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Marsilio Ficino, Neoplatonism / Hermeticism and Iconology: some reflections on the established stereotypes[1]

The culture of the Renaissance continues to be shrouded in numerous myths. On the one hand this is perpetuated by the standard perception of the Renaissance as the age in which reason, science and the arts triumphed over superstition. On the other hand, we are told that the Renaissance did not create anything radically new, since the roots of all of its achievements can easily be identified in medieval culture. If the second assertion should be seen simply as a somewhat naive attempt to increase interest in the Middle Ages, the first remains deeply rooted in the public consciousness. This article looks at one myth about Renaissance culture, the victim of which is Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499).

Ficino, first translator of Plato and Plotinus into Latin and one of the leading thinkers of the second half of the fifteenth century, undoubtedly occupied a key place in Renaissance philosophy, which inevitably led to a variety of later interpretations and – or so it seems to me – notable distortions of his work.[2] Much has been done in recent years to return to the 'authentic' Ficino, unfettered by the heavy chains of those numerous commentaries that so often cloud our understanding of his own thinking,[3] yet these long-established

[1] The text is translated by Catherine Phillips.

[2] For a biography and general survey of Ficino's work see: Raymond Marcel, *Marsile Ficin (1433–1499)*, Paris: Les belles lettres, 1958. On the fate of Ficino's texts and oeuvre: Paul Oskar Kristeller, 'Marsilio Ficino and his Work after Five Hundred Years', in: Gian Carlo Garfagnini, ed., *Marsilio Ficino e il ritorno di Platone. Studi e documenti*, 2 vols, Florence: Olschki, 1986, II: 15–196.

[3] Several collections published over the last fifteen years have played an important part in this: Michael J.B. Allen, Valery Rees, eds, with Martin Davies, *Marsilio Ficino: his Theology, his Philosophy, his Legacy*, Leiden–Boston–Cologne: Brill, 2002; Stéphane Toussaint, Sebastiano Gentile, eds, *Marsilio Ficino: fonti, testi, fortuna*, Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2006; Stephen Clucas, Peter J. Forshaw, Valery Rees, eds, *Laus Platonici Philosophi. Marsilio Ficino and his Influence*, Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2011. For many years Valery Rees has organised special Ficino sessions at the annual conference of the Renaissance Society of America. She is currently preparing *A Companion to Marsilio Ficino*, to be published by Brill.

stereotypes seem hard to uproot. Moreover, there is an entirely separate problem in that the scholarly literature traditionally and all too often mistakenly attributes to Ficino many phenomena in Renaissance literary culture. It seems to be *de rigueur* to make some reference to his writings and such were the breadth of his interests, the scope of his writings in the impressive *Opera omnia*, that with high-quality modern publications of his works readily accessible, it is easy to find a suitable quotation.[1] It soon becomes clear, however, that references of this kind are usually employed to bolster a particular scholar's own arguments and are in fact entirely unconnected to Ficino's own thoughts or the complex context of Florentine intellectual life in the second half of the fifteenth century. This author has come across many examples of such a superficial interest in Ficino's writings.[2] The textbook example is probably the popular and widely circulated concept of *dignitas hominis* which, though never a central subject in Ficino's philosophy or that of his younger contemporary Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494), fits so well with contemporary understandings of so-called 'Renaissance humanism'.[3]

In this article I shall deal with three different questions. Above all, the Platonic Academy that supposedly existed in Florence, headed by Ficino. Secondly, the extremely influential viewpoint of Frances A. Yates regarding

[1] Marsilio Ficino, *Marsilii Ficini florentini, insignis philosophi platonici, medici atque theologi clarissimi opera, in duos tomos digesta*, Basileae: ex officina Henricpetrina, 1576. Of the more recent publications of his works, we might cite: *Platonic Theology*, tr. Michael J.B. Allen with John Warden, Latin text ed. James Hankins with William Bowen, 6 vols, Cambridge, MA–London: Harvard University Press, 2001–2006; *Commentaries on Plato*, I, *Phaedrus and Ion*, ed. Michael J.B. Allen, Cambridge, MA–London: Harvard University Press, 2008; *Teologia platonica*, ed. Errico Vitale, Milan: Bompiani, 2011; *Commentaries on Plato*, II, *Parmenides*, ed. and tr. Maude Vanhaelen, Cambridge, MA–London: Harvard University Press, 2012.

[2] Amongst the numerous possible examples we might cite Mikhail B. Yampolsky, *Ткач и визионер. Очерки истории репрезентации, или О материальном и идеальном в культуре* [Weaver and Visionary. Essays on the History of Representation, or On the Material and the Ideal in Culture], Moscow: NLO, 2007; Aleksandr V. Markov, 'Исихастское искусство толкования и ренессансный филолог Кристофоро Ландино' [The Hesychastic Art of Interpretation and the Renaissance Philologist Cristoforo Landino], in: *Правда. Память. Примирение. XV международные Успенские чтения* [Truth. Memory. Reconciliation. XV International Uspensky Readings], Kiev: Dukh i Litera, 2017: 201–13.

