

**Hermeticism and astrology:
What is the relevance of hermetic
astrology for modern man?**

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Abstract

According to the hermetic sources the cosmos is a living sacred being mixed out of body, soul and spirit. The human has a special place in it due to the soul's mediating role and our paradoxical nature. On the one hand we are able, through reason, to negotiate our way through the material world and on the other, through nous, we have qualities of imagination and intuition and so are able to appreciate love and beauty as intrinsic to the spiritual life of the cosmos. The qualities of nous can be cultivated via reverence and initiation and enable man to see the world symbolically and so divine the course of best action, in line with God's will. The recovery of these ideas in the Renaissance by Marsilio Ficino, was central to his spiritual work and astrological practice, which was a daily preoccupation for him.

In our time there is a tendency to prioritise the material world, manipulated by science and technology, accompanied by the loss of soul or spirit. These factors contribute to the loss of the presentiment of astrology as described by Geoffrey Cornelius. In the twenty first century, Iain McGilchrist argues from material science, that we do indeed have two ways of engaging with the world built in to the two hemispheres of our brains. These two modes show illuminating similarities to the hermetic reason and nous. From a practical and philosophical perspective McGilchrist sees us as dangerously left sided, losing touch with soul and spirit and therefore with our moral compass. McGilchrist shows us that seeing past the immediate facts, to a wider world of life giving possibilities, is a right hemisphere contribution. Jake Chapman teaches this wider seeing by way of soft systems thinking, questioning the left hemisphere application of machine metaphors to living systems and opening a path to adaptive responses to problems. The psychologist C. G. Jung saw the world as full of paradox and reasserted soul as a mediating factor via the study of psyche. This paper explores the hermetic tradition and Ficino's astrological hermeticism. It argues that, in our time, the symbolic seeing and divination of Ficino's hermetic astrology are tied in to the re-establishment of a hermetic perspective in the world at large, drawing on the work of figures such as McGilchrist, Chapman and Jung.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The love of God, unutterable and perfect, flows into a pure soul the way that light rushes into a transparent object. The more love that it finds, the more it gives itself; so that, as we grow clear and open, the more complete the joy of heaven is. And the more souls who resonate together, the greater the intensity of their love, and, mirror-like, each soul reflects the other.

Dante, *Purgatorio XV. 67-75*

This dissertation sets out key themes that are characteristic of hermeticism. These themes in philosophy and practice can be traced back to the world of Plato and the Platonic Academy and forward in time to Arabic learning, and then into Europe, where they were revived by Marsilio Ficino in 15th century Florence. Hermeticism continues to be an undercurrent in esotericism in Europe to the present day.

I am a practising astrologer and would like to think about my practice within a wider philosophical context, relevant to today, yet drawing on deep roots in the western esoteric tradition. In a more personal sense, I have long suspected that astrology has both a mystical dimension and a role in human development. I want to take this opportunity to try to weave these threads together, since this has always felt so deeply meaningful to me. I want to follow up the little play I wrote and performed, as part of my MA in Myth, Cosmology and the Sacred at Canterbury Christ Church University. For this I drew on mystical texts from Rumi and Ibn ‘Arabi, from the ideas of Ficino but most of all from the hermetic texts. The play brought the ideas in these texts to life in striking fashion. The writing of the play obliged me to focus on the source texts, fragmentary and sometimes confusing and obscure as they are. The texts contain ideas and images that are vivid, evocative and sometimes shocking. No wonder they have held an abiding fascination throughout the history of Western esotericism.

Approach to the subject

At no point does this paper attempt to validate astrology as a predictive craft. The main themes in hermeticism are explored in chapter 2. Here astrology has a place amongst divinatory oracle practices. In chapter 3 the hermetic themes are explored in the thoughts and astrological practice of Marsilio Ficino. In chapter 4 the hermetic themes are brought up to date with reference to the work of Iain McGilchrist on neuroscience and of C. G. Jung on the unconscious, leading to some concluding thoughts on the possibility of a hermetic approach to astrological practice in the twenty-first century.

The status of astrologers is at a nadir in our times yet Crystal Addey (Addey, 2014) tells us that, in classical times the status of astrologers and philosophers was on a par, mutually respectful and supportive. This is because the ancient world had a broader sense of the sources of knowledge; there were different ways of knowing.

Divination includes astrology in this context and all forms of divination could bring divine knowledge. Divination was not predictive but rather a way of enabling people to look deeply into the present and explore viable scenarios for action and likely outcomes in a complex world.

The idea of paradox is a thread that runs throughout the *Corpus Hermeticum* (Copenhaver, 2000) that sees a path to dialectical resolution through the life of soul in the world, uniting body with spirit. In a parallel vein, Iain McGilchrist (McGilchrist, 2009) identifies the two hemispheres of the human brain as bringing into presence two world views, complementary, yet with different roles, that we ourselves need constantly to bring into relationship. There is a particularly intriguing correlation between McGilchrist's work and the *Corpus Hermeticum* when the latter speaks of nous and reason (Copenhaver, 2000, pp.15-16) suggesting that its authors intuitively grasped this aspect of the paradoxical human.

For Ficino our dual nature informs both science and art. He works all the time with his own chart and those of his companions, and is constantly urging them to beware or take advantage, as appropriate, of the perceived relations of the planets in their observed positions in the sky. In this sense he works with fate. However, he allows the planetary symbols their multivalence, extending their meanings to divine gifts and seeking to assimilate the divine intentions into himself and in this sense sets himself free. He affirms that this depends on the judgement or notio of the astrologer; something that must combine a lifetime's practice of technique alongside a kind of daily theurgic self-purification.

In our times there is no presumption of the reality of soul and spirit. God is dead as Nietzsche says and so we are left with only dead matter on our hands. C. G. Jung (Dyer, 2000) and James Hillman along with the therapists working in the Transpersonal and Archetypal traditions have sought to return soul to the world. Like the hermetic teachings, they give an ontological priority to psyche or soul. For Jung, psyche is our reality and this images the subject at the centre of the astrological chart, we are always at the centre of our field of consciousness. From the hermetic perspective or that of McGilchrist an objective validity for astrology is a requirement of the left hemisphere, of the "people of reason" (Copenhaver, 2000, p. 16). Its subjective value depends upon its healing power. Testimony to this arrives when therapists and astrologers work in parallel with their client as described by Delia Shargel (Shargel, 2016) in Chapter 4.

To enquire into the paradoxical nature of the human and propose a dialectical reconciliation has consequences for the enquirer and the enquiry. This study follows the position proposed by Arthur Versluis (Versluis, 2002) who argues that "a sympathetic empiricist perspective may well be indispensable for understanding the work one is investigating". He is here "referring to an intermediate position that incorporates the best of both emic and etic approaches... scholarship that strives to achieve a standard of objectivity, and on the other hand the virtues of an approach that seeks to sympathetically understand one's subject, to understand it from the inside out, so to speak" (Versluis, 2002, p. 5). Versluis proposes that "Western

esotericism... could perhaps best be characterized as a long series of different investigations into the nature of consciousness itself". This matter of consciousness is a major theme of this study running from Ancient Greece and Egypt up to the present day. As Versluis says "one finds a consistently recurrent theme of transmuting consciousness, which is to say, of awakening latent, profound connections between humanity, nature, and the divine, and of restoring a paradisaic union between them." (Versluis, 2002, p. 13) The twin approaches set out by Versluis are an apt parallel to the topic under discussion. The hermetic texts, Ficino and McGilchrist all distinguish a clear role for both focused study on the one hand and the sense of higher values on the other. From hermeticism this means employing both nous and reason in their places, from McGilchrist a combination of focused study with the sense of higher values and appreciation of life. In terms of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, nous responds at the level of the heart to the notion of the cosmos being formed out of love for beauty. The left hemisphere explores the text for details linking this cosmos to astrological symbolism in pursuit of a higher purpose. The notion of the divine world, the purely transcendent, being present in this world, immanencing in rocks, plants, creatures, galaxies by way of *sympatheia*, is best appreciated by way of a sympathetic engagement with the hermetic sources and its adherents.

Chapter 2

Hermeticism

We thank you, supreme and most high god, by whose grace we have attained the light of your knowledge...

Consciousness, by which we may know you;

Reason, by which we may seek you in our dim suppositions;

Knowledge, by which we may rejoice in knowing you.

Asclepius

(Copenhaver, 2000, p. 92 s.41)

This chapter sets out the main themes of hermeticism and briefly locates the source texts in their historical context. What were they and why were they so influential? At the heart of hermeticism is a creation story that describes the cosmos and the role of man in it. The cosmos is divine and single in essence, multiple in expression and divine symbols are strewn throughout it. It is composed of three elements matter, soul and spirit. The human soul is able to unite with spirit and matter by way of the dual composition of our mind. We and our cosmos are paradoxical in nature. Mankind can participate in the divine by way of the paradoxes in our own nature exemplified by mind and reason. We cultivate the mind or nous through reverence, whereas we understand the properties of the material world through reason. The cultivation of the reverent mind enables us to interpret the divine symbols through oracles, including the practice of astrology. The hermetic texts set out initiatic teachings whereby the acolyte is prepared to receive the divine word in his heart. Through preparation and initiation then the human soul sheds the negative attributes of the planets, taken on in the descent from the divine world at birth and re-ascends a planetary, symbolic, ladder back to our home in God. This view of the world provides a philosophical foundation for western astrology.

Historical context and key themes

According to Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke (Goodrick-Clarke, 2008), hermeticism is a strand in western esotericism that tends to adopt key themes from the *Corpus Hermeticum* itself. This work was probably written in third century A.D. Alexandria and presents sets of teachings that claim to originate with Hermes Trismegistus or the Thrice Greatest Hermes. Other hermetic sources include *The Asclepius*, *The Emerald Tablet* and the *Chaldean Oracles*. The documents that have survived to modern times are fragmentary and do not add up to a fully worked philosophy in any sense. The hermetic texts seem to offer a node or gathering point for ideas that are found in the works of Plato in 4 C BC and of the Neo-Platonists; amongst the Arab writers and mystics in the 8 – 12 centuries AD and in the works of Marsilio Ficino in 15th century Florence. Subsequently they have continued to be very influential in a substratum of esoteric ideas up to the present day.

