p. 64.
32. http://www.crystalinks.com/geber.html 33. Marshall 2001, pp. 218–20.
34. Holmyard, p. 73.
35. Ibid. p. 220.
36. Essentially, Arius argued against the Trinity, maintaining that Jesus was a 'created being,' and hence, not co-equal with God.
37. It may also, however, derive from *gharbala*, Arabic for 'sifting the fine from the coarse,' a central alchemical pursuit. See Marshall, 2001, p. 224.
38. http://www.crystalinks.com/geber.html 39. Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parsifal and Titure*l translated by Cyril Edwards (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 198.
40. Faivre, 1995, p. 19.
41. von Eschenbach, p. 197. There are, however, doubts about this connection. See Richard Barber's Introduction, Ibid. p. xix.
42. Joscelyn Godwin, *The Golden Thread* (Wheaton: Quest Books, 2007), p. 15.
43. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geber_(crater) 44. Ebeling, p. 70.
45. Visitors to Switzerland may notice chemists with the name 'Paracelsus', as I did in the *Hauptbahnhof* in Zürich.
46. The one exception was, as mentioned, the *Asclepius*, which was well known throughout the Middle Ages, but even this has a 'magical' aspect more in tune with alchemy than with the books of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, although, to be sure, it also speaks of 'cosmic consciousness'.
47. Ebeling, p. 59.
48. Faivre 1994, p. 11.

5. The Dignity of Man

On April 26, 1336, the Italian poet Francesco Petrarca, known to posterity as Petrarch, did something that apparently no one else had done before, or at least not for some time. He climbed a mountain to see the view.[1] In a famous letter to the Augustinian professor of theology — and Petrarch's former confessor — Dionigi di Borgo San Sepolcro, Petrarch described his, for the time, unusual excursion. Mont Ventoux, an impressive French peak northeast of Avignon, had been the object of Petrarch's curiosity for years. That area of France itself has a history rich in esoteric significance, having been home to the troubadours, Albigensians, and Cathars, and Petrarch tells Dionigi that the mountain had fascinated him since his early childhood. After reading an account of Philip of Macedon's ascent of Mount Haemus in Thessaly, Petrarch says he was 'seized by the impulse to accomplish what I had always wanted to do'.[2] 'Nothing but the desire to see its conspicuous height' was behind this impulse, Petrarch told Dionigi, which, while strange for Petrarch's contemporaries, is a fairly common reason for climbing a mountain today. Petrarch tells Dionigi that as he and his brother — whom he asked to accompany him — were about to start their trek, an old shepherd tried to dissuade them. Fifty years earlier the shepherd had been foolish enough to attempt the same thing, but after scrambling through the rocks, all he came back with was a bruised body and torn clothes, and ever since, no one had been mad enough to follow his example. The old man's warning only increased Petrarch's desire, and leaving their gear with him, the two brothers started their ascent, with the old shepherd shouting his misgivings after them.

Petrarch's account of his slow, meandering drift, filled with detours and wrong turns, in contrast to his brother's direct approach, is often reminiscent of Dante's admission at the start of *The Divine Comedy* that 'Midway along the journey of our life' he had 'wandered off from the straight path', and suggests that Petrarch's letter was a more self-consciously literary work than he claims.[3] Petrarch himself compares his circuitous route with the difficulties of achieving the 'blessed life'.[4] He tells Dionigi that no sooner did he return to the 'little rustic inn' from which they set out, than he withdrew to a remote part of the house, in order to pen his account 'on the spur of the moment', a claim some commentators find unbelievable. Yet while these doubts are understandable —

Petrarch's prose is a model of clarity, and he seems to have on hand a formidable array of learned quotations, and the ascent of a holy mountain is a not uncommon trope — Petrarch's assertion that he wrote the letter immediately after his descent is not impossible. Inspiration can accomplish extraordinary things, and from Petrarch's account it is clear that his ascent of Mont Ventoux moved him deeply.

What becomes clear in reading Petrarch's account is that he is at once fascinated with what he has done and terrified by it. He has in some way *transgressed* against the law, human and divine, and as much as he is exalted by the view, he is filled with remorse for enjoying it. Although Petrarch realizes that in some way, what he is doing will benefit others, he also feels an immense guilt for allowing the splendours of the world to dazzle him. Yet the view from the top is stunning, and is unlike anything Petrarch has ever seen. He feels 'overwhelmed by a gale such as I had never felt before and by the unusually open and wide view'.[5] *Space* such as he has never experienced suddenly opens up in front of and *below* him: he remarks on the clouds gathering below his feet, and how the sight made Olympus seem less fantastic. He looks toward Italy, and the Alps, 'frozen stiff and covered with snow', seem 'quite near … though they are far, far away'. He sees the mountains of Lyon and the sea near Marseilles, and can make out the waves 'that break against Aigues Mortes, although it takes several days to travel to this city', suggesting that, to some degree, a new sense of *time*, as well as space, has been given to him. Directly below him he saw the swiftly moving Rhone.

It isn't surprising that Petrarch wrote his account for his ex-confessor to read. All the while that his senses are overwhelmed with new, almost painful impressions, and his consciousness is struck by dazzling vistas, his conscience tugs at his awareness, reminded him of the prior claims that his *interior* world, his duty to God and the divine, has on his soul. His mind constantly returns to Augustine, his spiritual mentor, and he finds himself sinking into a gloomy introspection, considering his moral failures, and his inability to cast aside the things which he knows he should abandon, but cannot. He is so engrossed in his inner soliloquy that he forgets where he is and must make an effort to turn his attention back to the new world which has opened up at his feet. It is precisely this tension between his inner and outer worlds that led the philosopher Hans Blumenberg to call Petrarch's ascent of Mont Ventoux a 'monstrous human temptation' and to see it as 'one of the great moments that oscillate indecisively between the epochs', making Petrarch, for Blumenberg, both 'deeply Medieval' and 'early modern'.[6] Petrarch's mind is moving into a more modern form of

consciousness, and in his ascent of Mont Ventoux, it is as if he is *pulling* himself out of the two-dimensional world of a medieval tapestry, and entering the world of perspective, which, in Petrarch's time, was just beginning and which a century later would dominate Renaissance painting.

Yet even as Petrarch's senses and mind *widen* in order to take in the new perspective, some part of him wants to deny the widening. He tells himself, perhaps unconvincingly, that seen from the point of view of the soul, Mont Ventoux 'seemed hardly higher than a cubit compared to the height of human contemplation'.[7] From the point of view of the Hermetic gnosis, this comparison seems understandable, the infinite mind exceeding the limits of the finite world. Yet Petrarch's trepidation isn't motivated by a sense of the vast inner spaces through which the Hermetic philosophers journeyed and which, for him, were now reflected in the vast outer spaces his ascent of Mont Ventoux had revealed. His forced disdain of the mountain's grandeur — for it is clear that, for all his 'spiritually correct' rejection of it, he is nevertheless fascinated by it — is prompted by the negation of the world demanded by a cramped medieval Christian faith. Like the Gnostics, the Christians of the Middle Ages believed that the world was the realm of evil, and the expansive views unfolding in front of Petrarch are, he feels, just another temptation. With a world that had just become a hundredfold larger stretching out before him, he berates himself for still admiring earthly things.

This tug-of-war between his inner and outer worlds is reflected in a remarkable synchronicity that Petrarch experiences just before he must make his descent. Troubled by his inner dissonance — he found himself 'now relishing earthly enjoyment, now lifting up my mind to higher spheres' — Petrarch thought to take counsel.[8] Opening his copy of Augustine's *Confessions* — his constant companion — at random, he read the first passage his eyes fell upon. Augustine, it seems, had been watching. 'And men go to admire the high mountains,' he wrote in Book X, 'the vast floods of the sea, the huge streams of the rivers, the circumference of the ocean, and the revolutions of the stars — and desert themselves.' Petrarch was shaken.[9] Augustine, we know, was no fan of Hermes Trismegistus, but if his Hermetic *bête noire* was the *Asclepius* — which Petrarch knew well[10] — from this passage we can be sure he would have found Book V of the *Corpus Hermeticum* equally reprehensible. Here, we remember, Hermes tells his son Tat that if he wishes to see God he should 'consider the sun, the course of the moon, the order of the stars'.

Petrarch was understandably stunned by this synchronicity, and believed it was a sign. The climb down the mountain was taken up with his misgivings on

his delight in earthly wonders and his resolve to ‘get under foot not a higher spot of earth but the passions which are puffed up by earthly instincts’.[11] And strangely, as Petrarch headed down to his rustic inn, filled with these dark thoughts, he remarked on men’s weaknesses in oddly familiar words. ‘I thought,’ he wrote, ‘over how greatly mortal men lack counsel who, neglecting the noblest part of themselves in empty parading, look without for what can be found within.’ This language is strikingly reminiscent of Hermes’ words to Tat in Book IV, when he explains that those who choose the way of the body rather than the way of mind are ‘only parading through the cosmos’.[12] (We are also reminded of Zosimos’ blind ‘marchers’, whom we met in Chapter 4.) Petrarch, however, would not have known the *Corpus Hermeticum*, as it would be another century before Leonardo de Pistoia, Cosimo de Medici’s book scout, found a copy in Macedonia, and hurried back to Florence to give it to his boss.

Perspectival consciousness

The importance of Petrarch's ascent of Mont Ventoux has not been lost on historians of western consciousness. For the nineteenth century cultural historian Jacob Burckhardt, writing of the roots of the Renaissance, Petrarch's ascent marks the beginning of a new awareness of nature. In Petrarch, Burckhardt writes, nature's 'significance … for a receptive spirit is fully and clearly displayed', making him 'one of the first truly modern men'.[13] That Petrarch presaged the even deeper appreciation of nature that would arrive with the Romantics is clear in Burckhardt's remark that 'an indefinable longing for a distant panorama grew stronger and stronger in him', and was the central prompt for his ascent. 'Indefinable longing' or *Sehnsucht* would, a few centuries later, be a common theme of the German Romantic poets. In his *Faust* Goethe speaks of an 'unbelievably sweet yearning' that drove him to roam 'through wood and lea', and in 1777 Goethe himself would make his own ascent of the Brocken, which, even four centuries after Petrarch, was still considered an unusual pastime.[14]

For the philosopher Ernst Cassirer, Petrarch's ascent provides 'testimony to [the] decisive change in the concept of nature that began in the thirteenth century', and which is now seen as a 'new means of expression' for human consciousness; echoing Burckhardt, Cassirer remarks that 'the desire to immediately contemplate nature' was the main motive behind Petrarch's trek. Petrarch's ascent, Cassirer further argues, exemplifies the tension the new Renaissance soul would experience, finding itself caught between the pull of the spirit and of the earth. 'When it follows the path of spiritualism' [that is, religion], it disparages 'the value of life', yet when it sees 'soul and life' as one, it sacrifices 'spirit and immortality'.[15] More recently, for the post-Jungian archetypal psychologist James Hillman, Petrarch's revelation on Mont Ventoux uncovered 'the complexity and mystery of the man-psyche relationship', in which 'man may turn outward to the mountains and plains and seas or inward to images corresponding with these'. For Hillman this argues that 'imaginal events' — in the sense of Henry Corbin — 'have the same validity as do the events of nature'.[16] Hence for Hillman, Petrarch is not only a 'discoverer' of nature, but of the reality of the inner world as well.

Another cultural historian who recognized the importance of Petrarch's climb was the German born Swiss philosopher Jean Gebser, author of one of the most remarkable works of twentieth century philosophy, *The Ever-Present Origin*. For Gebser, Petrarch's ascent is an 'epochal event' which marks the 'discovery of landscape' and 'the first dawning of an awareness of space that resulted in a fundamental alteration of European man's attitude in and toward the world'.[17] With his ascent of Mont Ventoux, Petrarch became for Gebser the 'first European to step out of the transcendental gilt ground of the Siena masters', and 'the first to emerge from a space dormant in time and soul, into "real" space …' For Gebser this meant that with Petrarch western consciousness embarked on a radically new development, what Gebser calls the 'perspectival world'. According to one authority, 'the man of the Middle Ages was humble, conscious almost always of his fallen and sinful nature, feeling himself a miserable foul creature watched by an angry God'.[18] Now, no longer fixed in place, as one creature among others, as his medieval ancestors were, this new 'perspectival man' could 'rise above his station' — as Petrarch surely did — survey the vast landscape of creation, and map out his own destiny. In a sense, it was Petrarch's daring ascent, and not the orbiting of the Russian satellite *Sputnik* in 1957, that inaugurated the 'space age'.

Jean Gebser and structures of consciousness

Gebser's reading of Petrarch's ascent is in the context of his own analysis of what he calls the 'structures of consciousness'. These are different *forms* of consciousness through which mankind has been 'mutating' since the emergence of the first proto-humans millions of years ago. A satisfactory account of Gebser's 'structures' is impossible here — I refer the reader to my summary in *A Secret History of Consciousness* — but briefly put, Gebser believes that mankind has mutated through four previous structures of consciousness and that we are currently experiencing the breakdown of the fourth structure and the first stirrings of a fifth and final, 'integral' structure that will integrate the previous four and re-unite our alienated ego with the world, while retaining our independent, conscious 'I'. Gebser calls his earlier structures the *archaic*, the *magical*, the *mythic*, and the *mental-rational*, and each is characterized by an increasing separation from what Gebser calls 'origin'. This is a non-spatial, non-temporal ground or matrix, similar to the Hermetic 'One and All', out of which the different structures emerge. In Chapter 2, I briefly remarked that the consciousness of the ancient Egyptians responsible for the hieroglyphics, the *Book of the Dead*, and the *Book of What Is In the Duat*, was different from our modern consciousness, and suggested that seeing it in terms of what we can call 'right brain consciousness' would be a handy way of distinguishing it from our more 'left brain' dominant consciousness. For Gebser, the ancient Egyptians would have been a late example of what he calls the mythical structure of consciousness. Late, because for Gebser, the mythical structure began with the first civilizations after the last Ice Age, circa 10,000 BC, and ended roughly around 1200 BC, when the mental-rational structure began. In the mythic consciousness structure *feeling*, rather than thinking dominates, and what Schwaller de Lubicz called the 'intelligence of the heart' is the basic mode of awareness. (This is also in all essentials identical to 'right brain consciousness'.) [19] The mythical structure perceives the world not as an object of thought, but as a subject of feeling, and also as a living being. It is also in the mythical structure that polarity arises, and the previously undifferentiated cosmos of the archaic and magical structures separates into the binary pairs of earth/sky, male/female, gods/goddesses, and so on.

One strong link between the mythical consciousness structure and the

consciousness of ancient Egypt is the symbol of the circle. For Gebser, the circle is the purest symbol of the mythic consciousness structure, as it represents the loop of consciousness projecting itself into and returning from nature. Gebser sees the myth of Narcissus as exemplifying this process, the beautiful boy (the soul) falling in love with his own reflection in a pool (nature), and in Chapter 1 we saw the 'narcissism' of the creation myth depicted in the *Poimandres.* Yet another powerfully circular symbol is the Ouroboros which, as we saw in Chapter 4, is strongly associated with ancient Egypt.

As I remark above, the mythic consciousness structure is, for Gebser, followed by the mental-rational structure, the structure that dominates in our own consciousness. This is characterized by a profound *separation* from 'origin', of which our modern existential sense of being 'lost in the cosmos' is indicative. When a consciousness structure has exhausted its possibilities, it enters what Gebser calls its 'deficient' mode', which inaugurates the breakdown of that structure in order to clear a way for the new structure to arise. In our case, this is the *integral*, which will be characterized — at least according to Gebser — by an integration of the four previous structures, and a conscious participation in 'origin'. For Gebser, the deficient mode of the mental-rational structure began with the rise of perspective, with, that is, Petrarch's ascent of Mont Ventoux. For Gebser this marks the beginning of the furthest separation of consciousness from 'origin', from its roots in a non-spatial, non-temporal, hence non-material or spiritual source.

One result of this decoupling of consciousness from its source is the increasing alienation from both nature and itself that western consciousness has experienced for the last several centuries. Another result is the rise of science, rationalism, and the other specifically *human* achievements that constitute what we've come to call the modern world. Yet one of the paradoxes of the history of western consciousness is that the 'perspectival shift' that embodied the new exhilarating and terrifying separation of ourselves from 'origin', also triggered the last great revival of Hermetic thought. For perhaps the most adventurous beneficiaries of Petrarch's dangerous ascent were the readers of Hermes Trismegistus who followed in his wake. Freed now from the 'embedded' character of medieval consciousness, these new 'perspectival' men could bring new meaning to the idea of man as a 'little universe'. Yet at the same time as the mental-rational structure began to deconstruct, the new 'integral' structure, that would assimilate the previous consciousness structures into a creative whole, also began to emerge and find shape in the imaginations of these Renaissance Hermeticists.

Ficino: born under a bad sign

Marsilio Ficino was born in Figline, Italy, in the Val d'Arno on 19 October 1433, at 9:00 in the evening. Saturn, the planet of time, materiality, and restrictions was in the ascendant, and if you have only a passing familiarity with astrology, you will know that this is not a particularly auspicious augury. Readers of mythology will remember that Saturn — the Greek Kronos —ate his children and is usually depicted as an old man brandishing a scythe. Given the astral influences dominant at his birth, it's not surprising that Ficino grew up with a profound sense of melancholy and that he spent a great deal of his career exploring ways to offset the dark character allotted to him at his entry into the world.

In many ways, Ficino's use of the Hermetic wisdom he gleaned from the *Asclepius, Corpus Hermeticum*, and *Picatrix* — a Arabic manual of spirit evocation not ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus, but which contains the story of the fantastic city of Adocentyn, mentioned in the Introduction — was an early form of psychotherapy.[20] Frances Yates didn't know how accurate she was when she remarked that reading Ficino's Renaissance 'self help manuals', collectively known as *The Book of Life*, 'we might be in the consulting room of a rather expensive psychiatrist who knows that his patients can afford plenty of gold and holidays in the country'.[21] Not long after Yates wrote this, James Hillman would be claiming the 'loveless, humpbacked, melancholy' Ficino as an early and seminal exponent of the 'centrality of the soul' which is at the heart of Hillman's 'archetypal psychology'.[22]

It's also not surprising that Ficino would become a 'Doctor of Souls', a phrase he used to described Plato and which, legend has it, his patron, Cosimo de' Medici used to describe Ficino himself.[23] Ficino's father was a successful doctor — one of his many influential patients was Cosimo — and Ficino himself would more than likely have followed in his father's footsteps, were it not for the influence of his mother, who seems to have had considerable psychic gifts. She predicted several events accurately, such as her own mother's death, that of a new born baby, and her husband's accident with a horse, and had a reputation for being slightly odd.[24] Some suggest that Ficino inherited his oversensitive temperament and frail physique from her, and Ficino himself believed that his

overly coddled mother could, in some way, travel ‘out of her body’. If Ficino did inherit his weakness from his mother, he countered them by assimilating his father’s character as a healer. In many ways Ficino’s career as an Hermetic medicine man was born of the union of his parents. As cliché would have it, he was doctor and patient in one.

Ficino was a sickly boy, and his humped back, dwarfish form and stammer meant few friends, but what he lacked in physical vitality — he was, according to his translator, ‘one of the least active of men’ — he more than made up for with an acute and highly active mind.[25] His one physically attractive feature was his golden hair, and his gracious, courteous manner made him immediately likeable. He first heard of his great love Plato from Luca d’Antonio de Bernardi, his Latin teacher, who also introduced him to another love, music. One form of Ficino’s later practical Hermeticism was singing the Orphic hymns, which he translated, to his own lyre accompaniment. Yet Plato, who would take a back seat to Hermes, was also outranked by Aristotle, and Ficino’s early education was Aristotelian through and through. Although scholars such as John Argiropolos would leaven his dry Aristotelian discourse with some occasional Platonic yeast, most church scholars distrusted what little they knew of Plato as anti-Christian. It wouldn’t be until Ficino’s own translations appeared that Plato would begin to receive the respect the father of western philosophy deserved.

His appetite for Platonic philosophy was whetted by the lectures he attended at the University of Florence given by Cristoforo Landino. But when he was eighteen Ficino started seminary school — he eventually became a priest — and the anti-Plato pressure was unavoidable. After reading some of his essays, Landino encouraged Ficino to continue with Greek — and Plato — but soon after Ficino had a kind of religious crisis. He was forbidden to attend any of Argiropolos’ lectures, and St Antoninus, the archbishop of Florence, accused him of heresy, a presage of the suppression later Renaissance Hermeticists would encounter. Sending him back to Figline, the archbishop advised Ficino to read Thomas Aquinas. No doubt Ficino did — he seems to have read anything he could get his hands on, a predictable Saturnine trait — but he continued writing. For a time he studied medicine at the University of Bologna, and seemed that he would, after all, become a doctor, like his father. But then came Ficino’s big break. The stars, it seemed, had something else in store for him.

Plato returns

For all his importance for the history of western thought, George Gemistos Plethon remains a shadowy figure. His discourse on Plato and the Neoplatonists dazzled Cosimo de' Medici and the members of his philosophical circle during the Council of 1439, but this wasn't true of the Aristotelian churchmen, who thought Plethon could be the devil in Neoplatonic clothing. (It didn't help that Plethon was against the reunification of the Orthodox and Latin church — which he hated — and only supported it because the Byzantine Emperor Palaeologus needed help against the Turks.) He was well versed in other arcane thought too. The *Chaldean Oracles* were another keen interest of Plethon's, along with Orpheus, Pythagoras, Zoroaster, and other pagan minds whose ideas raised Catholic eyebrows and tempers, and he seems to have practised a kind of 'magical music', that Ficino himself would pursue.[26] The *Oracles*, however, were especially important to Gemistos. Like the *Corpus Hermeticum*, they were believed to have been written in dim ages past — Zoroaster, the founder of the ancient Persian religion, is often named as their author — and like the *Corpus Hermeticum*, we now know they weren't. Their origins lie in second century AD Rome and with a family of astrologers and magicians called the Juliani, who called themselves 'Chaldeans' — the name can refer to ancient Sumer, Akkad, Assyria, or Babylonia — as some modern day western esoteric societies might call themselves 'Egyptians'. The father would put his son into a trance, using some form of theurgic ritual, and while in this altered state, the boy would answer questions and prophesize the future. Neoplatonists such as Iamblichus collected some of these remarks, and as the esoteric scholar Joscelyn Godwin writes 'from them it passed on to Byzantium, where it was commented on by Michael Psellus'.[27] Gemistos, a high-ranking official in the crumbling Byzantine empire, came upon the *Oracles*, and along with Plato, Plotinus and the rest, he brought his knowledge of them to Florence, too.

When Plethon made his fateful and sole journey to Florence, Ficino was only a boy, and so he never met the man whose ideas and personal power would have so great an influence on his life. Plethon died in Mistra in 1452, when Ficino was nineteen. During a private dinner with Cosimo, Plethon's erudition inspired the great patron. He had already seen Plethon disarm his Aristotelian opponents with his first hand knowledge of the Greek classics, and now the idea of bringing

Plato himself to Florence thrilled him. He would, as we've seen, start a new Platonic Academy, yes. But who would head it?

It's unclear whether Ficino's father or his old teacher Landino was responsible, but someone caught Cosimo's ear and told him of the brilliant young student who knew Greek, loved Plato, and wrote exceedingly well. Marsilio had met Cosimo once before, when he was nineteen, but failed to make an impression. This time was different. In 1459, when Ficino was a mere twenty-six, the great Cosimo requested his presence and got it. The second time around, Cosimo was impressed. After some preparations Cosimo installed the young man in a villa in Careggi, in the hills above Florence. Marsilio Ficino, Doctor of Souls, armed with some newly purchased Platonic texts, hung his shingle out the door. The Florentine Platonic Academy was open for business. It was not long after this that Cosimo asked him to hold off on Plato, and concentrate on the newly rediscovered Hermetic texts. Having heard so much about the thrice-great one and having studied his divine *Asclepius*, Marsilio was eager to start.

Ficino's Platonic Academy quickly became a site of pilgrimage for artists, poets, and philosophers, which was just as well, as Ficino himself seems never to have travelled far from Florence. Like most scholars, travelling in the mind was preferable to him, although he kept in contact with other thinkers through a voluminous correspondence. Although it is true, as James Hillman writes, that making Ficino 'the only source of the *quattrocento* rebirth goes too far', it is difficult to exaggerate his influence.[28]

Besides Pico della Mirandola, who we will meet shortly, Ficino's character and his Platonic-Hermetic philosophy informed most of the great minds of the time: Michelangelo, Raphael, Titian, Dürer, were all touched by his presence, spiritually if not physically. Ficino 'wrought a deep and lasting change in European society' and, as soon becomes clear to a student of the time, 'the whole intellectual life of Florence … was under his influence'.[29] To mention only one example, as Frances Yates and others have pointed out, Ficino directed the painting of Botticelli's *Primavera*, one of the most immediately recognizable Renaissance works. As Yates writes, the painting represents 'a practical application of [Ficino's] magic, as a complex talisman, an "image of the world" arranged so as to transmit only healthful, rejuvenating, anti-Saturnian influences to the beholder'.[30] This was in keeping with Ficino's belief that the purpose of the visual arts is to 'remind the soul of its origin in the divine world', and exemplified his use of Hermetic magic as a means of attracting beneficial influences from the planetary spheres.[31] But it was not solely as literal talismans that Renaissance art embodied magic. As Yates suggests, likening the power of

Renaissance art to the magic associated with the *Asclepius*, 'it is chiefly in this imaginative and artistic sense that we should understand the influence of the Renaissance magic of the type inaugurated by Ficino … The operative Magi of the Renaissance were the artists and it was a Donatello or a Michelangelo who knew how to infuse the divine life into statues through their art'.[32] Ficino's influence reached into other expressions of the great cultural rebirth too, and as his translator Clement Salaman has argued, in the century following Ficino's birth, more progress was made in the arts and sciences than in the previous millennium. It is arguable that — James Hillman's caution aside — more than anyone else, Ficino is responsible for the 'birth of beauty' associated with the fifteenth century.

Ficino took his Platonism seriously, not only in the sense that he re-enacted the *Symposium* every 7th of November — the date on which the original 'night of serious drinking' and thinking took place — but in his dedication to the philosophical life. He was an early riser, disciplined worker, and vegetarian, although he did, apparently, enjoy wine, hence the annual symposia. And while there's reason to believe he was homosexual — he spoke of an 'unique friend', Giovanni Cavalcanti — Ficino is believed to have been chaste. As his devotion to the *Symposium* suggests, his erotic focus was on the beauty of the soul. As it did for Hermes Trismegistus, this soul encompassed everything. As Ficino wrote in his major work, *The Platonic Theology*, in which he attempted to synthesize Platonic philosophy and Christianity, man's soul 'spans the heavens and the earth; he plumbs to the depths of Tartarus; nor are the heavens too high for him, nor is the centre of the earth too deep'.[33] The subtitle of this huge work, comprising eighteen books and begun in 1469, is *Immortality of Souls*, and while the idea that our souls are immortal was part of Christian thought, it didn't become part of Catholic dogma until the Lateran Council of 1512. There is good reason to believe that Ficino's work was an important influence in this decision, and we also remember that, as we've seen in Chapter 2, one of the central ideas of the ancient Egyptian religion was that a part of the soul, the *akh*, was immortal.

Escape from the stars

Although it is as a translator and commentator on Plato that Ficino's reputation in mainstream culture is established, for students of esotericism and Hermeticism, he is important in other ways too. Ficino not only made the *Corpus Hermeticum*, long lost to western minds, available again. When Cosimo de' Medici insisted he translated the Hermetic books before tackling Plato, Ficino used his new knowledge to develop a practical means of putting these Hermetic secrets to use, an application of Hermetic wisdom that, for practitioners of the arcane arts, remains useful today.

That astrology remains a popular subject is proven by the millions who read their horoscopes each day. But modern fans of Mystic Meg have little idea how gripped the Renaissance mind was by the power of the stars. We may read what's in store for us half-tongue-in-cheek, half in earnest, but for the Renaissance mind, the heavens were a living intelligence, a hierarchy of powers whose influence was felt through the inescapable astral emanations. This sense of the dominance of the stars would remain well into the time after Isaac Newton refashioned our vision of the cosmos. For medieval man, who felt himself completely embedded in the world, there was no escape from the power of the stars, and if a reader is interested in knowing how central the belief in astral dominance was in pre-modern times, I can refer him to a fascinating work, *The Great Year: Astrology, Millennarianism, and History in the Western Tradition*, by Nicholas Campion.

But as we've seen, with Petrarch's ascent of Mont Ventoux, late medieval (or early modern) man had pulled himself out of the medieval tapestry, and had begun to feel himself a free agent, able to direct his will and powers toward the world, rather than being a passive recipient of its influence. Ficino expressed this new freedom by using the power of magical talismans, a kind of astrological magnet. Informed with Hermetic correspondences, and directed at the *anima mundi*, or world soul, that Plato spoke of in the *Timaeus*, these could deflect baleful astral emanations and attract beneficial ones. As mentioned, much of this effort was directed at mitigating the heavy Saturnine influence Ficino was fated with at birth and also doubly attracted because of his scholarly inclinations. Whatever their birth signs, scholars and philosophers tend to fall prey to Saturn's depressions, and need to counter these with influences of a lighter, more buoyant

character, usually of Jupiter, Venus or the sun. Much of Ficino's 'natural magic' — magic, that is, that used cosmic and not demonic forces, as did most magic of the Middle Ages — was based on material in the *Picatrix*, which was considered, along with the *Asclepius*, a somewhat 'dangerous' work. But with much equivocation Ficino was able to convince the church authorities that his magic had nothing to do with 'evil' stellar demons, and relied on impersonal 'natural' agents. As the Church had yet to condemn Hermetic philosophy outright, and as Plato was still seen by some as a precursor of Christianity, Ficino, who was a priest, was able to develop his Hermetic prophylactic in relative safety. In keeping with his timid, retiring character, he understandably presented his ideas with numerous qualifications and with the caveat that, in the long run, the Church, of course, knew best.

