Foreword

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Hermeticism is one of the undercurrents of Western cultural memory; it has never been a main current, but neither has it been entirely marginal or entirely forgotten. The common thesis that it was a rediscovery of the Renaissance, something of which the Middle Ages had no inkling, is convincingly refuted in this book. To be sure, the appearance of a manuscript of the *Corpus Hermeticum* and its translation by Marsilio Ficino, completed in 1463, did, in fact, signify an intellectual revolution and established, at least in Florence and northern Italy, a Hermetic tradition with a character all its own. But there had been three lines of tradition in which the Hermetic body of thought had subsisted throughout the Middle Ages: citations by the Church Fathers (especially Lactantius and Clement of Alexandria), the tractate “Asclepius” in Latin translation, and texts that had already been translated from Arabic into Latin in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Florian Ebeling can thus distinguish two currents of Hermetic tradition. The one, which was based on the writings of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, was at home in Italy and spread from there throughout Europe, and the other, which was based in particular on the *Tabula Smaragdina* and other originally Arabic texts, had its center north of the Alps. Italian Hermeticism understood itself as a philosophy closely related to Neoplatonism, whereas, beyond the Alps, Hermeticism viewed itself as a practical, alchemical-medical science. Only the appeal to Hermes Trismegistus was common to both traditions. Until now, scholars have always understood the rubric “Hermetic tradition” to refer to the Hermeticism of the Florentine Renaissance and the history of its influence and adoption. Now, however, Florian Ebeling’s discovery of an independent northern Hermeticism has fundamentally altered and expanded our understanding

of Hermetic traditions. This book not only summarizes what is already known about Hermeticism but also sketches a wholly new picture of this topic. In his Heidelberg dissertation, basing himself on a text corpus of well over a hundred partly known and partly unknown alchemical tractates of the seventeenth century, Ebeling recovered the outlines of an independent image of Egypt in which that land was not an ancient, dead culture but a living tradition that could be inherited and carried on. Thus, for instance, Paracelsus could be understood as a new Hermes. This image of Egypt is that of the Rosicrucians and the Freemasons, as we encounter it, for instance, in Mozart's *Magic Flute*.

Hermes Trismegistus was considered to be an Egyptian sage, a fact that makes the Hermetic tradition so extraordinarily interesting for Egyptology. Among the traditions and memorable figures that have kept various images of ancient Egyptian civilization alive in Western cultural memory, Hermes Trismegistus is the most important, and the image of Egypt he represents is the most magnificent. For the West, along with the Hebrew Moses and the Greek Plato, there has always been, though only seldom on the same level, the Egyptian Hermes Trismegistus. As archetype of a third position between Christianity and paganism, Hermes Trismegistus had his finest hour in the Renaissance, in the framework of the tradition of *prisca theologia* (ancient theology) founded by Marsilio Ficino. For more than a hundred years it seemed as though the exclusivity of Christian monotheism, with its sharp distinction between religion and idolatry, and between orthodoxy and heresy, was allowing itself to be sublimated into a comprehensive, universalist perspective—until, in the course of the Counter-Reformation, the boundaries were closed again, and Francesco Patrizi and his books ended up on the Index, Tommaso Campanella in jail, and Giordano Bruno at the stake. In the framework of *prisca theologia*, Hermes Trismegistus was a prominent, and at times the greatest, vehicle of a revelation granted by God not only to Jews and Christians but also to pagans.

The major problem of Hermeticism is that, on the one hand, the various traditions invoking Hermes can scarcely be reconciled with one another; whereas, on the other hand, some of these traditions resemble, to the point of confusion, other movements that do not mention Hermes. There is no “Hermeticism” in the sense of a unique and distinct movement or of a single philosophical system. Ebeling makes this point clear in his book. The alchemo-Paracelsism he describes here for the first time was an independent Hermetic tradition with almost nothing in common with the platonizing Hermeticism that originated in Florence. Although certain common elements stand out, they are not exclusively “Hermetic” but can be found in other traditions as well.

It seems to me that the most important element in Hermetic tradition is the motif of revelation. The various Hermetic discourses do not draw their authority from the persuasive power of their arguments but from their appeal to a higher revelation that lies beyond mundane reason. They set this revelation on a par with that of the Bible, and if the Hermetists can show that the Bible and the texts they ascribe to Hermes Trismegistus agree in the essential points of their theology and cosmology, then clearly both stem from the same divine source of revelation. Hermetic discourse is revelatory discourse. It proceeds from above to below, from a higher standpoint inaccessible to that of ordinary reason, in a solemn and authoritative tone. In late antiquity, from which the oldest of these texts stem, this tone was common far beyond Hermeticism. At that time the “book market” was flooded with texts that purported to be works of towering, semidivine figures from a primeval time near to that of the gods. These “pseudepigrapha” were not viewed as crude forgeries but as signals of a specific tradition to which appeal was made. Truth was more a matter of antiquity and origin than of coherence and evidence, a principle that has characterized Hermetic traditions down to their contemporary, postmodern manifestations. These reasons proved to be the undoing of Hermes Trismegistus, when his pseudepigraphic character was convincingly exposed by Isaac Casaubon in the year 1614. Along with the proof of his antiquity, his pretension to veracity and his prophetic character came crashing down.