The hermetic project is one of transmutation of lower, baser, and more material into higher, finer, and more spiritual. There are clear parallels with alchemy, which also

flourished alongside hermeticism in Alexandria in late antiquity. Humanity is called to a regenerative work of re-ascension and reintegration with the divine. Hermetic treatises present a guide or mentor figure who helps to raise souls by reawakening them to their divine nature, assisting in their spiritual transmutation, and leading them toward their heavenly destiny. The mentor or guide to the initiates is sometimes said to be Hermes Trismegistus, sometimes Poimandres. Peter Kingsley (Kingsley, 1993) sets out the etymology of the name Poimandres to show how it derives from the Egyptian gods Ra and Thoth and the Greek god Hermes. As Thoth he was a moon god and governed the seasons and time, including the time of the flooding of the Nile, so essential for Egyptian agriculture. As ruler of time he also governed the lives of people and acted as psychopomp or guide of the souls of the dead to the world of the gods. He was also the origin of order, the lawgiver and judge. All magical and occult powers were part of his domain (Goodrick-Clarke, 2008, p. 19). The Greek Hermes was also a psychopomp associated with the Moon. Both these deities were tricksters, inventive and playful and this contributed to their popularity.

The hermetic creation story

This is the story of the creation of the cosmos, revealed to a narrator who is in an altered state of consciousness. “Thought came to me of the things that are and my thinking soared high and my bodily senses were restrained, like someone heavy with sleep from too much eating or toil of the body” (Copenhaver, 2000, p. 1 s.1). The revelation comes from no lesser being than Hermes Trismegistus, Poimandres himself. No wonder he soon says he was “terrified, out of my wits” (Copenhaver, 2000, p. 2 s.8).

First the cosmos is made in terms not dissimilar to the description in Genesis, with light and darkness, water, fire, smoke and earth and “from the light... a holy word mounted upon the <watery> nature” (Copenhaver, 2000, p. 1 s.5). At this point Poimandres says “In your mind you have seen the archetypal form, the preprinciple that exists before a beginning without end.” (Copenhaver, 2000, p. 2 s.8) From this we move on to the generation of the solar system with the seven visible planets as governors. “The mind who is god, being androgyne and existing as life and light, by speaking gave birth to a second mind, a craftsman, who, as god of fire and spirit, crafted seven governors; they encompass the sensible world in circles, and their government is called fate.” (Copenhaver, 2000, p. 2 s.8) The mind is a craftsman who whirls the planet governors in circles so that they then use the elements, particularly water and earth, to create the living things appropriate to air, earth and water. The scene is now set for the creation of Man. Man is like god (Copenhaver, 2000, p. 3 s.12) and therefore wishes to be a creator. In support of this “the governors loved the man, and each gave a share of his own order. Learning well their essence and sharing in their nature, the man wished to break through the circumference of the circles...” (Copenhaver, 2000, p. 3 s.13).

The teaching continues with an exposition of the tripartite nature of the cosmos and its paradoxical nature which man is fitted to know by participating in the divine

mind. It is with this mind that God communicates through symbols, provided the man has prepared himself as a fit receptacle. "With this living thing alone does god converse, at night through dreams and through omens by day, and through all of them he foretells the future, through birds, through entrails, through inspiration, through the oak tree, whereby mankind also professes to know what has been, what is at hand and what will be." (Copenhaver, 2000, p. 47 s.19)

Man can be seduced by reason and the things of this world, for, of these people we are told that "their temperament is willful and angry, they feel no awe of things that deserve to be admired; they divert their attention to the pleasures and appetites of their bodies; and they believe that mankind came to be for such purposes."

(Copenhaver, 2000, p. 16 s.5) It is important that we choose mind in order to make ourselves like god since this mind can transport itself, via the imagination to all parts of the cosmos and even beyond it. "So you must think of god in this way, as having everything – the cosmos, himself <the> universe – like thoughts within himself. Thus, unless you make yourself equal to god, you cannot understand god; like is understood by like." (Copenhaver, 2000, p. 41 s.20)

God sows his seeds or symbols throughout the cosmos. "Clearly, the one who alone is unbegotten is also unimagined and invisible, but in presenting images of all things he is seen through all of them and in all of them" (Copenhaver, 2000, p. 18 s.2). This is the basis of the concept of *sympatheia*. It lies at the root of the possibility of sympathetic magic and the use of talismans. The things of this world participate in the divine by way of chains of sympathy whose action is that of daemonic spirits. Thus "energies are like rays from god, natural forces like rays from the cosmos, arts and learning like rays from mankind... And this is the government of the universe, dependent from the nature of the one and spreading through the one mind." (Copenhaver, 2000, pp. 35 s.22-23)

The human soul that descended from the divine realm as craftsman, carrying the nature of the planets, is intended ultimately to return and must surrender the negative planetary attributes along the way. "Thence the human being rushes up through the cosmic framework, at the first zone surrendering the energy of increase and decrease [Moon]; at the second evil machination, [Mercury] a device now inactive; at the third the illusion of longing, [Venus] now inactive; at the fourth the ruler's arrogance, [Sun] now freed from excess; at the fifth unholy presumption and daring recklessness [Mars]; at the sixth the evil impulses that come from wealth, [Jupiter] now inactive; and at the seventh zone the deceit that lies in ambush [Saturn]." (Copenhaver, 2000, p. 6 s.25) and declares "I have arrived, inspired with the divine breath of truth." (Copenhaver, 2000, p. 7 s.30) In Part XIII of the *Corpus Hermeticum* the real preparation for oracle and divination is revealed as a second birth since "whoever through mercy has attained this godly birth and has forsaken bodily sensation recognizes himself as constituted of the intelligibles and rejoices." (Copenhaver, 2000, p. 51 s.10)

In this story the *Corpus Hermeticum* tells the hermetic myth, not in our modern

sense of untrue but in Joseph Campbell's (Moyers & Campbell, 2013) sense of a myth to live by. It is a vision of life, of beauty, of struggle, of passion which allows the human a path of continuing development in adulthood and a creative role with god in the making of the world. The divine aspect is completely immaterial, yet it can exist in us just as thoughts, feelings and dreams can exist in us. The divine world is viewed as more important than the material because it is the source of the world and the source of all that we love and cherish in it since "For mankind... the ultimate standard is reverence, from which goodness follows." (Copenhaver, 2000, p. 73 s.11)

Symbol

*We shall show them Our signs in the horizons and in themselves, till
it is clear to them that it is the truth*

(Quran, 2009-11, p. 41:53)

*What is above is like what is below. What is below is like what is
above. The miracle of unity is to be attained.*

The Emerald Tablet (Shah, 1964)

*God is a circle whose center is everywhere, and its circumference
nowhere*

(Empedocles, 2016)

According to Scott (Scott, 2000, p. 2) symbols are the mode in which God communicates with man. A symbolic awareness is therefore a part of the education of the true human. This is not to say that symbol can be expressed fully in terms other than the image itself. The apprehension of symbol is a speechless and enrapt moment, an awakening or enlightenment, an experience of the numinous that is at once my experience and at the same time not of me. It possesses rather than is possessed.

In our world signs are usually intended to be unambiguous, such as traffic or exit signs. Symbols on the other hand are complex and paradoxical. According to Uzdavinys:

In the Chaldean Oracles, the sumbola are sown throughout the cosmos by the Paternal Demiurge and serve as the essential means of ascent and return to the gods; every soul was created by the Demiurge with harmonic ratios (logoi) and divine symbols (sumbola theia: Proclus In Tim.I.4.32-33); the logoi that constitute the soul's essence are sumbola and may be awakened through the theurgic rites; for Proclus, the inspired myths of Homer communicate their truth not by making images (eikones) and imitations (mimemata), but by making symbols (sumbola or sunthemata), because 'symbols are not imitations of that which they symbolize' (In Remp.I.198.15-16). (Uzdavinys, 2005, p. 311)

Symbols need to be appreciated in the context of the concept of *sympatheia*. In the Greek world this refers to:

Certain chains or 'sympathies' between specific objects (symbols) and gods: These chains emanate from the gods (and so the idea of 'divine love' is often spoken of as causing or underlying *sympatheia*)... Iamblichus considered the community of the gods as an ineffable and supracosmic process which enabled sympathy to arise: 'one single bond of friendship, embracing the totality of being, effecting this bond through an ineffable process of communion'... In this holistic view of the cosmos, human friendship and 'sympathy for one's fellow human beings' are expressions and manifestations of divine love and providence; this, friendship, love and care for humanity are crucial for the theurgist. (Addey, 2014, pp. 29-30)

The whole world is permeated with these symbols that come under the governorship of the planetary daemons. Man is also filled with these properties on his descent from the divine realm. By journeying from heaven to earth and returning to the divine realm the soul reconciles the paradoxes of the universe, connecting time with eternity, being with becoming, matter with thoughts and knowledges that are immaterial. We might see the planetary symbols as the seven notes of the octave or the seven colours of the rainbow. Just as all music in the western world can be seen as depending upon the octave and all colours in nature and art as depending on the colours of the rainbow, so the planets are comprehensive in the governorship. All aspects of the world, material and immaterial, come under their sway. They articulate the raw material for the Demiurge's creative play.

We can harmonise ourselves with the divine totality, integrating the virtues of the planets into our nature and becoming a microcosm.

This teaching underlies the practice of genethliacal astrology as it was originally conceived. In the nativity the 'Chaldeans' saw a chart of the astral bodies, as the journey through the planetary spheres had structured them. Correctly interpreted, this chart would reveal the native's constituent parts, material or subtle. It would speak of his daimon, the guardian angel who would accompany him on his voyage here below and watch over the fulfilment of his fate.

(Laboure, 1994)

In this story the earth has a real purpose. It is beautiful and she loves the man as he is the realisation of her purpose. (Copenhaver, 2000, p. 3 s.14) She is also, in a sense, the revelation of the divine and infused with divinity in every part, yet this requires eyes to see and ears to hear. The human soul has to recognise, in a sense to see through the appearances and this calls for the cultivation of certain forms of attention.