Ficino's astral prescriptions became, as we've seen, very popular, and many came to him for advice, regarding him as a sage who could pass on to others the secrets of tranquillity and strength. In the Renaissance world of intrigue and danger, these were highly desirable qualities. As James Hillman points out 'the Renaissance psyche' entailed 'a fantasy of street-knifings and poisonings, murder at High Mass, selling daughters, incest, torture, revenge, assassination, extortion, usury amid magnificence'.[34] But with the Hermetic knowledge in hand, man now had it in his power to modify, even master his fate. To some extent, Ficino's 'preventative magic' seems the opposite of Zosimos' Taoist *wu-wei* 'non-doing' and acceptance of fate, but Ficino's talismanic precautions were more therapeutic than an attempt to alter the heavens to suit his desires. As Hillman makes clear, rather than *banish* depression, as modern pharmapsychology aims to do, Ficino's teaching aimed at learning how to *live* with depression, to live, that is, with the soul, its highs and lows, its heavens and hells. Ficino's means of 'altering fate' were as subtle as listening to 'Jovial' music or taking long walks in the sun, or arranging your chamber with the appropriate venereal (Venus) colours to balance out the heavy Saturnine internal greys and blacks. In *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella*, D.P. Walker presents a picture of how Marsilio worked his 'spells':

> He is playing a *lira da braccio* or a lute, decorated with a picture of Orpheus charming animals, trees and rocks; he is singing … the Orphic Hymn of the Sun; he is burning frankincense, and at times he drinks wine; perhaps he contemplates a talisman; in day-time he is in sunlight, and at night he 'represents the sun by fire'.[35]

As Yates makes clear, one would need a fairly substantial income to follow Ficino's prescriptions, as they involved furnishing your private rooms with a variety of beautiful and symbolic objects. But for those who could afford it, Ficino's medicine was welcome indeed. Knowing the correspondences between microcosm and macrocosm, the astral links between the great world and the

small, Ficino's patients could create an Hermetic 'strange attractor' drawing or repelling the astral influence they chose. Understanding the connections among the various symbols, scents, colours, metals, numbers, dates, times, places, states of mind, and astral influence — as spelled out in Ficino's 'self help' work *On Making Your Life Agree With the Heavens* — the Renaissance Hermeticist had gained a power his medieval brother lacked, or avoided, fearful of trafficking with the devil.[36] Although to challenge fate was a mark of hubris, a rejection of divine providence, and suggested an alliance with the Evil One, Ficino's subtle intellect and gracious manner helped him over this hurdle, and allowed him to convince the authorities that the wisdom of the thrice-great one was not antithetical to received doctrine. He did have a scare in 1489 with the publication of his *Book of Life*, which attracted accusations of demonism and necromancy that made their way to Pope Innocent VIII. But letters from various influential friends convinced the Pope that the book was harmless and Ficino was allowed to spend his last decade in peace.

The dignity of Man

This was not the case with one of Ficino's most brilliant pupils, who seemed destined to burn his short candle at both ends. One aspect of Ficinian magic that made churchmen nervous was the idea that it could effect a kind of 'reparation' of the sensible world. The Hermeticist, Ficino believed, could 'repair' parts of the world which had 'fallen from grace', a claim that came dangerously close to treading on God's prerogative. For Ficino, the talismans charged with the Hermetic correspondences 'worked' because, as images and symbols, they were closer to the Platonic Ideas, since they drew on the Platonic *anima mundi* that acted as an intermediary between the physical world and the intelligible, or Ideal one. In this way, the *anima mundi* is very similar to Suhrawardi's *Hūrqalyā*, which, along with being an 'imaginal' yet *objective* reality, also works as a kind of 'blueprint' for the physical world.[37] An example from art may help clarify this. An artist has an *idea* for a painting. He forms an *image* of it in his mind. He then *embodies* this image on the canvas. For Suhrawardi, the Hermeticists, and other thinkers, the physical world is the result of an identical process. The Idea (archetype) begets the image (imaginal world) which results in the cosmos (physical world — God's canvas). It will be seen that the image is in the middle ground between the Idea and the finished product, which suggests that, relative to the finished product, it occupies a 'higher' place in the hierarchy of creation. This adds considerable weight to the old adage that one should be careful what one wishes for, a chestnut that the poet and magician W.B. Yeats expressed more eloquently in his belief that 'whatever we build in the imagination will accomplish itself in the circumstances of our lives'.

The Hermetic images were especially effective because, for Ficino and his contemporaries, having been part of the earliest dispensation, the *prisca theologia*, they were closer than any other to the divine source. By creating images of the external world in his imagination, the Renaissance magus could channel divine energies into the imperfect world of the senses. By employing the talismanic devices fashioned through his knowledge of the Hermetic books, Ficino had delivered to Renaissance man the means of becoming co-creator with God. The Hermetic books themselves suggest that in a very real sense, man is as necessary to God as God is to him — Meister Eckhart's belief — and that rather than an arbitrary act of divine will — *creatio ex nihilo* — God *needed* to create

the world, and man, in order to be fully himself, and that this creation is ongoing. As the *Poimandres* recounts, Nous created Man in order for someone to recognize his handiwork and to care for it. It was precisely this kind of thinking that would lead to Hermes Trismegistus' excommunication, because for the Church, God would remain God in all His perfection whether he created the cosmos, man, or not. To suggest otherwise argues that God was in some way lacking, and that, of course, was heresy.

Ficino himself, aware of the potential danger of these ideas, kept quiet about them, in keeping with his equivocal character and innate talent for surviving. His student, Count Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, however, was a different story. Born in Mirandola, near Modena, in 1463 — the year that Cosimo asked Ficino to put aside Plato and turn to Hermes — Pico was raised in one of the most brilliant and wealthy of the great Renaissance families. As a child he displayed an astonishing memory, and early on his mother primed him for a career in the Church. At fourteen, he studied canon law at Bologna, then passed through Italian and French universities for several years, during which time he mastered Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Chaldee, and Arabic. Described as 'the most romantic of all the Humanists', his fiery character was almost the polar opposite of Ficino's caution and tact.[38] When his mother died in 1480 — Pico was seventeen — he abandoned canon law and turned to philosophy, which he studied in Ferrara. Soon after he met Angelo Poliziano — a friend and patient of Ficino — and the young Dominican monk Girolamo Savonarola. Savonarola — the ascetic, book-burning millenarian and rabid anti-humanist, who was responsible for the 'Bonfire of the Vanities' — would become a major influence on Pico in his last years, and both his and Ficino's impact showed that, for all his oratorical brilliance, Pico remained a very impressionable young man, who was, it seemed, easily swayed by the minds around him.

Pico came into Ficino's orbit in 1484, when he settled in Florence and met both Lorenzo de' Medici — Cosimo's grandson — and the Doctor of Souls, on the day that Ficino had picked to publish his translations of Plato. Ficino had chosen the day because it was, he believed, astrologically auspicious. It seems it was, and not only for him, as both he and Lorenzo became lifelong friends of the brilliant and volatile prodigy, who quickly became one of the leading stars at Ficino's academy.

By that time, Pico had already devised his plan to defend nine hundred theses on theology in a public debate in Rome. It was during a stay in Perugia, following a disastrous love affair with the wife of one of Lorenzo's cousins, that he came upon works like the *Chaldean Oracles* and, most importantly, the Kabbala. The ancient Hebrew mystical system had roots going back to ages past,

but had only been codified in Spain by Moses de León in the late thirteenth century. Pico already knew the *Hermetica* and the idea of a *prisca theologia* was at the heart of his theses. His great aim was to synthesize the Christian, pagan, and Hebrew traditions — as they all had their roots in the primal revelation — and in this sense, Pico shared the syncretic impulse that gave birth to Hermetic thought in Alexandria more than a millennium earlier. In 1486, while in Rome awaiting the debate, Pico had his theses published and Pope Innocent VIII — who would give Ficino a scare three years later — got wind of Pico's plan and put a halt to it. Pico did, however, have the chance to deliver his famous *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, which encapsulates the essence of his theses. In 1487, Innocent VIII called for the theses to be reviewed, and the result was that thirteen of them were condemned outright. Pico humbly agreed to retract these, but then almost immediately he published an *Apologia* defending them. Innocent VIII was not amused and this time he forced Pico to retract both the *Apologia* and the condemned theses.

The other 887 theses didn't fare much better. Innocent VIII declared these to be unorthodox, and the central reason was that they 'reproduced the errors of pagan philosophers'. Worse still, some of them seemed to endorse magic, and not Ficino's harmless 'natural' kind. One thesis in particular can stand as an example of the sort of challenges the Church faced with Pico's ideas, and which it felt it had no choice but to condemn. It also makes clear how important Hermeticism and the Kabbala were for Pico. 'There is no science which gives us more assurance of Christ's divinity', Pico told the learned theologians, 'than magic and the Kabbala.' Although Pico wanted to use magic and Kabbala to assert Christ's divinity, as far as the Church was concerned the fact that he would use these to do so was scandalous, and suggested that Pico believed that Christ was little more than one magician among others. Faced with Innocent VIII's disapproval, in 1488 Pico understandably fled Italy but was arrested in France by Philip II of Savoy, who imprisoned him in Vincennes. He was released through appeals by Lorenzo de' Medici and allowed to live in Florence under his care, although it was not until 1493 and the ascension of Pope Alexander VI, who favoured Hermetic philosophy, that Pico was cleared of papal censure. At this point he renewed his friendship with Savonarola, which had cooled because of Pico's interest in heretical thinkers like Plato and Hermes Trismegistus. In his last years he wrote his *Heptaplus*, an allegorical account of the creation, and *De Ente et Uno* (1491), on being and unity. It wasn't until after his death that his *Treatise Against Astrology*, in which he rejected stellar determinism in favour of man's ability to master his fate through free will and Ficinian magic, appeared.

In 1492, as Christopher Columbus headed toward the new world, Lorenzo de' Medici died, and Pico moved to Ferrara. In the power vacuum left by Lorenzo's death, Savonarola rose to prominence in Florence and began, like Patriarch Theophilus of Alexandria before him, to burn pagan works and enforce a religious and moral fundamentalism. Ironically, but no doubt shaken by his encounter with papal displeasure, Pico became a fervent follower, rejecting Hermes, Plato, and the *prisca theologia*. Strangely, he was not alone; as D.P. Walker makes clear, most of the other Florentine Platonists, with the exception of Ficino, became followers of Savonarola too.[39] Savonarola declared that 'the least little child of the Christians is better' than Socrates and Plato, and suddenly the members of Ficino's academy agreed.[40] Never one to do things by half, Pico gave away his fortune and burned his own poetry. Years earlier he had expressed the wish to walk barefoot across Italy as a wandering evangelist, and now the asceticism of that youthful desire returned. But he never got the chance. He died under mysterious circumstances in 1494 — there's some suspicion that he was poisoned — at the age of thirty-one.

What a great miracle is Man

Unlike Ficino, who was satisfied with unlocking the secrets of the natural magic that flowed from the *anima mundi* — thereby steering clear of the authorities — Pico had bigger plans, and aimed to bring human consciousness to the very source of being itself. His reading of the Kabbala informed not only his desire to effect a union between Hebrew, Christian, and pagan belief; it revealed to him the potential for man to master the secret *logos*, hidden in numbers and the alphabet, and hence to attain godlike powers. Pico argued that for magic to be effective, it must reach beyond the stars, and into the higher, supercelestial spheres — the Eighth and Ninth, beyond the cosmos. His brand of magic tapped the forces that lay behind the sensible world: angels, archangels, the ten Sephiroth or powers of God on the Kabbalistic Tree of Life, even, perhaps, God himself, something the cautious Ficino would never have admitted. Pico's Kabbalistic investigations would open doors for Christian variants on an adamantly Jewish tradition, and make possible the kind of Kabbalistic magic associated with late nineteenth century occult figures and societies, such as Eliphas Levi, and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, whose most famous members were the poet W.B. Yeats and the notorious Aleister Crowley (whose link to a tradition of Christian magic seems peculiarly piquant). It is this tradition, stemming from Pico, that informs most modern magical practices today.[41]

This sense of man's potential divinity is clear in the opening of Pico's best known work, the *Oration On the Dignity of Man*. This has been called 'the manifesto of humanism', although 'superhumanism' may be more accurate, as Pico's sense of human potential goes far beyond what most modern humanists, who are for the most part secular thinkers, would accept today.[42] (And even humanists close to Pico's time, like Erasmus, were profoundly critical of his metaphysical preoccupations.) Pico begins his *Oration* by remarking that the esteemed Abdala the Saracen — today thought to have been a cousin of the prophet Mohammed[43] — when asked what in the world was most worthy of wonder, had answered 'man'. Pico supported this conclusion by quoting from the opening pages of the *Asclepius*, when Hermes tells Asclepius: 'What a great miracle is man'. That in 1603 Shakespeare would agree with Pico, writing in *Hamlet* 'What a piece of work is a man!' and extolling his virtues, suggests that

he either knew or knew of the *Asclepius* or Pico's *Oration*. The rest of Pico's rhetorical display is aimed at stating the case for man as persuasively as possible. Ironically, the fact that he faced papal censure suggests that he was successful.

His basic argument, and one that no pope would ever agree with, is that man is a god who, as Colin Wilson puts it, 'has forgotten his heritage and come to accept that he is a beggar'.[44] Pico was determined that we should remember our roots and reclaim our heritage. Central to his message is the idea that, unlike all other created beings, man has no fixed nature, a notion that echoes Poimandres' revelation to Hermes that man is dual-natured, equally of the earth and of the spirit, a revelation echoed in the *Asclepius*. 'The Supreme Maker decrees,' Pico tells us, that man 'should have a share in the particular endowment of every other creature … We have given you, O Adam, no visage proper to yourself.'[45] Nearly five hundred years later, this idea would be revived by an utterly un-Hermetic thinker, the existential philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, who argued that man had existence but no essence (which is echoed in Sartre's assertion that there is a human condition but no human nature). Thus, for both Pico and Sartre, man is protean, able to participate in all dimensions and spheres of reality. (Needless to say, Pico draws rather different conclusions from this insight than Sartre.) For Pico, the microcosm really is the macrocosm, or at least has the potential to be. 'We have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth,' the Supreme Maker tells man, 'neither mortal nor immortal, in order than you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer', a truly Hermetic proposition, and one the Church would find threatening, as it had no room for 'free and proud shapers' of anything.[46] Nevertheless, no longer fixed in his medieval slot — long since freed by Petrarch — man can now make of himself what he will. He can 'descend to the lower, brutish forms of life', or 'rise again to the superior orders whose life is divine'. The choice is his. 'Whichever of these a man should cultivate, the same will bear fruit in him.' This, we recall, is what Poimandres again told Hermes, and it is also the wisdom of the ancient Chinese sage Mencius, who taught that 'those who follow that part of themselves which is great are great men; those who follow that part which is little are little men', suggesting that the essence of the *prisca theologia* can be found in cultures having little or no physical contact between them.[47]

Pico's *Oration* is a thrilling, inspiring work, and with the writings of Hermes Trismegistus, Plato, the Kabbala, the Gospels, and the church fathers at his disposal, Pico believes he is in a good position to actualize these ideals. His confidence in challenging the religious leaders of his time to a public debate, at

the hoary age of twenty-four, argues in his favour, and I think it would be difficult for anyone reading the *Oration* today to come away from it without a new sense of our potentials. Yet for some, this supreme self-confidence is merely the *hubris* they contend is the most pervasive gift of the Renaissance, and which has resulted in the complete 'humanization' of the world, at the expense of both the sacred and nature.[48] It should be admitted they have a good argument. Pico himself seems to have changed his mind about man's godlike potential, and put himself under the repressive guidance of the anti-humanist Savonarola, who wanted to return to the Middle Ages, a disturbingly radical turnaround, which ultimately proved unsatisfactory. Yet, as Frances Yates writes, 'the profound significance of Pico della Mirandola in the history of humanity can hardly be overestimated'.[49] After him European man had the confidence to act upon the world and to control his destiny through knowledge. Pico himself may have in the end rejected this, but it was something that no Savonarola could take back.

Giordano Bruno — the Nolan

One Renaissance Hermeticist who took Pico at his word was the philosopher and theologian Giordano Bruno. In 1600, Bruno was burned at the stake at the hands of the Inquisition on the Campo de' Fiori in Rome. Bruno's *auto da fe* is usually chalked up to his championing of the Copernican heliocentric solar system against the reigning Ptolemaic geocentric one, which had been accepted by the Church for ages, and which was shared, with one alteration, by the Hermeticists; for the Hermeticists, following the Egyptian system, the sun was just above the moon and not, as in the Ptolemaic, in the middle of the five other planets. This picture of Bruno, however, is not quite accurate. He was in fact an 'acentrist' who believed in an infinite universe full of innumerable worlds — much like our modern conception — whose centre, as was said of God, 'was everywhere and its circumference nowhere', a remark that is attributed to a variety of thinkers, ranging from Hermes Trismegistus and Empedocles to Nicholas of Cusa and the rationalist Voltaire. Yet Bruno's martyrdom was not to the godless, meaningless universe of Big Bangs and black holes that emerged from the Copernican revolution, by which he would have been repelled. Bruno didn't burn because he favoured a cosmos reduced to mere energy and matter, drained of its spiritual character. According to Frances Yates, Bruno took Pico's challenge to reclaim our divine heritage so seriously — more seriously than the chastened Pico — that he attempted to revive the ancient Egyptian religion that he believed was the source of the Hermetic teachings. Bruno wished to break the repressive hold the Church had over men and to resurrect in its place the pantheon of man's earliest spiritual guides, the gods of ancient Egypt — with, admittedly, himself at its head. It is for this, and not for his place in the standard histories of 'the warfare between science and religion' that his 'martyrdom' should be remembered.[50]

Giordano Bruno was born Filippo Bruno in 1548 in the southern town of Nola, which was then part of the Kingdom of Naples, in the foothills of Mount Vesuvius, an apt birthplace for this volatile personality. It was because of his place of birth that he later called himself 'the Nolan', and he took the name Giordano from one of his tutors at the Augustinian monastery of San Domenico Maggiore, when he entered the Dominican order at seventeen. We know little about his mother, but Bruno's father was a soldier and it is tempting to anchor Bruno's own belligerent character in some paternal inheritance. He was educated

in Naples and it was while he was preparing to be ordained, which he was at twenty-four, that Bruno began to develop his remarkable powers of memory, about which he would later write several books. Pico, we've seen, also displayed a formidable memory, but Bruno's apparently excelled even his. It was so astonishing that Bruno is said to have demonstrated his mnemonic abilities before Pope Pius V and the influential Cardinal Rebiba. Bruno later claimed that a book of his, since lost, *On the Ark of Noah*, was dedicated to the Pope. In those days dedications had to accepted by the dedicatee, and that Pius V agreed to it suggests he was impressed by Bruno's gifts, a regard not shared by later pontiffs.

Like Ficino and Pico, Bruno was a man of the church, but his penchant for independent thought and his appetite for proscribed books and knowledge soon brought him into clashes with it. His turbulent and restless career can be seen as one long, wearying, and eventually futile battle against the authorities. It's understandable that many regard Bruno as a hero of free thought, brought down by an ignorant, oppressive regime, but as France Yates makes clear, Bruno was no saint, and his pride, arrogance, and pugnacity often made him his own worst enemy. In many ways he is reminiscent of his near contemporary Paracelsus, another aggressive Hermetic philosopher often at odds with the authorities, and we remember that the word 'bombastic' derives from his middle name Bombastus. That the officials Bruno often found himself at odd with were also aggressive, strong-willed, dominant men makes a kind of ecclesiastical 'clash of the titans', seem inevitable. Bruno's first offence was to have thrown away images of the saints — he kept only a crucifix — and to have recommended a 'dangerous' reading list to some unwary soul. More damaging was his defence of the Arian heresy, mentioned in Chapter 4, and his copy of Erasmus, the humanist philosopher, who had been banned. These early black marks inaugurated a life of contention, and at twenty-four Bruno fled Naples, the Inquisition, and the Church. In a time when the Church offered practically the only haven for men of learning, to have stepped outside its bounds almost ensured a life of homeless wandering. Like other Renaissance magi — Paracelsus, whose prodigious travels are legendary, again comes to mind — this is exactly what happened to Bruno. If Ficino was a sedentary stay-at-home, Bruno was an almost manic peripatetic.

For the next thirteen years, until his arrest in Venice in 1592, Bruno moved from place to place across Europe, finding friends, but more often enemies, and because of his aggressive, paranoid character, often those who had began as friends ended as enemies. He first went to the northern Italian port of Noli, then Savena, Turin, and Venice. In Padua, some fellow Dominicans urged him to don his habit again, an idea he seems to have adopted. He crossed the Alps into

France and in 1579 landed in Geneva, where he possibly joined the Calvinists. He seemed to have changed his mind about his habit, and accepted a gift of 'civilian' clothes from the Marchese de Vico of Naples, an Italian aristocrat living in Geneva who helped fellow countrymen. He attended the university, but after attacking the work of one of his professors was arrested. As he would do often from then on, he defended his actions, but prudence suggested he leave Geneva, which he did.

In Toulouse he earned a theology doctorate and lectured in philosophy; it seems he also tried to return to the Church, but was denied. In 1581 he went to Paris, where he lectured and, as would become a frequent practice, again demonstrated his powers of memory. He amazed his audience, although many believed his abilities were rooted in black magic, a stigma that would haunt Bruno for the rest of his career, and which had more than a degree of truth. His demonstratiosn were so successful that he secured influential French patrons who allowed him the time to write books about his theory of memory. In 1582 he published *On the Shadow of Ideas*, *The Art of Memory, and Circes' Song*. Bruno was not the only thinker promoting a mnemonic system. Pierre de la Ramée, better known as Peter Ramus, who died in 1572 in the Protestant massacre of St Bartholomew, developed a system, Ramism, which was basically a kind of learning by rote. Following his death, Ramus' system became increasingly popular in Protestant countries, and its 'logical' approach is still applied today. As we shall see, Bruno's system was something rather different.

In 1583 Bruno travelled to England, as a guest of the French ambassador, armed with letters of recommendation from Henry III of France, to whom Bruno dedicated one of his books. There he befriended the poet Philip Sidney — who also received a dedication — and although there is no record of his meeting the magician and mathematician John Dee, Queen Elizabeth's astrologer, Bruno moved in Dee's circle and a meeting between the two sages would be likely. Bruno was unsuccessful at obtaining a teaching position at Oxford, but he did lecture there on the Copernican system. His unorthodox astronomical views, however, coupled with his belief in a coming Hermetic/Egyptian 'new age' — with himself at its centre, in the same way that the sun was the centre of Copernicus' system — caused controversy, as did the suspicion that he had plagiarised his ideas from Ficino. Bruno's English stay was, however, productive. During this time he completed and published some of his most important works. In 1584 came *The Ash Wednesday Supper; On Cause, Principle and Unity; On the Infinite Universe and Worlds;* as well as *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*, in which he glorifies the ancient Egyptian-Hermetic religion, and in 1585 *On Heroic Frenzies*, something Bruno knew of

personally, and which he believed could lead mankind to the gods. Some of these works raised more than eyebrows and Bruno's lack of Ficinian tact and basic social skills, as well as his overbearing character, meant that, predictably, some who had started out as champions soon found themselves regarded as foes. The possibility that Bruno was working as a spy, informing on clandestine Catholics to Queen Elizabeth's 'spymaster', Sir Francis Walsingham, could not have helped his reputation.[51]

Martyr to the stars

After the French Embassy — where he was staying in London — was attacked by rioters, Bruno returned to Paris in 1585, but his 120 theses against Aristotle and his polemical pamphlets against the mathematical system of Fabrizio Mordente again sparked controversy. He moved on again, this time to Germany. Here he is believed to have started a kind of secret society of 'Giordanistis', dedicated followers of his millenarian ideas, or at least had plans to. He taught briefly at Wittemberg, then decided to try his luck with the Hermetic Holy Roman Emperor, Rudolf II of Prague. Rudolf II was a keen student of esoteric knowledge, if a hopeless emperor, and he would play host to some famous Hermetic figures, including John Dee and the alchemists Michael Maier and Michael Sendivogius. Rudolf II also hosted scientists such as Tycho Brahe and Johannes Kepler, who combined astrology with the new discoveries in astronomy. Whether it was strategic flattery or sincere belief, Bruno impressed on Rudolf II that he was the 'new Hermes Trismegistus', and that his reign inuagurated a new age.[52] Rudolf II, while a true believer and student of esoteric science, was often fickle, and while he could be generous, was equally parsiminous toward the scholars who knocked at his door. After a six month stay during which he failed to obtain a teaching position, Bruno left, with a 300 taler gift from Rudolf. Helpful, but not the security he wanted.

In Helmstedt Bruno was excommunicated by Lutherans, so he once more had to flee. Then, in 1591, at the Frankfurt Book Fair, fate began to close in. The patrician Giovanni Mocenigo invited him to Venice to tutor him in the art of memory. Around the same time, Bruno heard of a vacancy in the mathematics chair at the University of Padua. Bruno had a prodigious memory, but he wondered if the Inquisition had too, and bet on the possibility that they hadn't. He didn't get the position in Padua, and so in 1592 Bruno returned to Venice. It was a mistake that another Hermetic philosopher, the redoubtable Cagliostro, would make two centuries later.[53] As had happened so often in the past, trouble started between Bruno and his benefactor, and Mocenigo, perhaps frightened by Bruno's claims to semi-godhood, soon denounced him to the Inquisition. Perhaps they had practised his mnemonic techniques; in any case, the Inquisitors had not forgotten about Bruno, and on 22 May he was arrested. The charges against him included blasphemy, heresy, magic, and preaching the belief in a

plurality of worlds. Bruno seems to have defended himself well against his Venetian captors. He had magically prepared himself for the encounter with an array of talismans that were of an outright demonic nature — no gentle 'natural magic' for the volcanic Nolan. But word from Rome soon came and in 1593 he was transferred to the Eternal City.

Bruno remained in prison during his seven year trial. Although the charges against him were complex, it's unclear if promoting the Copernican system was one of them. Heliocentrism wasn't branded heretical until 1616 and even then this decision was overuled by more enlightened offices of the church.[54] As Arthur Koestler makes clear in his classic history of astronomy *The Sleepwalkers*, the Church bent over backward to accommodate Galileo, whose trial is seen as inaugurating the 'warfare' between science and religion. Unfortunately, like Bruno, Galileo was another tactless egotist who couldn't back down from a battle, and he only saved himself from Bruno's fate at the last minute. Yet preaching the belief in an infinite universe full of innumerable worlds, which Bruno clearly did, was heretical. Most of the charges dealt with Bruno's rejection of Christian dogma, but the ones that concern us most are the accusations of practising magic. Bruno appears to have accepted that he contradicted dogma and agreed to recant on the remarks that expressed this. But he refused to recant on his belief in a plurality of worlds and it was this that the equally wilful Cardinal Bellarmine, in charge of the proceedings, insisted on; Bellarmine would also lock horns with Galileo at the beginning of his clash with the Church a decade and a half later. Bruno appealed to Pope Clement VIII, hoping that a partial recantation would be sufficient and that the encouragingly named Pope would grant clemency. It was not to be. Clement VIII agreed with the guilty verdict. Deemed a heretic, Bruno was given over to the secular authorities and with a gag in his mouth to stop his 'dangerous words' — as well as his screams — the martyr to the stars met his fate.

Egyptian memories

Bruno's contribution to the Hermetic Renaissance is central, and for a full account the reader can do no better than to to refer to Frances Yates' classic work, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, on which I've drawn considerably for this chapter. But two aspects of Bruno's philosophy stand out: his proposed Egyptian revival and his mastery of the art of memory. Again, Yates has written at length on this ancient art, and the reader is referred to her book *The Art of Memory*.[55]

Known to the rhetoricians of antiquity and revived by Renaissance scholars, 'magical memory', as Bruno's mnemonic discipline is known, is a *sine qua non* of the true magus. One of the central themes in Bruno's Hermeticism was the reflection of the universe in the mind of the magician, a theme we have already come across more than once. In Book XI of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the Divine Mind tells Hermes that: 'Unless you make yourself equal to God, you cannot understand God.' 'Like is not intelligible save to like,' Hermes is told, and so the Hermeticist is advised to: 'Make yourself grow to a greatness beyond measure, by a bound free yourself from the body; raise yourself above all time, become Eternity; then you will understand God'.

Bruno's way of accomplishing this was to engrave on his consciousness divine images of the celestial archetypes — the seals of the stars, as he called them — in much the same way that Ficino had earlier used the imagination to fashion symbols to attract the radiations of the *anima mundi*. As the title of his book *The Shadow of Ideas* suggests, Bruno saw these images as shadows or reflections of the Platonic archetypes. To furnish this inner universe — the microcosm housing the macrocosm — he used a method familiar to classical orators. Roman rhetoricians would memorize a series of sites in an imaginary building and would attach to these 'places' images to remind them of the 'talking points' of their speech. As they gave the speech, they mentally 'walked' through the building, prompted by the memorized images. If we think of a virtual reality tour of an architectural site, or a trip through a castle in a video game, we have a fair idea of the process, except that the practitioners of the art used nothing but their own powers of imagination. As Yates points out, it is difficult for us to imagine a memory capable of the complex, vivid detail achieved by the ancient mnemotechnicians.

Reviving this practice, Bruno adapted it to his magical projects. Taking the divine images from the Hermetic books, and fashioning his own talismans, he fixed these in his imagination, thus furnishing his inner world with a blueprint of the universe. In the process he believed he acquired magical powers enabling him to act upon the world.

By thus reflecting the universe in his mind, Bruno became a co-creator with God, a theme that we encountered earlier in Ficino's notion of the possibility of Hermetically 'repairing' parts of the fallen world. In doing this Bruno fulfilled Pico's injunction that man must embody the highest and greatest good, a privilege and responsibility vouchsafed to him alone. Bruno's magical images were arranged in a mnemonic order with corresponding images of the natural world — plants, animals, minerals — and also with the sum of human knowledge symbolized by the images of the great thinkers and sages. At the centre of this system stood the magician, above space and time, much as Petrarch stood above the medieval world below, and as the new Copernican sun stood as the focus of its satellites — or one of them at least, as their elliptical orbits, soon recognized by Johannes Kepler, required two foci. By reflecting within his consciousness the entire universe of nature and man, Bruno thus met the Hermetic challenge of 'becoming Aion'. It should be apparent that this 'magical memory' shares many characteristics with the kind of experience had by R.M. Bucke, William James, and Ouspensky, discussed in Chapter 1.