[3] On which see: Brian Copenhaver, 'The Secret of Pico's Oration: Cabala and Renaissance Philosophy', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 26, 2002: 56–81; Ovanes L. Akopyan, 'Что такое "гуманизм"? От Ренессанса к современности' [What is 'Humanism'? Renaissance Ideas and Modern Interpretations], *Диалог со временем. Альманах интеллектуальной истории 45* [Dialogue with Time. Almanach of Intellectual History 45], 2014: 117–130; Ovanes L. Akopyan, 'Ренессансная магия как духовное явление (на примере текстов конца XV–начала XVI вв.)' [Renaissance Magic as a Spiritual Phenomenon (The Example of Late Fifteenth- and Early Sixteenth-century Texts)], *Диалог со временем. Альманах интеллектуальной истории 57* [Dialogue with Time. Almanach of Intellectual History 57], 2016: 76–92.

the dominance of the Hermetic tradition in the writings of a whole series of Renaissance thinkers from Ficino to Giordano Bruno. Lastly, I shall touch on the special but contradictory place in the history of Renaissance art and aesthetics traditionally allocated to Ficino since the first half of the twentieth century and still very much accepted today. As will be demonstrated, the shaping of these historiographical trends owed much to representatives of the school of Aby Warburg and the staff of the Warburg Institute, or scholars working closely with them. It may be that the longevity of these stereotypes was determined by the influential standing of those involved in their emergence. But the time has come to put an end to such myths, allowing us to take a fresh look at Renaissance culture in the second half of the fifteenth century and to rehabilitate Marsilio Ficino himself, revealing him to be a figure of even greater interest than is usually thought.

To take the first question, that of the Florentine Platonic Academy, we can firmly state that, in reality, it never existed. In the famous introduction to his translation of Plotinus' *Enneads*, Ficino states that when Georgius Gemistus (Plethon) attended the Council of Ferrara-Florence as part of the Byzantine delegation he made an indelible impression on the European humanists and supposedly prompted Cosimo de' Medici to revive the Platonic Academy.[1] Henceforth there were to be endless disputes as to the precise meaning of his words.[2] There is a widespread opinion that a whole group of thinkers gathered around Ficino, united by a common love for Platonic philosophy. This group supposedly included Cristoforo Landino, Angelo Ambrogini (Poliziano), Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and many other leading figures in Florentine intellectual life of the second half of the fifteenth century. The most recent research, however, has convincingly shown that there was no such circle of like-minded thinkers around Ficino. Two of his younger and perhaps most famous contemporaries, Poliziano and Pico della Mirandola, repeatedly criticised Ficino quite openly.[3] There is also considerable doubt that they were particularly admiring of Plato's authority. Although Pico della Mirandola undoubtedly took the Neoplatonic tradition as his basis in his first

[1] Marsilio Ficino, 'Marsilii Ficini florentini in Plotini epitomae', in *Opera*, Op. cit.: 1537.

[2] For the two views on the question: James Hankins, 'The Myth of the Platonic Academy of Florence', *Renaissance Quarterly* 44/3, 1991: 429–475; James Hankins, 'Cosimo de' Medici and the "Platonic Academy"', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 53, 1990: 144–62; Arthur Field, 'The Platonic Academy of Florence', in: Allen, Rees, Davies, Op. cit.: 359–376. On the rediscovery of Plato see also: James Hankins, *La riscoperta di Platone nel Rinascimento italiano*, Pisa: Edizioni della Normale, 2009 (first edn, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, 2 vols, Leiden–New York: Brill, 1990); Ovanes Akopyan, 'Платон и Ренессанс: "древняя теология" и примирение с Аристотелем' [Plato and the Renaissance: *prisca theologia* and Reconciliation with Aristotle], in: Irina A. Protopopova et al, eds, *Платоновский сборник (Приложение а Вестнику Русской христианской гуманитарной академии)* [Plato Collection (Supplement to the Bulletin of the Russian Christian Academy for the Humanities)], Moscow–St Petersburg: Russian State University for the Humanities–Russian Christian Academy for the Humanities, 2013, II: 320–340.

[3] Anna De Pace, *La scepsi, il sapere e l'anima. Dissonanze nella cerchia laurenziana*, Milan: LED, 2002.

truly philosophical text, his *Commento sopra una canzone d'amore di Girolamo Benivieni* (Commentary on a Poem of Platonic Love),[1] he was thereafter to take a different path: he saw his task, particularly in the early stages of his career, as being to unite all philosophical and theological thought under the overall auspices of Christian teaching.[2] Plato and the Neo-Platonists were but one of many sources, however important. In Pico's later writings Plato gradually receded into the background: if his treatise *De ente et uno* (On Being and the One) still touches on how Plato's followers distorted his thought,[3] in the *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem* (Disputations against Divinatory Astrology), no particular attention is paid to Plato at all, in contrast to, for instance, Aristotle.[4] Thus to apply the term ardent 'Renaissance Neo-Platonist' to Giovanni Pico is incorrect, for he was never any such thing.

Nor do the sources provide support for the common opinion that members of the Academy gathered at regular symposia to discuss pressing philosophical questions. We know from Ficino's own letters of two possible meetings of this kind, in autumn 1468. In the first letter Ficino mentions a conversation he had with three of his 'academy' pupils in the house of Francesco Bandini in Florence, in the second he likens his colleagues who gathered at the Villa Careggi to the participants in Plato's 'Banquet' *(Symposium)*.[5] This remark had serious historiographical consequences: it became the basis for the idea that Ficino's *Commentary on Plato's Symposium* (1469) was inspired by a real banquet. Despite the obvious appeal of such an interpretation, it seems more

[1] Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, 'Commento alla Canzona d'amore', in idem, *De hominis dignitate, Heptaplus, De ente et uno e scritti vari*, ed. Eugenio Garin, Turin: Aragno, 2004: 445–581; Unn Irene Aasdalen, 'The First Pico–Ficino Controversy', in: Clucas, Forshaw, Rees: Op. cit.: 67–88; Michael J.B. Allen, 'The Birth Day of Venus: Pico as Platonic Exegete in the *Commento* and the *Heptaplus*', in: M. V. Dougherty, ed., *Pico della Mirandola: New Essays*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008: 81–113.