Whereas the classical Hermetic writings did not make a central point of their venerable age but derived their revelatory quality more from the divine rank of their author, the issue of antiquity became a decisive criterion of truth in the framework of Christian chronology. Greater age meant higher truth. The best knowledge was the oldest knowledge. As a result, Hermetic knowledge came to be viewed as rescued primeval knowledge, the wisdom of Adam, that had in some way survived the Flood. Various ancient legends could be cited on this point. Josephus Flavius recounted that the grandchildren of Adam, the sons of Seth, had inscribed this primeval knowledge on two columns, one of them made of bricks in case of an outbreak of fire, the other of stone in case of a catastrophic flood. The column of stone survived the Flood and supposedly could still be seen in Syria. (Pseudo)-Manetho distinguished two figures named Hermes. The first wrote his wisdom in hieroglyphs on stelae. After the Flood, the second, son of Agathodaimon and father of Tat, deposited this wisdom in the temples in the form of books written in Greek. And Ammianus Marcellinus wrote that the wise men of Egypt, anticipating a catastrophic flood, prepared subterranean galleries and caves, and covered their walls with hieroglyphic inscriptions in which all their wisdom was recorded. These were typical

legends that had come to be attached in late antiquity to the mysterious, ruined monuments of Egypt and then were richly embellished by medieval Arab writers; from these sources they passed into alchemo-Paracelsism and into the lore of the Rosicrucians and Freemasons.

Behind these legends of the founding of Hermeticism stood a conviction that knowledge had been lost. The story of this loss in the *Sapientia Adamica* is the alchemical, Paracelsic counterpart to Ficino's conception of *theologia prisca*. In both cases there is a genealogy of knowledge, with Ficino in one case, and Paracelsus in the other, being the great modern collector and restorer of the scattered sparks of the original light. In both traditions Plato had a central role; both play him off against Aristotle, and both schools of thought saw themselves as a *philosophia pia*, a unity of religion and science, theology and philosophy, research and piety. This pessimistic, backward-looking concept of knowledge and tradition, which localized all knowledge in the Beginning, after which things could only go downhill, and according to which wisdom and research consisted in catching hold of these scattered sparks, characterized, inter alia, the philosophy of history of the Illuminati of the later eighteenth century. In the context of the Hermetic tradition, revelation was thus legitimized through a privileged contact not with the hereafter (by way of visions, as in the case of Emanuel Swedenborg, who otherwise stood so close to this tradition) but with the Origin.

The concept of revelation entails an attitude toward the world that I wish to call "hypercoscism." From antiquity on, all Hermetic traditions have insisted on the revelatory character of nature, on the divinity of the world as a work of God, and on the ever graded levels of presence or "immanence" of God in all things; at the same time, however, in Hermetic thought of all periods, it is clear that the essence and truth of God are not bound up in the things of the world, that they cannot be comprehended by human reason or described with human speech. This hypercoscism characterizes not only Jewish, Muslim, and Christian belief in a transcendent God but also the pagan monotheism of late antiquity, whose typical theological forms of discourse are revelatory addresses in the form of oracles (e.g., in Macrobius) or didactic dialogues (as in the *Corpus Hermeticum*). This transcendent or "hyperc cosmic" concept of God (the concept is ancient and stems from Vettius Agorius Praetextatus) that distinguishes between "encosmic" and "hyperc cosmic" gods is the deepest common denominator between Christianity and Hermeticism, and it was the basis of the latter's adoption in the framework of the Christian culture of the West.

In the Hermetic traditions, the motif of revelation is bound up with the motif of secrecy. In ordinary language this motif came to characterize the notion of "Hermetic" (as the mysterious, the inaccessible,

the self-contained). This stress on secrecy distinguishes Hermetic from biblical revelation. In the biblical tradition, revealed knowledge was intended for general distribution. The Torah given to Moses at Sinai was to be learned by heart and studied day and night by all the people of Israel, and the revelation of Christ was proclaimed to all peoples. The strictest secrecy, however, underlay Hermetic revelation. For that reason, unlike the Torah, it was codified not in the letters of an alphabet but in hieroglyphs: from late antiquity to the nineteenth century these pictorial symbols were understood to be a medium of enciphering ideas independent of language, notwithstanding that the preserved texts were themselves written in (or “translated into”) Greek, Latin, or Arabic.