Paradox, mind and reason

The hermetic cosmos is inherently paradoxical. This paradoxical universe can be known by man because we are ourselves paradoxical, having two modes of knowledge or perception. In the *Corpus Hermeticum* this is referred to as mind or

nous and reason. Mind/nous/heart are what assimilate man to the divine realm whereas discursive reason has a lesser and supporting function in this world. For example, “The many make philosophy obscure with the multiplicity of their reasoning.” (Copenhaver, 2000, p. 74 s.12) Whereas “the intelligible world, discernible only through mind's intuition, is incorporeal and that nothing corporeal can be combined with its nature.” (Copenhaver, 2000, p. 88s.34) What we are learning here concerns the knowledge of the divine ideas by way of the Intellect. Ideas are simply that, thoughts in a mind, intangible but knowable by way of intuition.

The *Corpus Hermeticum* also says those who honour both sides of their nature are loosed from “the bonds of mortality so that god may restore us, pure and holy, to the nature of our higher part, to the divine.” (Copenhaver, 2000, p. 74 s.11) This is because “god shapes mankind from the nature of soul and of body, from the eternal and the mortal, in other words, so that the living being, so shaped can prove adequate to both its beginnings, wondering at heavenly beings and worshipping them, tending earthly beings and governing them.” (Copenhaver, 2000, p. 71 s.8) And then again mankind is formed of both life and mortality and so able “to tend to earth and to cherish divinity as well.” (Copenhaver, 2000, p. 72 s. 9) This is a view of the cosmos as earth centred and therefore the earthly place of human consciousness. The divine may be seen here in the material world, through the craftwork of god the creator but god himself can only be known through something that god has implanted in man for the purpose, that which renders the human capable of self-realisation and fulfilment, of achieving his destiny.

Divination, initiation and astrology in the hermetic world

At the heart of the hermetic story is the initiatic conversation; now between Asclepius and Trismegistus, now with Poimandres and now with Tat. Much of this conversation concerns the nature of mind or nous as compared with reason. Intellect is the function of this reverend mind for “the intelligible world, discernible only through mind's intuition, is incorporeal” (Copenhaver, 2000, p. 88 s.34). Mind is a portal to a mystical vision of reality and the successful student Tat, says to his father Hermes Trismegistus, “I no longer picture things with the sight of my eyes but with the mental energy that comes through the powers. I am in heaven, in earth, in water, in air; I am in animals and in plants; in the womb, before the womb, after the womb; everywhere.” (Copenhaver, 2000, p. 51 s.11)

There is a reciprocal relationship between this divine mind and the human mind for in reality they are as one. The *Corpus Hermeticum* tells us:

Through mind, then, every living thing is immortal... With this living thing alone does god converse, at night through dreams and through omens by day, and through all of them he foretells and future, through birds, through entrails, through inspiration, through the oak tree, whereby mankind also professes to know what has

been, what is at hand and what will be.” (Copenhaver, 2000, p. 47 s.19)

Iamblichus, writing in the 3rd century AD, concerning his development of theurgy or god working, as a combination of Greek and Egyptian spiritual practice, explains that the cultivation of the qualities of the theurgist are a lifelong work, that entail purification through ritual, intellectual and ethical means. The theurgist must be in a state of ritual receptivity, showing potential, sympathy, receptivity and aptitude. This is necessary for working with symbols. “The central premise of theurgy is that an affinity (ultimately deriving from divine love) between the symbol and its respective deity allows the attraction of divine power into the practitioner’s soul.” (Addey, 2014, p. 203) Oracles and inspired divination were fundamental aspects of the philosophy of the Neo-Platonists. “Rationality and revelation were considered to be interlinked and complementary, mutually inclusive... for Porphyry and Iamblichus, oracles constituted symbols of the gods, which comprised tools for philosophical contemplation, insight and initiation.” (Addey, 2014, p. 4) From this perspective divination is “an essential element of mystical union with the divine.” (Addey, 2014, p. 4) We are here dealing with a higher order of wisdom and truthfulness. “Platonic conceptions of divinity often involved an intrinsic association of divinity with truth” (Addey, 2014, p. 11) as “Apollo, god of oracles and truth *par excellence* could not lie.” (Addey, 2014, p. 11)

Astrology has a special role within this scheme, since it is the means whereby “the gods issue cultic instructions to mortals regarding their correct worship.” (Addey, 2014, p. 120) Ritual instructions are based on an astrological determination of the correct timing of the event. This is only possible through the concept of sympathy discussed above and also by way of the quality, preparation and receptivity of the practitioner. Actions carried out with proper preparation and initiation, distinguish the true theurgist from the magician. The theurgist is under divine guidance and providence; the magician seeks power in the material world alone. In the hermetic context we can see that this is a distinction that makes all the difference between valid ritual and sacrilege. This essential distinction will later be picked up by Marsilio Ficino in his *Disputation against the Judgements of Astrologers*. The quality of judgement depends on the quality of the astrologer and it is this point that makes the discrimination of who is or is not a hermetic astrologer ambiguous or even unknowable.

In this context there was a close and mutually respectful relationship between philosophers and astrologers. Crystal Addey told us that:

- Divination and philosophy were deeply connected in the Ancient World.
- Philosophy was used for the interpretation of Oracles: the intellectual thought and personal reflection of the enquirer was a vital part of the experience of consulting an oracle.

- Philosophers argued for the truth and usefulness of oracles, astrology and other forms of divination.
- Philosophers were sometimes Priests at Oracle sanctuaries and often used divination in ritual practices.
- Philosophers wrote/compiled Collections of Oracles as a philosophical tool for reflection and divine wisdom.
- Philosophers themselves consulted oracles. (Addey, 2015)

One of the most striking passages in the Corpus Hermeticum concerns the fate of the world if we fail to cultivate the mind and reverence the gods, for then the Gods will turn their backs on us and walk away.

How mournful when the gods withdraw from mankind! Only the baleful angels remain... to mingle with humans, seizing the wretches and driving them to every outrageous crime – war, looting, trickery and all that is contrary to the nature of souls. Then neither will the earth stand firm nor the sea be sailable; stars will not cross heaven nor will the course of the stars stand firm in heaven. Every divine voice will grow mute in enforced silence. The fruits of the earth will rot; the soil will no more be fertile; and the very air will droop in gloomy lethargy. (Copenhaver, 2000, p. 82)

Some commentators consider that this powerful text is best understood in the context of its time and place of origin, when the Egyptian religion and culture seemed under threat of destruction from the Roman occupation and Christian desire for conformity of belief. However, I suggest that it has an abiding power to speak to our own time, which suffers from the loss of reverence and the creative power of nous and is faced with the overwhelming fears generated by man-made damage to the living systems of the earth.

Marsilio Ficino and his hermetic astrological practice

Marsilio Ficino was born near Florence in 1433. His father was the physician to Cosimo di Medici, one of the richest and most influential men in Europe at the time. The young Ficino was extremely talented and his father was keen for him to pursue a medical career. However, Ficino was fascinated with the philosophy and writings of Plato and particularly inspired by the platonic knowledge brought to Europe by Gemistus Plethon, the envoy of the Byzantine Empire. Plethon came to Europe in hopes of promoting a reconciliation of the Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches. Politically, this union was unsuccessful but Cosimo was inspired by Plethon with the idea of refounding the Platonic Academy in Florence. He sent out scouts to Byzantium to buy and return with books written by Plato and his followers. Above all he was keen to track down hermetic texts, since in Europe, at that time, only the Asclepius was available. Cosimo appointed the young Ficino to be his translator, a task that Ficino readily undertook, fostering the revived Academy at the Villa Carreggi outside Florence and experimenting with the ideas he found in these books, as a way of re-animating the spiritual life of his time with Platonic and hermetic ideas. (Garin, 1990)

Marsilio Ficino was a Dominican priest and did not lay claim to being an astrologer. Indeed, he wrote but never published, a condemnation of astrologers in the *Disputation against the Judgements of Astrologers*. (Voss, 2006, pp. 71-81) Nevertheless, his writing, particularly his many letters, are full of astrological references and exhortations to use astrological symbolism. In this he was treading a dangerous line. Aquinas had condemned the practice of astrology in the Christian world in the thirteenth century, drawing on earlier classical writers who interpreted Aristotle as describing a causal cosmos, removing God as the source of planetary rays. For Ficino, astrologers following this tradition, based on Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos*, practised a 'literalisation' of astrology and thereby "subsumed an essentially divinatory core of symbolic meaning into a dominant Aristotelian model of natural scientific 'cause and effect'." (Voss, 2006, p. 34) Brockbank cites O. Pederson saying "In the *Tetrabiblos* 'the principles of astrology were described in a secular manner without mythological or religious overtones'." (Brockbank, 2003, p. 40) This view of the cosmos was taken up "by a Stoical determinist tradition of astrology, where... the cosmos, stripped of its gods, became a natural scientific rather than divine structure... known through human reason... interpretations were given material bases [and caused] human action in the same way as they caused natural phenomena such as tides or weather." (Voss, 2006, p. 34) This natural way of knowing the world was tolerated by the Christian church but any hint of a "superhuman foresight or 'unnatural' kind of knowing, could only be a sin as it usurped the prerogative of God." (Voss, 2006, p. 35) Ficino knew the official line and in his writings he constantly qualifies his astrological advice by saying this is purely a work of nature, or he hides his own opinions behind that of his classical sources saying he not so much says these things as reports the opinion of others. In his *Three Books on Life* he thinks it prudent to remind the reader that "In all things which I discuss here or

elsewhere, I intend to assert only so much as is approved by the Church.” (Ficino, 1998)

In the golden thread of hermeticism Ficino found “Nothing less than a combination of ‘learning and keenness of mind’ and ‘sanctity of life and reverence for the divine’; in other words, a combination of intellectual penetration and religious devotion.” (Voss, 2000, p. 34) It is this combination of these two distinct attitudes towards the world that are the mark of his hermetic interpretation. On the one hand his “astrological framework is specific and his instructions technical – not only must one study the nature of the planets, but be able to calculate their movements and observe their configurations.” (Voss, 2000, p. 39) but this must be accompanied by an act of spiritual will and desire, so that the stellar pattern becomes a living symbol. (Ficino, 1998, p. 255)

Ficino, as an expert classicist knew that, for his ancient sources, astrology was informed by the concept of *sympatheia*, a term he sometimes expresses as quintessence or as baits (Ficino, 1998, pp. 245-247). The cosmos for him is, as Plato describes it, “an animal more unified than any other animal, the most perfect animal” (Ficino, 1998, p. 251). He feels a calling to revive the life of the church and his world, by way of a reanimation of the spirit in the world, which he links with daemonic powers. “For Ficino, Platonic philosophy was a vital intellectual preparation for the ultimate revelation of the Christian faith, and he believed he had been sent by Divine Providence to revitalise religion through its revival.” (Voss, 2011, p. 1) With reference to daemonic spirits he tells us “a natural cause does not channel the confluence of these mutually diverse factors to one end, but rather a daemonic cause... the cause assists the heavens by always providing the means to effect the end already known to the heavenly understanding, and also its own power to effect the end, which the motion of the heavens often does not make happen, but merely signifies.” (Allen, 1995, p. 87) Ficino seeks to show that “astrology is not causal or mechanistic at all, but metaphoric and divinatory. If the stars indicate divine will in the manner of omens and oracles, revealing the path of good fortune to those who can engage imaginatively with their patterns, then astrology enters the domain of the sacred” (Voss, 2011).

