

## Chapter IV

### FICINO'S NATURAL MAGIC<sup>1</sup>

FICINO, whose father was a physician, was himself a physician as well as a priest, and his *Libri de Vita*,<sup>2</sup> divided into three books and first published in 1489, is a treatise on medicine. It was absolutely inevitable that a medical treatise of the Middle Ages or the Renaissance should make use of astrological presuppositions universally taken for granted. Medical prescriptions were normally based on assumptions such as that the signs ruled different parts of the body, that different bodily temperaments were related to different planets. Much of Ficino's book could therefore be regarded, as he claimed, as normal medicine. Nevertheless he was also putting forward in it a subtle and imaginative kind of magic involving the use of talismans. He was nervously aware of possible dangers in this, and in his preliminary address he tells the reader that "if you do not approve of astronomical images" these may be omitted.<sup>3</sup>

The work is intended primarily for students who are liable

<sup>1</sup> Ficino's magic has been admirably discussed by D. P. Walker in his book on *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella* to which I am greatly indebted in this chapter. I am also indebted to E. Garin's essay, "Le 'Elezioni' e il problema dell'astrologia" in *Umanesimo e esoterismo*, ed. E. Castelli, Archivio di Filosofia, Padua, 1960, pp. 7 ff.

<sup>2</sup> *Libri de vita* is the collective title of a work divided into three books, the third of which has the title *De vita coelitus comparanda*. On the many editions of the *Libri de vita*, which was evidently one of the most popular of Ficino's works, see Kristeller, *Suppl. Fic.*, I, pp. lxiv-lxvi. It is included in Ficino, *Opera*, pp. 530-73.

<sup>3</sup> Ficino, p. 530 (address to the reader before Lib. III, *De vita coelitus comparanda*).

### FICINO'S NATURAL MAGIC

through over-intense application to their studies to grow ill or melancholy.<sup>1</sup> This is because the nature of their occupations brings them under the influence of Saturn, for contemplation and hard abstract study belong to Saturn who is also the planet of the melancholy temperament, and the star which is inimical to the vital forces of life and youth. Melancholy students who have used up their vital powers in their studies, and the old in whom these forces are in any case declining, are therefore advised to avoid as far as possible plants, herbs, animals, stones, and the like belonging to Saturn, and to use and surround themselves with plants, herbs, animals, stones, people, belonging to the more fortunate, cheerful, and life-giving planets, of which the chief are Sol, Jupiter, and Venus. Ficino has many enthusiastic passages on the valuable "gifts" making for health and good spirits to be obtained from these planets, which he poetically describes more than once as "the Three Graces".<sup>2</sup> The equation of beneficent astral influences with the Three Graces may be derived from a passage in the Emperor Julian's Hymn to the Sun.<sup>3</sup> Gold is a metal full of Solar and Jovial spirit and therefore beneficial in combating melancholy. Green is a health-giving and life-giving colour, and the reader is urged to come to "Alma Venus"<sup>4</sup> and to walk in the green fields with her, plucking her flowers, such as roses, or the crocus, the golden flower of Jupiter. Ficino also gives advice on how to choose a non-Saturnian diet, and thinks that the use of pleasant odours and scents is beneficial. We might be in the consulting room of a rather expensive psychiatrist who knows that his patients can afford plenty of gold and holidays in the country, and flowers out of season.

Talismans are not mentioned until the third book, which is the one which has the title *De vita coelitus comparanda*. Its first chapter opens with some obscure philosophy.<sup>5</sup> It is clearly enough based on the well-known tripartite division of intellect, soul, and body,

<sup>1</sup> On Ficino and melancholy, see E. Panofsky and F. Saxl, *Dürer's Melencolia I*, *Studien der Bibliothek Warburg*, 2, 1923; L. Babb, *The Elizabethan Malady*, East Lansing, 1951.

<sup>2</sup> *Libri de vita*, II, III, 5, etc.; (Ficino, pp. 536-7).