[2] This was reflected in Pico's most important early work, his *900 Theses*: Stephen A. Farmer, *Syncretism in the West: Pico's 900 Theses (1486): the Evolution of Traditional Religious and Philosophical Systems*, Tempe, AZ: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1998.

[3] The two best editions of this are: Stéphane Toussaint, *L'esprit du Quattrocento. Le* De Ente et Uno *de Pic de la Mirandole*, Paris: Champion, 1995; Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Dell'Ente e dell'Uno*, ed. Raphael Ebgi with Franco Bacchelli, Milan: Bompiani, 2010. *De ente et uno* contains criticism of Marsilio Ficino, who did not hesitate to respond to his younger colleague in his commentary on Plato's *Parmenides*; see: Maude Vanhaelen, 'The Pico–Ficino Controversy: New Evidence in Ficino's Commentary on Plato's Parmenides', *Rinascimento* 49, 2009: 1–39.

[4] See further: Ovanes Akopyan, 'The Light of Astrology: Giovanni Pico della Mirandola on Celestial Influence', in: Ovanes Akopyan, Charles Burnett, eds, *Anti-Astrology in Early Modern Europe: between Philosophy, Theology, and Science*, London–New York: Routledge, 2018 (forthcoming). See also: Ovanes Akopyan, *Споры об астрологии в ренессансной мысли второй половины XV – начала XVI века* [Controversies on Astrology in Renaissance Thought of the Second Half of the Fifteenth and Early Sixteenth Century], Candidate dissertation, Moscow: Moscow State University, 2014: particularly 271–312.

[5] James Hankins, 'The Myth of the Platonic Academy of Florence', Op. cit.: 446.

likely that Ficino's words were but a device, with no roots in reality.[1] Ficino may well, of course, have discussed Platonic philosophy privately with people in his circle, such as Lorenzo de' Medici, and even have taught it for a while,[2] but this does not negate the fact that there never were any general meetings of a 'Platonic Academy'. Lastly, the legend that Ficino kept a lit lamp before a bust of Plato as a mark of respect to the Ancient Greek philosopher does not stand up to criticism.[3]

The myth of the existence of the Platonic Academy in Florence was markedly political in nature. First Cosimo de' Medici and then his descendants who had returned to Florence in the first half of the sixteenth century sought to raise their own prestige by claiming the city as the cultural capital of the Italian and European Renaissance.[4] When speaking of the 'academy', however, Ficino insisted that Florence was, though important, merely another link in the preservation of the Platonic heritage, and that he himself, who had been responsible for bringing Plato's original thinking to European soil, simply continued the work of his predecessors, above all Plethon, with whose works he was familiar.[5] Thus Ficino's 'academy' should be understood not as an established institution or 'scholar's club', but merely as a metaphor for Platonic philosophy.

Nonetheless the image of the Academy seemed to give unity to intellectual life in Renaissance Florence and consequently proved extremely convenient and thus persistent in textbooks and serious research publications. First put

[1] Sebastiano Gentile, 'Per la storia del testo del Commentarium in Convivium di Marsilio Ficino', *Rinascimento* 21, 1981: 3–27, particularly 10–11.

[2] Jonathan Davies, 'Marsilio Ficino: Lecturer at the Studio fiorentino', *Renaissance Quarterly* 45/4, 1992: 785–790.

[3] Those involved in creating the myth of the lamp were followers of Girolamo Savonarola, who was sharply critical of the pagan interests of Florentine intellectuals in the second half of the fifteenth century. This legend thus reflects not so much historical fact as aspects of the political and ideological conflict that unfolded in Florence after 1492: Arnaldo Della Torre, *Storia dell'Accademia platonica di Florence,* Florence: Carnesecchi, 1902: 640; Marcel, Op. cit.: 293–294.

[4] James Hankins, 'The Invention of the Platonic Academy of Florence', in: James Hankins, *Humanism and Platonism in the Italian Renaissance*, 2 vols, Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2003–4, II, *Platonism*: 350–395, particularly 368–371; James Hankins, 'The Platonic Academy of Florence and Renaissance Historiography', in Luisa Simonutti, ed., *Forme del neoplatonismo. Dall' eredità ficiniana ai platonici di Cambridge,* Florence: Olschki, 2007: 75–96, particularly 78–81.

[5] The Biblioteca Riccardiana has the manuscript copy of Plethon's writings studied by Ficino: Brigitte Tambrun, 'Marsile Ficin et le Commentaire de Pléthon sur les "Oracles Chaldaïques"', *Accademia (Revue de la Société Marsile Ficin)* 1, 1999: 14. Kristeller, Op. cit.: 97–98. On Plethon's influence on Ficino overall see: Ilana Klutstein, *Marsile Ficin et la théologie ancienne. Oracles Chaldaïques, Hymnes Orphiques, Hymnes de Proclus*, Florence: Olschki, 1987; Sebastiano Gentile, Paolo Viti et al, *Marsilio Ficino e il ritorno di Platone*, exh. cat., Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Florence: Le Lettere, 1984: 25–27; Brigitte Tambrun, 'Pléthon et les mages disciples de Zoroastre', in: Pierre Magnard, ed., *Marsile Ficin: les platonismes à la Renaissance,* Paris: Vrin, 2001: 169–80; Brigitte Tambrun, *Pléthon. Le retour de Platon*, Paris: Vrin, 2006: 241–259.