In practising this magical memory, Bruno hoped to break through the dense matter of the terrestrial world and return to his true stature as an agent of the divine mind. This Hermetic 'heresy' — that man is not a mere creature but embodies the archetypal energies behind the world of appearances — is a radical development of Ficino's subtle astral magic, and of Pico's own heaven-storming. It moves from manipulating natural forces toward actualizing the divine powers dormant within us. It was not exactly the sort of the thing the Church would encourage, and it didn't.

Bruno's 'Egyptian revival', in which he hoped to bring back the ancient Hermetic religion with its appreciation of man as magus, and which formed part of his controversial Oxford lecture, was motivated by his deep antipathy to the image of man promulgated by the Church. Bruno believed that the decline of the ancient Egyptian religion, lamented in the *Asclepius*, had actually been brought about by the Church, and like Pico, Bruno believed it was his mission to awaken men to their true place in the cosmos. He put his beliefs on the line in *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*, in which he celebrates the magical Hermetic religion of the Egyptians. Throwing Ficinian caution to the wind, he proclaims that the ancient beliefs will soon return, with him at their head, clearly the sort of

thing the Church could not ignore. Bruno's Hermetic 'reformation' begins with a cleansing of the zodiac by the divine Sophia, Isis, and Momus (the Greek god of satire), archetypal Hermetic powers. For him, not only man's life on earth, but the entire cosmos, must regain its magical heritage. Sadly, as we will see in the next chapter, man's vision of the universe was moving in an even more radical direction.

It is true that in *The Ash Wednesday Supper*, in which Bruno satirizes the academic pendants who reject his Hermetic vision, he claims that the new Copernican heliocentric system is a sign that his Hermetic revival had begun. It wasn't, although in the next chapter we will see why Bruno would have thought it was. As Nietzsche remarked, Copernicus unchained man from the centre of the universe, and ever since we have been rolling away toward some X, that is, some unknown.[56] That Copernican universe is, however, much like the one Bruno saw in his imagination, years before Galileo peered at it through his telescope.[57] From the terrifying ascent of a mountain — now part of the Tour de France cycle race[58] — Hermetic man had pushed his way to the stars. The Church however, ironically allied with its new rival science, would do its best to try to keep him down to earth.

Notes

1. There is some question about whether Petrarch was the first to do this, or whether he actually made the ascent at all. Although subsequent historians have added to them, Lynn Thorndike's 'Renaissance or Prenaissance?' (*Journal of the History of Ideas* 4, No. 1, January 1943), presents the basic doubts. Others had of course climbed mountains before Petrarch, but these ascents were motivated by practical reasons. Petrarch's is unusual for being driven purely by curiosity.
2. Petrarch, 'The Ascent of Mont Ventoux,' translated by Hans Nachod, *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, edited by Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oscar Kristeller, and John Herman Randall, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), p. 36.
3. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy, Vol. 1: Inferno* translated by Mark Musa (London: Penguin, 1984), p. 67.
4. Petrarch, p. 40.
5. Ibid. p. 41.
6. Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1983), p. 341.
7. Petrarch, p. 45.
8. Ibid. p. 44.
9. Petrarch's synchronicity seems *double*, in the sense that *by definition*, a synchronicity is an immediately apparent correspondence between an inner and an outer event. The outer event that paralleled Petrarch's inner one — the passage from Augustine — is itself about the correspondence between the inner and outer world. Petrarch could have opened another book and read something about mountains alone, and

that would have been synchronistic enough. But he read something about the *relationship* between mountains and the inner world, which was precisely the issue preoccupying him at that moment. Petrarch, of course, did not have the benefit of the notion of synchronicity, which itself offers an answer to the issue troubling him, the conflict between the demands of his soul and the attraction of the outer world. In synchronicities we recognize directly that both worlds are *one*, or at least that the membrane separating them is permeable, which is an Hermetic insight itself.

Also, Augustine's rejection of the Hermetic notion that we can know God by observing the cosmos, will soon be echoed by the new scientific consciousness, but for a different reason.

For Augustine we should ignore the cosmos because contemplating it can lead our attention away from God. Science will tell us that it is pointless to look for God in the cosmos because He is not there. Hermeticism rejects both these positions.

10. Copenhaver, p. xlvii.
11. Petrarch, p. 46.
12. Ibid. p. 45. Salaman 2001 p. 39. Clearly, the choice of 'empty parading' is the translator's. In another English version, by James Harvey Robinson (http://history.hanover.edu/ texts/petrarch/pet17.html), we have 'vain show,' which means roughly the same. The Latin original is *spectaculis evanescant.* The *Corpus Hermeticum* wasn't translated into Latin until Marsilio Ficino's edition in 1463, and Petrarch could read no Greek. The similarity may be nothing but coincidence, but it is striking nonetheless, and there are other oddly Hermetic echoes. Petrarch remarks at one point that he 'leaped in my winged thoughts from things corporeal to what is incorporeal,' (p. 39) and speaks of 'the agile and immortal mind' which can reach its goal 'in the twinkling of an eye'. (p. 40) Although instantaneous mental travelling may not be an exclusively Hermetic motif, these phrases do resonate with the kind of ideas presented in the Hermetic books.
13. Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (London: Phaidon Press, 1944), p. 179.
14. Blumenberg, p. 342.
15. Ernst Cassirer *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), p. 141–44.
16. James Hillman, *Re-Visioning Psychology* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1977), pp. 196–7. Other elements in Petrarch's character of course also constitute an incipient Renaissance mentality, namely his love of antiquity, his scholarliness, and sense of history.
17. Jean Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin* translated by Noel Barstad and Algis Mickunas (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1985), p. 12.
18. Russell Kirk, Introduction, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (Chicago: Gateway Editions, 1956), p. xiii.
19. See Colin Wilson's *From Atlantis to the Sphinx* (London: Virgin Books, 1996).
20. Yates 1971, p. 54. To this list of influences D.P. Walker adds Proclus, Iamblichus, and Porphyry. See *Spiritual & Demonic Magic From Ficino to Campanella* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2000), pp. 36–37.
21. Yates 1971, p. 63.
22. Hillmann, pp. 200–201.
23. Ibid. p. 202.
24. Charles Boer, Introduction to Marsilio Ficino, *The Book of Life*, translated by Charles Boer (Woodstock, CN: Spring Publications, 1996), p. xv.
25. Marsilio Ficino, *Letters Vol. 1*, translated by the Language Department of the School of Economic Science (London: Shepard-Walwyn, 1975), p. 19.
26. Walker 2000, p. 60.
27. Godwin 2007, p. 3.
28. Hillman, p. 201.
29. Ficino, 1975, p. 19.
30. Yates 1971, p. 77. See also Ficino, 1975, p. 20.
31. Ficino 1975, p. 20.

32. Yates 1971, p. 104.
33. Quoted in Thomas Moore *The Planets Within* (London: Associated University Press, 1982), p. 32.
34. Hillman, p. 204.
35. Walker 2000, p. 30.
36. One hopes that Ficino's astral prescriptions were more successful than those aimed at health, as in *On Caring for the Health of Students*, or longevity, as in *How to Prolong Your Life*, which with *On Making Your Life Agree With the Heavens*, makes up his *Book of Life*. As his translator Charles Boer points out, 'Considering some of the substances Ficino recommends for ingestion,' his advice was 'atrocious,' and he remarks that many of his 'patients' 'spent years of their life laid up with gout'. Likewise, many of his close friends died young: Lorenzo de' Medici at 43, the poet Angelo Ambrogini, known as Il Poliziano, at 40, and Pico della Mirandola at 31. Ficino himself died just short of his sixty-sixth birthday, which, for that time, would have been considered old.
37. Godwin 2007, p. 7.
38. Pico della Mirandola, p. xii.
39. Walker 1972, p. 42.
40. Ibid. p. 43.
41. Some modern forms, however, eschew Kabbalism and aim at a more pure Hermetic approach. See, for example, Julius Evola and the UR Group *Introduction to Magic* (Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2001).
42. Pico della Mirandola, p. xiii.
43. See: http://weuropeanhistory.suite101.com/article. cfm/renaissance_a_rebirth_of_classical_era_thought
44. Colin Wilson, *The Occult* (New York: Random House, 1971), p. 321.
45. Pico della Mirandola, pp. 6–7.
46. Ibid.
47. http://www.humanistictexts.org/mencius.htm 48. For two radically different critiques of the Renaissance sensibility see René Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity and The Signs of the Times* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 232; and Charlene Spretnak, *States of Grace: The Recovery of Meaning in the Postmodern Age* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), pp. 197, 202.
49. Yates 1971, p. 116.
50. See, for example, Andrew White's *History of the Warfare of Science with Theology* (London: Macmillan, 1896).
51. Peter Marshall, *The Theatre of the World* (London: Harvill Secker, 2006), p. 138.
52. Ibid. p. 140.
53. In 1789, after an absence of many years, Cagliostro ceded to his wife's wishes and returned to Italy, where there was a warrant for his arrest. Put into Rome's San Leo prison, for nearly a decade he lived in a dark, dank cell and in 1797 was the last prisoner to be executed by the Inquisition. See my *Politics and the Occult* (Wheaton: Quest Books, Il, 2008), pp. 89–93.
54. Arthur Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 462.
55. Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).
56. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* translated Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 8.
57. In 1609 Galileo began experiments and observations with his telescope, developed from the earlier spyglass, which led to his book *The Starry Messenger* published in 1610. One of Galileo's revolutionary observations — in more ways than one — was of the moons of Jupiter. If, he asked, it was true that Jupiter had moons, like the Earth's, orbiting it, then it was possible that the Earth itself could orbit another body, the sun, which was what Copernicus had argued. Along with this remarkable discovery, Galileo was the first to gaze on stars and other celestial bodies, hitherto *unseen.* Before this, all men could work with was the naked eye. Galileo had passed beyond this limit. Galileo's discovery led to the notion of a cosmos much larger than had been suspected, yet Bruno had already 'discovered' this years before, through an act of *imagination*, which had presented to him an infinite cosmos, sprinkled with

innumerable worlds.

58. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mont_Ventoux

6. Hermes in the Underworld

Giordano Bruno's execution marked a shift in the Church's attitude toward Hermes Trismegistus and his followers, but even before this, a strong anti-Hermetic stance was gaining ground within it. All throughout the sixteenth century, magic was increasingly seen to be a threat, both to the Church's authority, and to the souls of its flock, and works like Cornelius Agrippa's great compendium, *On Occult Philosophy*, published in 1533, seemed to hearken back to the more 'demonic' form of magic linked to the *Picatrix* and the Middle Ages. Marsilio Ficino may have argued that his magic dealt purely with natural and cosmic forces, but why, many began to ask, did one need to turn to those forces at all, when Christ's love and goodness should be sufficient? Pico may have declared that his magic sought out only the angels, but who could tell when an angel was really an angel, and not a demon or devil in disguise? Couldn't some devious spirit convince the magician that he was a messenger from God, when he was really a servant of the devil? Wasn't it sheer hubris to think otherwise, as it was to think of lowly man as some miracle? And what need had the Church of these pagan beliefs anyway? Hadn't Christ come to show men 'the way and the life?' If so, then what need have we of Plato or Hermes or any other pagan philosopher? Aren't Christ's teachings enough? Why seek out others, which can only lead to confusion and set us off the one true path?

These arguments, voiced by figures such as Giovanni Francesco Pico (Pico's nephew), the Protestants John Weir and Erastus, the Spanish Bishop Pedro García, the Jesuit Martín del Río, and others, were detailed and fine-tuned, but their essence was simple and straightforward and boiled down to a basic belief. Magic was evil, demonic, and misguided, and the Church had no need of it.

It is difficult to argue against this kind of paranoia, which seems endemic to human psychology. Couldn't those people *really* be communists or terrorists or witches in disguise? How can you be sure? The Church alone was guarantor of truth, and with Bruno's example to point to, the danger entailed in pursuing the Hermetic path seemed self-evident.

Yet, although most of us would be surprised to know that the Church would have *ever* considered Hermes Trismegistus a 'fellow traveller', as mentioned, this had been very much the case. The mosaic pavement at the entrance to the cathedral of Siena, laid down in 1488 by Giovanni di Stefano, says this clearly.[1]

There, flanked by two Sibyls — ancient oracles who, like Hermes, were believed to have prophesized the coming of Christ — stood the thrice-great one. If this wasn't enough to suggest the importance Hermes Trismegistus once had for the Church, the inscription tells us that Hermes was a contemporary of Moses, and a figure depicting the receiver of the Ten Commandments seems almost to be bowing before the great Egyptian sage and magician. Another figure stands behind that of Moses, and this may be, as some have suggested, Asclepius or another Hermetic initiate, perhaps intent on hearing the conversation of these two ancient wise men. Hermes' hand rests on a tablet, on which is inscribed a passage from his *Asclepius*, in which, at least according to the church father Lactantius, the thrice-great one is speaking of the glory of Christ to come.

Although remarkable, the Siena Cathedral pavement isn't the only Hermetic iconography associated with the Church. Perhaps even more surprising are the frescoes in the Appartamento Borgia in the Vatican, painted for the 'Hermetic' Pope Alexander VI by Bernardino di Betto, better known as Pinturicchio. Alexander VI, we remember, was the pope who cleared Pico of the charges against him, and he seems to have shown a real interest in Hermetic, pagan and Egyptian ideas. Some of the frescoes seem to depict the career of Hermes. He's shown as the killer of many-eyed Argus (as Cicero recounted), then as the lawgiver to the Egyptians, then as teacher of Moses. Other Egyptian themes are prominent. Isis is shown sitting between Moses and Hermes, but perhaps most unusual are the scenes depicting the Apis bull, which was identified with Osiris and which formed one half of the union of Osiris and Apis in the Alexandrian syncretic god Serapis (whose Serapeum, we recall from Chapter 3, was destroyed by the Patriarch Theophilus in 391). As Frances Yates points out, the bull was the emblem of the Borgia family, and in this series of pictures, the Borgia bull becomes identified with the Apis bull.[2] As Apis was associated with Osiris, a sun god, the message seems to be that the Borgia pope is identifying himself with Egyptian sun-worship, perhaps even with the pharaohs, who considered themselves gods.

Yates suggests that Alexander VI agreed with Pico that magic and Kabbala could be important additions to Christian teachings, and one suspects that had Alexander VI been pope when Bruno was promoting his own, admittedly megalomaniacal version of a renewed Egyptian-Hermetic religion, he might not have met with such a grim end. As Antoine Faivre remarks, 'in the circles where Hermes passes, one can be sure that tolerance reigns'.[3] Indeed, Princess Emanuela Kretzulesco-Quaranta, author of a study of Francesco Colonna's late fifteenth century allegorical romance *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* — made

famous through the bestseller *The Rule of Four* — believes that Alexander VI wanted to turn Christendom into an Hermetic theocracy, not that different from the sort of thing Bruno had in mind.[4] Unfortunately, Alexander VI was the 'Borgia pope' and is associated with all the decadence and infamy linked to that family name. It was precisely against his nepotism and abuse that the fanatical Savonarola arose, and more than likely any association of Hermeticism with 'the most corrupt, ungodly and ambitious man who had occupied the throne' was not to its benefit.[5]

As we've seen, Clement VIII didn't share Alexander VI's Hermetic tastes, although the Venetian scientist and Platonic philosopher Francesco Patrizi did try to convince him to have Hermetic philosophy taught in Christian schools.[6] Patrizi died in Rome in 1597, before Bruno's execution, and it's unclear what his attitude toward Bruno might have been. He was, however, a critic of Aristotle, whose philosophy he believed was at odds with church teaching, and he accepted, like many others, that Plato and other pagan philosophers had paved the way for Christ. This was a view put forth by the humanist Agostino Steuco in 1540, when he coined the term *philosophia perennis* to account for the harmony he saw between the Church's teachings and the philosophers of antiquity. Patrizi's and Steuco's view, however, was an increasingly minority one, and other forces were at work, which would drive believers in Hermes into a spiritual wilderness, not unlike the one the author of the *Asclepius* envisioned in the dark days of Egypt. Yet one can't help wondering what the history of western thought would have been like if Patrizi and others of a similar mind, like the scientist, alchemist, and Bishop of Aire François Foix de Candale, who argued that the Hermetic books should be made canonical, had made their suggestions to more receptive ears.[7]

Oh Oh Oh, it's magic!

Ironically, it was magic, or what seemed to be a version of it, that helped widen the rift in Christendom that would become the Protestant Reformation. Something that troubled many critics of Catholicism was the idea that priests had some special relationship with God, or with the panoply of saints that increasingly resembled a pagan polytheism. One key issue was the 'indulgences' that priests sold to the faithful. These were fundamentally bribes accepted by the priests in return for assuring one's own salvation, or that of a loved one. Whether the indulgences worked is doubtful, but the money went to rebuild the basilica of St Peter in Rome, evidence, for Catholic critics, of a more straightforward form of indulgence. For a certain sum, the priest would use his 'powers' to make things right between you and the gods. If you paid enough now, you'd be assured of a good seat in heaven, or at least of a shorter time in Purgatory, an idea that was tabled at the Council of Florence that Gemistos Plethon attended. The priests would, in essence, perform a spell and compel the saints to work their magic, just as a student of the Picatrix would a demon. This disgusted people like Martin Luther, but the Church itself recognized there was more than some truth in the accusation.

One of the arguments against Ficino's magic was that the Church already had its own, and didn't need his. As D.P. Walker points out, along with Hermes, Plato, and the Neoplatonists, one of the influences on Ficino's magic was the Church itself. It isn't difficult to see the Catholic Mass as one of Ficino's 'natural magic' workings, and Ficino, we know, was a priest. As Walker writes, the elements of the Mass, 'music, words of consecration, incense, lights, wine, and a supreme magical effect — transubstantiation', are remarkably similar to the sort of thing Ficino prescribed to his Saturnine patients.[8] All the ingredients are there: symbols, correspondences, sensory effects, and, as in a magical ritual, if performed successfully, the participant should feel a sense of renewal. That the incorporation of the body of the god — theophagy, or, put less graphically, communion — is an ancient magical practice is another link between the Catholic Mass and pagan religions (see Sir James Frazer's classic *The Golden Bough*, which offers many examples). If the Church was already performing its own magical rituals it didn't need competition from Ficino.

Along with being against magic, Protestants also argued against bringing in

any ‘outside’ authorities to bolster Christianity’s stature. It was bad enough to have deal with the hierarchy of the Church, but to drag Plato, Hermes, and who knew who else into the picture only created more confusion and put more intermediaries between the individual and God, which was exactly the opposite of what the Protestants wanted. Even if Plato had sat at the foot of Hermes, all he learned was ‘bad’ Egyptian magic, and not the true religion, and Protestants rejected outright the idea that Moses learned anything at all from the Egyptians. The Bible alone held the key to salvation, and nothing Plato or anyone else wrote or thought could add anything to it. The kind of Puritanism the Protestants endorsed was essentially the same as the kind the Muslim orthodoxy raised against figures like Suhrawardi: if it isn’t in the Bible — or the Koran — then why do we need it? The Protestants decided they didn’t, and falling back on a tried and true method, they, like Theophilus of Alexandria before them, began to burn books. To give one example, during the reign of Edward VI, the teenaged king and the first English ruler raised as a Protestant, the Anglican Church was remodelled as Protestant, and in 1550, during a visit by government commissioners, huge bonfires were lit in Oxford, into which were thrown entire libraries.

Humanist, all too humanist

It seems understandable that the Church — both Catholic and Protestant — would take issue with Hermeticism. After all, magic is in many ways a kind of 'speculative religion' and the Catholics, who already had their own brand, and the Protestants, who didn't want any, would have no need of a rival. But the anti-Hermes movement wasn't limited to the spiritual competition. Purely academic forces were gathering strength and they too were unhappy with the prestige of the thrice-great one. From their perspective it wasn't so much the magical character of Hermeticism that troubled them, as its preoccupation with metaphysical questions and a boorish lack of sophistication. The Church's antipathy to Hermetic philosophy was arguably rooted in its mission to save men's soul. But for the other anti-Hermes camp, their main objection was little more than a fastidious disdain for bad grammar.

Humanism, we've seen, is linked to the Renaissance, but the kind of Humanism associated with, say, Pico, is very different from the Humanism that found fault with Pico's celebration of Hermes and Plato. Pico's Humanism is much more like that of the poet William Blake, a student of the Hermetic sciences who seems to echo Pico when he writes, in 'The Everlasting Gospel', 'Thou art a Man, God is no more/Thy own humanity learn to adore'. Blake wasn't an atheist and his remark that 'God is no more' announces the rejection of the repressive Gnostic demiurge, who in other poems Blake calls 'Old Nobodaddy'. Blake's Humanism is much more the 'superhumanism' I spoke of earlier in relation to Pico, with its celebration of human imagination and creativity as supreme powers. This was not the kind of Humanism that took issue with Hermes and which Blake would have seen as an expression of 'single vision', a kind of spiritual and intellectual myopia. To understand that kind of Humanism, we need to backtrack a bit and visit Petrarch once again.

When he wasn't climbing mountains, Petrarch devoted his time to a passionate study of the past, and to the Latin texts that had recently been recovered. Although he wasn't alone in this, Petrarch can certainly serve as a convenient symbol for the Humanism that found fault with Hermes. Petrarch, we remember, knew no Greek, and for his kind of Humanism, it was the Roman authors, and not the Greek, that set the standard. We could almost say there were two different kinds of Renaissance that appealed to two different aspects of

human consciousness. The one that looked to Greek philosophy, the Neoplatonists and Hermeticism was deeply interested in metaphysics and science; it was speculative and inspired, and depended as much on intuition as it did learning, and saw things in a ‘cosmic’ perspective. It was obsessed with the big questions, of fate, destiny, and knowing God. The other Humanism, that looked to the Roman authors, and is exemplified in Petrarch, was more focused on good form and rhetoric. It was urbane, sophisticated, and was concerned with ‘polite learning’. It kept itself in check, and ‘curbed its enthusiasm’. It wanted to ‘get things right’. It did not, as Bruno and Pico did, ‘go over the top’. It knew its limitations and stuck to them, and disdained the barbarous impetuosity of those who didn’t. The Romans created no philosophy, no science, and borrowed all they had from the Greeks. What they were good at was engineering, both mechanical and social. They excelled at politics and law, that is, specifically human pursuits. The idea of blasting off — even in the imagination — on a journey into the cosmos would have struck the Roman literati as infinitely adolescent, and this is how their Renaissance epigone felt as well. If Petrarch was troubled by his ascent of Mont Ventoux, we can only imagine what he might have thought of Bruno’s infinite universe.

With all consideration to the inadequacy of the idea, we might say that the Greek Renaissance was more ‘right brain’ while the Roman one was more ‘left brain’. One was concerned with plunging to the depths of things, the other with achieving a refined, dignified, and above all *correct* style. While Pico’s oratory soared to cosmic heights, that of figures like Erasmus stayed distinctly down to earth. This is clear in the academic curriculum that became associated with the two approaches. Urbane Humanism stuck to the *trivium* of grammar, logic, and rhetoric, while cosmic Humanism focussed on the *quadrivium* of arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy. (For what it’s worth, our word ‘trivial’, meaning unimportant, is linked to the Latin *trivium*.) For the cosmic or super Humanist, style is secondary to content, and he is willing, as Pico and Ficino were, to refer to barbarous, uncouth (in the sense of having bad Latin) thinkers of the Middle Ages, if they can help him on his quest. For the ‘all-too-humanist’ (to steal a phrase from Nietzsche), style and form count above all else, and the content is secondary. The poor Latin of the Middle Ages prevented them from taking *anything* written in it seriously. Here we can see a presage perhaps, of the famous ‘Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes’ that would characterize the early seventeenth century.

In a sense, we could say that these two forms of Renaissance created an early version of the ‘two cultures’ idea popularized in the late 1950s by the scientist and novelist C.P. Snow. When Bruno railed against the fools who failed to see

the significance of his ideas, his favourite insult was to call them ‘grammarian pedants’. Urbane Humanism can’t help but throw a wet towel on the aspirations of the mage. As Yates points out, ‘an atmosphere of unadulterated humanism is not one which is congenial to the Magus’.[9] This would soon prove true. As time moved on, Humanism and religion would prove incompatible — Humanists are today behind the ‘There is no God’ campaign, announced on bus hoardings — but initially the kind of Humanism associated with Erasmus posed no problem for the Church. Both Erasmus and Petrarch were devout Christians, and they used their learning to promote the Church’s cause. Ironically, it was cosmic Humanism, which was deeply religious, that was seen as the Church’s enemy, and which today, in a variety of forms — the whole gamut of new spiritual movements — opposes the complete secularization of society.

Mechanical marvels

It was not only at Hermeticists that urbane Humanists set their critical sights. They were also troubled by science, or at least by the rise of mathematics, the bed rock of science, and it was here that the 'two cultures' divide, mentioned above, began. Earlier I mentioned that in Oxford in 1550, whole libraries were put to the torch, a result of the Protestant rejection of Catholic magic. Included in the blaze were all works of metaphysics, but also those of mathematics. Practically anything except the Bible was suspicious, but books containing mathematical diagrams seemed especially so, as they were linked to the dark arts. Even the notion of 'calculation' was associated with 'conjuring', and as John Aubrey, the seventeenth century antiquarian (and discoverer of the 'Aubrey holes' at Stonehenge) remarked, Tudor authorities also 'burned Mathematical books for Conjuring books'.[10] It is difficult to think of a Humanist as responsible for book burning, but as Frances Yates argues, Erasmus' dislike of 'dialectics, metaphysics, or natural philosophy' led, by the strange twists of history, to the smoke and flames rising above literary funeral pyres. 'The humanist dislike of metaphysics and mathematical studies' she writes, 'had turned into Reformation hatred of the past and fear of its magic.'[11] If there is an intelligence behind history, it certainly has a taste for irony.

Another strange irony is that science, briefly in league with its enemy Humanist scholarship, would eventually undermine Hermeticism. Yet for a time, science was a fellow traveller with Hermeticism, just as Hermeticism was considered a fellow traveller with Christianity.

One of the things that troubled St Augustine about Hermes Trismegistus, we remember, was those talking statues he spoke of in the *Asclepius*. That kind of magic was considered demonic and it was this perception of it that someone like Marsilio Ficino had to overcome to have his 'natural magic' deemed acceptable. The link between magic and 'mechanical marvels' has a long history. Hero of Alexandria was, as mentioned in Chapter 2, famous for his mechanical marvels, which included an aeolipile (a kind of steam powered rocket-like engine); a vending machine; a 'wind wheel' (showing a first century AD concern for natural energy); and an entire mechanical play, devised for the theatre, including artificial thunder, what we could call an early form of 'special effects'. Other inventors in Alexandria competed with Hero for acclaim (in *The Rise and Fall of*

Alexandria, Pollard and Reid have a fascinating chapter on Alexandrian automata) and it wouldn't be surprising if some form of these mechanical marvels inspired the idea of the Egyptian talking statues. Later, Arab magicians and inventors became equally interested with the link between magic and mechanics, a fascination that fills the pages of *The Arabian Nights*, with its marvellous tales of automata: flying horses, humanoid robots, and living marionettes (a theme that would later obsess the German Romantic writer E.T.A. Hoffmann, who had a deep interest in Hermetic ideas).

Mechanics also played a great part in the Renaissance 'pagan revival', as seen in the many Renaissance 'magical' gardens filled with pagan and Hermetic images and allegories. One, the garden of the Villa d'Este in Tivoli, used techniques devised by Hero, which included bronze birds perched on artificial trees, which 'sang' when water was pumped through them by a hydraulic device.[12] Another, the Heidelberg castle and garden of Frederick V of the Palatinate, designed by the architect Simon de Caus, included water organs and singing fountains, and was decorated in Hermetic fashion. Sadly, these were destroyed in 1620, at the start of the Thirty Years War.

Hermeticists that followed Ficino, Pico, and Bruno, such as Athanasius Kircher, who we met in Chapter 2, were also fascinated by the magic of mechanics, as was the magician Cornelius Agrippa, who argued that a magician must have a secure knowledge of mathematics, as it is through this that he can perform what he called 'real artificial magic'. As examples of this Agrippa cites the talking statues of the *Asclepius* and the moving statues of the mythical Greek wonder worker Daedalus. Number became an important tool in the magician's workshop when Pico wedded Hermetic philosophy to Hebrew Kabbala. With its emphasis on the mystical value of the Hebrew alphabet, the mastery of which, the Kabbalist believed, would reveal divine secrets, Kabbala was a means of 'knowing the mind of God', something scientists are still eager to do today. And as in the Hebrew alphabet letters have a numerical value, a system developed, called *gematria*, in which different ideas or names were seen to be related because of their numerical identity. (In essence, this was a version of the Hermetic theme of correspondence.) Just as the Greek philosopher-mystic Pythagoras, a member of Ficino's 'Hermetic chain', believed, Kabbala maintained that numbers have a *qualitative* character. Numbers like 1, 2, 3 and 4 have, for Kabbala, a metaphysical and not only a numerical meaning. For it numbers are not merely units in a series, but express metaphysical realities in themselves, an idea we've come across in Chapter 4, when we encountered the alchemist Maria Prophetessa and her enigmatical aphorism: 'One becomes two, two becomes three, and out of the third comes the one as the fourth.' These are

not merely integers, one following the next; they are symbols of spiritual or ontological realities.

But the understanding of number involved in the ‘real artificial magic’ Agrippa spoke of was moving much closer to the purely quantitative aspect of it that we associate with modern mathematics and its application in science and technology. In order to perform ‘real artificial magic’, the magician had to abandon, or at least temporarily put aside, the Kabbalistic kind of ‘mathematical magic’.

Dr Dee

One mathematical magician, versed both in mechanics and Kabbala, was the astrologer and inventor John Dee, like Bruno, a guest, for a time, of the Hermetic emperor Rudolf II. Dee was more of an old school magician than one of the Ficinian type. Famously he and his scryer, Edward Kelly, made contact with several angels who spoke to Dee in a language he called Enochian. (Hermes Trismegistus, we remember, is associated with this Biblical figure, who was a descendant of Adam and is the author of the apocryphal *Book of Enoch*.) Kelly spoke with the angels through a crystal ball, and for a time Dee was held in high esteem. He was Elizabeth I's personal astrologer, although he eventually fell out of favour.