<sup>3</sup> Julian, *Works*, Loeb edition, I, p. 407.

<sup>4</sup> *Libri de vita*, II, 14 (Ficino, pp. 520-1).

<sup>5</sup> *Libri de vita*, III (*De vita coelitus comparanda*), I (Ficino, pp. 532-3).

but apart from that it is somewhat confusing. There is an intellect of the world and a body of the world, and between them is the soul of the world. In the divine *mens* or intellect are the Ideas; in the soul of the world are "seminal reasons" as many in number as there are ideas in the *mens*, and corresponding to them or reflecting them; to these seminal reasons in the soul there correspond the species in matter, or in the body of the world, which correspond to the reasons or depend on them, or are formed by them. If these material forms degenerate they can be reformed in the "middle place", presumably by manipulating the next highest forms on which they depend. There are congruities between the "reasons" in the soul of the world and the lower forms, which Zoroaster called divine links and Synesius, magic spells. These links depend not so much on stars and demons as on the soul of the world, which is everywhere present. Wherefore the "more ancient Platonists" formed images in the heavens, images of the forty-eight constellations, twelve in the zodiac, and thirty-six outside it, images also of the thirty-six "faces" of the zodiac. From these ordered forms depend the forms of inferior things.

Ficino states in the sub-title to the *Liber de vita coelitus comparanda* that it is a commentary on a book on the same subject by Plotinus. He does not specify here of what passage in the *Enneads* he is thinking, but P. O. Kristeller has observed that in one manuscript the *De vita coelitus comparanda* appears among the commentaries on Plotinus at *Ennead*, IV, 3, xi.<sup>1</sup> Plotinus here says:

I think . . . that those ancient sages, who sought to secure the presence of divine beings by the erection of shrines and statues, showed insight into the nature of the All; they perceived that, though this Soul (of the world) is everywhere tractable, its presence will be secured all the more readily when an appropriate receptacle is elaborated, a place especially capable of receiving some portion or phase of it, something reproducing it and serving like a mirror to catch an image of it.

It belongs to the nature of the All to make its entire content reproduce, most felicitously, the Reason-Principles in which it participates; every particular thing is the image within matter of a Reason-Principle which itself images a pre-material Reason-Prin-

<sup>1</sup> Kristeller, *Suppl. Fic.*, I, p. lxxxiv; cf. Garin, *article cited*, pp. 18 ff. Walker (p. 3, note 2) points out that *Enn.* IV, 4, 30-42, may also be relevant.

ciple: thus every particular entity is linked to that Divine Being in whose likeness it is made. . . .<sup>1</sup>

We seem to have here the two main topics of which Ficino is speaking, but put in a different order, which makes the thought-sequences a little clearer. (1) How the ancient sages who understood the nature of the All drew down divine beings into their shrines by attracting or securing a part of the soul of the world. This corresponds to Ficino's mention of magic links or spells, described by Zoroaster or Synesius, which are congruities between reasons in the soul of the world and lower forms. Ficino follows this by the mention of star images, as though these were a part of the magical linking system, and indeed stating that from the ordering of these celestial images the forms of lower things depend. (2) The outline of Neoplatonic theory—which Ficino puts before the allusion to magic, and Plotinus after it—of the reflection of the Ideas in the divine intellect in their images or forms in the soul of the world, whence they are again reflected (through the intermediaries in the soul of the world) in material forms.

What would make sense of Ficino's introduction of the reference to celestial images in his commentary on the Plotinus passage would be if he thinks that such images are in some way organically related to those "seminal reasons" or "reason principles" in the soul of the world which are the reflection in that "middle place" of the Ideas in the divine mind. Hence such images would become forms of the Ideas, or ways of approaching the Ideas at a stage intermediary between their purely intellectual forms in the divine *mens* and their dimmer reflection in the world of sense, or body of the world. Hence it was by manipulating such images in this intermediary "middle place" that the ancient sages knew how to draw down a part of the soul of the world into their shrines.