forward by an Italian historian of an older generation, Arnaldo della Teorre,[1] the myth of the Academy was taken up in Italy and beyond. At the insistent request of the Fascist curator of the humanities Ernesto Grassi, Eugenio Garin and his colleagues in Italy had to recreate the pagan myth of the Italian state but then, after the fall of Mussolini, they donned Communist attire and looked to 'Renaissance humanism' as it was understood within the context of the new ideology.[2]

The idea of the Academy found its supporters outside Italy – in part thanks to the efforts first of Ernst Cassirer, who was close to the circle of Aby Warburg, and then of Erwin Panofsky and André Chastel. The unity of thought in Florence during the second half of the fifteenth century that they constructed was interwoven with other stereotypes about the Renaissance era. Cassirer's *The Individual and the Cosmos* was to mark an important stage in forming a picture of Renaissance man.[3] This work, which so clearly reflected the humanist direction of German post-war intellectual life, made no allowance even for the possibility that Renaissance thought of the period was fragmentary and contradictory. That triad of Nicholas of Cusa, Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola was, for Cassirer, the bearer of new thoughts about the individual's place in the world, although the latter two knew nothing of the work of the former.[4] As part of the debate about the essence of 'humanism' in the second half of the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth, *The Individual and the Cosmos* remains a key text of its time, but its value for scholars of the Renaissance can be thrown into doubt.

Erwin Panofsky trod a somewhat different path. In his now classic work of 1924, *Idea. A Concept in Art History*, Panofsky concluded that Ficino remained purely a theoretician with regards to art.[5] Setting out the boundar-

[1] Della Torre, Op. cit.

[2] Akopyan, What is 'Humanism'?, Op. cit.: 119–120. On different approaches to the interpretation of Renaissance humanism see: James Hankins, 'Two Twentieth-Century Interpreters of Renaissance Humanism: Eugenio Garin and Paul Oskar Kristeller', in: James Hankins, *Humanism and Platonism in the Italian Renaissance*, Op. cit., I, *Humanism*: 573–590; Riccardo Fubini, 'L'umanesimo italiano. Problemi e studi di ieri e di oggi', *Studi francesi* LI, 2007: 504–515; Stéphane Toussaint, *Humanismes / Antihumanismes. De Ficin à Heidegger*, I, Paris: Les belles lettres, 2008.

[3] Ernst Cassirer, *Individuum und Kosmos in der Philosophie der Renaissance*, Leipzig–Berlin, 1927; English edn *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, tr. with an introduction by Mario Domandi, Oxford: Blackwell, 1963.

[4] Although Ficino was interested in a number of texts that once attracted Cusa, notably the works of Proclus and the Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, he never cited him in any of his own writings. The supposed similarity between certain passages in the writings of Cusa and Ficino is purely hypothetical, put forward by a number of scholars who provide no factual basis. Nor is there a single mention of Cusa in the writings of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. To judge by a surviving inventory of Pico's personal library he owned no works by Cusa.

[5] Erwin Panofsky, *Idea. Ein Beitrag zur Begriffsgeschichte der älteren Kunsttheorie*, Leipzig–Berlin, 1924; Eng. edn *Idea. A Concept in Art Theory*, tr. Joseph J.S. Peake, second corrected edn, New York: Harper & Row, 1975.

ies of ideal beauty and of 'art' itself, Panofsky concluded that Ficino was a faithful follower of Plato and Plotinus and was never interested in the second concept, the *artes* themselves. According to Panofsky, Ficino could not have ignored Plato's famous maxim that there was no place for an artist in an ideal state. Panofsky saw Ficino as preaching an ideal of beauty that was new in the Renaissance, as supporting the idea of a projection of the all-powerful and most beautiful One in this, our world, whilst at the same time opposing *techne* or practical art. Proclaiming the theoretical limitations of Ficino's thought, Panofsky contrasted him with Alberti, who came to his ideal of beauty not only through philosophical study but through practical knowledge, mathematics and the applied arts.[1] Panofsky nonetheless concluded that Ficino's aesthetics, set out mainly in his *Commentary on Plato's Symposium*, had numerous followers and were reflected in a whole series of works of art in the second half of the fifteenth and the sixteenth century.

This Neo-Platonicising reading of *ars* in the work of Ficino was quickly taken up by other scholars: we have only to recall the many works devoted to the influence of Ficino's Neo-Platonic philosophy – notably his theory of love – on Renaissance culture and art. Panofsky himself continued to develop the theme, reflected in successive publications, such as *Studies in Iconology* (1939).[2] In his analysis of Ficino's thought, Panofsky undoubtedly took as his starting point the research of his friend Paul Oskar Kristeller. We should not be misled by an apparent discrepancy in the chronology: although Kristeller's *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino* was published only in 1943, the first manuscript in German had been completed by 1937, but for obvious reasons Kristeller (a German Jew who fled when Hitler came to power) was unable to publish it and thus he prepared an Italian version in 1938. Then when Italy too commenced persecution of the Jews he hastened to America, where it at last became possible to publish his fundamental work.[3] But if Kristeller demonstrated the great influence on Ficino's thought of scholasticism and of Thomas Aquinas, Panofsky saw the medieval aspects of Ficino's writings as negligible: the emphasis in *Studies in Iconology* continued to be on the Platonic, or rather Plotinian, element and the theoretical nature of *ars*.