Ficino’s ‘internalisation’ of the heavens ... arose through his assimilation of the Hermetic teachings concerning the soul’s dynamic – and initiatory – relationship to the cosmos in its descent to embodiment and ascent to God through the seven spheres... the perennial wisdom which was believed to have been transmitted from Zoroaster and Hermes Trismegistus through Pythagoras and Orpheus, reaching ‘absolute perfection’ in the teachings of Plato – was revered precisely because it gave voice to a vital, personal connection between humans and the divine realm through the analogous correspondence of macrocosm and microcosm. (Voss, 2011)

For Ficino then “the whole of astrology is nothing other than the translation of reality into celestial language, an illustrated projection of the whole, in which the fantastic figures of the imagination transcribe the movements of the psyche, the stirring of the affection, the processes of the generation, the chains of concepts...” (Garin, 1990, p. 74) The fantastic figures of the imagination are immaterial and in that sense closer to the divine world. We are probably better to think of them as ‘imaginal’ in the sense used by Henri Corbin, as distinct from fantasy. (Corbin, 1971)

To appreciate Ficino as an exemplar of hermetic astrology is therefore not to translate his practice simply as a form of astrological technique for Ficino practised many techniques. It is rather an approach, based on philosophical premises and in particular on the idea of chains of sympathy, operated by daemonic intelligences derived from the One God. Ficino would be the first to condemn the idea of a materialistic astrology in which the planets, in their physicality, are causes of actions in this world, leading men to be fated from birth. Rather he urges us that with “A little additional preparation... to capture the gifts of the celestials, [or planetary daemons] provided each accommodates himself to that gift in particular to which he is particularly subject.” (Ficino, 1998, p. 251) The “gift to which we are subject” is found from the ruling planet of our birth chart. Ficino applied hermetic axioms of sympathy, the tripartite cosmos and the paradoxical nature of mind, to the idea of the planets as signs rather than causes. He uses his cosmological understanding to identify the soul qualities of a person and enable them to “align their lives with the heavens”; protecting them from difficult planetary transits; electing the auspicious moment for any action, making music, talismans, and performing theurgic ritual with planetary symbols for initiatic purposes.

Ficino’s cosmos and the mind

In Book 3, Chapter I of *Three Books on Life*, Ficino describes the tripartite nature of the cosmos as composed of Body, Soul and Intellect. He explains for us here that the nature of “Intellect is absolutely motionless, ... and very far away from the Body” (Ficino, 1998, p. 243) and “Body is in itself powerless... and far removed from Intellect”. It is only the Soul that unites them. Soul is the “Primum Mobile and movable of herself, of her own accord.” Soul is also “the mean of things, in her own fashion she contains all things and is proportionally... near to both. Therefore, she is equally connected with everything, even with those things which are at a distance from one other, because they are not at a distance from her.” (Ficino, 1998, p. 243) On account of this permeation of the divine and material worlds, the soul possesses knowledge of “Ideas in the Divine Mind”. Ficino explains that “if at any time the species degenerates from its proper form, it can be formed again ... through the Idea as intermediary” (Ficino, 1998, p. 243). In this way he offers us the possibility of healing, since our original Idea comes from God and cannot be anything other than perfect. Likewise he goes on to tell us that “if in the proper manner you bring to bear on a species... many things which are dispersed but which conform to the same Idea... you will soon draw a particular gift from the Idea, through the seminal reason of the Soul” (Ficino, 1998, p. 243). In this way he indicates to us the realm of

sympathies, spreading throughout the world on account of the activity of the soul. Through this we can make talismans, eat foods, make music or perform actions that awaken the divine Idea in us, restoring us to wholeness.

Ficino, in his commentary on Plato's *Symposium*, talks about the double light of the soul, saying the soul is born from God; it turns toward Him as its parent by a certain natural instinct, just as a fire created on earth, by the power of higher things, is immediately directed toward the higher things by an impulse of nature. Having turned toward Him, the soul is illuminated by His rays...having become closer to God through this first spark the soul can see, by it, both itself and things which are interior to itself, but soon it receives another brighter light by which it recognizes heavenly things also. It therefore has a double light.

For mankind the knowledge of the soul is not automatic. Ficino takes up the hermetic story in one of his letters saying that "Mercurius Trismegistus, the wisest of all the Egyptians" and Plato considers that souls were originally in the divine realm "steadfastly contemplating the eternal mind of God" (Ficino, 1975, p. 43) where they were "well nourished with perfect knowledge... fed on ambrosia and nectar". However, "souls are depressed into bodies through thinking about and desiring earthly things. [They] drink continuously of the river Lethe, that is forgetfulness of the divine. They do not fly back to heaven... until they begin to contemplate once more those divine natures which they have forgotten." (Ficino, 1975, p. 43) This requires "moral conduct and...contemplation". These are the two wings of the philosopher's mind which Ficino traces back to Socrates. On recovery of these wings, the soul is drawn away from earth by 'divine frenzy' (Ficino, 1996, pp. 64-69). To Plato he attributes the idea that "men never remember the divine unless they are stirred by its shadows or images, as they may be described, which are perceived by the bodily senses." (Ficino, 1996, p. 65) Ficino goes into these ideas in some detail explaining that we remember our true spiritual origin by way of the things we see in the world. However, we ought not to admire the material things in themselves for these are no more than shadows of the divine reality and "Plato holds it the mark of a dull mind and corrupt state if a man desires no more than the shadows of that beauty nor looks for anything beyond the form his eyes can see." (Ficino, 1975, p. 44) For Ficino, as well as two wings, the mind has two modes of operation derived from his hermetic sources. These are variously characterised as "learning and keenness of mind' and 'sanctity of life and reverence for the divine'; in other words, a combination of intellectual penetration and religious devotion." (Voss, 2000, p. 34)

Divine paradox

Ficino expresses his sense of the paradoxical nature of divinity in a letter to Michele Mercati. (Ficino, 1975, pp. 35-39) In this letter he describes his own struggles with faith in his earlier life in the form of a dialogue of his soul with god. Is he perhaps, in this sense, aligning himself with the start of the *Corpus Hermeticum* where the author dialogues with pure mind in the form of Poimandres? He follows the hermetic idea in illustrating the paradoxical nature of divinity with expressions such as "Your father is the least of all things in size, just as he is the greatest of all things in

excellence; and since he is very small he is within everything, but since his is very great he is outside everything...I fill and am not filled, for I am fullness itself. I penetrate and am not penetrated, for I am the power of penetration itself. I contain and am not contained, for I am containing itself... I am also able to enter and permeate ... being unity itself, through which all things are made and endure, and which all things seek.” Ficino’s deity goes on to say that the soul must not be content with any partial knowledge of god. It must “resist the body”, not content itself with the mind or intellect for “you ascend by understanding and love beyond any kind of intellect, to life itself, pure existence, absolute being.” It is a conceptual notion of the divine as the good, which is manifested throughout the material world “do you desire to look on the face of good? Then look around at the whole universe, full of the light of the sun.” and from here all materiality of vision must be gradually removed in imagination until the soul attains to pure light which “confers life on all, seeing that its very shadow is the light of this sun.” The sun therefore leads us in imagination towards its source. “It loves each single thing, for each single thing is especially its own.”

The Sun

One of the last books Ficino wrote was the *Book of the Sun* but he had very definite ideas about the Sun in his earlier works as well. He follows the *Corpus Hermeticum* again here. For instance, he explains “our own soul... puts forth a general force of life everywhere within us – especially through the heart as the source of fire which is the nearest thing to the soul. In the same way the World-soul, which is active everywhere, unfolds in every place its power of universal life principally through the Sun¹. Accordingly... the entire Soul, both in us and in the universe, dwells in any member but most of all in the heart and in the Sun.” (Ficino, 1998, p. 247) In the *Corpus Hermeticum* we find “Eternity, therefore, is an image of god; the cosmos is an image of eternity; and the sun is an image of the cosmos. The human is an image of the sun.” (Copenhaver, 2000, p. 40 s.15) This sense of the centrality of the Sun, which for Ficino is a physical reality as well as a philosophical one, leads him to propose remedies that are particularly solar. He tells us that the human species is primarily solar citing the Arab astrologers and goes on to substantiate this idea saying man is “erect and beautiful, from his subtle humors and the clearness of his spirit, from the perspicuity of his imagination and his pursuit of truth and honor.” (Ficino, 1998, p. 251) In order to make ourselves more solar then we can “drink in unconditionally the power of the Sun and to some extent the natural power of the Solar daemons.” (Ficino, 1998, p. 311) We do this by associating ourselves with solar things and he lists lions or cocks, Phoebean plants, “metals and gems and vapor and hot air”, citing Proclus as his authority. He refers to the “chain of beings [that] descends by levels from any star, of the firmament through any planet under its

¹ There is some inconsistency in the sources as to whether the word sun should be capitalised. I have followed the sources when quoting. However, in this chapter I have preferred capital letters for the initials of all the planets to indicate Ficino’s view that he is referring to their spiritual and daemonic personalities rather than their material forms.

dominion.” (Ficino, 1998, p. 311) Note that his chain is of beings or daemons, not of things and it is this that makes his cosmology hermetic and spiritual rather than purely physical.