There is, further, in Ficino's words, the notion that the material forms in the world of sense can be, as it were, re-formed, when they have degenerated, by manipulation of the higher images on which they depend. In his analysis of this passage, E. Garin has defined this process as the imitation or reconstruction of the higher images in such a way that the divine influences are recaptured and re-conducted into the deteriorated sensible forms.<sup>2</sup> Thus the priestly

<sup>1</sup> Plotinus, *Enn.*, IV, 3, xi; English translation by S. MacKenna, London, 1956, p. 270.

<sup>2</sup> Garin, *article cited*, pp. 21 ff.

Magus plays a semi-divine rôle, maintaining by his understanding of the use of images the circuit which unites the highest divine world with the soul of the world and the world of sense.

In his article on "Icones Symbolicae", E. H. Gombrich has analysed the mode of thought, so difficult for a modern to understand, by which, for a Renaissance Neoplatonist, an "ancient" image, one which reached him from traditions going back, so he believed, into a remote past, did actually have within it the reflection of an Idea.<sup>1</sup> An ancient image of Justice was not just a picture but actually contained within it some echo, taste, substance, of the divine Idea of Justice. This helps us to understand the way in which Ficino thinks of those star images descending from "the more ancient Platonists", though, in the case of such images, the relation to the Idea is even closer, through the cosmology of *mens, anima mundi, corpus mundi* in which the images have a definite place.

Thus Ficino's commentary on the Plotinus passage becomes, by devious ways, a justification for the use of talismans, and of the magic of the *Asclepius*, on Neoplatonic grounds—on the grounds that the ancient sages and the modern users of talismans are not invoking devils but have a deep understanding of the nature of the All, and of the degrees by which the reflections of the Divine Ideas descend into the world here below.

As D. P. Walker has pointed out,<sup>2</sup> at the end of the *De vita coelitus comparanda* Ficino returns to the commentary on the Plotinus passage with which he had begun the book, and now he states that Plotinus in that passage was merely imitating, or repeating, what Hermes Trismegistus had said in his *Asclepius*. This means that the *De vita coelitus comparanda* is a commentary only secondarily on Plotinus and primarily on Trismegistus, or rather, on the passage in the *Asclepius* in which he described the magical Egyptian worship.

When any (piece of) matter is exposed to superior things . . . immediately it suffers a supernal influence through that most powerful agent, of marvellous force and life, which is everywhere present . . .

<sup>1</sup> E. H. Gombrich, "Icones Symbolicae: the Visual Image in Neoplatonic Thought", *J.W.C.I.*, 1948 (XI), pp. 163-92.

<sup>2</sup> Walker, pp. 40-1.

as a mirror reflects a face, or Echo the sound of a voice. Of this Plotinus gives an example when, imitating Mercurius, he says that the ancient priests, or Magi, used to introduce something divine and wonderful into their statues and sacrifices. He (Plotinus) holds, together with Trismegistus, that they did not introduce through these things spirits separated from matter (that is demons), but *mundana numina*, as I said at the beginning, and Synesius agrees. . . . Mercurius himself, whom Plotinus follows, says that he composed through aerial demons, not through celestial or higher demons, statues from herbs, trees, stones, aromatics having within them a natural divine power (as he says). . . . There were skilful Egyptian priests who, when they could not persuade men by reason that there are gods, that is some spirit above men, invented that illicit magic which by enticing demons into statues made these appear to be gods. . . . I at first thought, following the opinion of the Blessed Thomas Aquinas, that if they made statues which could speak, this could not have been only through stellar influence but through demons. . . . But now let us return to Mercurius and to Plotinus. Mercurius says that the priests drew suitable virtues from the nature of the world and mixed these together. Plotinus follows him, and thinks that all can be easily conciliated in the soul of the world for it generates and moves the forms of natural things through certain seminal reasons infused with its divinity. Which reasons he calls gods for they are not separated from the Ideas in the supreme mind.<sup>1</sup>