Countering Panofsky, the 'moderate' Warburgian, is a second interpretation of Ficino's understanding of *ars* that proposes a radical new look at the question of *techne* and a rejection of the image of Ficino as theoretician

[1] Ibid.: 52–59. For criticism of Panofsky's approach and two views of *ars* in Ficino's work, see: Stéphane Toussaint, 'L'ars de Marsile Ficin, entre esthétique et magie', in: Philippe Morel, ed., *L'art de la Renaissance: entre science et magie*, Paris: Somogy, 2006: 453–467.

[2] Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology. Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*, New York – Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939.

[3] The most recent edition is Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Il pensiero filosofico di Marsilio Ficino*, Florence: Le Lettere, 2005. On Kristeller's difficult life see: John Monfasani, 'Paul Oskar Kristeller, 22 May 1905–7 June 1999', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 145/2, 2001: 208–211; Paul Oskar Kristeller, Margaret L. King, 'Iter Kristellerianum: The European Journey (1905–1939)', *Renaissance Quarterly* 47/4, 1994: 907–929.

of Neo-Platonic beauty. At its roots was a whole group of scholars whose lives were closely bound up in the Warburg Institute in London. Their approach would have warmed the heart of the Institute's founder: according to them, Ficino's concept of *ars* was linked to natural magic, being something necessary to subdue and swallow up the demonic element and thus transform original Chaos into Cosmos. Unlike Panofsky and his followers, who saw the *Commentary on Plato's Symposium* as the central text of Ficino's aesthetic programme, the opposing group of Warburgians based their reading of *ars* on well-known passages in Ficino's treatise *Three Books on Life*, particularly the third, 'Obtaining Life from the Heavens', published in 1489.[1] Frances Yates paid particular attention to this text in her celebrated book on the Hermetic tradition and Giordano Bruno.[2]

Ficino's *ars* took on a technical dimension because it was impossible without the production of those 'devices' through which one obtains life from the heavens, i.e. talismans. Music was another use of art to draw down positive heavenly influences;[3] in this case Ficino was undoubtedly heir to the Orphic tradition and we know that he translated some of the compositions attributed to the legendary 'ancient theologian' Orpheus, although for some reason he decided not to publish them.[4] A second important source for Ficino's musical interests was Plato's *Timaeus*, on which the Florentine wrote an extensive commentary. In it Ficino particularly stressed music's healing effect on the human soul and the link between musical structure and the workings of the universe.[5] According to one legend, at particularly difficult and important moments Ficino himself played a musical instrument,

[1] Marsilio Ficino, *Three Books on Life. A Critical Edition and Translation*, tr. and ed. Carol V. Kaske, John R. Clark, Tempe, AZ: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1998.

[2] Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, London: Routledge, 1964.

[3] On Ficino's musical magic see: D. P. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella*, University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000: particularly 3–29; Stéphane Toussaint, 'Quasi lyra: corde e magia. Nota sulla lira nel Rinascimento', in: Alessandro Magini, Stéphane Toussaint, eds, *Il teatro del cielo. Giovanni Bardi e il neoplatonismo tra Firenze e Parigi (Cahiers d'Accademia. IV)*, Lucca: San Marco Litotipo, 2001: 117–132; Angela Voss, 'Orpheus redivivus: the Musical Magic of Marsilio Ficino', in: Allen, Rees, Davies, Op. cit.: 227–241; Jacomien Prins, *Echoes of an Invisible World: Marsilio Ficino and Francesco Patrizi on Cosmic Order and Music Theory*, Leiden: Brill, 2015.

[4] In 1462 Ficino decided to translate the Orphic Hymns, but they were never published. It is thought that the reason lay in the criticism of Orphic magic addressed to Plethon by George of Trebizond in his *Comparatio Aristotelis et Platonis*. Ficino, still young and uncertain, probably simply had no wish to contradict the more influential thinker: D. P. Walker, 'Orpheus the Theologian and Renaissance Platonists', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 16/1–2, 1953: 100–120, particularly 107–109.

[5] There has as yet been no critical publication of Ficino's *Timaeus* commentary. The first modern publication of Ficino's treatise is currently being prepared by Jacomien Prins as part of the project to publish key Italian Renaissance texts, *I Tatti Renaissance Library*. This two-volume publication should be completed in 2018.

above all a lyre, in the hope of finding favour with the heavenly forces. The situation was similar with regard to talismans, although in this instance Ficino was hardly an innovator, since there was a rich medieval tradition behind him.[1] Ficino explains the reason why an artist starts to create, calling the *artifex interior* or internal impulse that correlates to the divine essence and which creates through and outside the artist.[2] With the aid of this curious image Ficino was able on the one hand to explain the essence of the creative process and on the other to reveal the artistic *techne* through the creation of talismans and Orphic music. It is not only Yates that has studied Ficino's natural magic, as set out in his *Three Books on Life*, but other scholars too, notably her colleague at the Warburg Institute Daniel P. Walker. And although there has been frequent criticism in recent years of the Yates–Walker thesis, it remains popular.

Thus, according to one's academic preferences Ficino's *ars* can be understood in two ways: either as a Neo-Platonic interpretation of beauty, as set out by the more rational Panofsky, or as a magical art linked with Hermetic philosophy and the acquisition of life from Heaven.