Ficino is well aware of natal astrology as well as the movements of the planets. For instance he tells us that “Solar are those people... who are born when Leo is ascending and the Sun either is in it or aspects it” (Ficino, 1998, p. 311). He is also familiar with the solar return and with ingress charts, for he tells us that “as soon as the Sun enters the same minute, [as the birth time] they [the astrologers] think that the man is, as it were, reborn; and thence they prophesy his year’s fortune.” (Ficino, 1998, p. 345) In a similar way he suggests that we can think of the world being reborn “when the Sun has reached the first minute of Aries.” (Ficino, 1998, p. 345) This tells us that his astrology is both material, having regard to the positions of the planets and divinatory, yielding symbolic meanings.

Triumph over Fate

“All things are directed from goodness to goodness. Rejoice in the present; set no value on property, seek no honours. Avoid excess; avoid activity. Rejoice in the present.”

Maxim on the walls of the villa Careggi (Ficino, 1975, p. 40)

One of the most potent astrological ideas that Ficino offered the people of his time was the idea that they could work with the properties in their birth chart to turn aside the worst effects of their astrological fate. In a letter he says “someone may say it is foolish to wish to contend against unassailable fate. I, however, reply that it can be opposed as easily as one may wish to oppose it.” (Ficino, 1996, p. 125) He goes on to compare the movement of the spheres with the possibility that “he who puts them under examination seems already to have transcended them, to have come near to God Himself... guided, now by the providence of God that is above the heavens, and now by the freedom of the mind.” (Ficino, 1996, p. 125)

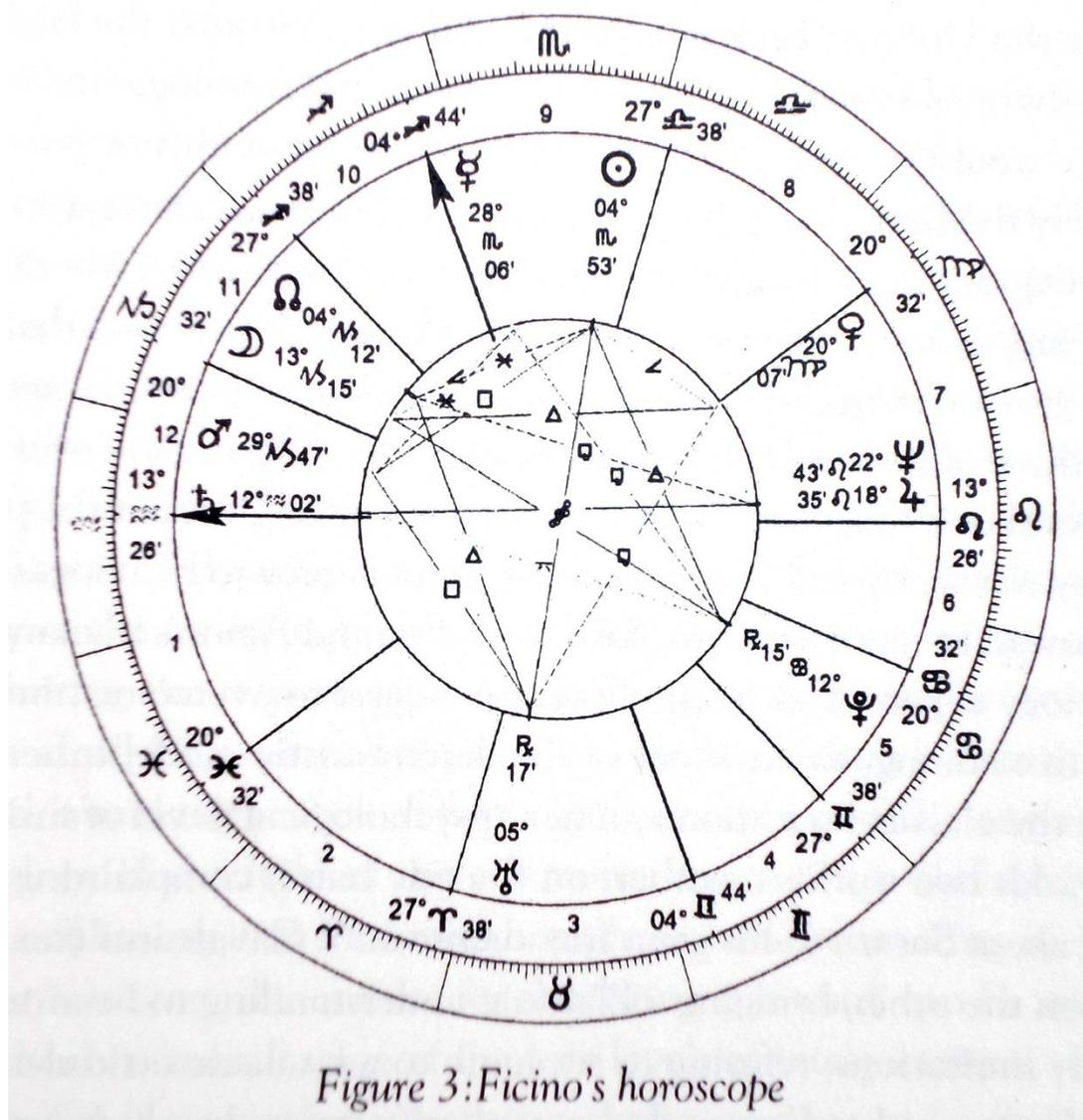


Figure 3: Ficino's horoscope

(Voss, 2006, p. 27)

Ficino was motivated to apply this maxim to himself by the onerous nature of his own birth chart as understood in traditional terms. For instance, he writes to Giovanni Cavalcanti that "Saturn seems to have impressed the seal of melancholy on me from the beginning; set, as it is, almost in the midst of my ascendant Aquarius, it is influenced by Mars, also in Aquarius, and the Moon in Capricorn. It is in square aspect to the Sun and Mercury in Scorpio, which occupy the ninth house." (Ficino, 1996, p. 160) From an astrological point of view, Saturn would be associated with limits and with fears. In his ascendant it affects his body, his health and his personality. Saturn is at home in Aquarius meaning its powers are strong, in other words it can be very limiting and make the native, the person whose chart this is, very fearful. Mars and Saturn are considered malefic or infortunes, so they tend to bring out the worst in the situation; Mars through anger, Saturn through restraint. Their influence on the Moon is likely to adversely affect his mood. A square aspect is also considered stressful, so a square to the Sun and Mercury exerts a grinding

pressure on his self-expression (Sun) and ability to think and express his ideas (Mercury).

Ficino would certainly have known about these qualities in his chart from an early age. (Voss, 2006, p. 27) His father Diotifeci, was doctor to Cosimo di Medici and would have integrated astrology with his medical understanding. It is the sense of having been born with this astrological stigmatism to bear that motivated him to find ways to legitimately escape or modify his own fate. One way to do this was to counterpose a more helpful planet against the malefic. In his *Three Books on Life* he says “when you fear Mars, set Venus opposite. When you fear Saturn, use Jupiter.” (Ficino, 1998, p. 275) When he says this, he is applying the full symbolic array that he associates with these planets in the process. He even includes a kind of dance, saying “And see to it that you engage in some continual motion... and make sure that your own motion is the opposite of the external motions which are secretly going to harm you, and that you imitate so far as possible the action of the heavens.” (Ficino, 1998, p. 275) Ficino closes a letter to Giovanni Cavalcanti saying “I see that you are again... urging me to sing another hymn of recantation to Saturn... I shall say... that a nature of this kind does not issue from Saturn; or...I shall... say that this nature itself is a unique and divine gift.” (Ficino, 1996, p. 160). It could be a unique and divine gift for Ficino in the sense that Saturn, as the furthest sphere from the earth, is also closest to the divine realm, close to the 8th clime or the sphere of the fixed stars and therefore favours divine contemplation.

Music was a vital part of Ficino’s practical and spiritual project. In his letter to Antonio Canigiani, (Ficino, 1996, pp. 61-63) he links music to its origin in Apollo, god of the Sun, who is also the “discoverer of medicine” saying “Apollo, by his vital rays, bestows health and life on all and drives away disease” and he goes on to say that by sounding the strings of the lyre, Apollo regulates the seasons. He goes into great detail about the connections between music, body and soul since “music takes place in reason, the second in fantasy, and the third in words; thence follows song and after that the movement of the fingers in sound. Lastly the movement of the whole body in gymnastics or dancing. Thus we may see that the music of the soul is led by steps to all the limbs of the body.” Lest we should imagine Ficino in wild dancing frenzy he tells Canigiani that “Plato does, however, criticize plaintive and light music on the grounds that it leads to lack of spirit, lechery, and bad temper. But he recommends solemn and calming music as the most wholesome medicine for spirit, soul and body.” For this reason Ficino will “often resort to the solemn sound of the lyre and to singing, to avoid other sensual pleasures entirely... to raise the mind to the highest considerations and to God as much as I may.”