Early in his career, while at Cambridge, Dee devised a mechanical flying scarab, as a special effect for a production of Aristophanes' play *Peace*.[13] The scarab, we know, was an important symbol for the Egyptians, representing the god Khephra, who was associated with the rising sun and the resurrection of Ra after his journey through the underworld. It's not certain how Dee achieved his effect, but many thought black magic must have been involved, since, after all, he was using mathematics. Dee was not the last to combine science and magic. The fascination with mechanical marvels carried on into later centuries, and perhaps reached its high point in the eighteenth century, with the Frenchman Jacques de Vaucanson's flute-playing android and mechanical excreting duck, and the Austrian Wolfgang von Kempelen's celebrated mechanical chess-playing Turk. One eighteenth century Hermeticist — although his modern followers would deny he was one — who was also a scientist and mechanical inventor was the Scandinavian Emanuel Swedenborg. In his early years, Swedenborg, who would later talk to angels and visit heaven, hell, and the planets, drew up plans for a flying carriage, an air gun, and a kind of DIY home entertainment system, among other inventions.[14]

Dee's mathematics, however, had a more serious aspect as well. According to his biographer Benjamin Woolley, Dee's *Propaedeumata Aphoristica*, published in 1568, anticipated in several ways Isaac Newton's epoch-making *Principia Mathematica*, and Dee also argued for the counterintuitive fact that bodies of unequal mass nevertheless fall at the same speed. (The 'discovery' of this is usually attributed to Galileo, who, at least according to his first biographer

Vincenzo Viviani, dropped two cannon balls of unequal mass from the top of the tower of Pisa, to disprove Aristotle's theory that weights of unequal mass would fall at unequal speeds.) Dee also devoted a great deal of thought to the question of the tides, as did Galileo, and seems to have had some intuition of Newton's insight into gravity.[15] And like Newton and Galileo, Dee was a keen astronomer.

Yet Dee, who, like Giordano Bruno, is believed to have been in the employ of the Elizabethan spymaster Sir Francis Walsingham, was eventually accused of black magic and sorcery, and died in poverty and obscurity.[16] It seems that any knowledge outside the Church, whether scientific or Hermetic, was considered dangerous, and mathematical knowledge, whether employed in mechanical calculations or calling Kabbalistic angels, was doubly so.

Here comes the sun

Perhaps the most surprising link between magic and mathematics can be found in what must be the single most important shift in human consciousness marking the beginning of the modern age: the Copernican heliocentric solar system. Like Galileo, Copernicus is usually depicted as a heroic pursuer of truth, an intrepid investigator, fearlessly following his insights to their end. In fact, Copernicus appears to have been a rather timid and pedantic scholar, who changed the way we looked at the universe in spite of himself. As one writer remarked, Copernicus 'was the type that Freud would label an anal erotic, meaning a fusser'.[17] It wasn't a sudden inspiration that led to his new theory, but a nagging obsession with a minor problem in the reigning Ptolemaic system, with its confusing planetary epicycles, without which Copernicus would have left it alone.[18] As it was, Copernicus still kept a great deal of Ptolemy in his new system anyway, and even added to the number of epicycles. It was only at the end of his life that Copernicus agreed to publish his ground-breaking book *On The Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres* (1543). Although he had written it decades earlier, he famously held the first copy in his hands on his deathbed. Friends had urged him to publish it for years, but Copernicus demurred, most likely because of fear of ridicule and a disinclination to be the centre of attention. He also proved to be a less than magnanimous individual. In the preface to the work, Copernicus fails to mention his friend and devoted follower, Rheticus (Georg von Lauchen), who had painstakingly copied out the manuscript after writing about the theory — without, following Copernicus's demand, mentioning its author — in what he called the *First Account*. Rheticus, who had energetically promoted Copernicus' work among scholars and aroused more interest in it than Copernicus ever did, was left out of the picture when Copernicus' achievement became well known.[19]

In the last chapter I mentioned that, while in Oxford, Bruno lectured on Copernicus' theory, and presented it in the context of his own mission to resuscitate ancient Egyptian sun worship. One might think that this was a case of one genius hijacking the work of another, and this, I gather, is what the dons at Oxford thought, although they more than likely didn't consider Bruno a genius. Yet, as Frances Yates makes clear, Copernicus was himself soaked in the Hermetic ideas that fuelled Bruno's vision.

The sun plays a central role in the Hermetic cosmology. In the *Asclepius* Hermes speaks of the sun's 'divinity and holiness' and tells Asclepius that he should think of it as a 'second god'. In Book XVI of the *Corpus Hermeticum* the sun is called 'the craftsman', Plato's name for the demiurge in the *Timaeus*, and its importance is made clear in other Hermetic books. The sun's work, Asclepius tells King Ammon in Book XVI, is to bind heaven and earth, by sending 'essence' down to earth, and raising matter up to itself. Giving freely of its divine light, its fructifying energies reach from above to below, from the clear skies to the profound depths. The sun also had an important role in Ficino's natural magic, being a conduit for the energies of the *anima mundi*.

In introducing his work, two previous thinkers that Copernicus enlists in giving support to his theory are members of the Hermetic Chain of Ficino's *prisca theologia*. Pythagoras, who learned the *prisca theologia* from Aglaophemus (an Orphic initiate), believed that the sun and the planets circled around what he called a 'central fire', and Philolaus, one of Pythagoras' followers, and a teacher of Plato, agreed. But more to the point, Copernicus refers directly to the *Asclepius*, and its appreciation of the sun as a 'visible god'. Copernicus, of course, didn't arrive at his new system through magic, yet the fact that in the Hermetic cosmology the sun occupies a different position than it does in Ptolemy's, as mentioned in the last chapter, combined with the importance Hermes gives it, would have certainly been an influence on Copernicus' thinking. Copernicus was well versed in the Hermetic literature, and as Yates put it, his discovery 'came out with the blessing of Hermes Trismegistus upon its head'.[20] Yet its protracted pregnancy and long labour — Copernicus began the book in 1507 and finished it in 1530, but it didn't see print for another thirteen years — leads one to wonder if it was more than timidity and Copernicus' retiring soul that compelled him to wait until the end of his life to make public his ideas. The anti-Hermes sentiment, we know, was on the rise, and, as we've seen from the career of Bruno, it wouldn't be too long before authors, and not only their books, would be burned.

Monsieur Casaubon

The mathematics behind Dr Dee's flying scarab and Copernicus' heavenly revolutions would, in less than a century, lead to a near complete devaluing of Hermeticism's credibility. But the real hammer to hit the nails in Hermes Trismegistus' coffin — or sarcophagus — was the classical scholar and philologist Isaac Casaubon.

Born in Geneva in 1559 to French Huguenot parents, Casaubon, brilliant scholar that he was, doesn't strike one as a man responsible for a major shift in human consciousness, and in his own career, the part he played in bringing one about appears almost as an afterthought. Casaubon's first lesson in Greek occurred in a cave in the Dauphiné in south-eastern France, following the St Bartholomew Massacre in 1572 that killed Peter Ramus, Bruno's rival memory theorist. Hiding from angry Catholics was a part of everyday life for Isaac, whose father was the head of a Huguenot congregation, and until he was nineteen the only schooling he received was at home or on the run. In 1578 he was sent to the Academy of Geneva where, after a few years, at only twenty-two, he succeeded his teacher, the Cretan Francis Portius, as a professor of Greek. Casaubon was devoted to study. He spent all his money on books, and made copies of texts that were not yet in print. He remained in Geneva until 1596, when he secured a position at the University of Montpellier in France. His stay in Montpellier, however, was less successful than his time in Geneva, and after a few years Casaubon set himself up as an independent editor of the classics.

His star began to rise in 1600 when he was invited by Henry IV — Henry of Navarre, whose marriage to the sister of Charles IX in 1572 sparked the massacres that had Isaac's family hiding in caves — to come to Paris. There he became embroiled in the increasingly dangerous religious and political rows between Catholics and Protestants. But through his readings of the church fathers, Casaubon himself had arrived at an compromise position, a 'middle way' that occupied the demilitarized zone between Calvinism and Ultramontanism, the zealous belief that the pope was the absolute ruler and final arbiter of the Christian faith. Yet the partisans on either side saw this as merely fence-sitting, and each vied with the other to secure his full support. By 1610, Casaubon had enjoyed a pension from the king for many years, and had been

appointed the head of his library, and he was generally regarded as the most learned man in Europe. But when Henry IV was assassinated on 14 May 1610, by François Ravaillac, a Catholic fanatic, Isaac knew his position was shaky. Henry IV himself had converted from Calvinism to Catholicism in order to accept the throne in 1589. His Edict of Nantes of 1598 secured religious freedom for Protestants, and although it ended the religious civil war ravaging France, the Catholic powers were never happy with it. With Henry IV's murder, the Ultramontane party had shifted into power and Casaubon realized he would have to move on.

He had met and befriended Henry Wotton, the English diplomat and poet, years before in Geneva. In October 1610 Casaubon travelled to London with Wotton's brother, Edward, Baron of Marley, the English ambassador, having accepted an invitation from the Archbishop of Canterbury to come to England. Casaubon's 'middle way' seemed a perfect fit with Anglicanism, and to have the most learned man in Europe espousing the English path between two undesirable extremes seemed a good idea. Casaubon was received warmly by James I, and eventually he was commissioned by the king to write a criticism of the Italian cardinal, church historian and almost-pope Caesar Baronius' vast *Annales Ecclesiastici* (1588–1607), a twelve volume history of the Church. It was while trawling through this Counter Reformation response to Protestant attacks on Catholicism that Casaubon's philological expertise undermined the credibility of the thrice-great one, or at least of some of his most well known works.

Baronius was no spin-doctor or propagandist for the Church. The nineteenth century British historian Lord Acton called his *Annales* the greatest church history ever written, and he was known for his deep love of truth and personal honesty. He's said to have coined the term 'Dark Ages', and when discussing the controversy around Galileo, to have quipped that 'the Bible tells us how to go to heaven, not how the heavens go', suggesting that truth, and not dogma, was important to him. But Baronius' Greek was not exemplary, and neither was the textual scholarship of the material he had to work with. Casaubon's brief was to apply his own philological acuity to the learned cardinal's great opus.

It was while doing this that Casaubon discovered something. Baronius repeated what the church father Lactantius had said about how Hermes Trismegistus, as well as the Sibyls, had prophesized the coming of Christ. Casaubon's urbane Humanist instincts were alerted. Hermes Trismegistus was, he knew, supposed to be the great sage behind Plato, yet Casaubon knew there was no mention of Hermes Trismegistus, or the Sibyls, anywhere in Plato. There wasn't any in Aristotle either, or in any of the other great pagan thinkers who were supposed to have been the recipients of his wisdom. That was odd. You

would think that if Hermes Trismegistus was the fount of the knowledge that reached Plato via Aglaophemus, Pythagoras, and Philolaus, Plato would have mentioned him somewhere in all of his many writings. But he doesn't. Not even once. The good cardinal wasn't responsible for this — he was, after all, only recounting what previous church historians and chroniclers had said, and he had simply taken them at face value. But Casaubon couldn't, his urbane Humanist integrity wouldn't let him. He didn't deny that there most likely was a *real* Hermes Trismegistus, some time in the dim past. But his philological instincts told Casaubon that however wise this individual was, he couldn't have written the works attributed to him, and certainly not the *Corpus Hermeticum*.

Looking at these books closely, Casaubon came to the conclusion that they were more likely Christian forgeries, pious frauds got up in the early days of Christianity for perhaps good reasons, to anchor the Church's authority in the wisdom of the ancients and to convince pagans that Christ was merely the fulfilment of what the earlier sages had only hinted at. But they were false all the same. The Greek these texts were written in was not an early Greek, but a Greek of a later style, using a later vocabulary; it was not the Greek that someone earlier than Plato would have used. It was the Greek of the first few centuries after the birth of the Saviour, the Greek, most likely, of Roman Alexandria. And the similarity between themes in the *Corpus Hermeticum* and Plato wasn't explained by the fact that Plato had learned from Hermes, but by the more likely story that the authors of these forgeries borrowed Platonic ideas. There was nothing to suggest that the 'wisdom' in them originated in ancient Egypt. The Christian echoes were too clear for that. If we want to be specific, there were traces of the *Timaeus*, St Paul, *Genesis*, and St John's Gospel. There were other traces too, but the idea was clear.

Sometime around 100 AD in Alexandria, some enthusiastic Christians, hoping to bring pagans over to the true faith, concocted these forgeries, and to give them as powerful an authority as they could, they attributed them to a wise man of the past. Their readers most likely would not have had training in textual analysis and so they were accepted as true. Then, with the collapse of Rome, they entered the maelstrom of the dark times, and when they were recovered, the enthusiastic Ficino — a great *reader* perhaps, but no true scholar, otherwise he would have noticed the absence of Hermes in Plato — accepted them at face value. Having already been impressed by the *Asclepius* Ficino didn't doubt these texts' authenticity, and until now, no real scholar has laid eyes on them. Did Lactantius *know* they were fakes? Casaubon might have asked. Perhaps. A good cause may require regrettable means. And the *Asclepius*? True, the Greek text was lost, but guilt by association is difficult to shed. Most likely it, too, was cut of the same

cloth. Yet, these were not the only mistakes the good cardinal's history passed on, and the diligent Casaubon rolled up his ecclesiastical sleeves and got back to work …

Thus the glory of the thrice-great one was reduced to the stature of a well-meaning lie. It was not the most explosive transition from one view of the cosmos to another, but it was one just the same.

Casaubon's demolition job was housed in his detailed critique of a equally detailed history of the Church and, although he was considered the most learned man in Europe, it took some time before his revelations became widely known. And when they did, they did not have an immediate effect. But it was only a matter of time. Yet Casaubon himself would not be aware of the results of his philological nitpicking. Baronius died after completing his *Annales*. Casaubon died after completing his critique of only the first half of the *Annales*' first volume, which was published in 1614. His last years were not cheerful. James I was an increasingly unpopular king and because of his intimacy with him, Casaubon shared in this. Others around the king resented a Frenchman enjoying English privileges, and Casaubon was the recipient of a variety of insults, abuses, and even assaults. A malformation of his bladder plagued him, and he aggravated it by his tendency to overdo his studies. He was by contemporary standards a workaholic and would have benefited by following some of Ficino's anti-Saturnine regimes. It was his desire to leave none of the cardinal's mistakes uncorrected that finally killed him — which does not speak well of Baronius' work — and he is buried in Westminster Abbey. His fame as a scholar exceeded his life and soon passed into the realm of myth. The dry as dust mythologist Mr. Casaubon in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1874) is based on him, as is the scholar in Umberto Eco's anti-Hermetic 1988 novel *Foucault's Pendulum*. Curiously, 1614, the year of Casaubon's death, saw the publication of what is considered another esoteric literary hoax, one that may have been linked to the now discredited Hermetic works.

After Casaubon

Although Casaubon's criticisms discredited the idea that the *Corpus Hermeticum* was written in primordial times, he may have inadvertently secured an even more unassailable status for the thrice-great one. As Antoine Faivre remarked, Casaubon's exposé may have helped to reinforce the belief in a hidden tradition which was now 'all the more secret or primordial because one could no longer date it'.[21] Of course, the value of a philosophical or spiritual text isn't anchored in its author or when it was written, but in its content, and by this standard — the only one by which they should be judged — the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the *Asclepius* and the other *Hermetica* remain important works in the same way that the Gospels are important religious texts regardless of when they were written. Yet by the time of Casaubon's dating, the 'quarrel between the ancients and the moderns' was getting into full swing, and the thinkers embodying the deficient mode of the mentalrational consciousness structure — inaugurated by Petrarch — were busy excising what remained of the earlier animistic view of the cosmos from western consciousness.

But although Casaubon's dating clearly lowered Hermes Trismegistus' cachet among many, indeed most scholars, it did not, as Yates suggests, mark his death. It took some time for the ripples of Casaubon's work to reach beyond the readers of church history, and even some of these were not entirely convinced of its significance. Ralph Cudworth and Henry More, the central figures among the Cambridge Platonists, accepted Casaubon's assessment of some, but not all, of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. Some of the treatises, they thought, could be Christian forgeries, but not all of them. And while Cudworth and More thought that Hermes himself was no longer a viable figure, the idea of a *prisca theologia* rooted in Egyptian wisdom was still, they believed, of much value and could continue without the thrice-great one.[22] The great Egyptian may have become a liability, they thought, but the *philosophia perennis* associated with his name could get along without him.[23]

Another important figure to carry on the Hermetic tradition post-Casaubon was the sixteenth century Italian magician and philosopher Tommaso Campanella.

Like Giordano Bruno, whose career his own parallels in many ways, Campanella was a devotee of Ficino's star magic and believed he was destined

to lead a magical-religious reform that would inaugurate a new age of Egyptian Hermeticism, something along the lines of the Hermetic Restoration following the decline of Egypt predicted in the *Asclepius*. Unfortunately, when Campanella tried to put these ideas into political action, during a revolt against Spanish-Habsburg rule in his native Calabria in 1598, the uprising was quickly crushed and he was arrested. He was tortured and spent the next twenty-seven years in prison and Campanella only escaped Bruno's fate by pretending to be mad, an example of the kind of survival skills Bruno lacked. This wasn't the first time Campanella enjoyed the comforts of a Catholic cell. Like Bruno, Campanella had joined the Dominican order and like Bruno he soon found himself running afoul of it. In 1593 he was arrested in Padua on charges of heresy, specifically for preaching the idea of a world soul, Ficino's *anima mundi*. After being transferred to Rome in 1594 he was released in 1595, most likely because of a treatise he addressed to Pope Clement VIII, in which he portrayed him as monarch of a vast universal religious and political union, transferring to Clement VIII a destiny Campanella had envisioned for himself. He also supported the aims of the Spanish monarchy, a sign, Yates remarks, of Campanella's willingness to say the right thing when necessary, an acceptance of *realpolitik* that the older Bruno could have used. As his failed revolt suggests, Campanella's advocacy of Spanish rule dissipated when it opened the door of his cell. Years later, though, Campanella would radically change his views on Spain, and see it as a candidate for a universal Hermetic-Catholic empire.

Toward the end of 1597, Campanella left Rome and headed to Naples. There he met with astrologers who confirmed his view that the heavens portended great changes on Earth, specifically in the political and religious affairs of Europe. It was these signs that convinced him that it was time to put his Hermetic ideas into practice. Campanella seems to have misread the stars; his revolt was a disaster and in 1599 he was back in prison, this time for a much longer stay.

Although tortured, he put his confinement to good use and while in prison Campanella wrote the work he is most known for, the utopian *City of the Sun*. It was first published in Germany in 1623, using a manuscript smuggled out by some of Campanella's followers. Although traces of Plato's *Republic* can be found in it –as is the case with practically every western utopia — the central influence on the *City of the Sun* seems to be the strange city of Adocentyn, mentioned in the *Picatrix*. This is the city that Hermes Trismegistus is supposed to have built in 'the east of Egypt' and in which he used magic to accomplish amazing things. In Adocentyn Hermes' magic could regulate the Nile, make himself invisible, animate statues to act as guardians of the city's gates, raise a multi-coloured lighthouse — whose radiations would mimic those of the stars —

and perhaps most spectacular, use talismans to make its citizens virtuous, a remedy for anti-social behaviour one could only wish worked. A similar magical atmosphere inhabits Campanella's solar city, one soaked through and through by the power of the stars. Stellar magic is even responsible for a form of eugenics there. Only astrologically correct couples can mate, and only then when the stars are in the best position to ensure a beneficial issue. The city itself is divided into seven sections, following the octave of the seven Hermetic planets, and in its centre is a vast temple, perfectly round, with a great domed ceiling covered with symbols of the stars and their powers, a model of the macrocosm.

Everything about Campanella's city is arranged in order to achieve the most beneficial correspondence with the heavens, as if some Hermetic social planner had used Ficino's *On Making Your Life Agree With the Heavens* as a blueprint. The social order mirrored this as well, with a Sun Priest (most likely modelled on Campanella himself; like Bruno, he entertained messianic fantasies) as the supreme ruler, a nod to the Copernican theory, of which Campanella was an advocate. Along with the heavens, also worshipped were the great teachers and magi, members of the *prisca theologia*. At the head of these was Christ, who Campanella, like Pico, saw as a great magus.

One difference between Campanella and Bruno was Campanella's belief that the magical reform he envisioned could be carried out within the structure of the Church. In fact, for him it was the natural place for it. For all his heretical beliefs, Campanella accepted the Catholic framework and was in the Pico tradition that linked Hermetic magic with the powers of the angels. In 1628, after his release from prison, he even performed some Ficinian star magic for Pope Urban VIII, who wanted to avoid the baleful emanations of an eclipse.[24] Campanella suggested to Urban VIII that the magic he could perform for one person — it was successful; Urban VIII survived the eclipse — could, under the right conditions, be performed for an entire people, the sort of thing Hermes Trismegistus accomplished in Adocentyn. Urban VIII was, like Alexander VI, a magical pope — at least he had a deep interest in astrology — and Campanella hoped he would adopt his reforms. Another power broker Campanella tried to interest in his ideas was Cardinal Richelieu. But it was not until 1643, a year after Richelieu's death, that France would see the reign of its own Sun King, Louis XIV.

The great Fludd

Campanella can be excused for continuing on in the Hermetic tradition in spite of Casaubon's debunking, as he was in prison when Casaubon's work was published, and had little chance to read it. Even with reading privileges, one can hardly imagine his jailers allowing him access to a Protestant critique of Roman Catholic history. But others knew of Casaubon and carried on in spite of him. One of these was Athanasius Kircher. Another was the philosopher Robert Fludd.

According to his biographer, Fludd 'lived at the very end of the era in which it was possible for one mind to encompass the whole of learning'.[25] A look at Fludd's wide interests, which encompassed medicine, mathematics, astrology, music, the art of war, divination, mechanics, and the art of memory, suggests this is no exaggeration. Fludd was one of those embarrassingly prolific individuals who, for one reason or another, seem very rare in our time. His polymath abilities would have earned him a dozen modern degrees. Like his contemporary Kircher, Fludd was a firm believer in the *prisca theologia* and in the ability of man, the microcosm, to house the cosmos, the macrocosm, and his own quest for knowledge suggests he took this notion literally. This macrocosm/microcosm theme had a more than philosophical application. Based on his Copernican vision of the heart as the sun and the blood as the planets, Fludd speculated on the cardiovascular system and arrived at a correct picture of it earlier than his contemporary, William Harvey, who is usually accredited with establishing it.[26] Equally impressive are Fludd's ideas for 'mechanical marvels'. Patents for variations on his 'perpetual motion machine', based on the work of Hero and Archimedes, were being taken out as late as the 1870s. As with John Dee, science and Hermeticism were equal partners in Fludd. His goal was to 'summarize the knowledge of both the universe and man', and in the pursuit of this Fludd was not going to let Casaubon's' philological fussing get in the way.[27]

Robert Fludd was born in Bearsted, Kent, in 1574, to a prestigious family. His father was Sir Thomas Fludd, who was knighted by Elizabeth I for his services to England as war treasurer in the Netherlands. At seventeen Fludd entered St John's College in Oxford. Although St John's offered a wide range of studies, its focus was on theology, and Fludd did not escape this emphasis. According to J.B. Craven, after his graduation in 1598, Fludd remained 'a faithful and

attached friend and member of the Church of England'.[28] Like other Renaissance Hermeticists, Fludd wanted to find the common ground shared by the teachings of the Church and those of Hermes Trismegistus. One of his aims in later life would be to bring together the creation myths voiced in *Genesis* and the *Poimandres*, a goal that hearkens back to the efforts of Pico della Mirandola.

After graduating, Fludd spent several years travelling in Europe, journeying through France, Spain, Italy, and Germany. It was during these journeys that he most likely came upon the ideas of Paracelsus, the 'northern Hermes'. Paracelsus, who died in 1562, had developed an alchemical system of 'alternative health'. Based on understanding the inner workings of nature, the properties of plants, and their use in medicines, it also included the influence of the stars, and, perhaps most important in the context of Hermeticism, the power of the imagination. Paracelsus called the imagination an 'inner firmament', a handy way of referring to the Hermetic notion that the mind of man — the microcosm — contains the universe — the macrocosm. Through his contact with Paracelsian ideas, Fludd developed an interest in alchemy and chemistry; the two had yet to split into separate pursuits. He also developed an interest in the occult sciences, in other words, Hermeticism and Kabbala. In Chapter 4, I spoke of the differences between the southern, Florentine Hermeticism, and its northern Paracelsian brother. In Fludd, the two streams came together, and in many ways, the Hermeticism familiar to contemporary students, which combines alchemy and the 'cosmic' vision of the Alexandrian Hermeticists, has its roots in Fludd's work.

After his travels Fludd returned to Oxford, where he entered Christ Church and worked toward degrees in medicine. Yet his growing mystical and occult interests troubled his colleagues. Perhaps a memory of Bruno's visit raised some eyebrows, but the fact that with Bruno and Paracelsus, Fludd seems to have shared a strong streak of arrogance, can't have helped. Bruno and Paracelsus found it difficult to suffer fools gladly. From most accounts it seems Fludd did too. One example of this was a dressing down he received from the college authorities over his insistence on the superiority of chemical medicines (drugs, an idea he absorbed from Paracelsus) over the remedies of Galen. Known as the 'father of western medicine', Galen was a Greek-Roman physician of the second century AD, whose theories dominated medical thought for more than a millennium; in many ways he could be seen as the Aristotle of medicine. Paracelsus infuriated the learned doctors of his time by suggesting that they should abandon Galen and concentrate instead on reading the book of nature, which contained the recipes for dozens of cures. These were the chemical remedies Fludd championed, and just as Paracelsus did, he caught flak for it.

Paracelsus also angered his contemporaries by his concern for the poor and for treating them free of charge. Ficino didn’t accept a fee for his services either, and with the strong emphasis on imagination in both thinkers, it seems clear that Paracelsus, the northern Hermes, was influenced by his southern brothers.

Fludd managed to steer through these difficulties, and by 1610 he had received his degrees in medicine, and a license to practise. His combative character delayed his acceptance into the Fellowship of the College of Physicians of London, but after two attempts he was received. He established a practice in London where by all accounts he was successful. Fludd maintained a laboratory, where he conducted alchemical and medical experiments. He also was able to employ his own apothecary, rather like your local GP having a Boots to himself. But Fludd’s success wasn’t based solely on his academic studies. Like Ficino and Paracelsus, Fludd seemed to have had a charismatic, ‘magnetic’ personality — ‘magnetic’ in the way that another occult physician, the eighteenth century Austrian healer Anton Mesmer, would make popular. (The term ‘mesmerised’, meaning hypnotised, derives from him.) He seemed to exert a healing influence on his patients, which suggests that Fludd may have been a natural healer. Like Ficino and Paracelsus, he also used astrology in his work, fine-tuning his prescriptions to the specific needs of his patients, a ‘patient friendly’ approach that had baffled Paracelsus’ contemporaries and no doubt Fludd’s as well.

The Rosy Cross

Amidst all this Fludd found time to write, and among his many interests one in particular began to dominate his mind. Earlier I mentioned that in 1614, the year that Casaubon delivered his bombshell, another esoteric literary ‘hoax’ appeared on the scene. Whether the two are directly linked is unclear. But the fact that as one set of mystical writings were losing their grip on Europe’s intelligentsia, another dramatically arrived, begs the question of a connection.

Elsewhere I have written at length about the mysterious Rosicrucian Brotherhood.[29] Here I want to concentrate on its role as psychopomp, in leading Hermes Trismegistus and his followers into the underworld. If Isaac Casaubon’s scholarly acumen led to the death of Hermes Trismegistus, with the Rosicrucians, the Hermetic philosophy, which they embodied in a new form, became a *secret teaching*. There had of course been select, élite groups dedicated to different mystical beliefs in the past. Pythagoras founded one, and perhaps the most well known ‘secret’ gatherings — if we can allow this oxymoron — were those associated with the Mysteries of Eleusis. But with the Rosicrucians we get, I believe, the first occult ‘secret society’ in the modern sense, because with them the occult — Hermetic philosophy — goes underground.

Briefly, the Rosicrucian story is this. In 1614, in Cassel, Germany, a pamphlet appeared announcing the existence of secret society, the Fraternity of the Rosy Cross. The pamphlet’s readers were invited to seek out the society and join it in its work. This was nothing less than the religious, scientific, social, and political reformation of Europe, a reformation the pamphlet couched in obscure astrological and Hermetic language with clear anti-Catholic and anti-Habsburg tones. In the following two years more strange Rosicrucian pamphlets appeared, and soon a ‘Rosicrucian furore’ spread across the continent. Yet who the Rosicrucians were exactly remained unclear, as every attempt to contact them met with silence. The Rosicrucian brothers proved so covert that they were soon nicknamed ‘the Invisibles’. Because of this, many people began to believe that the whole thing was a hoax, and in the end, Johann Valentin Andreae, a Lutheran pastor and one of the authors of the Rosicrucian documents, admitted that at least one of them, *The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz* (1616), a strange alchemical text, was what he called a *ludibrium*, which translates as a ‘serious joke’. As Andreae was a literary man, fascinated with the

theatre, this meant that the Rosicrucian documents were a kind of ‘play’ with a nevertheless serious intent.

The Rosicrucians’ own story about who they were, however, was unambiguous. The *Fama Fraternitas* (‘The Fame of the Brotherhood’), the pamphlet announcing their arrival, told the story of the brotherhood’s founder, Christian Rosenkreutz. In search of secret knowledge, Christian travelled in the east, where, among other places, he reached the mysterious city of Damcar. In Chapter 4, I mentioned that Damcar has been identified by some as Harran, the Hermetic city in ancient Mesopotamia. After his travels, which took him to Arabia and Morocco, Christian returned to Europe. Here he hoped to pass on the wisdom he had gathered to congenial minds and to enlist them in his mission to spark a general reform of Christendom. Unfortunately, he met only with derision, so in Germany, he decided to build a temple to house his knowledge. Five years later he again set out to travel across Europe, but this time he was joined by a few followers. Eventually they separated, and these original Brothers of the Rosy Cross (Rosenkreutz means ‘rose cross’ in German) went to different lands, in order to spread the word. Eventually, in 1484, Christian died — he was said to have been 106, having been born in 1378 — and knowledge of the brotherhood passed into myth. Yet, in 1604, a year signalled by heavenly events, such as the discovery of ‘new stars’ in the constellations Serpentarius and Cygnus, the tomb of Christian Rosenkreutz was discovered. (A supernova — an exploding star — was sighted in that year by Johannes Kepler, and it is called both Supernova 1604 and Kepler’s Supernova.) There, within a seven-sided vault illuminated by a kind of miniature sun, lay Christian’s uncorrupted body. Geometrical figures covered the walls, and within were discovered works by Paracelsus, and a variety of mechanical marvels, including something the authors of the *Fama* called ‘artificial songs’. Also within was a strange book containing Christian’s secret knowledge. For the tomb’s discoverers, this marked the renewal of Christian’s reforming mission, and so they travelled throughout the land, spreading word of the coming momentous changes.