The problem is that both viewpoints, widely reflected in the secondary literature, can be thrown into doubt. Not only is Panofsky's thesis regarding Ficino's purely theoretical understanding of *ars* and his rejection of *techne* disproved by the sources – in fact Ficino saw the arts as beneficial to the soul and called on people to devote their time to the artistic practices, above all music – but it touches on an important methodological question often forgotten by scholars. In most instances there is no factual basis for the assertion that Renaissance artists read Ficino's *Commentary on Plato's Symposium* or that they used this text in any way when resolving questions of iconography. The applied method of seeking analogies between Ficino's treatise and works of art in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries is retro-active.

Nor should we forget three essential factors affecting the repercussions of Ficino's treatise. Firstly, it is a complex philosophical composition that could hardly be seen as accessible to the less knowledgeable: although Ficino himself prepared an Italian translation, its complex texture still limited the number of potential readers. Secondly, although the *Commentary* was well known among European intellectuals in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, it had to compete with other writings in a similar genre and of similar content, such as the extremely popular *Dialogues of Love* by Leone Ebreo, reprinted 25 times in the course of the sixteenth century and translated into all the main European languages.[3] Lastly, as we will show and as his contem-

[1] Nicolas Weill-Parot, *Les 'images astrologiques' au Moyen Age et à la Renaissance. Spéculations intellectuelles et pratiques magiques (XII–XV siècles)*, Paris: Champion, 2002.

[2] The theoretical foundation for this is set out in: Marsilio Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, Op. cit., 4/XIII:3: 168–182. See also: Stéphane Toussaint, L'ars de Marsile Ficin, Op. cit.: 457–460.

[3] Eugenio Canone, 'Introduzione', in: Leone Ebreo, *Dialoghi d'amore,* ed. Delfina Giovannozzi, Rome–Bari: Laterza, 2008: XVIII–XIX.

poraries were well aware, the Neo-Platonic theory of love was not the main theme of Ficino's *Commentary*.

Panofsky's thesis thus needs to be revised. No less susceptible to criticism is the interpretation in which magic and the Hermetic tradition are seen as underlying Ficino's *ars* and *techne*. It would be hard to find a book as outstanding and yet contradictory as Yates' study of Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic tradition. It might seem that everything in the book has long been reassessed, including the main thesis of the primarily Hermetic nature of Bruno's philosophy and the influence of Hermeticism on the history of learning,[1] yet it remains one of the most widely read books on the history of Renaissance magic. Some passages are still used to justify a variety of conclusions as to place of astrology, alchemy, Hermeticism and other occult sciences in the Renaissance. This is not the place to linger on the numerous errors in Yates' book and we shall limit ourselves to pointing the interested reader towards those works devoted to its excessive magical-Hermetic interpretation of the writings of, for instance, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola[2] and Cornelius Agrippa.[3] But we cannot move on without giving a brief analysis of what Yates understands as Ficino's natural magic.

In the chapter on Ficino's natural magic and his *Three Books on Life* Yates asserts confidently that the Hermetic tradition was a central element in his thinking; moreover, she says, the order of Ficino's translations – first the Hermetic corpus, then Plato, Plotinus and other Neo-Platonists – tells us that for

[1] For instance: Robert Westman, 'Magical Reform and Astronomical Reform: the Yates Thesis Reconsidered', in: Robert Westman, J. E. McGuire, eds, *Hermeticism and the Scientific Revolution,* Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977: 2–91; Brian Copenhaver, 'Natural Magic, Hermetism, and Occultism in Early Modern Science', in: David C. Lindberg, Robert S. Westman, eds, *Reappraisals of the Scientific Revolution,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990: 261–301. On Bruno's cosmology, which has no particularly link with Hermeticism, see, in particular: Robert S. Westman, *The Copernican Question. Prognostication, Skepticism, and Celestial Order*, Berkeley–Los Angeles–London: University of California Press, 2011; Dario Tessicini, 'Giordano Bruno on Copernican Harmony, Circular Uniformity and Spiral Motions', in: Migule Á. Granada, Patrick J. Boner, Dario Tessicini, eds, *Unifying Heaven and Earth. Essays in the History of Early Modern Cosmology*, Barcelona: Universitat de Barcelona Edicions, 2016: 117–157.

[2] Stephen A. Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, Op. cit.: 115–132.

[3] In her book Yates states that Agrippa's text 'does not fully give the technical procedures, nor is it a profound philosophical work, as its title implies, and Cardanus, a really deep magician, despised it as a trivial affair'; Yates, Op. cit.: 130. The most recent research shows, however, that Agrippa's work was not as banal as it might seem. Agrippa was involved from the start in the revival of the Sceptical tradition, which was probably reflected in his treatise *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*. Thus the scorn for Agrippa that characterises Yates' book is inappropriate. Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim, *Dell'incertitudine e della vanità delle scienze*, ed. Tiziana Provvidera, Turin: Aragno, 2004; Paola Zambelli, *White Magic, Black Magic in the European Renaissance*, Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2007: 115–182; Vittoria Perrone Compagni, 'Tutius ignorare quam scire: Cornelius Agrippa and Scepticism', in: Gianenrico Paganini, José R. Maia Neto, eds, *Renaissance Scepticisms*, Dordrecht: Springer, 2009: 91–110.

the Florentine thinker Hermes was not just the oldest in the hierarchy of 'ancient theologians', but the most important.[1]

Yates leaves aside any facts that do not fit into her system: that Ficino saw Zoroaster as the first of the 'ancient theologians', that he worked on many other magical, Neo-Platonic and theurgic texts before his translation of Hermes.[2] Most importantly, Yates and the supporters of magical *ars* in Ficino's thought choose to ignore the fact that some 25 years passed between the publication of the Hermetic Corpus and the treatise *On Life*. For a quarter of a century Ficino worked unceasingly, his productivity was remarkable: during this period he prepared the whole of the Platonic Corpus (published 1484), translated the *Enneads* in record time – just 22 months,[3] wrote a whole series of his own compositions, including the fundamental treatise *On the Christian Religion* (completed in 1474) and *Platonic Theology on the Immortality of the Soul* (first version completed in 1474, the final version published in 1482). There are no significant traces of Hermeticism in these works. Episodic references to the writings of Hermes should not lead us astray: Ficino indeed thought Hermes, along with Zoroaster, Orpheus and Pythagoras, to be among the 'ancient theologians' who preceded Christian theology, but in no way did he single him out among the rest of these semi-mythical figures.