Allen tells us that Ficino’s Orphic hymns were to be accompanied by fumigations which have “a long and complex history in cult practices all over the world, and a number of the fumigants enjoined in the hymns are rich in medical, magical and religious associations.” (Allen, 1995, p. 79) Claiming to follow Plotinus, Ficino would offer “frankincense and manna to the Sun, styrax to Saturn and to Jupiter, myrrh to Neptune, and frankincense again to Mercury”. Allen suggests that Ficino did not

publish these instructions precisely because they might be thought of as “rendering visible daemonic forms which might grace the worshipper with their presence, if the daemons were so inclined and the aromas were to their particular liking... Ficino was demonstrably familiar with vapors, hazes, sprays, sacred dusts, and powders of various kinds, all of which could function in essentially the same way”. (Allen, 1995, p. 81) In this place Ficino is not simply aspiring to assimilate himself to heaven but hoping to invite heavenly intelligences to earth. This is a practice he could have obtained authority for from the *Asclepius* where Hermes Trismegistus tells Asclepius how humans make idols “from a mixture of plants, stones and spices... that have in them a natural power of divinity... those gods are entertained with constant sacrifices, with hymns, praises and sweet sounds in tune with heaven’s harmony: so that the heavenly ingredient enticed into the idol by constant communication with heaven may gladly endure its long stay among human kind.” (Copenhaver, 2000, p. 90) The point of this activity is so that “our gods render aid to humans as if through loving kinship, looking after some things individually, foretelling some things through lots and divination, and planning ahead to give help by other means, each in his own way.” (Copenhaver, 2000, pp. 90-91)

All in all, then Ficino applies the concept of *sympatheia* throughout his cosmological and astrological understanding. He invites the immaterial and divine daemons of the planets to his aid, with a symbolic practice. The quality of the emotion we invest in our talismans, songs and vapours is a key ingredient. He refers to “the intention of the imagination [saying] if anyone... yearns vehemently to get help from it and believes with all his heart and hopes with all his strength, he will surely get a great deal more help from it... The human spirit is transformed into this Jovial spirit by an affect which is love... [therefore] the love and faith of the sick person towards the doctor... are very conducive to health” (Ficino, 1998, p. 353) In this sense he is almost proposing something like the placebo effect which has been found to be a contributory factor in healing in our day. (Young, 2016) In a postscript on *Freedom from Care* Ficino urges his readers on what we might interpret today as stress management. “Live joyfully in the present, day by day. For worry about present circumstances both snatches the present from you and takes away your future... Heaven’s joy has created you... By your joy heaven will preserve you.” (Ficino, 1998, p. 405)

In this Chapter I hope to have indicated some of the ways in which Ficino’s appreciation of the golden thread of hermeticism illuminated his astrological understanding and practices. In the next I will explore the resonances of hermeticism and astrology in the present day.

Chapter 4

Hermeticism, astrology and modern man

“God is dead... and we have killed him...How shall we, murderers of all murderers, console ourselves? ... Who will wipe this blood off us? With what water could we purify ourselves? What festival of atonement, what sacred games shall we need to invent?”

Friedrich Nietzsche: *Parable of the Madman* (Nietzsche, 1997)

At this point it is necessary to pull the threads together and look at whether there can be a hermetic astrology for our time? The question is challenging if not impossible in that, as Geoffrey Cornelius has set out in *Field of Omens* (Cornelius, 2009), there is no presentiment, no cultural readiness in our major institutions, to accept that astrology might have any validity at all, either in theory or in practice. How then can there be one for our time?

Other elements of the hermetic perspective have equally been devalued and slipped from public discourse. Matter is what matters now, whereas soul and spirit are intangible and therefore not of overriding importance in our collective decision making. The re-establishment of the presentiment of a hermetic astrology depends on the re-establishment of the philosophical perspective in which it once found its place.

This chapter sets out some ways in which elements of this perspective are affirmed in our time by the work of Iain McGilchrist on neuroscience and the work of C. G. Jung on psychoanalysis. An inclusive, paradoxical, both/and perspective is a vital aspect of hermetic mysticism. Iain McGilchrist sets out how both/and perspectives are hard wired into our brains and shows, with the help of Max Scheler's pyramid of values, the way our two modes of thinking associate with matter, values and ultimately the Holy. He also makes it abundantly clear he considers our prevailing cultural perspective to be dangerously one sided in favour of rationalist, left brain thinking. The work of Jung is equally important in reasserting the mediating role of the psyche or soul and the importance of dreams as a place where symbols have the capacity to expose us to the numinous, to qualities of experience that are compelling, perplexing and impervious to reason. They take us into the right hemisphere world.

Astrology is at all times symbolic work demanding both right and left hemisphere modes of thinking, allowing us to conjure with the complexity in ourselves and in our world. Jake Chapman's work on soft systems thinking illustrates the attitudes of the two hemispheres at work in public policy, by way of two sets of metaphor. Equally it illustrates Ficino's approach to astrological practice as either fated or liberating. A hermetic astrology will encompass personal and spiritual development for both the practitioner and their client; an assimilation to the cosmos as sacred, by way of *sympatheia* and the divination of the path of good fortune.

The Mind and McGilchrist

McGilchrist's book, *The Master and His Emissary* (McGilchrist, 2009) takes the metaphor of master and emissary to explore the role of the two hemispheres of our brain, in bringing into reality for us, not one world view but two. Although the two hemispheres overlap in function on nearly every issue, they do so in different ways and with different outcomes. The bottom line is that by adopting one or other mode of attention to the world, we actually generate very different worlds for ourselves and, in a sense two different sub personalities. What's more McGilchrist shows in what ways one view can oppose or overcome the other, so that the narrow minded and controlling emissary, the left hemisphere, can dominate and negate the wise master, the right hemisphere. The consequences of such a result are likely to be ultimately catastrophic, not least because the left hemisphere is unable to take on board or generate any new thinking and is therefore powerless to solve the problems it witnesses or creates.

To understand how this is so and bring out some of the parallels with mind and reason in the *Corpus Hermeticum* we need to set out the characteristics of both hemispheres very briefly. The left hemisphere we might compare with reason in the hermetic texts. Its focus is on the material world and particularly with making use of the world and manipulating it for our benefit. (McGilchrist, 2009, p. 38) In order to do this we need to be selective about what we see, in order to focus in on the useful elements. The left hemisphere is therefore biased toward identification by parts rather than wholes. (McGilchrist, 2009, p. 49) It takes things literally and prefers to classify things in broad categories such as useful/useless. It tends towards abstraction in the sense of taking things out of their context. The left hemisphere has a tendency to make divisions in knowledge where there are none in nature. On this basis it "draws mistaken conclusions from the information available to it and lays down the law about what only the right hemisphere can know." (McGilchrist, 2009, p. 81) It does this because it needs to be right yet this sense of rightness and certainty is related to narrowness of view. (McGilchrist, 2009, p. 83) Notice the phrase 'needs to be right', indicating that there is a sense of a distinct personality at work here. McGilchrist is saying that the ego personality, at this moment is identified with this 'need'. "The left hemisphere likes things that are man-made. Things we make are also more certain: we know them inside out, because we put them together." (McGilchrist, 2009, p. 79) They are not, like living things, constantly changing and moving beyond our grasp. The "left hemisphere is unconcerned about others and their feelings: 'social intercourse is conducted with a blanket disregard for the feelings, wishes, needs and expectations of others'." (McGilchrist, 2009, p. 58) The only emotion associated with the left hemisphere is anger. Compare this with the *Corpus Hermeticum* on the people of reason alone: "their temperament is willful and angry, they feel no awe of things that deserve to be admired; they divert their attention to the pleasures and appetites of their bodies; and believe that mankind came to be for such purposes." (Copenhaver, 2000, p. 16 s.5)

We might compare what McGilchrist says about the right hemisphere with the attributes of mind or nous in the *Corpus Hermeticum*. The right hemisphere makes sense of things in the round and in context. It is attuned to things as they are in the world in their uniqueness dealing with individuals as gestalt wholes. (McGilchrist, 2009, pp. 50-51) It is able to take in new information, which it does, non-judgementally. (McGilchrist, 2009, p. 56) The right hemisphere is therefore the learning hemisphere, engaged in processing new information and is able to explore “an array of possible solutions, [to a problem] which remain live while alternatives are explored”. (McGilchrist, 2009, p. 41)

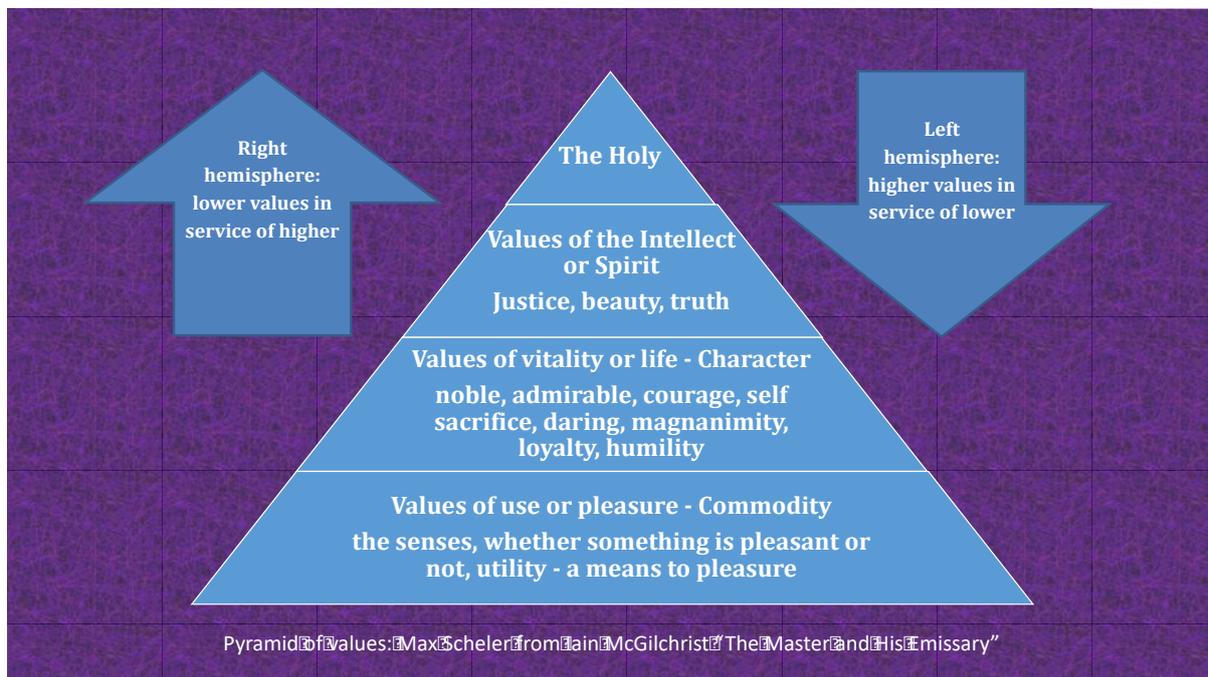
The right hemisphere brings together different elements, including information from the ears, eyes, and other sensory organs, and from memory, so as to generate the richly complex but coherent, world we experience. It has a “broader field of attention, open to whatever may be, and this, coupled with greater integration over time and space, is what makes possible the recognition of broad or complex patterns, the perception of the ‘thing as a whole’, seeing the wood for the trees.” (McGilchrist, 2009, p. 43) It perceives the emotional significance of events and is able to connect with complex and ambiguous symbols. (McGilchrist, 2009, p. 51) It is better able to accommodate the paradoxical nature of the world, for example via concepts of time and eternity. McGilchrist writes:

Music takes place in time. Yet music also has the capacity to make us stand outside time... Perhaps this going ‘through’ a thing to find its opposite is an aspect of the right hemisphere world, in which ‘opposites’ are not incompatible, an aspect of its roundness rather than linearity... time itself is... paradoxical in nature, and... music does not so much free time from temporality as bring out an aspect that is always present within time, its intersection with a moment which partakes of eternity... [It brings] out the spirituality latent in what we conceive as physical existence, and uncover[s] the universality that is, as Goethe spent a lifetime trying to express, always latent in the particular... music... is used to communicate with the supernatural, with whatever is by definition above, beyond, ‘Other than’, ourselves. (McGilchrist, 2009, p. 77)

McGilchrist tells us that the left hemisphere deals with explicit meanings only whereas the right hemisphere deals with the implicit and metaphor.