An interpretation of this passage is that Ficino used to agree with Thomas Aquinas, who explicitly condemns as demonic the magic in the *Asclepius*,<sup>2</sup> but since he has read Plotinus' commentary he understands that, though there may have been bad Egyptian priests who used demonic magic, Hermes Trismegistus was not one of them. His power came only from the world, from his insight into the nature of the All as a hierarchy in which the influence of the Ideas descends from the Intellect of the World, through the "seminal reasons" in the Soul of the World, to the material forms in the Body of the World.<sup>3</sup> Hence, celestial images would have their power from the "world" not from demons, being

<sup>1</sup> *De vita coelitus comparanda*, 26 (Ficino, pp. 571-2). Another important description of the hieratic magic which Ficino knew well was Proclus' *De Sacrificiis et Magia* which he translated (Ficino, pp. 1928-9), and on which see Festugière, I, pp. 134-6; cf. also Walker, pp. 36-7; Garin, *article cited*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>2</sup> *Contra Gentiles*, III, civ-cvi.

<sup>3</sup> cf. Walker, p. 43.

something in the nature of shadows of Ideas, intermediaries in the middle place between Intellect and Body, links in the chains by which the Neoplatonic Magus operates his magic and marries higher things to lower things.

Thus the magic of the *Asclepius*, reinterpreted through Plotinus, enters with Ficino's *De vita coelitus comparanda* into the Neoplatonic philosophy of the Renaissance, and, moreover, into Ficino's *Christian* Neoplatonism. The latter feat necessitated, as we have seen, much ingenious evasion of authoritative Christian pronouncements. When Ficino wrote the *De vita coelitus comparanda* he had perhaps recently been reading Origen against Celsus, which he cites in chapter XXI,<sup>1</sup> and where he might have noticed the quotation from Celsus where the pagan accuses the Christians of mocking the Egyptians "although they show many profound mysteries and teach that such worship (in the Egyptian magical religion) is respect to invisible ideas and not, as most people think, to ephemeral animals."<sup>2</sup> Eager to snatch at anything in favour of his hero, the holy Hermes Trismegistus, Ficino might have been encouraged by Origen's reply to this: "My good man, you commend the Egyptians with good reason for showing many mysteries which are not evil, and obscure explanations about their animals." Nevertheless, the context in which this remark is made is less encouraging, and Origen's whole effort was directed towards refuting Celsus' view of the history of religion, which was that an ancient good, religious tradition, of which the Egyptians were an example, had been corrupted, first by the Jews, and then still further destroyed by the Christians.

Ficino's magic is based on a theory of *spiritus* which has been admirably defined by D. P. Walker, to whose book the reader is referred for a full and scholarly discussion of this subject.<sup>3</sup> Ficino bases the theory of how we are to "draw down the life of heaven" upon the *spiritus* as the channel through which the influence of the stars is diffused. Between the soul of the world and its body there is a *spiritus mundi* which is infused throughout the

<sup>1</sup> Ficino, p. 562.

<sup>2</sup> Origen, *Contra Celsum*, trans. H. Chadwick, Cambridge, 1953, p. 139.

<sup>3</sup> Walker, pp. 1-24 and *passim*. Ficino's chief expositions of the *spiritus* theory in the *Libri de Vita* are in Lib. III (*De vita coelitus comparanda*), I, 3, 4, II, 20, but the theory is assumed and referred to throughout.

universe and through which the stellar influences come down to man, who drinks them in through his own spirit, and to the whole *corpus mundi*. The *spiritus* is a very fine and subtle substance, and it was of this which Virgil spoke when he said:

Spiritus intus alit, totamque infusa per artus  
mens agitat molem et magno se corpore miscet.<sup>1</sup>

It is to attract the *spiritus* of a particular planet that animals, plants, food, scents, colours, and so on associated with that planet are to be used. The *spiritus* is borne upon the air and upon the wind, and it is a kind of very fine air and also very fine heat. It is particularly through the rays of the Sun and of Jupiter that our spirit "drinks" the spirit of the world.