Frances Yates suggests that the Rosicrucians may be linked to the sect of Giordanisti that Bruno is believed to have founded in Germany, and there are also possible ties with Tommaso Campanella. Some of Campanella’s followers were members of what the historian Christopher McIntosh calls the ‘Tubingen Circle’, which included Johann Valentin Andreae, and Andreae may have read the manuscript of *The City of The Sun* they smuggled to Germany, where it was later published.[30] Other possible sources for the brotherhood are the Paracelsian groups that rose up after the northern Hermes’ death, such as the *Orden der Unzertrennlichen* (Order of the Inseparables) and the *Fruchtbringende*

Gesellschaft (Fruit-Bringing Society), whose odd name for English readers means ‘fructifying’ or ‘fruitful’.

The origins of the Rosicrucians remain a mystery, but that needn’t detain us here. What seems important is that by this time, the Hermetic science they promoted, and through which they hoped to bring about the kind of reformation of Christendom envisioned by both Bruno and Campanella, had gone *underground*. Ficino, Pico, Bruno, and Dee were very much out in the open about their Hermetic beliefs. They talked to popes and queens about them. And we’ve seen how attempts were made by many scholars to bring Hermetic ideas and Christian faith together. Now, following the Church’s rejection of Hermes, the Protestant attack on magic, and Casaubon’s Humanist debunking of the primordial status of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, Hermetic science had to disguise itself. In fact, it had to become so covert that it actually turned ‘invisible’, as the Rosicrucians seem to have been. No longer is only the *knowledge* pursued by the Hermeticists ‘occult’, meaning ‘occluded’, that is unseen; now its proponents must be too. And as I’ve suggested elsewhere it is with this turn of events that modern occultism begins.[31] Freemasonry, Swedenborgianism, Mesmerism, the occult revival of the nineteenth century, Theosophy, Anthroposophy, Gurdjieff, Jung, and the rest of the ‘alternative’ systems that make up the occult ‘counterculture’ of the west: all, in different ways, emerge from the reservoir of ‘rejected knowledge’ formed by the ‘death’ of Hermes Trismegistus. Yet Hermes’ tenure in the underworld, like that of the sun god Ra, may only be temporary, and may, as the name of one of the most famous Hermetic societies of the late nineteenth century had it, be heading toward a golden dawn.

The central agent in this subterranean exodus wasn’t the Church, or its Protestant reformers, or even the Humanists. They too, sooner or later, would, in different ways fall under siege by the power that was initially exerting pressure on Hermeticism. What was at work was a shift in human consciousness, and the visible sign of this was the rise of science.

Mechanical monsters

Robert Fludd's first published work was a impassioned defence of the Rosicrucians, who by this time had become the object of much calumny. The *Apologia Compendiaria Fraternitatem de Rosea Cruce suspicionis et infamiae maculis aspersam, veritatis quasi Fluctibus abluens et abstergens* appeared in 1616, and as its long title suggests, Fludd took defending the Rosicrucians seriously. There is a slight 'serious joke', however, in the title, as its English translation makes clear: A Compendious Apology for the Fraternity of the Rosy Cross, pelted with the mire of suspicion and infamy, but now cleansed with the waters of truth. As Fludd's own name translates as *de fluctibus* in Latin, the 'waters of truth' here are Fludd's own. This was the only facetious thing about Fludd's work. Fludd's defence rested on his linking the Brotherhood to the *prisca theologia*, and he argues that the magic the fraternity employs is both scientific and holy. In this statement alone it's clear that Fludd is fighting a war on two fronts.

In 1617 Fludd followed up his opening salvo with another Rosicrucian defence, the *Tractatus Apologeticus*, and his immense work, *Utriusque Cosmi Historia* — its full title is longer than that of his *Apologia* — also published in 1617, is probably the most complete exposition of the philosophy of the macrocosm and the microcosm — the above and the below — conceivable. It covers optics, music, mechanics, hydraulics, astrology, geomancy, and much more. Not surprisingly, its pages are filled with quotations from Ficino's translations of the *Corpus Hermeticum.* Fludd quotes Ficino so often that, as Yates suggests, he probably knew him by heart. Yet oddly, Fludd dedicated this colossal text to James I, the same king who provided Casaubon with the opportunity to undermine the authority of the work on which, more than any other, Fludd's own depended. As in the case of Kircher, Fludd seems to be one of the last great dinosaurs, doggedly holding on in an age no longer suited to his survival. His salutation of James I as 'Ter Maximus', one of Hermes Trismegistus' titles, thus linking the king to the founder of the science he is trying to defend, seems, in hindsight, somewhat desperate. This seems especially so when we recall that James I snubbed John Dee, and that his own distaste of the occult materialized in a book, *Demonologie*, attacking witchcraft.

But the real battle Fludd faced wasn't with Casaubon, but with the Catholic

monk, theologian, philosopher, music theorist, and mathematician Marin Mersenne.

Mersenne was born in 1588 in the province of Maine in France. He was educated by the Jesuits and at the age of twenty-three he joined the Minim Friars, a Catholic religious order founded in Italy in the fifteenth century and noted for its devotion and humility. In 1620 Mersenne entered the convent of L'Annonciade in Paris, where he studied mathematics and music; one of his fellow students there was the philosopher and mathematician René Descartes, with whom Mersenne became friends, and Mersenne's musical studies led him to being known as the 'father of acoustics'. Mersenne was what we would today call a 'networker', bringing together thinkers of like mind, and disseminating their ideas. He corresponded widely with a number of scientists and scholars, among them the Dutch poet Constantijn Huygens, father of the astronomer Christian Huygens, accredited with the wave theory of light. Mersenne was also a devotee of Galileo, and a friend of Galileo's staunch defender, Pierre Gassendi. He also knew Campanella and at one point asked Descartes if he would like to meet him. Descartes declined.

In 1623 Mersenne published a huge, unwieldy, and unclassifiable work, *Quaestiones Celeberrimae in Genesim*, a disjointed commentary on the *Book of Genesis*. In essence, though, it really was a protracted polemic against the Hermetic world view. Using the account of creation in Genesis, Mersenne launched into a bitter attack on magic, divination, Kabbala, pantheism, astral magic, the *anima mundi*, and perhaps most energetically, animism, the idea that the universe was a living, sentient being with whom man could communicate. As you might expect, the targets of Mersenne's attack were the familiar followers of the thrice-great one. Ficino's use of talismans and images, and his belief that through these man could draw down forces from the stars, is presented as not only against church doctrine — Mersenne's critique is in the service of *both* orthodox Catholicism and the new mechanical science — but insane.[32] But Ficino is not alone. Pico's belief in magical Kabbala is also singled out, as is Agrippa's own magic. Bruno and Campanella are not spared, nor are Hermetic apologists such as Francesco Patrizi, and the recent Rosicrucian upstarts come in for it too. But the central recipient of Mersenne's animus is the arch-Hermeticist and Rosicrucian defender Robert Fludd.

In Mersenne's eyes, Fludd represents a dangerous attempt to turn back the clock, to revive or at least keep on life-support a view of man and the cosmos that is outmoded, outworn, and out of touch with reality. If, as Joscelyn Godwin argues, Fludd wanted to promote a philosophy that 'combines the practical examination of nature with a spiritual view of the universe as an intelligent

hierarchy of beings, which draws its wisdom from all possible sources, and which sees the proper end of man as the direct knowledge of God', Mersenne wanted to show that this was a misguided project and a complete waste of time.[33] Not only that, it was also a blasphemous impediment to the growth of real knowledge, which, at this point, meant the kind of *quantitative*, mechanical knowledge associated with Galileo and later Descartes. As Frances Yates writes, Mersenne was 'actively combating Renaissance animism and magical conceptions in order to clear a way for the new times', those new times being our own scientific, rationalist, decidedly un-magical world.[34] Mersenne was, in other words, one of us. It's no surprise that his friend Descartes would later argue that only man had an interior world — a soul — and that animals were merely a kind of machine, and that the world was moved not by an *anima mundi*, but by purely mechanical forces, thus introducing the debilitating mind-body divide that has plagued us ever since. If Petrarch had one foot in the Middle Ages and the other in the fledgling modern world, Mersenne has both feet firmly planted in modernity.

Gebser again

Earlier in this chapter I wrote that, by the time of Casaubon's bombshell 'the thinkers embodying the deficient mode of the mentalrational consciousness structure — inaugurated by Petrarch — were busy excising what remained of the earlier animistic view of the cosmos from western consciousness'. Here let me explain what I meant.

By the time of Casaubon's dating, and Mersenne's attack on Fludd and the whole Hermetic tradition, the deficient mode of the mentalrational consciousness structure (introduced in Chapter 5) had, according to Jean Gebser, been dominant for three centuries. As mentioned, in Gebser's scheme, the mentalrational structure is the most distanced and separated from what he calls 'origin', an a-temporal, non-spatial, non-manifest reality not dissimilar to the Hermetic 'One, the All'. The previous consciousness structures, the archaic, magical, and mythic, all enjoy a greater *participation* in the world. The archaic structure is practically identified with it, the magical experiences consciousness as *unified* with its surroundings, and the mythic, as I remarked in Chapter 2, sees its inner world *reflected* in the outer one. It is only with the rise of the mentalrational structure that consciousness feels completely separated from the cosmos.

This allows for greater freedom and individuation, and was absolutely necessary for the development of an independent, self-conscious ego, an 'I' able to think for itself and to actualize free choice, something absent in the previous structures. But it also gives rise to some problems. One is a sense of cosmic alienation. The mathematician, physicist, and religious thinker Blaise Pascal was born in the same year that Mersenne published his anti-Hermetic polemic. Pascal was a prodigy, and at the age of twelve, he was sitting in on mathematics discussions in Mersenne's cell, along with thinkers such as Descartes. Pascal grew up in the anti-animistic world that Mersenne's work celebrated, and, regarding the vast, empty, oblivious universe we are all familiar with, he would write in his *Pensées*, 'the eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me'.

It is true that the earlier Ptolemaic cosmos was a cosier place, with Earth at the centre and the humming crystalline planetary spheres gracefully doing their rounds. But Bruno's infinite cosmos full of innumerable worlds was just as infinite as the inanimate spaces that terrified Pascal. Yet Bruno wasn't frightened

by them; indeed, he was eager to get to them. Likewise, although the Hermeticists envisioned a cosmos similar to the Ptolemaic one, they also strove to break out of it, to pierce the cosmic shell and enter a space 'beyond heaven where there are no stars'. There's nothing cosy about this. It is not simply the increased size of the universe that troubles Pascal, but its *silence*. It is unaware of him, or of anyone else, and this is a problem that the unavoidable rise of the mentalrational structure precipitates. It provides us with a dead, inert universe, that is utterly oblivious of us, or of anything, and which originated in an unfathomable explosion countless aeons ago. Bruno's universe is just as infinite, but it is a universe with which we can in some way communicate, or, as I would better put it, participate. The universe that emerges from Mersenne's anti-Hermetic attack — the universe, that is, that we all know — is one in which this is impossible, and in which any attempt to do this is simply considered insane. I am not sure of the exact date when this sort of sensibility begins — Mersenne may be the one who starts it — but an interesting study would be to find the point in western history when the belief in being able to communicate with nature — the world — which is the essence of animism, is declared a sign of madness. Not black magic or demonism, but madness, that is, in our modern sense of the term. Originally madness meant in some way being privy to the gods. This in itself is an interesting turnaround. Where before madness meant proximity to the gods, today talk of the gods is seen as a sign of madness.

As Gebser and others, such as the spiritual scientist Rudolf Steiner, argue, the rise of the mentalrational structure, its entering its deficient mode, and all the developments that accompany this, were — are — unavoidable, and it would be easy to agree with Mersenne and see Fludd and the whole course of modern 'underground' Hermeticism as a futile attempt to stay within earlier consciousness structures, in this case the magical and mythic.[35] And it is true, I think, that in some cases, a turn toward the occult and magic *is* simply an attempt to avoid the 'stranded' feeling of modern consciousness by plunging into earlier modes. But a look at the sophisticated systems that Fludd, Kircher, Ficino and others produced suggests that there is something more at work here than an expression of cosmic nostalgia. As Joscelyn Godwin writes of Fludd, but which can be equally said of his fellow Hermeticists and Rosicrucians, he was pursuing the 'possibility … of a cosmic view free alike from the myopia of materialism and the absurdities of naïve spiritualism'. [36] In the opening chapter of this book, I remarked that the aim of gnosis was not to become simply overwhelmed by it, but to capture some of its insights so that they can be transformed into *episteme*, turning them into the kind of knowledge that can be passed on to others. This, I

think, is what Fludd and the other Renaissance Hermeticists were precisely about. To strive to be *absorbed* in the cosmos, to obliterate one's individual, discrete, separated consciousness and melt into the infinite buoyant waters would, I think, qualify as an attempt to slip back into a previous consciousness structure. (This, in many ways, seems to be what happens under the influence of psychedelic drugs.) But that is not what Fludd or the other Hermeticists are doing. In this sense they are not 'mystics', although, to be sure, mysticism will be a charge made against them by more 'modern' thinkers. They do not want to *lose* their individuality in the world, but to communicate with it, and you cannot communicate with the world if you are lost in it. As Glenn Alexander Magee writes, 'salvation for the Hermeticists was… through gnosis, through understanding'.[37] You cannot have gnosis — knowledge, understanding — without a knower and a known, even if these two ultimately are in some way one.

Magee is writing from the perspective of understanding one of western thought's greatest figures, the nineteenth century philosopher G.W.F. Hegel, in terms of Hermeticism. Hegel was one of the many minds in the west who were influenced by the stream of Hermetic and esoteric thought that went underground following the work of Casaubon and Mersenne. Goethe, his great contemporary, was another, and there were many more. A scholar somewhat earlier than Magee, the literary critic M.H. Abrams, also noted that Hegel had absorbed a great deal of Hermetic philosophy. Like the Hermeticists, Hegel argued for the unity of being, but also like them he made knowledge and the *struggle to achieve* it the centre of his thought. Abrams noted that, for Hegel, and for the Romantic movement in which Abrams sees him, 'the overall course of things is envisioned as a circular movement from unity into multiplicity, and, ultimately back to unity'.[38] Yet this unity isn't simply given to us. What makes man 'Man' 'is his aspiration toward a harmony and integrity which is much higher than the unity he has lost'.[39] The process of achieving this 'higher unity' seems to take a distinctive shape. It is, Abrams writes, an 'ascending circle, or spiral', and, as we are speaking Hermetically, one cannot but think of Hermes' caduceus, with its spiralling snakes. Not simply a turn back to a former but outgrown unity — which would, in terms of Gebser's scheme, mean a regression into a previous consciousness structure — but a 'return ahead' into what Gebser calls the 'integral structure', which unites and makes whole the previous four structures, and reinstates a 'participatory' consciousness, *while retaining an independent ego*. Hegel himself said that 'philosophy exhibits the appearance of a circle which closes with itself', which seems another version of the Hermetic

Ouroborus, the snake eternally returning into itself. Yet the oneness that it returns to is somehow higher, somehow *more*, for the journey it has taken. As a more contemporary thinker puts it: 'Deeper insight into the process of conscious evolution depends, to some extent, on having experienced the process of alienation and learned how to transform it'.[40] This is true for the individual, and I would suggest it is also true for a civilization as a whole.

I offer these remarks as a suggestion that what Fludd and the others were doing, although it ultimately proved unsuccessful, was a kind of salvage operation, retaining the vestiges of the ancient wisdom, the *prisca theologia*, and uniting them with the new knowledge emerging at the beginning of modern times. As Gebser argued, the previous consciousness structures do not simply disappear. They remain and are, in effect, 'covered over' by the new one, just as physiologically our old 'reptilian' and animal brains were 'covered over' by our distinctly human cortex. And, as Gebser also argued, at the same time that a dominant structure enters its deficient mode, the latent new structure begins to emerge. The new emerging structure, the *integral*, will, as mentioned earlier, integrate the four previous structures and will also achieve a new *conscious* relationship with 'origin', with the 'ever-present' source of its being, unlike our earlier 'unconscious' unity with it. This seems rather like the notion of achieving a higher unity by following an ascending spiral. In its deficient mode, what was a credit in the earlier stages of a consciousness structure, begins to be a deficit, and what was an advantage becomes a liability. I think Gebser was right in arguing that the kind of separation reached by the mentalrational structure was a necessary stage in the development of consciousness. Although some might argue otherwise, I don't think we were destined to remain in the warm embrace of the early consciousness structures, and were only cast out into the cold daylight of reason because of some sin or catastrophe. The kind of immediate, intuitive knowledge enjoyed by earlier forms of consciousness may be enviable, just as we may envy our children's innocence. But none of seriously believes we would all be better off if we remained children; certainly our own children would suffer if we did, for who then would care for them? Whether we like it our not, we are obliged to grow up, and this means having an independent ego, able to face the cosmos on its own.

We can even, I think, trace the shifts in the dominant consciousness structure through the different approaches to the Hermetic gnosis discussed in this book. The ancient Egyptians seem to have had an immediate, almost instinctual experience of it. With the Alexandrian Hermeticists, we have a religious-spiritual practice aimed at triggering it: rituals, meditations, going into the desert, different techniques geared toward producing ecstatic states, which suggests

these were not readily at hand. For the Renaissance Hermeticists it becomes a complex magical-philosophical *system*, an intellectual enterprise requiring arguments and proof. What it can be for ourselves remains to be seen, but by now, another four centuries on from both Casaubon and Mersenne, it is time to start thinking about the new consciousness structure which, according to Gebser, we have already felt the presence of for at least the last century. It may be that what Hermes has to tell us can help bring it along.

Notes

1. Copenhaver, p. xxxii.
2. Yates 1971, p. 115.
3. Faivre 1995, p. 100.
4. Joscelyn Godwin *The Pagan Dream of the Renaissance* (Boston: Weiser Books, 2005), p. 162.
5. Colin Wilson, *A Criminal History of Mankind* (G.P. Putnam & Sons: New York, 1984), p. 345.
6. Faivre, p. 100.
7. Ibid.
8. D.P. Walker, *Spiritual & Demonic Magic*, p. 36.
9. Yates, p. 163.
10. Quoted in Benjamin Woolley, *The Queen's Conjuror* (HarperCollins: London, 2001), p. 12.
11. Ibid. p. 167.
12. Godwin, *Pagan Dream of the Renaissance*, p. 163.
13. Woolley, p. 13.
14. See Gary Lachman *Into the Interior: Discovering Swedenborg*, 2nd edition (Swedenborg Society: London, 2009), pp. 26–8.
15. Woolley, pp. 54–5.
16. See http://www.newdawnmagazine.com/Article/The_ British_Occult_Secret_Service.html
17. Colin Wilson, *Starseekers* (Hodder & Stoughton: London, 1980), p. 86.
18. Ptolemy (90–168 AD) was an Egyptian-Greek living in Roman Alexandria. He devised a complicated geocentric solar system that employed the idea of 'epicycles '— mini-orbits around an imaginary point that the planets performed as they circled the earth — in order to account for the observed phenomenon of the planets' frequent apparent backward (retrograde) motion. It was not until Johannes Kepler's discovery in 1609, following Copernicus, of the planets' elliptical orbit around the sun — including the earth's — that Ptolemy's epicycles were jettisoned.
19. Ibid. pp. 91–92.
20. Yates, p. 154.
21. Faivre, *The Eternal Hermes*, p. 61.
22. Yates, pp. 423–31.
23. D.P. Walker, *The Ancient Theology*, p. 241.
24. Yates, p. 375.
25. Joscelyn Godwin, *Robert Fludd* (Thames and Hudson: London, 1979), p. 5.
26. Relating internal organs to the planets was not unusual in Fludd's time, and a more recent attempt to understand human anatomy in light of the macrocosm is Rodney Collins' fascinating, if not entirely convincing work *The Theory of Celestial Influence* (Watkins: London, 1980).
27. Ibid.

28. J. B. Craven, *Robert Fludd* (William Peace & Sons: London, 1902), p. 22.
29. *Politics and the Occult*, pp. 1–35.
30. Christopher McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians* (Crucible: Wellingborough, 1987), p. 36.
31. In Gary Lachman *Politics and the Occult* 2008, and *The Dedalus Book of the Occult: A Dark Muse*, 2003.
32. Yates, p. 435.
33. Godwin, *Robert Fludd*, p. 10.
34. Yates, p. 402.
35. This was a trajectory Gebser shared with Rudolf Steiner. See my article 'Rudolf Steiner, Jean Gebser and the Evolution of Consciousness,' *Journal for Anthroposophy* Fall 1995; also Lachman *A Secret History of Consciousness*, 2003, pp. 217–67.
36. Godwin, *Robert Fludd*, p. 5.
37. Magee, p. 11.
38. M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (Oxford University Press: London, 1971), p. 158.
39. Ibid. p. 185.
40. Colin Wilson, *From Atlantis to the Sphinx* (Virgin Books: London, 1996), p. 10.

7. Hermes Rising

With the Rosicrucians the Hermetic tradition as we understand it today begins. With their appearance — or non-appearance — ideas and disciplines once discussed and practised openly moved to a shadowy realm on the margins of the mainstream, and aside from periodic ‘revivals’ — the most recent beginning in the 1960s — the once prestigious pursuit of ancient wisdom took on a somewhat furtive, almost criminal character.[1] The Church, traditionally seen as the enemy of the rising scientific enlightenment, has over the centuries managed to withstand the buffetings the increasing dominance of scientific rationalism has given it, and the two have more or less reached a workable if not amiable détente. The same is not true of Hermeticism, nor of the other related esoteric disciplines.

In a way this makes sense. The Church has a history of compartmentalizing the demands of reason and of faith, and could accommodate the increase in scientific knowledge while affirming the sanctity of its own territories. Charles Darwin, who, perhaps more than anyone else, was responsible for dethroning humanity from any privileged status in the cosmos, could, while telling us we were trousered apes, remain a devout Christian.[2] But as Hermeticism is precisely a way of *knowledge*, of gnosis, the new dispensation, characterised by Mersenne’s attack on the animism of Robert Fludd, had to wipe it out. Or, failing that, to cast such aspersions on it that no self-respecting thinker would give it the time of day, for fear of ridicule.

Just as in many cases Christianity conquered by reducing the earlier gods of its new converts to the status of demons, the mental-rational consciousness structure, determined to sweep all before it in its ruthless deficient mode, began a policy of character assassination on the occult, esoteric, and Hermetic sciences. We, products of a unquestioned modernity, have been brought up with the sense that the ‘occult’ is something disreputable, superstitious, and, in a broadly popular sense, ‘dangerous’, as the hundreds of ‘scary’ films about Satanists and ‘black magic’ attest. It is curious that in a time when most hitherto ‘taboo’ subjects can now be discussed openly, we still can’t talk about the occult in any objective, non-biased way. We encourage people to confess to and speak ‘frankly’ about sexual details and personal failings in a way that would

scandalize an earlier age, and in our need for 'transparency' take any sign of reticence as an indication of 'denial'. Yet any discussion of the occult in the popular media falls prey to what I call the '*X-Files* effect'. This means that, aside from sensationalistic treatments of it, the subject can *never* be discussed without in some way suggesting that the people who concern themselves with it are 'odd' or mentally 'soft', that any sane rational person will recognize this immediately, and that in the end, only science can offer us any dependable knowledge of ourselves and our world.

In saying this I am not trying to promote or 'sell' the occult. I am trying to see if we can understand the way in which our culture has characterized it as an expression of the need for a dominant consciousness structure to obliterate or at least radically minimize the value of a previous consciousness structure. In order to establish itself as *the* means of acquiring knowledge, the deficient mode of the mental-rational structure *had* to undermine any legitimacy that the now outmoded Hermetic view might have retained. I should add that this was not solely in order to usurp its position. Knowledge of the kind Mersenne celebrated can be obtained *only* by regarding the world in the way he promotes, that is, as non-animistic, in other words, as 'dead', a truth the Romantic poet William Wordsworth recognized in his poem 'The Table Turned', when he wrote that 'we murder to dissect'. It is only by divesting the world of its living character that we can gain the kind of knowledge about it that we associate with science. In order to grasp the laws of planetary motion we have to forfeit the idea that the angels move the stars. The fact that this kind of knowledge led to our technological triumphs is generally regarded as evidence of its superiority. That the Mersenne view opened the way to undeniable advance practically goes without saying: more than one historian has pointed out that western civilization has advanced more in the last four hundred years than in the previous four thousand. The point is not to deny the benefits that this perspective produced, which are many and valuable, but to recognize that something of equal value was lost in the process. That 'something else' is as important to our well being as the material benefits our technological advance has created, although its absence is less immediately detected, and recognition of this became the central theme linking the different 'underground' movements that resisted the complete rationalization of life. One source that these movements dipped into, in search of weapons or merely to revitalize their own efforts, was Hermeticism.

As I have written at length about the history of modern occultism and esotericism and its resistance to the complete 'scientization' of life elsewhere, it would be redundant to repeat this here, and a reader wishing to follow this trajectory can continue it in my other books *Politics and the Occult* and *The*

Dedalus Book of the Occult: A Dark Muse. In this last chapter I would like to mention a few other ways in which the now rejected Hermetic view carried on in the increasingly modern world.

Masonic trials

In Chapter 4, I quoted Joscelyn Godwin's remark that Freemasonry is the 'most lasting creation of the Hermetic tradition in the West'. Like much else in the Hermetic and esoteric tradition, the roots of Freemasonry are, as the cliché goes, shrouded in mystery. In Chapter 4, I also mentioned that some historians trace Freemasonry's origins to the Knights Templar. Others, such as Thomas De Quincey, the famous 'English opium eater', suggest that Freemasonry arose as an offshoot of the Rosicrucians, and there is good reason to suspect that there is a link between Freemasonry and some of the practices associated with Renaissance Hermeticism. In 1583, James VI of Scotland (soon to become James I of England, enemy of witchcraft and friend of Isaac Casaubon) appointed William Schaw as master of works. Schaw was responsible for the organization of all the stonemasons' lodges in Scotland, and he seems to have included an odd addition to the usual requirements for entry. Schaw made it a necessity for each new lodge applicant to be tested 'in the art of memorie and the science thereof'.[3] Was this 'art of memorie' the same as the one Bruno practised? Schaw could be referring to simple everyday memory, the kind needed to memorise rituals and passwords. But would one need to be 'tested' in this, and would it be referred to as an 'art?' Robert Fludd, who, while not a Rosicrucian himself was certainly a most vocal apologist for the Brotherhood, developed his own form of the art of memory, but this was after the 'Rosicrucian diaspora'. This was the exodus from central Europe of various thinkers associated with the Rosicrucians, following the defeat of Frederick V of the Palatinate at the hands of the Habsburgs at the Battle of White Mountain on November 8, 1620. So while there is clearly a link between the Rosicrucians and Freemasonry, it doesn't account sufficiently for its origins, as William Schaw's 'memory testing' predates the Rosicrucian manifestoes.

Others place Freemasonry's beginnings even further back in history, into prehistory, in fact. The Old Charges, a Masonic text dated to 1400 and found in what are known as the Cookes and Regius Manuscripts, claims that Freemasonry goes back to antediluvian times. Its secrets were recovered after the Flood, and it is from them that Hermes Trismegistus and the sages who followed him got their wisdom. Probably the most accepted account of Freemasonry's origins places it in the tale of Hiram Abiff, master builder of Solomon's Temple, who was

murdered by three lower-grade masons when he refused to divulge the secret 'Mason's word'. Yet according to at least one esoteric scholar, Manly P. Hall, Hiram Abiff himself is a kind of 'code word' for a 'universal agent', and is the focus of the Hermetic *Emerald Tablet*.[4] Hall's 'universal agent' is reasonably identifiable as the 'universal soul or spirit' that, as mentioned in Chapter 4, E. J. Holmyard argues is depicted in the fabled *Emerald Table*, and while this clearly doesn't confirm Hall's claim, it at least suggests that it warrants some attention.

In *The Lost Keys of Freemasonry*, Hall argues that there is a 'definite correspondence between the Hiramic legend of Freemasonry and the Osiris myth as expounded in the initiation rituals of the Egyptians',[5] a connection I mentioned in Chapter 2. Hall speaks of a 'remarkable scroll' that provides 'the almost undeniable evidence that the Egyptian mysteries were the progenitors of modern Freemasonry',[6] and in support of this claim he enlists the 'early Masonic historians … Albert Mackey, Robert Freke Gould and Albert Pike'. Hall fails to provide the sources for his claims about the 'remarkable scroll', but he recounts a mysterious tale about the *Emerald Tablet*. He tells us that 'a very ancient author' — whose name, he admits, isn't known — claims to have seen the *Emerald Tablet* in Egypt. 'Its characters,' Halls writes, 'were represented in bas-relief, not engraved.' It was two thousand years old, and the emerald had once been in a 'fluidic state like melted glass', and then hardened through some alchemical process.[7] Hall further informs us that a 'papyrus of the *Book of the Dead* definitely proves … that this strange document (presumed to be concerned solely with the destiny of the disembodied spirit) was actually a dramatic ceremonial staged by living actors, presumably in the recesses of the temples', an idea we discussed in Chapter 2 in relation to Jeremy Naydler's work.[8]

Hall is less than forthcoming about his sources, so it's not unreasonable for us to take his remarks with a grain of salt. Yet if we allow the possibility that what he says has some foundation, it leads to some interesting speculations. Referring to the papyrus copy of the *Book of the Dead*, Hall calls it a 'mutilated fragment bearing witness of those arcane rites attendant upon the installation of the Initiate of the Osiris cult', and that the identity of the Osiris and Hiram myths makes the *Book of the Dead* 'the open sesame of symbolic Masonry …' The essence of these rites centred around 'the secret disciplines by which the reasonable nature [the mind, or nous] is emancipated from its bondage without the ministrations of decay'.[9] In other words, they are the same as the injunction to 'practise dying' that, as we saw in Chapter 2, Jeremy Naydler sees as the focus of 'Egyptian shamanism' and which also forms part of both Plato's philosophy and Hermeticism. Like Naydler, Schwaller de Lubicz, and Athanasius Kircher, Hall

believes there is more to Egyptian hieroglyphics than what the official account of them suggests, and he goes further and argues that, since the rise of Christianity, there has been an organized effort to obscure the true character of ancient Egypt. After the burning of the Serapeum by the Emperor Theodosius, Hall contends that 'Christian scholars … inaugurated an elaborate program of archaeological reconstruction', the result being a 'ridiculous conglomeration of puerility which for several hundred years was palmed off upon a comparatively illiterate world under the name of Egyptology'.[10] Hall in fact argues that there are two opposing schools of archaeology. One, composed of 'strictly materialistic minded men … classifies but never attempts to interpret … or fit together the fragments of old civilizations and cultures'. The other, to which people like Schwaller de Lubicz and Kircher no doubt belong, are 'intuitionalists' who 'attempt to build some reasonable pattern out of the wreckage'. This distinction leads Hall to conclude that 'in spite of all our discussions, excavations and so forth, we are still for the most part ignorant of the real elements of Egyptian mythology'.