In the imagination of the Hermetists, hieroglyphs performed three functions: that of arcanizing, of denoting ideas independent of language, and of immediate signification. The concept of “arcanizing” refers to the function of maintaining secrecy. In this regard, hieroglyphs function as a cryptography that discloses its meaning only to the initiated. In his well-known critique of writing in the *Phaedrus* and in his Seventh Letter, Plato denounced what he took to be an especially grave deficiency of written communication: that it does not distinguish between the initiated and the uninitiated, thus exposing its message to all sorts of misuse and misunderstanding. Hieroglyphic writing that can be read only by the initiated counters this deficiency. As a medium of denoting ideas, hieroglyphs stand in opposition to phonetic scripts, which represent the sequence of sounds in spoken language. Ancient writers such as Diodorus and Plotinus had already stressed that hieroglyphs did not refer to syllables and words but to concepts and ideas. Finally, the notion of “immediate signification,” coined by Aleida Assmann, refers to the distinction introduced by Plato between “natural” (*phusei*) and “conventional” (*thesei*) signs. Natural signs denote the signified by means of a natural and thus immediate relationship, whereas conventional signs do so indirectly via a code agreed upon by society. Since Aristotle, it has seemed certain that writing and speech proceed according to the principle of mediated signification. The Hermetic traditions, however, regarded hieroglyphs as natural signs that stood in an immediate relationship to the world, and, for these traditions, the world was a cosmos of signs and a system of relationships in which each thing was imprinted with the “signature” of its meaning. Adam, who gave names to the creatures, knew how to “read” them, and this knowledge survived the Flood and the decline of ancient cultures to be handed down to the present era through the currents of Hermetic tradition.

For all these reasons the Hermetic traditions, and above all the alchemo-Paracelsic tradition, regarded themselves as a nondiscursive philosophy communicated through symbols. We encounter the concept of a “*philosophia*

dià symbólōn” already in Philo of Alexandria. In his biography of Moses he writes that Moses was initiated into Egyptian “philosophy, communicated through symbols,” during his upbringing as a prince in Pharaoh’s court.

Along with revelation and secrecy, “initiation” is the third concept unceasingly connected with the Hermetic traditions. Initiation is much more than a communication of knowledge. It involves not only knowing the hieroglyphic code, the enigmatic protective shell of Hermetic wisdom, but also demonstrating that one is worthy of this knowledge. The reason for the arcanizing of Hermetic knowledge was concern that it might fall into unworthy hands. Initiation was thus, above all, a test of worthiness that preceded the conveying of knowledge and constituted its necessary presupposition. Knowledge was to be communicated only to the worthy. Worthiness was not a question of knowledge but of virtue. This caution was connected with the special power ascribed to natural symbols. On the basis of thinking in terms of references and analogies, rather than causal relationships, Hermeticism developed a theory of the coherence of the world that could be put to practical use, magically, mystically, and medically, but, above all, alchemically, for refining metals, prolonging life, achieving earthly bliss—in short, for producing the Philosophers’ Stone. The framework of immediate signification was a far better guide to the secrets of Nature than that of conventional science.

These and many other motifs are common, but not exclusive, to the Hermetic traditions; they are also found in contexts in which Hermes Trismegistus plays no role. The Paracelsic doctrine of signatures and thinking in analogies, for example, reappears in the later eighteenth century in the work of Emanuel Swedenborg, and the doctrine of universal oneness resembles the thought of the pantheists and of the followers of Spinoza. The project of a writing system denoting concepts (*Begriffsschrift*, “concept writing”) fascinated Leibniz and other seventeenth-century philosophers, whereas the Egyptianizing Freemasons of the late eighteenth century were concerned with the mysteries of Isis and her “veiled image at Sais,” not with the teachings of Hermes Trismegistus. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries many of these elements were taken over by movements such as theosophy and anthroposophy, which had in common the triad of revelation, secrecy, and initiation. In the multiplicity of its traditions, which cannot be subsumed under a single “system,” and with its complex of concepts, forms of thought, and types of discourse, Hermeticism developed an alternative, decidedly backward-looking culture of knowledge that continued without reference to either ancient Egypt or Hermes Trismegistus; for this reason it survived the unmasking of the primeval Egyptian sage in 1614 and the decipherment, and demystification, of the Egyptian hieroglyphs in 1822. Today, with our

postmodern, “anything goes” attitude, and our radical rejection of the belief in progress characteristic of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there is an attraction in a backward-looking culture of knowledge like Hermeticism, which seeks its salvation in the protective recollection of origins. Perhaps the ancients not only saw much that is important to us today but also knew much that we have, in the meantime, forgotten.

THE SECRET HISTORY OF
HERMES TRISMEGISTUS