Now there is nothing about the *spiritus* theory in the passage in the *Enneads* which seems to be the chief basis of Ficino's commentary, and, though it may be obscurely referred to elsewhere by Plotinus, I have not been able to find in that philosopher any such clear-cut definition of the *spiritus mundi* as the vehicle of stellar influences and the basis of magical operations such as Ficino seems to be working from. Where he could have found such a clear-cut theory, and specifically in relation to practical magic and to talismans, was in the *Picatrix*. As we saw in the last chapter, the theory of magic in that work depends on the series *intellectus, spiritus, materia*; the material of lower things being intimately related to the *spiritus* material in the stars.<sup>2</sup> Magic consists in guiding or controlling the influx of *spiritus* into *materia*, and one of the most important ways of doing this is through talismans, for a talisman is a material object into which the *spiritus* of a star has been introduced and which stores the *spiritus*. This theory of pneumatic magic, Ficino could have studied in *Picatrix*, together with the lists of things which attract *spiritus*, full instructions for making talismans, and lists of images for using on talismans. The possibility that Ficino may have used *Picatrix* is increased by the similarity of some of the images which he describes to some of those in *Picatrix*.

Ficino's images are mostly in chapter XVIII of the *De vita coelitus comparanda*. After mentioning the images of the signs of

<sup>1</sup> Virgil, *Aeneid*, VI, 726-7. Quoted by Ficino in *De vita coelitus comparanda*, 3 (Ficino, p. 535).

<sup>2</sup> See above, pp. 51-2.

the zodiac, he says that there are also images of the faces of the signs, drawn from the Indians, Egyptians, and Chaldeans (lists of decan images do come from these sources), as for example:

In the first face of Virgo a beautiful girl, seated, with ears of corn in her hand and nursing a child.<sup>1</sup>

This decan image in this actual form, with the child, is drawn not from *Picatrix*, but from Albumazar, whom Ficino mentions as the source. It is the only decan image which he describes—all his other images are planet images—and he is not sure whether it is right to use it. He then says that if you want to obtain gifts from Mercury, you should make his image on tin or silver, with the sign of Virgo and characters of Virgo and Mercury; and the decan image for the first face of Virgo may be added “if this is to be used”. This talisman would thus consist of the image of Mercury, some signs and characters, and perhaps the Virgo image with the child. Note that the talisman is not a medical talisman, but to obtain intellectual “gifts” from Mercury.

To obtain long life, you may make the image of Saturn on a sapphire in this form: “An old man sitting on a high throne or on a dragon, with a hood of dark linen on his head, raising his hand above his head, holding a sickle or a fish, clothed in a dark robe.” (*Homo senex in altiore cathedra sedens uel dracone, caput tectus panno quodam lineo fusco, manus supra caput erigens, falcem manu tenens aut pisces, fusca indutus ueste.*<sup>2</sup>) This image is close to one in *Picatrix* and contains elements from two others. (Saturn images in *Picatrix*: *Forma hominis super altam cathedram elevatus & in eius capite pannum lineum lutosum, & in eius manu falcem tenentis: Forma hominis senex erecti, suas manus super caput ipsius erigentes, & in eis piscem tenentis . . . : Forma hominis super draconem erecti, in dextra manu falcem tenentis, in sinistra hastam habentis & nigris pannis induti.*<sup>3</sup>) For a long and happy life, says Ficino, you may make on a white, clear, stone an image of Jupiter as “A crowned man on an eagle or a dragon, clad in a yellow garment.” (*Homo sedens super aquilam uel draconem coronatus . . . croceam induto uestem.*<sup>4</sup>) There is a very similar image of Jupiter in *Picatrix*.

<sup>1</sup> *De vita coelitus comparanda*, 18 (Ficino, p. 556).

<sup>2</sup> Ficino, pp. 556–7.