The importance of metaphor is that it *underlies all forms of understanding whatsoever*, science and philosophy no less than poetry and art... The realm of all that remains, and has to remain, implicit and ambiguous is extensive, and is crucially important. This is why one feels so hopeless relying on the written word to convey meaning in humanly important and emotionally freighted situations. (McGilchrist, 2009, p. 71)

McGilchrist cites the pyramid of values (McGilchrist, 2009, p. 160) developed by the philosopher Max Scheler and maps the worlds engendered by the hemispheres onto it:



The priorities of the left hemisphere map exclusively onto the lowest level of this pyramid. Here we have the values concerning whether something is pleasant or not and whether it is useful. McGilchrist associates the right hemisphere with all the higher values in this pyramid and with the ability to deal with paradox. The right hemisphere responds to a range of emotions related to bonding and empathy so, “in the absence of a functioning right hemisphere, our world and ourselves become emotionally impoverished.” (McGilchrist, 2009, p. 62) Moral values are preferentially the priority of the right hemisphere “linked to the capacity for empathy,... deeply bound up with our emotional sensitivity to others. Empathy is intrinsic to morality.” (McGilchrist, 2009, p. 86)

In terms of the two modes of knowing and values, Jeremy Naydler writes that “We live today at a time of increasing polarisation between, on the one hand, the reductionist philosophy of scientific materialism, so prevalent in the media and so dominant in our academic institutions, and on the other hand philosophies, many of which draw on very ancient traditions, that acknowledge the reality of inner worlds.” Being preoccupied with “inner worlds” is not a mainstream activity in our time and yet Naydler sees it as of vital importance to us, not simply in terms of ‘ultimate meanings’ but also our orientation towards the kind of food we eat, how we want our children to be educated, the kind of medicines we take, the buildings we design and a host of other extremely practical and down to earth things.” (Naydler, 2005, p. Preface)

“Anything that is essentially sacramental, anything that is not founded on rationality, but on bonds of reverence or awe (right-hemisphere terrain) becomes the enemy of

the left hemisphere, and constitutes a bar to its supremacy; so the left hemisphere is committed to its destruction.” (McGilchrist, 2009, p. 347) Against this background, McGilchrist’s metaphor is sobering, the emissary eventually saw “his master’s temperance and forbearance as weakness, not wisdom, and ... became contemptuous of his master. And so it came about that the master was usurped, the people were duped, the domain became a tyranny; and eventually it collapsed in ruins.” (McGilchrist, 2009, p. 14)

McGilchrist states that the left brain cannot generate anything new and is therefore fated to constantly recycle old ideas. McGilchrist would identify symbolic awareness and spiritual purpose as the domain of the right brain hemisphere. This hemisphere is also the only route to new thinking and therefore vital for addressing the problems of our age in new and creative ways. Jake Chapman compares the results of two modes of thinking, tied to two sets of metaphor, in public services in the UK.

The way to visualise the difference between the mechanistic, linear approach to policy and the holistic, systemic approach is to compare the results of throwing a rock and a live bird. Mechanical linear models are excellent for understanding where the rock will end up, but useless for predicting the trajectory of a bird – even though both are subject to the same laws of physics. To the degree that social and organisational systems, like the NHS, show adaptive behaviours they are better regarded as similar to live birds than lumps of rock. (Chapman, 2002, p. 12)

He uses the machine metaphor to describe problematic and inappropriate ways of addressing problems. From McGilchrist we can see that this is a preferred left hemisphere approach. On the other hand adaptive behaviours are the domain of the right hemisphere. Chapman’s metaphor of the living bird is helpful to us when thinking about Ficino’s hermetic and theurgic approach to astrological practice. On the one hand the bird feels the throw and initially moves in that direction, not unlike Ficino’s understanding of the initial effect of Saturn in his birth chart. However, Ficino makes an adaptive response to the situation, based on his understanding of the best possibilities available to him practically and symbolically. This makes the outcome harder to predict but likely to be more auspicious for him.

Chapman in his teaching on complexity and soft systems practice in the public service observes that:

People find it hard to face the uncertainty, ambiguity and different views of what is happening in complex situations... The most common ways of avoiding complexity are to presume simple causation of the issue (when in fact there are multiple interacting causes), to adopt an ideological position or to make use of stereotypes that evoke prejudices used in justifying a simplistic “solution”. However it is achieved, the consequences are, that a policy or intervention that ignores complexity will generate a

plethora of *unintended consequences*. These arise because the simple causation or solutions presumed by the advocate do not match the reality of what is occurring in the real world. (Chapman, 2012)

This is clearly a consequence of unbridled left hemisphere thinking. Again there is a parallel with Ficino's *Disputation against the Judgements of Astrologers* where he argues for the complexity and difficulty in judging from the stars saying "the stars are numerable and all act... But we have only – and imperfectly – observed seven planets in addition to the stars in the constellations." (Voss, 2006, p. 75)

There are many ways in which McGilchrist sees the Renaissance as "a huge expansion of the right hemisphere's way of being in the world, into which, initially, the work of the left hemisphere is integrated... [he concludes] it is this that accounts for the astonishing fertility and richness as well as the remarkable breadth of concern, to this day memorialized in the concept of the Renaissance man" (McGilchrist, 2009, p. 329). Ficino's translations and interpretations of the Platonic and hermetic texts played a crucial role in this development.

Jung and Astrology

Vocatus atque non vocatus, Deus aderit

Called or uncalled, God will be present

Carved by Jung above the door of his house in Kusnacht, Switzerland²

C. G. Jung is a seminal figure in the development of psycho-analysis in the twentieth century and much has been written about his interest in astrology, divination and the western esoteric tradition. I will therefore simply give brief indications as to the ways in which his thought parallels the nature of the hermetic cosmos or gives value to the practice of a hermetic astrology.

Leon Schlamm describes Jung as "a secular (post-religious) Western visionary mystic" (Schlamm, 2007, p. 1). In this role he addresses, in new and creative ways the "disenchantment of the world" by "rationalisation and intellectualisation" (Willis & Curry, 2004, p. 77). Jung himself laments this situation:

As scientific understanding has grown, so our world has become dehumanized. Man feels himself isolated in the cosmos, because he is no longer involved in nature and has lost his emotional "unconscious identity" with natural phenomena. These have slowly

² Aniela Jaffe says: "It is the answer the Delphic Oracle gave the Lacedaemonians when they were planning a war against Athens" (1979: 136).

In a letter of November 19, 1960, Jung explains the inscription:

By the way, you seek the enigmatic oracle *Vocatus atque non vocatus deus aderit* in vain in Delphi: it is cut in stone over the door of my house in Kusnacht near Zurich and otherwise found in Erasmus's collection of *Adagia* (XVIth cent.). [Jung had acquired a copy of the 1563 edition of Erasmus's *Collectaneas adagiorum*, a compilation of analects from classical authors, when he was 19 years old.] It is a Delphic oracle though. It says: yes, the god will be on the spot, but in what form and to what purpose? I have put the inscription there to remind my patients and myself: *Timor dei initium sapientie* ["The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."] Here another not less important road begins, not the approach to "Christianity" but to God himself and this seems to be the ultimate question. (1975: 611)

lost their symbolic implications... His contact with nature has gone, and with it has gone, and with it has gone the profound emotional energy that this symbolic connection supplied. (Jung, 1964, p. 95)

Jung explains his work in a potently cosmological and symbolic sense.

Since the stars have fallen from heaven and our highest symbols have paled, a secret life holds sway in the unconscious. This is why we have a psychology today, and why we speak of the unconscious. All this would be quite superfluous in an age or culture that possessed symbols... Our unconscious, on the other hand, hides living water... "the heart glows," and a secret unrest gnaws at the roots of our being. (Jung, 1971, p. 25)

Could we understand symbol here in its original sense in which God and man commune together? According to Scott, "The symbol is the immanent expression of the Divine. Through participation in both the sensible and the metaphysical orders of ontological Existence the symbol acts as the vehicle by which the human may be lead back to the Divine." (Scott, 2000, p. 2) Jung presents his understanding of this in terms of the psyche. Main proposes that there is a continuum of consciousness and reality, physical, psychic and spiritual which is "an aspect both of every individual person and of the world as it exists independently of any individual person." (Main, 2007, p. 27) This continuum; "a kind of spectrum: from physical to psychic to spiritual – is characterized by increasing subtlety of "substance" and operation and consequently also by increasing difficulty of observation and quantification" Nevertheless, Jung was acutely aware of spirit and deemed manifestation of spirit as "characterized by numinosity, with all the qualities implicit in this term: otherness, awfulness, overpoweringness, urgency, fascination – in general, a distinctive prerational and transrational emotional charge." (Main, 2007, p. 29) The workings of the spirit are compared with "its capacity for re-patterning or restructuring contents within the fields of the psychic and physical" (Main, 2007, p. 29) as in intuitive or creative action. Jung accepts the terms matter, psyche and spirit and uses them all. However he writes of "the relative validity of the realistic standpoint... or of the idealistic standpoint...; [concluding] I would only like to unite these extreme opposites by... the psychological stand point." (Main, 2007, p. 32)

We are in truth so wrapped about by psychic images that we cannot penetrate at all to the essence of things external to ourselves. All our knowledge consists of the stuff of the psyche which, because it alone is immediate, is superlatively real. (Jung, 1969, p. 353)

Jung is therefore locating psyche or soul as the only mode whereby news from the worlds of spirit and matter become conscious for us. In this sense we may see him reanimating the idea of the role of the soul, as mediator between matter and spirit in the hermetic world; joining the two perspectives, the realistic and idealistic standpoints and also in a sense uniting the two functions of the human brain, as

described by McGilchrist. Jung proposes the mind of man as uniting the opposites of the paradoxical world using symbol.