Whether we accept Hall's rendition or not there does seem to be a strong resonance between the trials and challenges one encounters in the underworld as depicted in the *Book of the Dead*, and the initiation rituals associated with Freemasonry. If we accept, as Hall and Naydler argue, that the rituals associated with the *Book of the Dead* had a more than funerary function — were indeed part of a ceremony in which the participant would 'practise dying' while alive — then this connection seems strengthened. Other aspects of Freemasonry, such as the belief in a Supreme Being and the emphasis on moral and ethical obligations — so rigorously tested in ancient Egypt by the feather of Ma'at — also suggest a connection. Although by now Freemasonry has accumulated a history and mythology that would require an entire book to unravel, and which, for some readers, might prove tedious, one delightful way of seeing the Egyptian (and hence Hermetic) character of Freemasonry is by attending a performance of Mozart's Hermetic masterpiece, *Die Zauberflöte*, 'The Magic Flute'. Along with Haydn and many other artists and thinkers of the late eighteenth century, Mozart was a Mason, and in *Die Zauberflöte*, the trials and challenges facing the Masonic initiate are translated into a popular comic opera, a kind of musical *ludibrium* in which even the common man and woman are redeemed. As Goethe, thought to be a Mason himself, remarked about *Die Zauberflöte*, 'It is enough that the crowd would find pleasure in seeing the spectacle; at the same time, its high significance will not escape the initiates'.

Hermetic Romanticism

Mention of Goethe reminds us of the Hermetic character of much of Romanticism, which I briefly touched on in the last chapter. Goethe himself practised alchemy for a time, and was a reader of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, as well as other esoteric writings. He was familiar with the work of Swedenborg, Jacob Boehme, Paracelsus, and the alchemist Thomas Vaughn, among other writers. Goethe's interest in alchemy was not solely intellectual. As a young man he suffered a kind of extended nervous breakdown, and he was cured from this condition by a 'universal medicine' administered by a Dr Metz, who also advised that he read certain alchemical and Kabbalistic texts.[11] It was after this cure that Goethe set up an alchemical laboratory in his parents' attic and for a time tried to produce *liquor silicum*, a kind of alchemical glass that dissolved when exposed to air. He was not very successful, but his interest in Hermetic ideas outlived his alchemical failures.

The most obvious link between Goethe and Hermeticism is his classic occult drama *Faust*, but Goethe was also deeply interested in the Rosicrucians, and his unfinished poem *Die Geheimnisse* ('The Mysteries') is about the secret Brotherhood. Reading Johann Valentin Andreae's *Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz*, mentioned in the last chapter, inspired Goethe to write his own Hermetic fable or *Märchen, The Fairy Tale of the Green Snake and the Beautiful Lily*. This in turn inspired Rudolf Steiner to develop his own form of Hermetic philosophy, first under the auspices of theosophy, then later through his own teaching, anthroposophy.[12]

Steiner, who at the age of twenty-two was given the task of editing Goethe's scientific writings, was also deeply influenced by the poet's work on plant morphology, *The Metamorphosis of Plants*. Here Goethe spoke of what he called 'active seeing', a way of observing nature that saw it as living, developing, and purposeful, not as the 'dead' mechanism of Mersenne and Descartes. In nature Goethe recognized an animated *whole* that expressed itself in its innumerable creations and their perpetual transformation, a perception that Ficino or Fludd would have shared. 'Active seeing' is a way of *participating* with the thing observed, and not, as the new scientific method proposed, of remaining 'detached' and 'objective' toward it, which meant, in effect, to treat it as if it were 'dead', with no reality other than that which could be weighed and

measured. As Goethe practised ‘active seeing’, he discovered that he could perceive what he called the *Urpflanze*, the archetypal plant from which all others derived, a kind of Platonic ‘blueprint’ that, while not immediately ‘visible’ to the untrained eye, can nevertheless be perceived through focussed attention to a plant throughout all its stages of development. The key here is that the observer’s consciousness enters into a kind of *union* with the plant or other object of observation. For Goethe it also happened when he viewed Strasbourg Cathedral during its construction; he could, without seeing the plans, tell *before it was finished* how the completed structure would look.[13] That is, through his *imagination*, Goethe could, when practising ‘active seeing’, enter into the inner being of whatever he was observing, in the way that the philosopher Bergson argued ‘intuition’ could. Here ‘imagination’ is not understood in the reductive sense of ‘unreal’ but in the sense given it by Hermetic thinkers such as Ficino and Suhrawardi, as a means of entering the *Hūrqalyā*, the Imaginal World or *anima mundi* that mediates between the world of pure abstraction (Plato’s Ideas) and physical reality (in Goethe’s case, a plant or a cathedral). Another area in which Goethe applied ‘active seeing’ was in optics, and in his *Theory of Colour* he famously challenged Newton’s discoveries about light, which he argued were obtained through a kind of ‘torture’ of natural phenomena. (Like William Blake, who also railed against him, Goethe was unaware of Newton’s alchemical interests.) Goethe’s ‘active seeing’ and its concomitant recognition of a ‘living nature’ was shared by the *Naturphilosophie* that developed in Germany in the last decade of the eighteenth century. Represented by the philosophers F.J.W. Schelling, Franz von Baader, and others, it argued for a Nature as a living whole, which it believed was the visible aspect of Spirit — or, more Hermetically, Mind. Because of this union between Nature and Spirit, *Naturphilosophie* saw the world as an *expression* of Spirit, and hence recognized it as a kind of text to be decoded through the principle of correspondence, which, as we saw in Chapter 2, is a central theme of Hermeticism. As Antoine Faivre remarks, for *Naturphilosophie*, the world is full of ‘symbolic implications’ suggesting ‘invisible processes’, that correlate with human feelings; hence ‘knowledge of Nature and knowledge of oneself go hand in hand’, clearly an Hermetic insight.[14]

Naturphilosophie influenced Hegel, whose Hermetic links were mentioned in the last chapter, and it was also an influence on the philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte, who, along with Goethe, was a strong influence on Rudolf Steiner. Again, against the new ‘scientific’ view of a dead, mechanical nature, and the old religious view of a lowly, corrupt one, *Naturphilosophie* proposed a vital,

animated, and intelligent Nature, that it regarded and experienced holistically. A later thinker to share in this Hermetic perception of a living, intelligent universe was the nineteenth century psychologist Gustav Fechner, whose ideas influenced those of William James (see Chapter 1). Fechner did solid, fundamental work in experimental psychology, but he was also a visionary who believed that man stood in the centre of the cosmos, between the soul of Nature and that of the stars, which he saw as angels — a deeply Hermetic view.[15] Henri Bergson (see Chapter 2) and Alfred North Whitehead, whose 'process philosophy' presents a living, growing universe, also shared the Hermetic notion of panpsychism, the belief that mind, rather than a product of material forces operating solely in human brains, pervades the universe. In more recent years the panpsychic idea has been proposed by the philosopher of mind David Chalmers, and by now the notion of a living planet, James Lovelock's Gaia, has become a part of our common culture.[16]

Another Romantic poet that shared *Naturphilosophie's* Hermetic view of a living cosmos and its belief in a unity between the spiritual and natural world was Friedrich von Hardenberg, better known under his pen-name of Novalis. Novalis is perhaps the most openly Hermetic of the Romantics, in that his fragmentary work is full of the kind of aphoristic remarks that the scholar Jean-Pierre Mahé argues is of the essence of the Hermetic teaching.[17] As Clement Salaman writes: 'There are passages in Hermes which may be read in a few seconds and yet contemplated for life'.[18] The same can be said for much of Novalis' writings, which, like the Hermetic aphorisms, are meant to be pondered and meditated on as aids to spiritual insight. As the Romantic movement saw a shift in occult practice from the meticulous observance of ritual and ceremony to the power of the imagination, the figures of the poet or artist and the mage began to merge, a metamorphosis I chart in *A Dark Muse*. Novalis recognizes this in his Hermetic remark that: 'The genuine poet is all-knowing — he is an actual world in miniature'.[19] This microcosmic/macrocosmic note is struck again when Novalis writes that: 'We will come to understand the world when we understand ourselves'; and again when he tells us that: 'Man is a sun and his senses are planets'.[20]

Bees of the invisible

Another of Novalis' sayings leads us to a more modern Hermetic poet. 'We dream of journeys through the cosmos', Novalis wrote, and added: 'isn't the cosmos within ourselves? The depths of the spirit we know not. Toward the Interior goes the arcane way. In us, or nowhere, is the Eternal with its worlds, the past and future.'[21] With its echoes of Pico and Bruno, this is a clear expression of the Hermetic idea that man must house within himself the entire universe. More than a century later, another poet writing in German, the Austrian Rainer Maria Rilke, himself echoed Novalis. In the Seventh of his *Duino Elegies*, Rilke wrote that 'Nowhere can the world exist but within'.[22] In response to what he saw as the 'emptying' of the world of significance through the rise of the rationalistic reductive view, Rilke, like many other late-Romantic souls, turned inward. The old symbols of meaning — whether religious or classical — were no longer viable; as I've remarked elsewhere, 'like exhausted batteries, they could no longer hold a charge'.[23] So Rilke recognized that his task — the task of the poet — was to *save* the visible, outer world from complete meaninglessness, by taking it into his own soul. The microcosm would save the macrocosm, by sheltering it within itself.

Rilke spelled out this idea in a remarkable letter to his Polish translator Witold von Hulewicz. Not only were the once potent religious and spiritual symbols no longer able to carry the force of the numinous, even the items of everyday life were now *ersatz*. Rilke speaks of 'pseudo things' and 'Dummy-Life' coming from America — the increasingly disposable manufactured junk rolling off countless production lines — and laments how, in the not too distant past, the articles of everyday life still retained a kind of soul, an interiority. 'Even for our grandparents,' Rilke writes, 'a "House", a "Well", a familiar tower, their very dress, their cloak, was infinitely more, infinitely more intimate …'[24] With that intimacy gone, it is up to the poet, with his alchemical powers, to transmute the things of the earth into a new kind of existence. Hence, Rilke advises that the Angel of the *Elegies* — a symbol of transfigured being — will not be impressed by any supernatural display, but that we should rather offer him some mundane item, a jug, a rope, a bridge, provided it has been transfigured by our *bringing it within*.[25] And what can this sheltering of things in our interior world mean but to

transport them from the physical plane to that of the Imaginal World, to the soul of the Earth, where they will be protected from further decay?

It is through this process, Rilke told von Hulewicz, that we become what he called the 'bees of the invisible'. In the Ninth *Elegy* Rilke asks: 'Earth, isn't this what you want, to arise within us invisible? To be wholly invisible someday?'[26] Rilke called the task of accomplishing this *Herzwerk*, 'heart work', and in his letter he spells it out in detail. 'Our task,' he writes, 'is to stamp this provisional, perishing earth *into ourselves* [my italics] so deeply, so painfully and passionately, that its being may rise again, "invisibly," in us. We are the Bees of the Invisible.' We do not do this solely for ourselves, Rilke tells us, but as an effort on behalf of what he calls 'the Whole'. 'All the forms of the here and now,' he told von Hulewicz, 'are not merely to be used in a time-limited way, but, so far as we can, instated within the superior significance in which we share …'[27] That superior significance is not 'a Beyond, whose shadow darkens the earth', but a Whole into which transitory things are 'everywhere plunging'. Rilke's Whole, like Gebser's 'origin' strikes me as not too dissimilar to the Hermetic 'One, the All', and it may be worth noting that Gebser began his explorations into the structures of consciousness through a study of Rilke's poetry.[28]

If Rilke's *Herzwerk* seems less triumphant than either Pico or Bruno's challenge to 'become the universe', or even less Romantic than Novalis, this shouldn't be surprising. Rilke was writing at a time when the deficient mode of the mental-rational consciousness structure had reached a kind of peak (or, perhaps more apt, a vale), and his call to 'save the world' understandably has, if not an air of desperation, at least an elegiac tone. Rilke was writing at the time of 'the decline of the West', after the devastating catastrophe of the First World War, and in many ways his call to save the world is a salvage operation. Yet he gathers from it some remarkable prospects. Elsewhere I have commented on some similarities between Rilke's call to recreate the Earth 'invisibly' and some ideas of Rudolf Steiner.[29] Having come back to this theme, I now see more similarities. Rilke writes that the work of converting the 'visible and tangible into the invisible vibration … of our own nature … introduces new vibration-numbers into the vibration-spheres of the universe', a thought that Pythagoras, one of the *prisca theologia*, would not have argued with. Rilke goes on to say that: 'since the various materials in the cosmos are only the results of different rates of vibration' — an idea he shared with G.I. Gurdjieff [30] — 'we are preparing in this way, not only intensities of a spiritual kind, but — who knows? — new substances, metals, nebulae and stars.'[31]

This is a remarkable reflection. By transforming the outer world into an inner invisible one, Rilke is saying that we may indeed be creating *new* worlds, not only interior ones, but 'real', physical, tangible ones. An astronomical analogy may make this clear. By drawing the things of the outer world into the 'black hole' of our consciousness (which is invisible, as an astronomical black hole is because its gravity is so great that light cannot escape it), we may be creating, somewhere out in the universe, what some astronomers call a 'white gusher', the *other end* of a black hole, a kind of cosmic geyser, out of which all the matter sucked into a black hole emerges, but transformed into *new* matter, Rilke's 'metals, nebulae and stars'. Rilke, in effect, is saying that our mental acts, our consciousness, can create worlds, and this was an idea he shared with Steiner. One of the most baffling things Steiner said was that the future *physical* body of the Earth will be shaped by the *thoughts* of people living today, just as the Earth of the past was formed by the thoughts of earlier people (so the physical world we experience today — its clouds, mountains, lakes, and so on — has its roots, at least according to Steiner, in the consciousness of people in the past).[32] In different ways, both Steiner and Rilke are saying the same thing: that consciousness, the mind, can create physical reality. This seems to take the Hermetic view of man as a microcosm a step further: not only can we house the cosmos in our minds, we can actually use our minds to create it. If nothing else, this puts a whole new meaning into the Hermetic notion that we are 'caretakers' of the world.

Arts of memory

We may think the above speculations go a bit too far, but there are other, perhaps less radical ways in which we can understand the Hermetic idea of the microcosm housing the macrocosm. One is through grasping the power of memory and its ability to transcend the present moment, giving us access to a wider range of reality than the immediate 'here and now'. We know that the Art of Memory was a central practice among Renaissance mages and that it was one of the tools they used in order to embrace the cosmos. More recently the mind's ability to recapture the past has been explored by the existential philosopher Colin Wilson. In his book *The Occult*, Wilson introduced the notion of what he calls 'Faculty X', the ability to grasp 'the reality of other times and places'. In Chapter 1, I gave an example of Faculty X that Wilson often cites, the novelist Marcel Proust tasting a *madeleine*, a kind of biscuit, dipped in tea, and suddenly being transported to Combray, where he spent his childhood holidays. Proust was not simply reminded of this; he did not merely *remember* that as a child he spent the summer in Combray. Like the patient who suddenly 're-experienced' a past event, when his brain was accidentally stimulated by the neurosurgeon Wilder Penfield, for Proust it was as if he was suddenly *there again*. The experience was more than a 'normal' memory, which is generally at best a pale reflection of a past event, and usually not more than the mere knowledge (in the non-gnosis sense) that it occurred. We can say that the difference between the two would be like looking at a flat black and white photograph of some scenery and then suddenly finding yourself *in it*, in full colour and three dimensions, with all the sounds and smells.

For Proust himself, the experience was almost mystical, and it gave him a sense of something in him that transcended time, in the same way that the aim of Plato's injunction to 'practise dying' was to bring about a sense of one's immortality. 'No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate,' Proust writes, 'than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses … And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, *its brevity illusory* [my italics] … I had ceased now to feel mediocre, contingent, mortal.'[33]

Why did Proust no longer feel 'mediocre, contingent, mortal'? Why was life's

brevity now illusory? Because by tasting the *madeleine* Proust realized that reality exceeded the limits of the present moment, the 'here and now' that he — and all of us — are trapped in most of the time. If someone was to simply remind him that he spent his childhood holidays in Combray, he might feel a brief pleasure at the memory and breathe a sigh of nostalgia for times past. But the 'extraordinary thing' happening to him had nothing to do with nostalgia, which is a more or less melancholy reflection on the unavoidably fleeting character of experience. In fact, it was anti-nostalgic, because what it told Proust was that the past was *still real*, and that it could be grasped by the mind, which is exactly what Proust set out to do in his vast novel. He says as much when, after trying to revive the sensation again through sipping more tea and failing, he reflects that 'the truth that I am seeking lies not in the cup but in myself'. The Combray of Proust's youth exists, just as the entire life of Wilder Penfield's patient exists, *in his mind*.

Wilson offers many other examples of Faculty X taken from literature. Another favourite is from Hermann Hesse's novel *Steppenwolf*. Harry Haller, Hesse's hero, is a fifty year old intellectual who is so bored with his empty, uneventful life that he has decided to kill himself. On the way home to slit his throat, Haller decides to stop at a tavern and have a glass of wine. Then, as with Proust's madeleine, something strange happens. Haller sips the wine and finds that: 'A refreshing laughter rose in me … It soared aloft like a soap bubble, reflecting the whole world in miniature on its rainbow surface.' Then a kind of past-life parade opens up to his inner eye. 'In my brain,' Haller tells us, 'were stored a thousand pictures.' He reflects on these: an ancient, weathered wall, old, forgotten illuminated texts, poems long gone to oblivion, a solitary cypress on a forlorn hill, the movement of clouds at night above the Rhine. As these images pass, Haller's misery fades and he is surprised to find that he is happy. 'The golden trail was blazed. I was reminded of the eternal, of Mozart and the stars.'[34]

Like Proust, Haller's experience gives him a sense of immortality. Again, if, in his earlier suicidal mood, filled with grumblings about bourgeois civilization, someone had mentioned Mozart to him, he would have nodded and more than likely reflected on how genius is destroyed by an uncaring world, and added one more to the already many reasons he had to kill himself. But his sip of wine, like Proust's madeleine, somehow triggered Faculty X, and now the fact of Mozart is suddenly *real*, just as the images of his past — the weathered wall, the clouds above the Rhine — are also *real*. And just as the reality of Combray makes Proust recognize the illusion of life's brevity — in other words, his own immortality — so too the reality of Mozart reminds Haller of the eternal. Clearly it is not simply nostalgia for the past that makes Haller happy. Paradoxically, the

past, at that moment at least, is no longer past. It, like himself, is timeless. Later, after spending a night with a dance hall girl, Haller has another Faculty X moment. ‘For moments together my heart stood still between delight and sorrow to find how rich was the gallery of my life, and how thronged the soul of the wretched Steppenwolf with high eternal stars and constellations.’ Again, that recognition of some part of him that transcends time.

It should be apparent that what is involved in both examples is something similar to the distinction between gnosis and episteme discussed in Chapter 1. Both Proust and Hesse (Harry Haller is clearly an *alter ego* of his creator) knew about their past. Neither the glass of wine nor the madeleine dipped in tea gave them any new *information* about their past. What happens in both cases is that they both somehow ‘know’ the reality of the past — or of something objective, like Mozart — in a way that makes that knowledge *real*. Before they knew but now they *really know*. (Again, our language, which is not made to deal with these distinctions, breaks down.) They know in a way that the significance of that knowledge is clear. We can say they know in 3D, as opposed to their ‘normal’ 2D knowledge. Or we can simply say that they had a moment of gnosis. In saying this, we can see that Proust and Haller had an experience similar to Ouspensky when he confronted his ashtray, although, as they were not feeling the effects of nitrous oxide, the sensation was not overwhelming. The *reality* of what they already know has hit them in so direct a way that it causes both to feel immortal. It is not so much the *content* of that knowledge — which, I point out again, they were already aware of — but the fact that they can now grasp its *reality* vividly and vitally that effects the transformation.

It should also be clear that the kind of memory Proust, Hesse, and Wilson are concerned with is strongly linked to what Henry Corbin called the Imaginal World, which we met in Chapter 4. Again, the Imaginal World is not the world of make believe or of fantasy. It is an objective world perceived *inwardly*, with the mind’s eye. Rilke’s ‘invisible’ interior world is a part of the Imaginal World, as is the kind of vivid awareness of ‘other times and places’ reached through Faculty X. When Hesse’s Haller recalls the ‘thousand pictures’ stored in his brain, and can recall vividly the clouds above the Rhine or an ancient weathered wall, he is no longer merely remembering these things in the usual way, but is, in a real sense, *perceiving* them again. They still exist, in his mind, and their images make up part of the Imaginal World.

Becoming Aion, again

Now, along with showing us that our minds are all quite capable of housing the world — as Bruno's Art of Memory aimed at doing — Wilson's Faculty X shows us that we can also travel outside of the body, in the same way that the ancient Egyptians did when they practised releasing the *ba* from the constraints of the physical form. While my physical body may be stuck in whatever 'here and now' it occupies, mentally I can choose whatever 'there and then' I wish to visit. A remarkable example of this can be found in the writer Christopher Isherwood's novel *The World in the Evening*, published in 1954. Isherwood's hero has had a bad accident; both legs are in casts and he is forced to spend weeks recuperating in bed. He is thus quite 'fixed' in a very specific 'here and now'. He uses this time to reflect on the course of his life, and he has sufficient leisure to notice some odd things. There are, for instance, the curious experiences he has upon waking:

> Lying there, in the almost mindless calm of first waking, *I felt as if I could remember everything I'd ever done or said or thought since I was a baby* [my italics]. Only this wasn't exactly remembering. Memory pieces things together gradually, making a chain; this was total instantaneous awareness. The thousands of bits of my life seemed to be scattered around me, like the furniture of the room, all simultaneously present. I wasn't young; I wasn't old; I wasn't any particular age or any particular I … Consciousness lay there, anonymous, and looked at the accumulated clutter of half a lifetime.[35]

What first strikes us is that Isherwood's hero — the aptly named Stephen Monk — seems to be experiencing what Maurice Nicoll called 'living at all points of the life,' which, as I remarked in Chapter 3, is a definition of the Hermetic notion of 'becoming Aion', of stepping *outside* of time. Lying in bed with two broken legs, Stephen can nevertheless rise above time and space, and see his life as a whole. This vision leads to a sense of optimism — Proust's and Haller's sense of immortality — and the determination to rectify the mistakes he has made and to 'do better'. Later in the novel, Stephen re-reads letters from his first wife, who has recently died, and this experience, too, provides some strange insights. As with his 'becoming Aion' experience, mornings, he finds, are the best time to read the letters, but even so, he discovers that he must first get 'in the right mood'. 'Sometimes, 'he says, 'I'd lie quite still with my eyes closed for as much as half an hour, letting myself sink slowly into a state of reverie that *was almost a trance*' [my italics]. This relaxation seems very similar to the state Hermes Trismegistus is in before Poimandres appears to him, as we saw in Chapter 1, and it is also very similar to the kind of trance states that Jeremy Naydler argues were involved when the ancient Egyptian shamans 'practised

dying’. What emerges from this meditative calm is another remarkable experience of ‘time travel’:

> When Elizabeth [Stephen’s first wife] mentioned the Schwarzsee, I could literally smell the wet lilac-bushes; when she described our trip to Khalkis, I felt a sudden intense hunger for fried squid. Now and then, these sense-impressions were so vivid that I wondered if this wasn’t something more than memory; if I wasn’t, in some way, *actually reliving the original event*.[36] [My italics.]

If this last line reminds us of the experience of Wilder Penfield’s patient, the next is even more remarkable:

> That day we had lunch with Rose Macaulay in Carcassonne — did I merely remember a bright green snail crawling up the table-leg or *was I noticing it now for the first time?*[37]

Stephen’s memories are so vivid, it seems, that he is actually *picking out details that he hadn’t noticed before*. But if he hadn’t noticed them, how could he ‘remember’ them? Of course this is a novel, so the events aren’t ‘real’, but the idea is nevertheless startling. Like Wilder Penfield’s patient, Stephen is ‘reliving’ a past event, but he is reliving it so intensely that he is able to pay more attention to it than he did the first time. This suggests that he is doing something more than, as it were, playing a video tape of the experience. He is either literally back in it, back there having lunch in Carcassonne, but now noticing some things for the first time, or some part of him which he was unaware of remembered more about the event than ‘he’ did, and is now giving up information that Stephen had but *didn’t know* he did.

The caduceus of the brain

In both cases of Stephen's 'time travel' he is in a state of deep calm, almost a trance, and both occur just as he has woken up; he speaks of 'the almost mindless calm of first waking'. Earlier I remarked that these sort of Faculty X memories seem to belong to Corbin's Imaginal World. When Isherwood writes that: 'The thousand bits of my life seemed to be scattered around me, like the furniture of the room', the impression is that his hero is lying in bed and is in some way actually *looking* at the 'bits' of his life, that they are independent, objective images, that are in some way 'out there' in the same way as the furniture is. The notion of seeing clear, distinct, independent images as one is waking up is related to the phenomenon of hypnagogic imagery, which occurs during a brief, visionary state we all pass through as we fall asleep at night and as we wake in the morning. It occurs in that twilit intermediary state between sleeping and waking, and in different ways, visionary thinkers such as Swedenborg, Rudolf Steiner, and Carl Jung, among others, have explored this strange in-between state of consciousness. Hypnagogic imagery, it strikes me, seems closely related to Corbin's Imaginal World, and elsewhere I have shown how Swedenborg, Steiner, and Jung used it to take their own inner voyages.[38] It should be pointed out that hypnagogic states are not exclusively visual. They are often auditory and can be tactile and olfactory as well, and there is a good argument that they are related to precognition, clairvoyance, synchronicities, and other 'paranormal' phenomena.[39]

The most exhaustive study of hypnagogic states is *Hypnagogia* by Andreas Mavromatis, published in 1987, and I have written at length about Mavromatis' work in *A Secret History of Consciousness*. The simplest way to describe hypnagogic states is to say they are a kind of dreaming while awake. Although clearly related, they should be distinguished from 'lucid dreams', which we can describe as 'waking while dreaming'.[40] They are most closely associated with the intermediary state between sleeping and waking, but Mavromatis makes clear that hypnagogic states can be induced voluntarily, through conscious relaxation. The kind of relaxed states conducive to hypnagogia are similar, if not practically identical to the kind Jeremy Naydler associates with the 'Egyptian shamans' releasing the *ba* and with the state Hermes Trismegistus was in when he encountered Poimandres, when his 'bodily senses were withdrawn as in

sleep'. If both Hermes' experience and that of the Egyptian initiate take place in the Imaginal World, there is a good argument that they entered it via hypnagogic states.

Mavromatis argues that hypnagogia is linked to the sub-cortical structures of the brain, which are known collectively as the 'old brain'. During hypnagogic states, he suggests that the usually dominant neo-cortex — the evolutionarily recent and specifically 'human' part of the brain — is inhibited, and much older structures, such as the reticular brainstem core, hippocampus, medulla oblongata, and thalamus 'take over'. Cortical brain activity is associated with clear, logical thought and the perception of a well-defined 'external' world. When such activity is inhibited during sleep or in states of deep relaxation, the older brain structures dominate. These structures are more attuned to inner experience and to a 'pre-logical' form of thought that uses imagery, symbols, and analogy rather than language and clearly defined concepts. As noted earlier, this is the kind of thought Athanasius Kircher, René Schwaller de Lubicz, and others associate with ancient Egypt and which Jean Gebser locates in the mythic consciousness structure.

In describing hypnagogic states as 'dreaming while awake', Mavromatis associates them with the Fourth State of Tantric Yoga, the 'half-dream state', in which all of the states of consciousness — waking, dreaming, and dreamless sleep — 'intersect'. Curiously, he links this experiential 'intersection' with the physical 'intersection' of the brain structures responsible for it. The thalamus, which Mavromatis suggests is the centre of consciousness and the probable source of hypnagogic phenomena, is anatomically linked to the 'reptilian brain', limbic system, and the cerebral hemispheres, the three 'houses' of the triune human brain (Chapter 1). (I will merely note the importance of the 'triune' theme in relation to Hermes Trismegistus.) Each of the three brains, Mavromatis argues, has a consciousness and 'logic' of its own, and he suggests that the consciousness of one brain would appear rather strange to another. What happens in hypnagogia is that the dominance of the cortex — what Schwaller de Lubicz called 'cerebral consciousness' — is inhibited, either through sleep or deep relaxation, allowing the consciousness of the other 'brains' to emerge. As cortical consciousness 'shuts off' fairly quickly as we fall asleep — 'falling asleep' *is* cortical consciousness 'shutting off' — we pass into these other forms of consciousness without noticing them. This is because 'we', our conscious, observing egos, are associated with cortical consciousness, and if 'we' are not there, there is no 'one' to observe them. Yet, if a minimal level of cortical arousal can be maintained, then the 'consciousness' of the old brain can be observed. This is exactly what Tantric exercises concerned with the 'Fourth

State' aim at, but it is also what consciously induced hypnagogic states try to achieve. It is also, if the reader will allow me to repeat it once again, what is happening to Hermes Trismegistus when his 'bodily senses' are 'withdrawn as in sleep', and why he later admonishes Asclepius and his other students to be 'entirely present' and to attain a 'godlike concentration of consciousness'. It is the combination of the two that produces the visionary state. As Mavromatis makes clear, in meditative states the thalamus and other 'old brain' structures are active, while enough attention is maintained to prevent the practitioner from falling asleep. The new brain, as it were, 'shuts down' enough for the old brain to 'turn on', but stays 'on' just enough to observe the old brain's consciousness. We can say, then, that in hypnagogia, one brain 'watches' another.