<sup>3</sup> *Picatrix*, Lib. II, cap. 10; Sloane, 1305, f. 43 verso.

<sup>4</sup> Ficino, p. 557.

(*Forma hominis super aquilam . . . omnia suis vestimenta sunt crocea.*<sup>1</sup>)

For the curing of illnesses, Ficino advises the use of this image: “A king on a throne, in a yellow garment, and a crow and the form of the Sun” (*Rex in throno, crocea ueste, & coruum Solisque formam*).<sup>2</sup> The resemblance of this image to one in *Picatrix* is striking: *Forma regis supra cathedram sedentis, & in sui capite coronam habentis, et coruum ante se, et infra eius pedes istas figuras* (magic characters).<sup>3</sup> In *Picatrix* this is not a medical talisman, as in Ficino, but will enable a king to overcome all other kings.

For happiness and strength of body, Ficino advises an image of a young Venus, holding apples and flowers, and dressed in white and yellow. (*Veneris imaginem puellarem, poma floresque manu tenentem, croceis & albis indutam.*<sup>4</sup> The comparable Venus image in *Picatrix* is: *Forma mulieris capillis expansis & super ceruum equitantes in eius manu dextra malum habentis in sinistra vero flores et eius vestes ex coloribus albis.*<sup>5</sup>)

An image of Mercury described by Ficino is “A helmeted man sitting on a throne, with eagle’s feet, holding a cock or fire in his left hand. . . . (*Homo sedens in throno galeratus cristatusque, pedibus aquilinis, sinistra gallum tenens aut ignem . . .*<sup>6</sup> A comparable Mercury image in *Picatrix* is: *Forma hominis in eius capite gallum habentis, & supra cathedram erecti & pedes similes pedibus aquilae & in palma sinistra manus ignem habentis.*<sup>7</sup>) Ficino says that this image of Mercury is good for wit and memory, or, if carved in marble, is good against fevers.

The resemblances between Ficino’s talismans and those in *Picatrix* are not absolutely conclusive evidence that he used that work. He knew, and mentions, other source for images,<sup>8</sup> and the gods on his talismans are mainly composed of their normal forms,

<sup>1</sup> *Picatrix*, loc. cit. Sloane, 1305, loc. cit.

<sup>2</sup> Ficino, loc. cit.

<sup>3</sup> *Picatrix*, loc. cit.; Sloane, 1305, f. 45 recto.

<sup>4</sup> Ficino, loc. cit.

<sup>5</sup> *Picatrix*, loc. cit.; Sloane, 1305, f. 44 verso.

<sup>6</sup> Ficino, loc. cit.

<sup>7</sup> *Picatrix*, loc. cit.; Sloane, 1305, loc. cit.

<sup>8</sup> Particularly Peter of Abano. He never mentions *Picatrix* by name. Perhaps he thought that Abano was a safer source to mention. The later controversy accusing Abano of having borrowed from *Picatrix* (see above, p. 50) might have been indirectly aimed at Ficino.

such as Jupiter on an eagle, or Venus with flowers and apples. Nevertheless one does gain the impression that he had been looking through the chapter on planet images in *Picatrix*. What is interesting is that, on the whole, he seems to avoid decan images, concentrating almost entirely on planet images. This was noticed by W. Gundel, the great authority on decan images, who thinks that Ficino's partiality for planet images reflects a traditional rivalry between decan and planet images which Ficino decides in favour of the latter. "Bei Ficinus ist die alte Rivalität der grossen Systeme der dekan- und der planetengläubigen Astrologie zugunsten der Planeten entschieden."<sup>1</sup> One wonders if this choice was related to the avoidance of demonic magic. By avoiding the images of the decan demons and by using planet images—not to evoke the demons of the planets but only as images of "mundane gods", shadows of Ideas in the Soul of the world—the pious Neoplatonist could perhaps believe that he would be doing only a "world" magic, a natural magic with natural forces, not a demonic magic. Watching Ficino's anxieties and hesitations, one is amazed at the daring of those bold characters beyond the Appenines, in Ferrara or in Padua<sup>2</sup> who did not fear to decorate the walls of their apartments with the images of the terrible Thirty-Six.