How else could it have occurred to man to divide the cosmos, on the analogy of day and night, summer and winter, into a bright day-world and a dark night-world peopled with fabulous monsters, unless he had the prototype of such a division in himself, in the polarity between the conscious and the invisible and unknowable unconscious? (Jung, 1971, p. 22)

He further says that “unequivocal statements can be made only in regard to immanent objects; transcendent ones can be expressed only by paradox” (Jung, 1971, p. 357) and this matters because:

The paradox is one of our most valuable spiritual possessions, while uniformity of meaning is a sign of weakness. Hence a religion becomes inwardly impoverished when it loses or waters down its paradoxes; but their multiplication enriches because only the paradox comes anywhere near to comprehending the fullness of life. Non-ambiguity and non-contradiction are one-sided and thus unsuited to express the incomprehensible. (Jung, 1971, p. 357)

An awareness of living in a paradoxical world can be uncomfortable and the process of moving to appropriate lived relationship with it can be healing but can also pose major difficulties:

One should not underestimate the demands and the hazards involved in pursuing one’s true personality. One is liable to encounter personal resistance or collective disapproval. And one never knows what the unconscious will produce, nor are there any guarantees of either success or return... most of us are either called to it by some overwhelming summons or driven to it by some disturbing experience of suffering. (Tyas, 2010, p. 13)

That is, suffering for the ego as it faces its shadow and is forced to undergo a kind of death in life, a form of psychoanalytic initiation.

The path of healing Jung developed is based on a one to one therapeutic encounter, not unlike the divinatory encounter of *theoros* and *hermeios* as described by Cornelius (Cornelius, 2009, pp. 106-204) with the dream as the oracular and symbolic statement to be interpreted. Jung also worked with visualisation and took advice from divinatory resources such as the I Ching. His fascination with astrology is well known, although the outcome for astrology firmly locates astrology in the world of tricksterish symbolism, rather than materialist science, as Maggie Hyde observes. (Hyde, 1992, pp. 78-79)³

³ Hyde relates a story shared by Lindsay Radermacher about her chart for a dead fox. She felt the moment of seeing the fox was significant but could not tell why and could not discern relevant symbolism in the chart. However, when giving a lecture on ‘dead’ charts she found to her consternation that the symbol

The symbolic attitude is an area of overlap between Jung and astrological practice. However, few astrologers today want to present themselves to the world as diviners or oracle interpreters. Like Jung, they would wish to present their work as founded on reason and science. Jung always affirmed that his work was based on empirical science but for astrologers, in the present time, this is not an option. As Hyde says:

Divination has no public place and we would not expect our leaders to make known the omens before embarking on wars or other national enterprises. Whatever great men do in private, it remains publicly unacceptable to have a US President throw the I Ching, follow a dream or listen to an astrologer, as the stir over Ronald and Nancy Reagan's astrological advisor readily revealed. Jung lamented that even eastern cultures had stopped divining about affairs of state. (Hyde, 1992, p. 71)

Hyde says that it is not a simple matter of turning symbols into signs. In Ficino's terms, this process simply generates "silly similitudes". Jung is with Ficino on this point, that a symbol is dependent on the 'consciousness of the one considering it' (Hyde, 1992, p. 79). In other words the judgement of the astrologer, *judicio* for Ficino, including their personal maturity, wisdom and experience come into play. Likewise, the astrologer cannot simply stand aside and let symbol speak without an awareness of their own participation and the way the symbol affects them. Like psychologists, projection may be at work or the 'secret mutual connivance' identified by Jung (Hyde, 1992, p. 143) in his astrological experiments.

No one has done more than Liz Greene to bring about the marriage of Jungian analysis and astrological symbolism and bring them to the attention of the public. Given the poor status of astrology at the outset of her project, she has certainly enhanced its fascination for myriads of students and practitioners. Jungian astrology is now seen as a major strand within the contemporary astrological current. However, this has not protected these astrologers from sometimes adopting a simplistic and deterministic approach to their thinking about the subject. Hyde undertakes an analysis of Greene's own descriptions of her way of proceeding and finds that core astrological craft and technique can be lacking. (Hyde, 1992, pp. 91-101) Ficino urges us to use both intuition and technique in our work. For Liz Greene it looks as though the symbolic imagination sometimes takes flight, forgetting the technique.

The ultimate concern has to be the effect on the client, whether of astrologer or psychoanalyst and sometimes, most persuasively, when the two work together. Delia Shargel, a transpersonal analyst working in a tradition that builds on Jung's work, is convinced that astrological symbolism can aid the self-awareness and healing of suffering because "it helps us move beyond the internalized modern world view of separateness and alienation by making a deep, numinous connection with the

came to life and appeared to describe both the audience and the chart. She later found that foxes sometimes pretend to be dead in order to catch their prey.

cosmos, mirroring us right down to the minutiae of our daily lives and the inner workings of our souls,” (Shargel, 2016, p. 70). In my own experience as an astrological practitioner, this often happens by the telling of a myth related to a planet that appears likely to be significant. Telling the myth is not, in itself, an interpretation but the client can be aroused by the relevance of the analogy with their own situation. They then reveal what is going on, assisting the astrologer in moving, as Cornelius puts it, from the speculative to the realised interpretation. (Cornelius, 2003, pp. 292-296)

Shargel associates the healing capacity of this kind of work with the idea that astrological symbols are “*multivalent*, capable of expressing themselves in a multitude of ways while remaining consistent with a central archetypal core of meaning.” (Shargel, 2016, p. 72) In this approach the symbol retains enough complexity to continue to function. However, as Ficino found, the native also has the capacity to make creative choices about how to live their lives. Shargel says that, as a result of astrological insights, her client was able to choose:

Different but still archetypally appropriate manifestations [and this] lets the archetypal energies at the core of the complex express themselves in more life-enhancing behaviour, thus promoting self-acceptance... psychic energy is no longer as bound up in unconscious conflict. Furthermore, it is possible to recover from the activation of the complex more quickly by using the more conscious and compassionate parts of the psyche to help soothe underlying conflicts in a self-compassionate manner. (Shargel, 2016, p. 75)

Conclusions

This paper proposes that hermeticism still has relevant ideas for us today in wrestling with a complex world and our need for new responses to the problems created by our left brain, objectivist and materialist focus. Astrology clearly can have a hermetic dimension as shown by Ficino. Many present day astrologers could claim to be hermetic in the sense that they apply the principles of *sympatheia* to connect with the planets by way of myth, art, drama, food, medicine, music, incense and so on. Some would also claim a healing dimension to their practice, by combining psychology with astrology, or a spiritual dimension such as Kabbalistic astrology (Halevi, 1986). In all this, Ficino counsels that it is the judgement of the astrologer that counts. This depends upon their preparation, reverence and ability to combine and interpret the fruits of our two modes of thought.

The astrological practice envisaged by the hermetic texts would have been a form of divination.

Everywhere it occurs, divination involves complementary modes of cognition associated with primary process and secondary process thinking or knowing. (Fernandez 1991; Kracke 1992). Diviners are specialists who use the idea of moving from a boundless to a bounded realm of existence in their practice... [They] excel in

insight, imagination, fluency in language, and knowledge of cultural traditions. During a divination, they construct usable knowledge from oracular messages. To do so, they link diverse domains of representational information and symbolism, with emotional or presentational experience. (Tedlock, 2001, p. 191)

Although astrologers are often reluctant to accept the description of diviner, this is likely to be a consequence of the devaluation of these modes of thought in our time. We now begin to see that this devaluing is unhelpful, not simply to astrologers but in terms of a wider approach to human development.

Above all astrology is always a way of working with symbol. According to Scott “The symbol is the immanent expression of the Divine. Through participation in both the sensible and the metaphysical orders of ontological Existence the symbol acts as the vehicle by which the human may be lead back to the Divine.” (Scott, 2000, p. 2) It can therefore be a means of “Re-membering” in the Platonic sense of anamnesia, leading to absolute knowledge. According to Snodgrass (Scott, 2000, p. 9) symbols can be visual or spatial or found in myth, ritual or doctrine. The astrological symbol is founded on the cosmos itself which according to Coleridge is none other than “one vast complex *Mythos*, or symbolic representation” (Scott, 2000, p. 12) and provides the “key for the return of the human to the Divine. This is to recognize Cosmic Existence as theophany... the reflection of the Divinity in the mirror of created forms... [and imaging the hermetic journey of the soul] The cosmos is not only the theatre wherein are reflected the Divine names and Qualities. It is also a crypt through which man must journey to reach the Reality beyond cosmic manifestation.” (Scott, 2000, p. 12) Ultimately, Joseph Milne tells us:

The way a culture views the cosmos determines the way it views human nature or understands itself. The two are inextricably bound together. If the cosmos is seen as essentially holy, and therefore as revelatory, as the religions and the poets have always seen it, then it is possible for the human soul to participate consciously in the providential destiny of the cosmic narrative. But if the cosmos is seen as an indifferent mechanism blindly hurtling to its eventual extinction, then human nature will be seen likewise. It will be closed in upon itself and unable to find meaning outside its own alienated subjectivity, trying to invent itself from within, and likewise be unable to confer any blessings upon the earth or the heavens which the mystics regard as part of the true calling of humanity and which always closes Shakespeare’s comedies. (Milne, 2007, p. 7)

It is this holy cosmos that a hermetic astrology aspires to reveal.

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