I should point out that Mavromatis sees the thalamus as important for another reason as well. This is because the pineal gland is located within it. The function of this tiny organ is still something of a mystery. Famously, the philosopher Descartes believed it was the physical 'seat of the soul', a hypothesis that earned Descartes some criticism. Yet modern neuroscience and ancient wisdom suggests that Descartes may not have been far from the mark. The pineal gland is very old, dating back as far as the Devonian and Silurian periods, roughly from 450 to 350 million years ago. One of its earliest functions was as a kind of eye located in the top of the head of primitive reptiles. In some contemporary vertebrates, including humans, the pineal gland is still photosensitive, and in humans the early 'pineal eye' appears in the initial stages of life. It soon disappears, but the associated gland remains, and it too is sensitive to light.

In mammals, the pineal gland produces the amino acid melatonin, which is important in the production of the neurotransmitter serotonin. It is also involved in the maintenance of serotonin in the hypothalamus, and in the distribution of other neurotransmitters to other parts of the brain. Melatonin is also linked to skin colour, and this function is associated with pineal gland's sensitivity to light.

One curious fact about melatonin is that an excess of light and stress tends to inhibit its production, and this in turn affects the size of the pineal gland, making it smaller. The opposite effect is achieved through darkness and relaxation; these increase melatonin production and the pineal gland's overall activity. As anyone who has taken melatonin as a supplement knows, it can have a relaxing effect on the nervous system, and this suggests a kind of positive feedback loop between melatonin production and the state most conducive to it. Relaxation increases melatonin production, which in turn produces deeper relaxation, which results in more melatonin, and so on. This is some hard neurological evidence for the mystic's appreciation of calm and darkness, and why the poets traditionally

favour the night.

It is also neurological evidence for the ancient Hindu idea of the ‘third eye’. The pineal gland is located exactly where this source of visionary insight is supposed to lie, suggesting that Descartes may have closer to pinpointing the ‘seat of the soul’ than his critics believed. Opening the ‘third eye’ results in ‘spiritual vision’ and ‘enlightenment’, which may be a way of expressing the connection between melatonin production and its affect on neurotransmitters.

Mavromatis notes the strong link between the pineal gland and the ‘third eye’, but he also suggests that the ‘intersection’ of the old and new brain structures that he believes is responsible for the visionary states associated with hypnagogia, is reminiscent of the symbolism of the Hermetic caduceus. Opening the ‘third eye’ symbolizes the reawakening of an ancient spiritual vision, once available to man, but ‘temporarily (for some millions of years, that is) lost due to an evolutionarily necessary descent into matter, to be regained in due course at a higher level’. Mavromatis goes on to say that:

> In the West, this latter level is often represented by the god Hermes’ sceptre, the caduceus, depicting two snakes entwined around a central rod which culminates in a small sphere or cone flanked by two wings … It is worth noting that the snakes represent the two supposedly opposite sides of man, whereas the sphere or cone stands for the unity of consciousness. The two wings sprouting from the sphere are both higher representations of the two sides of man and the symbols of completion and of liberation of consciousness: they are the two cerebral hemispheres flanking, and practically encasing, the pineal gland.[41]

That hypnagogia is produced by a ‘return’ to earlier forms of consciousness, housed in the ‘old brain’, gives new meaning to the notion of ‘ancient wisdom’. Curiously, Mavromatis remarks on the ‘spiral fashion’ in which this is achieved, with the older forms of consciousness being observed by the newer, ‘cortical’ consciousness, and in turn producing a consciousness that ‘transcends’ both. As mentioned in the last chapter, this ‘spiral’ motif seems to have strong connection to Hermetic ideas, linked to the snakes of the caduceus, and also to the Ouroborus. Another curious ‘spiral/snake’ connection can be found in Jeremy Narby’s fascinating book *The Cosmic Serpent*, an account of his experiences with the powerful psychoactive drug ayahuasca. After taking the drug, Narby had a vision of two giant boa constrictors who spoke to him, imparting ancient wisdom. Narby had been prompted to experiment with ayahuasca after reading an account of its effects by the anthropologist Michael Harner, who also spoke of giant reptilian creatures ‘resting at the lowest depth of his brain’, a remark that immediately suggests the ‘old’ reptilian brain that lies *beneath* the new cerebral cortex. Harner remarked that these creatures ‘resembled DNA’. Narby was interested in how the indigenous people who use ayahuasca in religious ceremonies knew of its properties, and also of the many medicinal properties of the thousands of plants in the native jungle, a knowledge they could not have acquired through trial and error. They told him the *plants themselves* gave them

this knowledge, which came to them when they took ayahuasca. Narby reflected on the similarity between the ‘snakes’ and the DNA molecule — which, as mentioned earlier, resembles the entwined serpents of the caduceus — and went on to research snake symbolism in world mythology. Narby found innumerable examples of entwined snake imagery associated with sacred knowledge, and he further reflected that the ‘snakes’ of the DNA molecule are connected via ‘rungs’ which make it look like a kind of ‘ladder’. The motif of a ‘ladder’ to heaven is strongly associated with shamanism — as noted in Chapter 2 — and is also closely linked to the Hermetic idea of the journey through the planetary spheres. In the context of hypnagogia, we see that Mavromatis believes that its visions are linked to a return ‘spiral fashion’ to an older form of consciousness while simultaneously maintaining the newer, cerebral consciousness, and that he relates the entwined snakes of the caduceus to the linking of the old and new brain systems. Ultimately, Narby came to the conclusion that the imagery of entwined snakes was a symbol of DNA, and that the *DNA molecule itself* somehow communicates with shamans via ayahuasca.

The Hermesian spirit

It would not be unreasonable for some readers to think that the above reflections have at best only a tenuous connection to Hermeticism. Yet, as the Hermetic scholar Antoine Faivre points out, like Hermes himself, Hermeticism need not be announced as such to be present, and Hermes, we know, is a trickster who turns up in some strange places. 'The word [Hermeticism],' Faivre tells us, 'does not always appear where this state of mind, these doctrines, and these practices are apparent.'[42] Yet Hermes' presence can be felt.

The doctrines and practices Faivre refers to are those I've explored in this book. What I'd like to do in these closing pages is to focus on what we he calls the 'Hermesian' state of mind. Yet before I do this, I feel I should point out that as Hermes is the god of crossroads, of pathways, of meetings, and of messages, it is perhaps not so great a stretch that I link ideas about the 'intersection' — our modern term for 'crossroads' — of states of consciousness and the brain systems responsible for them, as well as the associated neurotransmitters — chemical 'messengers' — to the thrice-great one. And the fact that I have linked some Hermetic themes to Jean Gebser's ideas about the integral consciousness structure, which again relates to the idea of 'bringing things together' — 'integrating' them — suggests, to me at least, that the connections here are perhaps not as tenuous as one might think. Just as hypnagogia can be understood as a recapitulation of older brain functions while retaining cerebral consciousness, Gebser's integral structure 'integrates' earlier consciousness structures while retaining the independent ego: both are concerned with the 'meeting' of old and new forms of consciousness in order to produce something more than both, and the integral consciousness structure Gebser envisions seems one in which an Hermetic view of the world could be maintained. And regarding Rilke's 'bees of the invisible' and the kind of memory associated with Faculty X, Faivre himself writes: 'Is not the art of memory … first of all a means of reading the world so as to interiorise it and … rewrite it within the self?' And 'it is especially under the inspiration of the *Corpus Hermeticum* … that memory and imagination are associated to the extent of blending together. After all, a part of the teaching of Hermes Trismegistus consisted of 'interiorizing' the world …'[43] So again, perhaps my speculations are not entirely unfounded.

In fact, this kind of 'bridging' is the sort of activity Faivre has in mind when

he writes of an ‘Hermesian spirit’. This spirit, he argues, is essentially one of syncretism and eclecticism. Whether it is Hermes and Thoth themselves, or heaven and earth — above and below — the Hermetic act seems to be one of connecting otherwise apparently disparate ideas, beliefs, and visions, and producing some new vital current out of the encounter. This is not the same as the postmodern ethos of ‘anything goes’, which is motivated more by a jaded, often cynical ‘post-belief’ than by any effort to transcend the cul-de-sac at which western philosophy has arrived. Quite the contrary. If, Faivre tells us, the Hermeticists ‘see the body as a magical object, mystically linked to the planets and to the elements of nature, it is because they find sense everywhere in things and transcend the illusion of banality’. And this, Faivre remarks, is a ‘supremely poetic task’.[44] Postmodern thinking, to me at least, seems to operate with exactly the opposite mindset: ‘deconstructing’ the great systems of thought, it arrives at a vision (or lack of it) that finds no sense — no meaning — anywhere. When nihilism first raised its disturbing head in the second half of the nineteenth century, it caused a kind of panic in the collective consciousness. Now it is taught at universities and hardly causes a stir. When the notion that the world is meaningless — something science tells us as well — is accepted with as little reaction as a remark about the weather, we can be sure that something has gone wrong with our perception of things.

At the beginning of the last century G.R.S. Mead contrasted the Hermetic gnosis with the ‘doubting mind’ whose ‘noise of words’ about the ‘appearance of things’ only led to confusion. Some years later Frances Yates suggested that it was the exhaustion of Greek dialectics that led the Egyptian Greeks of Alexandria to seek out new ways of explaining the world through mysticism and the occult. Perhaps now, more than a century after Mead, it is time for Hermes to rise to our aid again.

It is this feeling, I think, that leads many today to argue for a return to more ‘traditional’ systems of thought, but these have their own drawbacks and I have written about them elsewhere.[45] In contrast to a return to Tradition, in the sense of a received body of eternal beliefs and revelations, Faivre speaks of a ‘traditional spirit, composed of intense and focused curiosity’ in which Tradition would refer ‘less to an immutable deposit than to a perpetual renewal’.[46] This suggests a ‘tradition’ aimed at asking questions, rather than one of having answers, and this strikes me as an appropriately Hermetic approach to things.

This ‘intense and focused curiosity’ is one of the virtues we have inherited from the Renaissance and it is also the drive behind the eclectic character of the Hermesian spirit. This is a curiosity that does not reject the modern world —

inaugurated by Marin Mersenne's attack on animism — but tries to synthesize its insights with those of the past in order to produce some third new possibility, not immediately given by either (and the parallel with hypnagogia, which brings together the 'old' brain with the 'new', as well as with Gebser's 'integral structure', which integrates 'outgrown' forms of consciousness, seems suggestive). And although this tactic may seem peculiarly modern, it is really as old as the *Corpus Hermeticum* itself, which, as Faivre tells us, was the result of 'diverse contributions, of disparate philosophies blended in a melting pot, the theoretical and doctrinal coherence of which is scarcely perceptible'.[47]

This 'openness to modernity', Faivre argues, allows for what he calls a 'third path', different from the 'purist' — the Traditional in the strong sense — or the 'historical'. In his reading the 'historical path' makes up the various forms of 'popular' spirituality and occultism that abound today. In these approaches, a wide spectrum of beliefs — generally regarded as 'New Age' — offer an 'alternative' to the mainstream. Yet while they may address the spiritual hunger many feel, they lack the intellectual and philosophical power to be more than a kind of well-meaning 'counter-culture', and their less than rigorous character allows them to be easily — and often rightly — ignored. Opposed to these two extremes — the hard core Traditionalists and the flaky New Age — Faivre offers what he calls the 'Humanist path'. This is a humanism in the sense of Ficino, Pico, Bruno, and Fludd, not that of Erasmus. It is not just an acceptance of some Hermetic ideas, but an effort to acquaint oneself with as much of the world of learning as possible. As one of the patron saints of this 'third path' is Thoth, the god of writing, and as Hermes Trismegistus himself is said to written some thirty-six thousand books, this shouldn't be surprising.

Because of its 'expanded field of research', this 'erudite Hermeticism' requires 'a level of culture that must encompass more than the esoteric'.[48] For both the Traditionalist and the New Ager, culture in the broad sense that Faivre intends isn't necessary. Indeed, more often than not it's seen as an impediment to 'salvation' rather than an aid. This is especially true of modern culture, which both the Traditionalist and New Ager tend to regard as more or less 'evil', a product of the Kali Yuga, the 'Dark Age' both believe we find ourselves in. Yet one of the most Hermetic works of the twentieth century, the anonymous *Meditations on the Tarot*, subtitled 'A Journey into Christian Hermeticism', combines Hermetic ideas and Roman Catholicism with probing discussions of psychology, philosophy, sociology, science, and dozens of other 'modern' topics to form a thought-provoking and often controversial work. Any reader coming to the *Meditations on The Tarot* expecting a nice New Age work on telling the

future will be surprised, and the many references to Bergson, Nietzsche, Goethe, and other giants of western culture, will more than likely put them off. And the Hermeticism that comes through in this 600 + page *magnum opus* is itself an example of the synthesizing character Faivre sees at the heart of Hermetic philosophy. For its author, 'the Hermeticist is … a person who is at one and the same time a mystic, a gnostic, a magician, and a "realist-idealist" philosopher' who brings together and synthesizes 'the diverse planes of the macrocosm and the microcosm'.[49] This work of synthesis is achieved through the Hermeticist because he himself is a synthesis of a mystical, a gnostic, a magical, and a 'Hermetic-philosophical' 'sense' (again, the theme of integration), and is able to apply to any object of knowledge the method best suited to it. But although it seeks knowledge, it does not proceed as science does. Rather than 'aspiring to power over the forces of nature … Hermeticism aspires to conscious participation with the constructive forces of the world …' and its means of achieving this are not 'univocal concepts and their verbal definitions … but rather arcana and their symbolic expressions'.[50] These 'arcana', as we've seen, can be practically anything, even something as commonplace as an ashtray, an example of Hermeticism's 'concrete' approach. As the Hermeticist would say, it all depends on how you look at it.

The Hermesian spirit, then, is a call to widen our perspectives to include as much of the world as possible, and to believe that not only nature, but the man-made world too, has a spiritual character. Rather than hold fast to the idea of a primordial, inviolate Tradition — as the followers of René Guénon and the Traditionalist school do — or substitute New Age 'philosophies' for modern ones, the Hermesian way is to bring together what is of value from both the esoteric undercurrent and the exoteric mainstream. And — as Gebser suggests is characteristic of our slowly emerging new consciousness structure — to integrate them, so that something new and unforeseen may arise. This is something I believe I have tried to do in this book, and in my others.

Again, following this 'third path' seems to have been with Hermeticism from the start. 'From the first centuries to the present day,' the Hermetic scholar Wouter J. Hanegraaff writes, 'there has … existed a third current, characterized by a resistance to … either pure rationality or doctrinal faith.'[51] Perhaps because we have a deep seated hunger for some all encompassing final answer to life's mysteries, the 'totalizing' systems of science and religion still seem very attractive, while the kind of 'hovering life' — in the novelist Robert Musil's phrase — which combines science and mysticism and is able to exist in the kind of creative uncertainty the Hermesian spirit celebrates, is less so. But there have

always been those who know that life's mysteries are not to be answered but lived, and the third path of the Hermesian spirit is one in which they are lived most intensely.

And Hermes Trismegistus himself? Well, we can still learn much from him. If nothing else his call for us to be 'caretakers' of the Earth is clearly much needed today, and if this is all we learn from him, we shall profit from it considerably. But while we should certainly fulfil the obligations of one side of our nature, we should not allow those of our other half to fall into neglect. One way to avoid this is to muster that 'godlike concentration of consciousness' the thrice-great one required of his students in order to grasp his teaching, lest it 'comes like a rushing river tumbling in flux' and 'outruns any effort we make' to understand it. The similarity between this and Faivre's 'intense and focused curiosity' seems clear. It is through efforts like this that the two branches of knowledge — gnosis and episteme — with which we began this essay, come together and inform that 'third path' upon which, as his sobriquet suggests, Hermes is our most trusted guide. That path, however, is not straight. It curves and curls and twists, like the serpents of his caduceus, and if we happen to lose our way — which is altogether possible and in fact to be expected — we may find some unknown treasure, some *hermaion* that makes the detour more than worthwhile. Hermes, we remember, is the god of travellers, not of destinations or arrivals, and as the world is infinite, so too is the knowledge of it. In fact, with each new incremental advance of our knowledge, the world itself increases by so much. And, as Rilke tells us, each act of consciousness may indeed create new worlds. So there is much at stake. The prospect is certainly challenging, daunting even. But it is also powerfully exciting and a tremendous lure for that 'intense and focused curiosity' that fuels this never-ending quest. As P.D. Ouspensky wrote, at the close of a book that emerged from his experience with his ashtray, 'the real, true progress of thought exists only in the widest possible striving toward knowledge, a striving which does not admit the possibility of resting on any forms of knowledge already *found*'. 'The meaning of life,' Ouspensky recognized, 'lies in eternal seeking, and *only by seeking* shall we ever find new reality.'[52] This is one way to describe the Hermetic path. It is a very good way, I think, and it is in this sense, I believe, that we should follow the teachings of Hermes Trismegistus.

Notes

1. See Gary Lachman, *Dedalus Book of the 1960s: Turn Off Your Mind* (Sawtry: Dedalus, 2010).

2. The phrase ‘trousered ape’ is from C.S. Lewis’ *The Abolition of Man*, and is a characterization of Darwin’s theory that humans evolved from apes.
3. Quoted in Richard Smoley, *Forbidden Faith*: *The Gnostic Legacy from the Gospels to the Da Vinci Code* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), p. 141.
4. Manly P. Hall, *The Lost Keys of Freemasonry* (New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2006), p. 85.
5. Ibid. p. 91.
6. Ibid. p. 92.
7. Ibid. p. 86.
8. Ibid. p. 94.
9. Ibid. p. 95.
10. Ibid. p. 111.
11. Roland D. Gray, *Goethe the Alchemist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), p. 371.
12. See Gary Lachman, *Rudolf Steiner: An Introduction to His Life and Work* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 2007), p. 125.
13. See ‘Goethe and the Idea of Scientific Truth’ in Erich Heller, *The Disinherited Mind* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, & Cudahy, 1957).
14. Faivre, 1994, p. 83.
15. See especially Fechner’s *Nanna, or the Soul Life of Plants* (1848) and *Concerning Souls* (1861).
16. David Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).
17. Introduction to *The Definitions of Hermes Trismegistus to Asclepius* translated by Jean-Pierre Mahé in Salaman 2001 p. 127.
18. Salaman 2007, p. 47.
19. Novalis *Pollen and Fragment*s translated by Arthur Versluis (Grand Rapids: Phanes Press, 1989), p. 50.
20. Ibid. p. 71.
21. Ibid. p. 26.
22. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, translated by J.B. Leishman and Stephen Spender (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1939), p. 61.
23. Lachman, *A Secret History of Consciousness*, 2003 p. 252.
24. Rilke, 1939 p. 129.
25. Ibid. p. 77.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid. p. 128.
28. Lachman, *A Secret History of Consciousness*, 2003 p. 224.
29. Ibid. n.7, pp. 304–5. Briefly, around the same time that Rilke was receiving the inspiration for the *Duino Elegies*, Steiner gave a series of lectures in which he also proposed the idea of a coming ‘invisible world’. In 1911, Steiner lectured on The *Reappearance of Christ in the Etheric* (Spring Valley: Anthroposophic Press, N.Y.: 1983), and argued that the earth was becoming a ‘corpse’ as preparation for its new planetary incarnation as Jupiter. In order to accomplish this, Steiner said, ‘it is necessary for the earth to be destroyed; otherwise the spirit will not become free’. For Steiner, as for Rilke, the external world was in the process of passing away in order to arise in a new spiritual form.
30. P.D. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 1983, p. 122. In speaking of what Gurdjieff calls ‘the law of seven or the law of octaves’ — which I discuss in Chapter 3 — Gurdjieff told Ouspensky that ‘in order to understand the meaning of this law it is necessary to regard the universe as *consisting of vibrations*’. Gurdjieff prefaced his remarks about the law of seven with the Hermetic statement that ‘the study of man must proceed on parallel lines with the study of the of the world, and the study of the world must run parallel with the study of man’.
31. Rilke, 1939 pp. 128–29.
32. See Rudolf Steiner, *Lucifer and Ahriman* (North Vancouver: Steiner Book Centre, 1984).
33. Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past* (New York: Vintage Books, 1982), p. 48.
34. Hermann Hesse, *Steppenwolf* (New York: Henry Holt, 1929), p. 46. That in Hesse’s passage we can

find more than one Hermetic trope — the world reflected in miniature (macrocosm/ microcosm), his brain storing a thousand pictures (art of memory), the eternal and the stars (the timeless realm of nous) — was a discovery for me. I did not realize they were there before deciding to include this quotation in this chapter. This seems an example of the Greek *hermaion*, the 'lucky find' associated with Hermes. That the find itself is about Hermetic themes suggests it is a kind of double *hermaion*.

35. Christopher Isherwood, *The World in The Evening* (London: Methuen, 1984), p. 109.
36. Ibid. p. 116.
37. Ibid.
38. See Lachman, *Discovering Swedenborg*, 2009, pp. 94–98; *Rudolf Steiner*, 2007, pp. 149–51; and *Jung the Mystic* (New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2010), pp. 119–20.
39. Auditory hypnagogia is as common as the visual type. In *The Natural Depth in Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972) the psychologist Wilson Van Dusen records several 'auditory hallucinations' which, although at first seemingly nonsensical, were on reflection found to contain profound insights relating to his current psychological or physical state. Another example of auditory hypnagogia is the automatic writing associated with the French surrealists of the 1920s. See my article at: http://www.forteantimes.com/features/ articles/227/hypnagogia.html
40. In 'lucid dreams' we become conscious within a dream and, rather than 'waking up' in the usual sense, retain consciousness while continuing to dream. Basically, we are awake in a dream, know that we are dreaming, can act consciously within it, and can continue in this state. In hypnagogic states, we are awake but are aware of involuntary inner imagery — much like the imagery of a dream — which we can observe while also being aware of our physical, external surroundings. So in lucid dreaming, we are awake while dreaming, and in hypnagogic states, we are dreaming while awake.
41. Andreas Mavromatis, *Hypnagogia* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 263–64.
42. Faivre 1995 p. 60.
43. Ibid. p. 66; also Faivre, 1994, p. 13.
44. Faivre, 1995, p. 70.
45. See Lachman, 2008.
46. Faivre 1994,, p. 41.
47. Faivre 1995, p. 55.
48. Faivre 1994, p. 41.
49. *Meditations on the Tarot* (New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2002), pp. 89, 48. It is generally acknowledged that the author of this remarkable work was the Russian Valentin Tomberg.
50. Ibid. p. 90.
51. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, Preface, *Gnosis and Hermeticism: From Antiquity to Modern Times*, ed. Roelof Van Den Broeck and Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), p. vii.
52. P.D. Ouspensky, 1981, p. 291. Although not acknowledged in the book, *Tertium Organum* arose out of Ouspensky's experience with nitrous oxide. See Lachman, 2006, pp. 45–54.

Endnotes

Introduction

1. Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 13.
2. Although commonly referred to as the ‘Mercury dime’, the coin actually depicts the goddess Liberty wearing a Phrygian cap; the wings symbolize free thought.
3. Eliphas Levi, *The History of Magic* (York Beach, Maine: Weiser, 2000), p. 79.
4. Florian Ebeling, *The Secret History of Hermes Trismegistus* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2007), p. x.
5. Antoine Faivre, *The Eternal Hermes* (Grand Rapids: Phanes Press, 1995), p. 19.
6. Yates 1971, pp. 54–56.
7. Ebeling, p. x.
8 Yates 1971, pp. 7–10.
9. Faivre 1995, p. 101. See also D.P. Walker, *The Ancient Theology* (London: Duckworth, 1972), p. 221.
10. Manly P. Hall, *The Secret Teachings of All Ages* (New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2003), p. 96.
11. Levi, p. 80.
12. Yates 1971, p. 5.
13. By Graham Hancock and the Dalai Lama, respectively.
14. Christopher McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians* (Wellingborough: Crucible,1987), p. 30.
15. Gary Lachman, ‘The Renaissance of Hermetic Man,’ *Gnosis,* Summer 1996 pp. 28–33.
16. Yates 1971, p. 42.
17. Ibid, p. 5.

Chapter 1

1. G.R.S. Mead, *Gnosis of the Mind* (Benares: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1906), p. 10. Text available at http://www. gnosis.org/library/grs-mead/grsm_gnosismind.htm 2. Ibid. p. 23.
3. Clement Salaman, Dorine van Oyen and William D. Wharton translators, *The Way of Hermes* (London: Duckworth, 2001), p.13. See also notes 9 and 11 below.
4. Mead 1906, p. 46.
5. As with ‘romantic’ and ‘existential,’ ‘gnostic’ has taken on a usage and meaning that exceeds reference to the religious and spiritual communities and beliefs that arose in the first centuries following Christ and is now often used in a broader sense to mean secret, hidden, or occult, as well as the individuals who pursue knowledge of this kind. For the specific historical groups and teachings that make up Gnosticism, I will use Gnostic. For less specific references, I will use gnostic.
6. *C.G. Jung Speaking*, ed. William McGuire and R.F.C. Hull (London: Pan Books, 1980), p. 428.
7. Salaman 2001, p. 58.

8. There are several definitions and interpretations of the Greek word *Nous*, which in English is sometimes used to mean ‘common sense’, and which is the probable source of the American slang phrase ‘use your noodle’, meaning to ‘use your head,’ to think something through. For different Greek philosophers — Anaxagoras, Plato, Aristotle — it means intellect, mind, logos, reason, either that of the individual or of God. In terms of experience, as I hope will become clear, for the Hermetic thinkers, the sense in which it is understood as a sudden godlike cognition is probably the closest.
9. Clement Salaman, Introduction to *Asclepius The Perfect Discourse of Hermes Trismegistus* (London: Duckworth, 2007), pp. 11–12. Readers who go on to read Salaman’s excellent translations may note that some of the language used is remarkably similar to that of the Gurdjieffean ‘fourth way’. This is not surprising, given that Salaman is a member of the School of Economic Science, an offshoot of P.D. Ouspensky’s London ‘fourth way’ schools of the 1930s and ‘40s. This is not to say that Salaman has imported language from one ‘esoteric school’ to another. ‘Wakefulness’ and the struggle against ‘sleep’ that characterizes the ‘fourth way’ are themes inherent in the *Hermetica*, as well as in other spiritual philosophies. Salaman is also the editor of a translation of *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino* (1999) prepared by the London Language Department of the School of Economic Science.
10. Salaman 2001, p. 15.
11. For this account I have relied on Clement Salaman’s translation of the *Asclepius* and, with Dorine van Oyen and William D. Wharton, of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, published as *The Way of Hermes*, above. Both are highly readable and not top-heavy with critical apparatus, although the Introduction to the *Corpus Hermeticum* by Gilles Quispel, and Jean-Pierre Mahé’s translation of and Introduction to *The Definitions of Hermes Trismegistus to Asclepius*, included in the book, are essential. I have also consulted Brian Copenhaver’s *Hermetica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) and G.R.S. Mead’s classic *Thrice Greatest Hermes* (York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, 2001). Timothy Freke’s and Peter Gandy’s *The Hermetica* (London: Piatkus Books, 1997) is a very readable popular re-interpretation and compilation of the Hermetic writings from different sources.
12. Salaman 2001, pp. 131, 126.
13. Copenhaver, p. 1. *The Way of Hermes* has ‘*Nous* of the Supreme’.
14. In his fascinating book *The Reflexive Universe* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1976), the philosopher and inventor Arthur M. Young makes some remarks about light that seem to have an Hermetic cast. ‘Light,’ Young says, ‘is the unitary purposive principle which engenders the universe,’ and ‘has the nature of a first cause’. (p. 23) ‘Light, because it is primary, must be unqualified — impossible to describe — because it is antecedent to the contrasts necessary to description.’ (p. 10) ‘Light is not an objective thing that can be investigated as can ordinary objects … Light is not seen. It is seeing.’ (Ibid.) The history of light as a metaphor for vision and knowledge — illumination, enlightenment — is too long to enter here, but seems to warrant a serious study. See also Arthur Zajonc, *Catching the Light: The Entwined History of Light and Mind* (New York: Bantam, 1993).
15. Mead 1906, p. 11
16. Salaman 2007, p. 58.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid. p. 73.
19. Salaman 2001, p. 79.
20. These twelve tormentors, if one persists on the Hermetic path, are replaced by knowledge, joy, self-control, steadfastness, justice, generosity, truth, Supreme Good, life, and light.
21. Salaman 2001, p.38.
22. Ibid. p. 63
23. Ibid. p. 70
24. Salaman 2007, p. 55.
25. Ebeling, p. 67.
26. Richard M. Bucke, *Cosmic Consciousness* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1966), pp. 9–10. One of the examples Bucke gives of previous experiences of cosmic consciousness is that of the fifteenth century

German shoemaker and mystic Jacob Boehme. In one account of his experiences, Boehme speaks of it in a way remarkably similar to Bucke. 'The gate was opened to me,' Boehme wrote, 'that in one quarter of an hour I saw and knew more than if I had been many years together at university.' Again, the profound cognitive character of the experience is clear. In an earlier experience, Boehme looked 'into the principles and deepest foundations of things'. Ibid. pp. 182, 180.