It was, moreover, intended that *Three Books on Life*, completed in 1489, would become a commentary on one of the fragments of Plotinus' *Enneads*, which Ficino was then translating.[4] At the same time he was translating another influential Neo-Platonic treatise, Iamblichus' *On the Egyptian Mysteries*. Although the publication of the latter had to wait eight long years, the translation was ready by early 1489.[5] Ficino's extensive commentaries on the treatise are a markedly Christianised text that is very far from the theurgic original, suffused with magic. As Brian Copenhaver has convincingly

[1] Yates, Op. cit.: 78–79.

[2] Briefly on the succession of translations of the 'ancient theologians' and the very concept of *prisca theologia* see in: Akopyan, 'Plato and the Renaissance', Op. cit.: 324–329.

[3] Stéphane Toussaint, 'Introduction', *Plotini Opera omnia. Cum latina Marsilii Ficini interpretatione et commentatione. Facsimilé de l'édition de Bâle, Pietro Perna, 1580*, ed. Stéphane Toussaint, Villiers-sur-Marne: Phénix, 2005: I–II.

[4] Although the translation of the *Enneads* was ready by 1486, Ficino continued to improve it over the next six years. The first Latin translation of Plotinus thus appeared only in 1492. On the history of Ficino's work on the *Enneads* see: Henri D. Saffrey, 'Florence, 1492: The Reappearance of Plotinus', *Renaissance Quarterly* 49/3, 1996: 488–508; Christian Förstel, 'Marsilio Ficino e il Parigino greco 1816 di Plotino', in: Toussaint, Gentile, Op. cit.: 65–88; Albert M. Wolters, 'The First Draft of Ficino's Translation of Plotinus', in: Gentile, Viti, Op. cit.: 305–329.

[5] Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Supplementum Ficinianum*, 2 vols, Florence: Olschki, 1937, I: CXXXII–CXXXIV. For a general analysis of the text: Guido Giglioni, 'Theurgy and Philosophy in Marsilio Ficino's Paraphrase of Iamblichus's De Mysteriis Aegyptiorum', *Rinascimento* 52, 2012 [2014]: 3–36. The text itself was published: 'Iamblichus. De Mysteriis Aegyptiorum, Chaldaeorum, Assyriorum Marsilio Ficino interprete', in: Angelo-Raffaele Sodano, ed., *Giamblico. I misteri egiziani*, Milan: Bompiani, 2013: 539–634.

demonstrated, it was Iamblichus, and not Hermes, who – along with Plotinus – was to be one of two main sources for the magical speculations of *Three Books on Life*;[1] the third source was the medieval medico-astrological tradition that placed particular emphasis on the production of talismans: Nicolas Weill-Parot's superb 900-page study brilliantly brings out the medieval sources of Ficino's talismanic magic, which modern commentators so frequently prefer to forget.[2]

It is thus not hard to conclude that it is not only – and indeed not so much – Hermeticist philosophy that stands behind Ficino's *artifex interior*. To understand the true basis of Ficino's aesthetics, we must return to his *Commentary on Plato's Symposium*, or rather to a key passage in the third chapter of the first book.

Here he says: 'The fire that follows we call the growth of love; greater closeness – a burst of love; its formation – the perfecting of love. The aggregate of all forms and ideas is called in Latin *mundus*, and in Greek *cosmos*, that is the ordered world. The feature of this world and order is beauty, to which the love that has been born has drawn and fascinated the mind; the mind that was without form, to that same, now beautiful mind. Thus the nature of love lies in that it attracts us to beauty and brings together both the beautiful and the ugly.' Three *substantiae* are responsible for organising this world, *substantiae* that transform chaos into order: 'Thus there are three worlds, and three chaos. In all of them love accompanies chaos, precedes the world, sets the immovable in motion, illuminates darkness, brings the dead to life, gives form to the formless, perfection to the imperfect.'[3] It is not hard to guess what

[1] Brian Copenhaver, 'Iamblichus, Synesius and the Chaldaean Oracles in Marsilio Ficino's *De vita libri tres*: Hermetic Magic or Neoplatonic Magic?', in: James Hankins, John Monfasani, Frederick Purnell Jr., eds, *Supplementum Festivum. Studies in Honor of Paul Oskar Kristeller*, Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1987: 441–455; Brian Copenhaver, 'Renaissance Magic and Neoplatonic Philosophy: "Ennead" 4.3–5 in Ficino's "De vita coelitus comparanda"', in: Garfagnini, Op. cit.: 351–369.

[2] See footnote 32.