27. Ernest Lee Tuveson, *The Avatars of Thrice Greatest Hermes* (London and Toronto: Associated University Press, 1982), pp. 202–51.
28. See Gary Lachman, *In Search of P.D. Ouspensky* (Wheaton: Quest Books, 2004).
29. P.D. Ouspensky, *A New Model of the Universe* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), p. 278.
30. Ibid. pp. 280–81.
31. P. D. Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), p. 258.
32. Emanuel Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell* (London: Swedenborg Society, 1992), pp. 173, 188, 172, 172–73.
33. Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception* (London: Grafton Books, 1987), p. 15.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid. p. 20.
36. Ibid.
37. Salaman 2007 p. 61.
38. Huxley, p. 21.
39. Manly P. Hall, *The Secret Teachings of All Ages* (New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2003), p. 96.
40. Salaman 2001, p. 58.

Chapter 2

1. Quoted in Arthur Versluis, *The Egyptian Mysteries* (London: Arkana, 1989), p. 3.
2. Ebeling, p. 29.
3. Joscelyn Godwin, *Athanasius Kircher* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1979), p. 6.
4. The *Voynich Manuscript* is a strange, illustrated text, believed to have been written in the fifteenth or sixteenth century. It is written in an unknown script, and its author is unknown, although some suggested candidates include the Franciscan friar and scholar Roger Bacon and the Elizabethan magician John Dee. It features illustrations covering biology, botany, cosmology, and astronomy. Although many have tried, including some renowned WWII code breakers, to this day it is undeciphered. Images from the *Voynich Manuscript* can be seen at: http://beinecke.library.yale.edu/digitallibrary/voynich.html 5. Godwin 1979, p. 56.
6. Quoted in John Gregory, *The Neoplatonists* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1999), p. 150.
7. Godwin 1979, p. 56.
8. Manly P. Hall, *The Lost Keys of Freemasonry* (New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2006), p. 108.
9. Versluis, p. 5.
10. Godwin 1979, p. 21.
11. Quoted in Hall, 2003, p. 162.
12. Jeremy Naydler, *Plato, Shamanism, and Ancient Egypt* (Oxford: Abzu Press, 2005), p. 1.
13. See for example Mircea Eliade *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (London: Arkana, 1989).
14. Lewis Spence, *Ancient Egyptian Myths and Legends* (Minneola: Dover, 1990; originally published 1915), p. 174.
15. See R.T. Rundle Clark, *Myth and Symbol in Ancient Egypt* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1993), pp. 35–67.

16. Ibid. p. 12.
17. Naydler 2005 p. 22.
18. Naydler remarks that Homer speaks of *thumos*, located in the chest, as the centre of man's emotional life, and says that Homer's characters 'conduct an inner dialogue with their *thumos*, and come to decisions about what to do, and how best to act'. (p.16), A similar idea was presented in Julian Jaynes *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1977). Briefly, Jaynes argues that Homeric man lacked the kind of interior space we possess and did not, as we do, 'ask ourselves' what we intend to do about something and come to decisions about it. Rather, Homeric man possessed two consciousnesses, housed in different sides of the brain (hence, 'bicameral,' which means 'two chambered'). He felt the left side of the brain as 'I' — as we do — and the consciousness on the right side came to him as 'voices'. When Homeric man heard 'messages' from the gods, Jaynes argues, he was really receiving instructions from the right side of the brain. Jaynes argues that a series of catastrophes and upheavals forced Homeric man to fuse the two consciousnesses together, to arrive at the kind of ego-consciousness familiar to ourselves. The right brain, however, continues to posses a consciousness of its own, as experiments with split-brain subjects have shown, although for the most part it remains 'unconscious' for its left brain counterpart.
19. This, of course, flies in the face of all modern ideas about consciousness and its relation to the brain, which can be summed up in the philosopher John Searle's remark that 'the brain causes consciousness'. Yet how much brain is actually necessary for not only consciousness, but a high level of intelligence, is debatable. See Gary Lachman *A Secret History of Consciousness* (Great Barrington: Lindisfarne, 2003), pp. xxv–xxvi.
20. Salaman 2001, p. 48.
21. Salaman 2007, p. 82.
22. Naydler 2005, p. 30.
23. Rundle Clark, 1993, p. 36.
24. See my article 'René Schwaller de Lubicz and the Intelligence of the Heart' at http://www.unitedearth.com.au/lubicz.html. In it I point out the links between Schwaller de Lubicz's two modes of cognition and Alfred North Whitehead's similar ideas presented in his short book *Symbolism, Its Meaning and Effect* (New York: G.P. Putnam & Sons, 1959).
25. For more on 'participatory epistemology' see Lachman, *A Secret History of Consciousness* 2003 pp. 153-78.
26. R.A. Schwaller de Lubicz, *Esotericism and Symbol* (New York: Inner Traditions, 1985), p. 49.
27. R.A Schwaller de Lubicz, *Nature Word* (Lindisfarne Press: West Stockbridge, 1982), p. 135.
28. Salaman 2001, p. 84.
29. G.R.S. Mead, *Thrice Greatest Hermes* (York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser 2001), Book Two, p. 158.
30. Schwaller de Lubicz, 1985 p. 49.
31. Steven Weinberg, *The First Three Minutes* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), p. 154.
32. Schwaller de Lubicz, 1985, p. 55.
33. Ibid. p. 5.
34. R. A. Schwaller de Lubicz, *Symbol and the Symbolic* (Brookline, Mass: Autumn Press, 1978), p. 8.
35. Jeremy Naydler, *Ancient Egypt and the Soul of the West* (Oxford: Abzu Press, 1996), p. 3.
36. See my essay: 'The Spiritual Detective: How Baudelaire invented Symbolism, by way of Swedenborg, E.T.A. Hoffmann and Edgar Allan Poe' in *Between Method and Madness: Essays on Swedenborg and Literature* ed. Stephen McNeilly (London: Swedenborg Society, 2005), pp. 31–44. Also Lachman, *A Secret History of Consciousness*, 2003 pp. 153–61.
37. Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), p. 10. It should go without saying that Faivre's three other *sine qua nons* of esotericism, 'Living Nature,' 'Imagination and Mediation,' and 'Experience of Transmutation,' are all found in the Hermetic tradition.
38. Christopher Bamford, '*Nature Word*, the Hermetic Tradition, and Today,' in Schwaller de Lubicz 1982, pp. 27–28.

Chapter 3

1. Hall 2003, p. 96.
2. Justin Pollard and Howard Reid, *The Rise and Fall of Alexandria* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), p. xvii.
3. Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 14.
4. Fowden, p. 23.
5. ", pp. xiii–xiv.
6. Fowden, p. 22.
7. See 'The Spirit Mercurius' in C.G. Jung *Collected Works Vol. 13, Alchemical Studies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968).
8. See http://encyclopedia.jrank.org/articles/pages/94/Secret-Knowledge.html
9. See http://projectsx.dartmouth.edu/history/bronze_age/lessons/ les/26.html 10. Fowden, pp. 57–59.
11. Copenhaver, p. xiv.
12. Fowden, p. 213.
13. Gilles Quispel, Preface Salaman 2001, pp. 12–13. See also Quispel's essay 'The Asclepius: From the Hermetic Lodge in Alexandria to the Greek Eucharist and the Roman Mass' in *Gnosis and Hermeticism: From Antiquity to Modern Times*, ed. Roelof van den Broeck and Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Albany: Suny Press, 1998), pp. 69–77 in which he speaks of a 'ritual of initiation that originated in Alexandria and presupposes a mystery religion there that focused on the heavenly journey of the soul' (p.73).
14. Salaman 2007, pp. 78–79.
15. Ibid. p. 81.
16. Ibid. p. 78.
17. See Fowden, pp. 38–44.
18. Salaman 2001, p. 42.
19. Claire Goodrick-Clarke and Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, Introduction to *G.R.S Mead and the Gnostic Quest* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2005), p. 15.
20. Ibid. p. 118.
21. Ibid.
22. See, for example, Salaman 2001, p. 47.
23. Ibid. p. 52.
24. Glenn Alexander Magee, *Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), p. 12.
25. Salaman 2001, p. 34.
26. Salaman 2007, pp. 74–75.
27. Hoeller bases his account on Lewis S. Keizer's commentaries on the Hermetic text, *The Eighth Reveals the Ninth*, found among the Gnostic works discovered in Nag Hammadi. See *The Eighth Reveals the Ninth: A New Hermetic Initiation Discourse* (Seaside: Academy of Arts and Humanities, CA, 1974), pp. 58–63. However, William C. Geese, in *Corpus Hermeticum XIII and Early Christian Literature* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, Netherlands, 1979), p. 42, note 43, questions Keizer's conclusions.
28. Stephan Hoeller, Introduction to G.R.S. Mead *Hymns to Hermes* (Boston: Weiser Books, 2006), p. 15.
29. P.D. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), pp. 82–84.
30. Mead 2006, p.63.
31. Ibid. p. 18.
32. Gregory, 1999, p. 149.
33. James M. Robinson, ed. *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996), pp. 324–25.

34. Salaman 2001, pp 129–30.
35. Maurice Nicoll, *Living Time* (London: Watkins, 1981), pp. 103, 119.

Chapter 4

1. Peter Marshall, *The Philosopher's Stone* (London: Macmillan, 2001), pp. 153–54.
2. It can be found at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emerald_ Tablet#Newton.27s_translation 3. Quoted in Marshall, 2001, pp. 250–51.
4. E.J. Holmyard, *Alchemy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 98.
5. Sean Martin, *Alchemy and Alchemists* (Harpenden: Pocket Essentials, 2006), p. 39.
6. The title of a classic work on the subject by Mircea Eliade, *The Crucible and the Forge*.
7. Holmyard, p. 27.
8. Archimedes was born in Syracuse in Sicily, but came to Alexandria as a young man. At the time of his 'Eureka' experience, he had returned to the city of his birth.
9. Martin, p. 45.
10. Jung 1968, pp. 57–65.
11. Quoted in Fowden, p. 125.
12. Ibid. p. 122.
13. Salaman 2001, p. 39.
14. Fowden, p. 124.
15. Ibid. p. 122.
16. Ibid. p. 124.
17. C.G. Jung, *The Secret of the Golden Flower* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1962), p. 91.
18. Quoted in Georg Feuerstein, *Structures of Consciousness* (Lower Lake, CA: Integral Publishing,1987), p. 205.
19. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, translator William Kaufmann (Vintage Books: New York, 1974), p. 223.
20. Quoted in Marshall, 2001, p. 208.
21. Ibid. p. 191.
22. H.G. Wells *A Short History of the World* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 192.
23. Holmyard, p. 36.
24. http://www.hermetics.org/Sabians_of_Harran.html 25. http://www.hermetics.org/Sabians_of_Harran.html Whether Christian Rosenkreutz was an actual person or an allegorical figure remains unclear. No exact dates for his birth are given, although in the second Rosicrucian Manifesto (1615), the year 1378 is mentioned. He was supposed to live for 106 years, which would place his death in 1484. As Harran was levelled in 1271 there would have been nothing but ruins at the time of any possible visit. There has been some suggestion of a possible link between Christian Rosenkreutz — who or whatever he may have been — and Gemisthos Plethon, although aside from the fact that both were connoisseurs of ancient wisdom, there is nothing concrete connecting the two. However see Christopher Bamford's essay 'The Meaning of the Rose Cross' at:

    http://rosicrucianzine.tripod.com/cb_tmotrc.htm 26. Walter Scott, Introduction *Hermetica* (Boston: Shambhala, 2001), pp. 98–101. Exactly which Hermetic books the Harranians possessed is unclear, although Scott believes they had the whole *Hermetica*, including books that are since lost to us. Ibid. p. 108.
27. Ibid. p. 105.
28. See Henry Corbin *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth from Mazdean Iran to Shi'ite Iran* (Princeton: Princeton/Bollingen, 1977).

29. In *Heaven and Hell*, a titled borrowed from Swedenborg, Huxley wrote that ‘Like the earth of a hundred years ago our mind still has its darkest Africas, its unmapped Borneos and Amazonian basins’. And while the creatures that inhabit these ‘far continents’ of the mind seem ‘improbable,’ they are nevertheless ‘facts of observation,’ which argues for their ‘complete autonomy’ and ‘self-sufficiency’. Huxley, p. 69–70.
30. Scott, p. 108.
31. Holmyard, p. 64.
32. http://www.crystalinks.com/geber.html 33. Marshall 2001, pp. 218–20.
34. Holmyard, p. 73.
35. Ibid. p. 220.
36. Essentially, Arius argued against the Trinity, maintaining that Jesus was a ‘created being,’ and hence, not co-equal with God.
37. It may also, however, derive from *gharbala*, Arabic for ‘sifting the fine from the coarse,’ a central alchemical pursuit. See Marshall, 2001, p. 224.
38. http://www.crystalinks.com/geber.html 39. Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parsifal and Titure*l translated by Cyril Edwards (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 198.
40. Faivre, 1995, p. 19.
41. von Eschenbach, p. 197. There are, however, doubts about this connection. See Richard Barber’s Introduction, Ibid. p. xix.
42. Joscelyn Godwin, *The Golden Thread* (Wheaton: Quest Books, 2007), p. 15.
43. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geber_(crater) 44. Ebeling, p. 70.
45. Visitors to Switzerland may notice chemists with the name ‘Paracelsus’, as I did in the *Hauptbahnhof* in Zürich.
46. The one exception was, as mentioned, the Asclepius, which was well known throughout the Middle Ages, but even this has a ‘magical’ aspect more in tune with alchemy than with the books of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, although, to be sure, it also speaks of ‘cosmic consciousness’.
47. Ebeling, p. 59.
48. Faivre 1994, p. 11.

Chapter 5

1. There is some question about whether Petrarch was the first to do this, or whether he actually made the ascent at all. Although subsequent historians have added to them, Lynn Thorndike’s ‘Renaissance or Prenaissance?’ (*Journal of the History of Ideas* 4, No. 1, January 1943), presents the basic doubts. Others had of course climbed mountains before Petrarch, but these ascents were motivated by practical reasons. Petrarch’s is unusual for being driven purely by curiosity.
2. Petrarch, ‘The Ascent of Mont Ventoux,’ translated by Hans Nachod, *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, edited by Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oscar Kristeller, and John Herman Randall, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), p. 36.
3. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy, Vol. 1: Inferno* translated by Mark Musa (London: Penguin, 1984), p. 67.
4. Petrarch, p. 40.
5. Ibid. p. 41.
6. Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1983), p. 341.
7. Petrarch, p. 45.
8. Ibid. p. 44.
9. Petrarch’s synchronicity seems *double*, in the sense that *by definition*, a synchronicity is an immediately

apparent correspondence between an inner and an outer event. The outer event that paralleled Petrarch's inner one — the passage from Augustine — is itself about the correspondence between the inner and outer world. Petrarch could have opened another book and read something about mountains alone, and that would have been synchronistic enough. But he read something about the *relationship* between mountains and the inner world, which was precisely the issue preoccupying him at that moment. Petrarch, of course, did not have the benefit of the notion of synchronicity, which itself offers an answer to the issue troubling him, the conflict between the demands of his soul and the attraction of the outer world. In synchronicities we recognize directly that both worlds are *one*, or at least that the membrane separating them is permeable, which is an Hermetic insight itself.

Also, Augustine's rejection of the Hermetic notion that we can know God by observing the cosmos, will soon be echoed by the new scientific consciousness, but for a different reason.

For Augustine we should ignore the cosmos because contemplating it can lead our attention away from God. Science will tell us that it is pointless to look for God in the cosmos because He is not there. Hermeticism rejects both these positions.

10. Copenhaver, p. xlvii.
11. Petrarch, p. 46.
12. Ibid. p. 45. Salaman 2001 p. 39. Clearly, the choice of 'empty parading' is the translator's. In another English version, by James Harvey Robinson (http://history.hanover.edu/ texts/petrarch/pet17.html), we have 'vain show,' which means roughly the same. The Latin original is *spectaculis evanescant.* The *Corpus Hermeticum* wasn't translated into Latin until Marsilio Ficino's edition in 1463, and Petrarch could read no Greek. The similarity may be nothing but coincidence, but it is striking nonetheless, and there are other oddly Hermetic echoes. Petrarch remarks at one point that he 'leaped in my winged thoughts from things corporeal to what is incorporeal,' (p. 39) and speaks of 'the agile and immortal mind' which can reach its goal 'in the twinkling of an eye'. (p. 40) Although instantaneous mental travelling may not be an exclusively Hermetic motif, these phrases do resonate with the kind of ideas presented in the Hermetic books.
13. Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (London: Phaidon Press, 1944), p. 179.
14. Blumenberg, p. 342.
15. Ernst Cassirer *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), p. 141–44.
16. James Hillman, *Re-Visioning Psychology* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1977), pp. 196–7. Other elements in Petrarch's character of course also constitute an incipient Renaissance mentality, namely his love of antiquity, his scholarliness, and sense of history.
17. Jean Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin* translated by Noel Barstad and Algis Mickunas (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1985), p. 12.
18. Russell Kirk, Introduction, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (Chicago: Gateway Editions, 1956), p. xiii.
19. See Colin Wilson's *From Atlantis to the Sphinx* (London: Virgin Books, 1996).
20. Yates 1971, p. 54. To this list of influences D.P. Walker adds Proclus, Iamblichus, and Porphyry. See *Spiritual & Demonic Magic From Ficino to Campanella* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2000), pp. 36–37.
21. Yates 1971, p. 63.
22. Hillmann, pp. 200–201.
23. Ibid. p. 202.
24. Charles Boer, Introduction to Marsilio Ficino, *The Book of Life*, translated by Charles Boer (Woodstock, CN: Spring Publications, 1996), p. xv.
25. Marsilio Ficino, *Letters Vol. 1*, translated by the Language Department of the School of Economic Science (London: Shepard-Walwyn, 1975), p. 19.
26. Walker 2000, p. 60.
27. Godwin 2007, p. 3. 28. Hillman, p. 201.
29. Ficino, 1975, p. 19.

30. Yates 1971, p. 77. See also Ficino, 1975, p. 20.
31. Ficino 1975, p. 20.
32. Yates 1971, p. 104.
33. Quoted in Thomas Moore *The Planets Within* (London: Associated University Press, 1982), p. 32.
34. Hillman, p. 204.
35. Walker 2000, p. 30.
36. One hopes that Ficino's astral prescriptions were more successful than those aimed at health, as in *On Caring for the Health of Students*, or longevity, as in *How to Prolong Your Life*, which with *On Making Your Life Agree With the Heavens*, makes up his *Book of Life*. As his translator Charles Boer points out, 'Considering some of the substances Ficino recommends for ingestion,' his advice was 'atrocious,' and he remarks that many of his 'patients' 'spent years of their life laid up with gout'. Likewise, many of his close friends died young: Lorenzo de' Medici at 43, the poet Angelo Ambrogini, known as Il Poliziano, at 40, and Pico della Mirandola at 31. Ficino himself died just short of his sixty-sixth birthday, which, for that time, would have been considered old.
37. Godwin 2007, p. 7.
38. Pico della Mirandola, p. xii.
39. Walker 1972, p. 42.
40. Ibid. p. 43.
41. Some modern forms, however, eschew Kabbalism and aim at a more pure Hermetic approach. See, for example, Julius Evola and the UR Group *Introduction to Magic* (Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2001).
42. Pico della Mirandola, p. xiii.
43. See: http://weuropeanhistory.suite101.com/article. cfm/renaissance_a_rebirth_of_classical_era_thought 44. Colin Wilson, *The Occult* (New York: Random House, 1971), p. 321.
45. Pico della Mirandola, pp. 6–7.
46. Ibid.
47. http://www.humanistictexts.org/mencius.htm 48. For two radically different critiques of the Renaissance sensibility see René Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity and The Signs of the Times* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 232; and Charlene Spretnak, *States of Grace: The Recovery of Meaning in the Postmodern Age* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), pp. 197, 202.
49. Yates 1971, p. 116.
50. See, for example, Andrew White's *History of the Warfare of Science with Theology* (London: Macmillan, 1896).
51. Peter Marshall, *The Theatre of the World* (London: Harvill Secker, 2006), p. 138.
52. Ibid. p. 140.
53. In 1789, after an absence of many years, Cagliostro ceded to his wife's wishes and returned to Italy, where there was a warrant for his arrest. Put into Rome's San Leo prison, for nearly a decade he lived in a dark, dank cell and in 1797 was the last prisoner to be executed by the Inquisition. See my *Politics and the Occult* (Wheaton: Quest Books, Il, 2008), pp. 89–93.
54. Arthur Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 462.
55. Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).
56. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* translated Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 8.
57. In 1609 Galileo began experiments and observations with his telescope, developed from the earlier spyglass, which led to his book *The Starry Messenger* published in 1610. One of Galileo's revolutionary observations — in more ways than one — was of the moons of Jupiter. If, he asked, it was true that Jupiter had moons, like the Earth's, orbiting it, then it was possible that the Earth itself could orbit another body, the sun, which was what Copernicus had argued. Along with this remarkable discovery, Galileo was the first to gaze on stars and other celestial bodies, hitherto *unseen.* Before this, all men could work with was the naked eye. Galileo had passed beyond this limit. Galileo's discovery led to the

notion of a cosmos much larger than had been suspected, yet Bruno had already 'discovered' this years before, through an act of *imagination*, which had presented to him an infinite cosmos, sprinkled with innumerable worlds.

58. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mont_Ventoux

Chapter 6

1. Copenhaver, p. xxxii.
2. Yates 1971, p. 115.
3. Faivre 1995, p. 100.
4. Joscelyn Godwin *The Pagan Dream of the Renaissance* (Boston: Weiser Books, 2005), p. 162.
5. Colin Wilson, *A Criminal History of Mankind* (G.P. Putnam & Sons: New York, 1984), p. 345.
6. Faivre, p. 100.
7. Ibid.
8. D.P. Walker, *Spiritual & Demonic Magic*, p. 36.
9. Yates, p. 163.
10. Quoted in Benjamin Woolley, *The Queen's Conjuror* (HarperCollins: London, 2001), p. 12.
11. Ibid. p. 167.
12. Godwin, *Pagan Dream of the Renaissance*, p. 163.
13. Woolley, p. 13.
14. See Gary Lachman *Into the Interior: Discovering Swedenborg*, 2nd edition (Swedenborg Society: London, 2009), pp. 26–8.
15. Woolley, pp. 54–5.
16. See http://www.newdawnmagazine.com/Article/The_ British_Occult_Secret_Service.html 17. Colin Wilson, *Starseekers* (Hodder & Stoughton: London, 1980), p. 86.
18. Ptolemy (90–168 AD) was an Egyptian-Greek living in Roman Alexandria. He devised a complicated geocentric solar system that employed the idea of 'epicycles '— miniorbits around an imaginary point that the planets performed as they circled the earth — in order to account for the observed phenomenon of the planets' frequent apparent backward (retrograde) motion. It was not until Johannes Kepler's discovery in 1609, following Copernicus, of the planets' elliptical orbit around the sun — including the earth's — that Ptolemy's epicycles were jettisoned.
19. Ibid. pp. 91–92.
20. Yates, p. 154.
21. Faivre, *The Eternal Hermes*, p. 61.
22. Yates, pp. 423–31.
23. D.P. Walker, *The Ancient Theology*, p. 241.
24. Yates, p. 375.
25. Joscelyn Godwin, *Robert Fludd* (Thames and Hudson: London, 1979), p. 5.
26. Relating internal organs to the planets was not unusual in Fludd's time, and a more recent attempt to understand human anatomy in light of the macrocosm is Rodney Collins' fascinating, if not entirely convincing work *The Theory of Celestial Influence* (Watkins: London, 1980).
27. Ibid.
28. J. B. Craven, *Robert Fludd* (William Peace & Sons: London, 1902), p. 22.
29. *Politics and the Occult*, pp. 1–35.
30. Christopher McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians* (Crucible: Wellingborough, 1987), p. 36.
31. In Gary Lachman *Politics and the Occult* 2008, and *The Dedalus Book of the Occult: A Dark Muse*, 2003.

32. Yates, p. 435.
33. Godwin, *Robert Fludd*, p. 10.
34. Yates, p. 402.
35. This was a trajectory Gebser shared with Rudolf Steiner. See my article 'Rudolf Steiner, Jean Gebser and the Evolution of Consciousness,' *Journal for Anthroposophy* Fall 1995; also Lachman *A Secret History of Consciousness*, 2003, pp. 217–67.
36. Godwin, *Robert Fludd*, p. 5.
37. Magee, p. 11.
38. M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (Oxford University Press: London, 1971), p. 158.
39. Ibid. p. 185.
40. Colin Wilson, *From Atlantis to the Sphinx* (Virgin Books: London, 1996), p. 10.

Chapter 7

1. See Gary Lachman, *Dedalus Book of the 1960s: Turn Off Your Mind* (Sawtry: Dedalus, 2010).
2. The phrase 'trousered ape' is from C.S. Lewis' *The Abolition of Man*, and is a characterization of Darwin's theory that humans evolved from apes.
3. Quoted in Richard Smoley, *Forbidden Faith*: *The Gnostic Legacy from the Gospels to the Da Vinci Code* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), p. 141.
4. Manly P. Hall, *The Lost Keys of Freemasonry* (New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2006), p. 85.
5. Ibid. p. 91.
6. Ibid. p. 92.
7. Ibid. p. 86.
8. Ibid. p. 94.
9. Ibid. p. 95.
10. Ibid. p. 111.
11. Roland D. Gray, *Goethe the Alchemist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), p. 371.
12. See Gary Lachman, *Rudolf Steiner: An Introduction to His Life and Work* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 2007), p. 125.
13. See 'Goethe and the Idea of Scientific Truth' in Erich Heller, *The Disinherited Mind* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, & Cudahy, 1957).
14. Faivre, 1994, p. 83.
15. See especially Fechner's *Nanna, or the Soul Life of Plants* (1848) and *Concerning Souls* (1861).
16. David Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).
17. Introduction to *The Definitions of Hermes Trismegistus to Asclepius* translated by Jean-Pierre Mahé in Salaman 2001 p. 127.
18. Salaman 2007, p. 47.
19. Novalis *Pollen and Fragment*s translated by Arthur Versluis (Grand Rapids: Phanes Press, 1989), p. 50.
20. Ibid. p. 71.
21. Ibid. p. 26.
22. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, translated by J.B. Leishman and Stephen Spender (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1939), p. 61.
23. Lachman, *A Secret History of Consciousness*, 2003 p. 252.
24. Rilke, 1939 p. 129.
25. Ibid. p. 77.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid. p. 128.
28. Lachman, *A Secret History of Consciousness*, 2003 p. 224.

29. Ibid. n.7, pp. 304–5. Briefly, around the same time that Rilke was receiving the inspiration for the *Duino Elegies*, Steiner gave a series of lectures in which he also proposed the idea of a coming 'invisible world'. In 1911, Steiner lectured on The *Reappearance of Christ in the Etheric* (Spring Valley: Anthroposophic Press, N.Y.: 1983), and argued that the earth was becoming a 'corpse' as preparation for its new planetary incarnation as Jupiter. In order to accomplish this, Steiner said, 'it is necessary for the earth to be destroyed; otherwise the spirit will not become free'. For Steiner, as for Rilke, the external world was in the process of passing away in order to arise in a new spiritual form.
30. P.D. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 1983, p. 122. In speaking of what Gurdjieff calls 'the law of seven or the law of octaves' — which I discuss in Chapter 3 — Gurdjieff told Ouspensky that 'in order to understand the meaning of this law it is necessary to regard the universe as *consisting of vibrations*'. Gurdjieff prefaced his remarks about the law of seven with the Hermetic statement that 'the study of man must proceed on parallel lines with the study of the of the world, and the study of the world must run parallel with the study of man'.
31. Rilke, 1939 pp. 128–29.
32. See Rudolf Steiner, *Lucifer and Ahriman* (North Vancouver: Steiner Book Centre, 1984).
33. Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past* (New York: Vintage Books, 1982), p. 48.
34. Hermann Hesse, *Steppenwolf* (New York: Henry Holt, 1929), p. 46. That in Hesse's passage we can find more than one Hermetic trope — the world reflected in miniature (macrocosm/ microcosm), his brain storing a thousand pictures (art of memory), the eternal and the stars (the timeless realm of nous) — was a discovery for me. I did not realize they were there before deciding to include this quotation in this chapter. This seems an example of the Greek *hermaion*, the 'lucky find' associated with Hermes. That the find itself is about Hermetic themes suggests it is a kind of double *hermaion*.
35. Christopher Isherwood, *The World in The Evening* (London: Methuen, 1984), p. 109.
36. Ibid. p. 116.
37. Ibid.
38. See Lachman, *Discovering Swedenborg*, 2009, pp. 94–98; *Rudolf Steiner*, 2007, pp. 149–51; and *Jung the Mystic* (New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2010), pp. 119–20.
39. Auditory hypnagogia is as common as the visual type. In *The Natural Depth in Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972) the psychologist Wilson Van Dusen records several 'auditory hallucinations' which, although at first seemingly nonsensical, were on reflection found to contain profound insights relating to his current psychological or physical state. Another example of auditory hypnagogia is the automatic writing associated with the French surrealists of the 1920s. See my article at:

    http://www.forteantimes.com/features/ articles/227/hypnagogia.html 40. In 'lucid dreams' we become conscious within a dream and, rather than 'waking up' in the usual sense, retain consciousness while continuing to dream. Basically, we are awake in a dream, know that we are dreaming, can act consciously within it, and can continue in this state. In hypnagogic states, we are awake but are aware of involuntary inner imagery — much like the imagery of a dream — which we can observe while also being aware of our physical, external surroundings. So in lucid dreaming, we are awake while dreaming, and in hypnagogic states, we are dreaming while awake.
41. Andreas Mavromatis, *Hypnagogia* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 263–64.
42. Faivre 1995 p. 60.
43. Ibid. p. 66; also Faivre, 1994, p. 13.
44. Faivre, 1995, p. 70.
45. See Lachman, 2008.
46. Faivre 1994,, p. 41.
47. Faivre 1995, p. 55.
48. Faivre 1994, p. 41.
49. *Meditations on the Tarot* (New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2002), pp. 89, 48. It is generally acknowledged that the author of this remarkable work was the Russian Valentin Tomberg.

50. Ibid. p. 90.
51. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, Preface, *Gnosis and Hermeticism: From Antiquity to Modern Times*, ed. Roelof Van Den Broeck and Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), p. vii.
52. P.D. Ouspensky, 1981, p. 291. Although not acknowledged in the book, *Tertium Organum* arose out of Ouspensky's experience with nitrous oxide. See Lachman, 2006, pp. 45–54.

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