[3] 'Incendium sequens, amoris dicimus incrementum. Appropinquationem, amoris impetum. Formationem, amoris perfectionem. Formarum omnium idearumque complexionem, mundum Latine, Grece κόσμον, id est, ornamentum vocamus. Huius mundi et ornamenti gratia pulchritudo est, ad quam amor ille statim natus traxit mentem atque perduxit, mentem ante deformem ad mentem eandem deinde formosam. Ideo amoris conditio est, ut ad pulchritudinem rapiat ac deformem formoso coniungat… Tres igitur mundi, tria et chaos. In omnibus denique amor chaos comitatur, precedit mundum, torpentia suscitat, obscura illuminat, vivificat mortua, format informia, perficit imperfecta'; Marsile Ficin, *Commentaire sur le Banquet de Platon, de l'amour. Commentarium in Convivium Platonis, de amore*, tr. and ed. Pierre Laurens, Paris: Les belles lettres, 2012, I. 3: 13–15. For a clear example of how Ficino combines the Christian theology of the Trinity with Neo-Platonic motifs: 'Tres apud eos mundi sunt, tria itidem chaos erunt. Primum omnium est deus, universorum auctor, quod ipsum bonum dicimus. Hic mentem primo creat angelicam, deinde mundi huius animam, ut Plato vult, postremo mundi corpus. Summum illum deum, non mundum dicimus, quia mundus ornamentum significat ex multis compositum. Ille vero penitus simplex esse debet,

Ficino understands by the traditional Latin theological term *substantia* or *hypostasis* in Greek – it certainly has nothing to do with Platonic love. This brief but extremely important fragment shows most clearly that the *Commentary on Plato's Symposium* has nothing to do with love, Eros and other images that are so keenly attributed to it: it is in fact a text about the second hypostasis, i.e. Christ. We find the same thing with two other well known treatises by Ficino, *The Book of the Sun* and *On Light* (1492): although they are traditionally linked to astrological symbolism and Neo-Platonic light theory, at their heart is Light – Christ himself.[1] Moreover, as Dilwyn Knox perceptively pointed out, Ficino presents his thinking with great finesse in the *Commentary*: in the third chapter of the first book (1.3), Ficino speaks of Three in One, thus referring to the Trinity.[2] It is not difficult to conclude that since at the foundation of Ficino's whole discourse lie two categories, love and light, both of them irrevocably associated with the second hypostasis, Christ, then all the following thoughts on *ars*, *techne* and aesthetics should be seen as deriving from his Christological thesis. It was no coincidence that the *Commentary* was one of only two treatises that Ficino personally translated into Italian. The second, strange as it may seem, was the treatise *On the Christian Religion*.[3] Lastly, we know that Ficino's contemporaries saw and understood the theological meanings in the *Commentary on Plato's Symposium*: we find evidence for this, for instance, in the *Three Books on Love* by an admirer

sed mundorum omnium principium atque finem ipsum asserimus. Mens angelica primus mundus est a deo factus. Secundus universi corporis anima. Tertius, tota hec quam cernimus machina. In his utique mundis tribus, tria et chaos considerantur. Principio deus mentis illius creat substantiam, quam etiam essentiam nominamus'; ibid.: 11. Characteristically, the term *substantia* is used exclusively with regard to the second state, i.e. to Christ; *principio*, the first word of the Book of Genesis, and the passage on the 'formless and dark being' ('hec in primo illo creationis sue momento informis est et obscura', compare with the Vulgate: 'terra autem erat inanis et vacua et tenebrae super faciem abyssi et spiritus Dei ferebatur super aquas'), serve as a direct reference to the Creation of the world by the triune God. The Russian translation (Marsilio Ficino, 'Комментарий на «Пир» Платона, о Любви' [Commentary on Plato's Symposium, on Love], tr. Aleksandr Gorfunkel, Vladimir Mazhuga, Ilya Chernyak, in: *Эстетика Ренессанса* [Renaissance Aesthetics], 2 vols, Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1981 I: 146–147) relies entirely on the Neo-Platonic reading of the theory of love. If nothing else, evidence of this is provided by the translation almost throughout of the word *amor* as Eros, thereby utterly distorting the meaning of the word as used by Ficino.

[1] Marsilio Ficino, 'Liber de Sole. Liber de lumine', in *Opera*, Op. cit.: 965–986.

[2] I would to thank Professor Knox for pointing out this interesting detail, and along with Valery Rees and Michael Allen for introducing me to the fascinating world of Ficino's theology. Professor Knox is currently preparing a new bilingual publication of Ficino's *Commentary on Plato's Symposium* for I Tatti Renaissance Library.

[3] Ficino prepared two versions of the treatise, in Latin and in his own Italian translation. The Italian appeared first, in 1475; the Latin followed a year later: Cesare Vasoli, *Quasi sit deus. Studi su Marsilio Ficino*, Lecce: Conte, 1999: 120. On the treatise see above all: Amos Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico, and Savonarola: The Evolution of Humanist Theology. 1461/2–1498*, Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2008: 205–77. I am currently preparing an edition of this treatise along with a Russian translation.

of Ficino's work, Francesco Cattani da Diacceto, where those same thoughts on light-bearing hypostasis are repeated in the same chapter 1.3.[1]

My conclusion is that Ficino became a victim of the desire to create large, clumsy constructs, whether art historical, philosophical or historical. This attempt to fit Ficino into some apparently integral picture is, however, at variance with primary sources. Should we not, at last, reject all generalisations and return to Ficino himself, the melancholic recluse in the Villa Careggi?

[1] Francesco Cattani da Diacceto, *I tre libri d'amore*, Venice: de' Ferrari, 1561, I:3: 20–24.