It is very strange to follow the convolutions and involutions of Ficino's mind in this chapter XVIII. Before he introduces his lists of planetary talismans he has some curious remarks on the cross as a kind of talisman.<sup>3</sup> The force of the heavens is greatest when

<sup>1</sup> Gundel, *Dekane und Dekansternbilder*, p. 280.

<sup>2</sup> The images of the decans are shown in the astrological scheme on the walls of the Salone at Padua; this scheme was first fully interpreted by F. Saxl (*Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaft*, 1925-6, pp. 49-68) through study of the astrology of Guido Bonatti and of the *Astrolabium planum* of Peter of Abano, the figures of which are derived from Albumazar. Cf. J. Seznec, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods*, trans. B. F. Sessions, New York, 1953, pp. 73-4.

<sup>3</sup> "Tunc enim stellae magnopere sunt potentes, quando quatuor coeli tenent angulos imo cardines, orientis uidelicet occidentisque, & medii utrinque. Sic uero dispositae, radios ita conjiciunt in se inuicem, ut crucem inde constituent. Crucem ergo ueteres figuram esse dicebant, tum stellarum fortitudine factam, tum earundem fortitudinis susceptaculum, ideoque habere summam in imaginibus potestatem, ac uires & spiritus suscipere Planetarum. Haec autem opinio ab Aegyptijs uel inducta est, uel maxime confirmata. Inter quorum characteres crux una erat insignis uitam eorum more futuram significans, eamque figuram pectori Serapidis

the celestial rays come down perpendicularly and at right angles, that is to say in the form of a cross joining the four cardinal points. The Egyptians hence used the form of the cross, which to them also signified the future life, and they sculptured that figure on the breast of Serapis. Ficino, however, thinks that the use of the cross among the Egyptians was not so much on account of its power in attracting the gifts of the stars, but as a prophecy of the coming of Christ, made by them unknowingly. Thus the sanctity of the Egyptians as prophets of Christianity through their use of the cross as a talisman comes in as an appropriate introduction to the list of talismanic images.

After this list, Ficino makes great play with the recommendation by doctors, particularly Peter of Abano, of the use of talismans in medicine. Then, after some references to Porphyry and Plotinus, he comes to Albertus Magnus, described as Professor of Astrology and Theology, who in his *Speculum astronomiae* has distinguished between false and true use of talismans.<sup>1</sup> Next he again worries over what Thomas Aquinas has said in the *Contra Gentiles*, finally reaching a position which he imagines is near to that of Thomas, namely that the talismans have their power mainly from the materials of which they are made, not from the images.<sup>2</sup> Yet if they are made under the influence of a harmony, similar to the celestial harmony, this excites their virtue.

In short, by devious means, Ficino has extracted his use of talismans from blame. I believe that he is thinking primarily of planetary talismans, and of these used not in a "demonic" manner but, as Walker has said, with "spiritual" magic, a magic using the *spiritus mundi*, to be attracted mainly through groupings of plants, metals, and so on, but also through use of planetary talismans which address the stars as world forces, or natural forces, and not as demons.<sup>3</sup>

"Why, then, should we not permit ourselves a universal image, that is an image of the universe itself? From which it might be

<sup>1</sup> Ficino, p. 558.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, loc. cit.; cf. Walker, p. 43.

<sup>3</sup> But cf. Walker's discussion (pp. 44-53) of "Ficino and the demons".

insculpebant. Ego uero quod de crucis excellentia fuit apud Aegyptios ante Christum, non tam muneris stellarum testimonium fuisse arbitror, quam uirtutis praesagium, quam a Christo esset acceptura . . ." Ficino, p. 556.

hoped to obtain much benefit from the universe." This cry comes at the beginning of chapter XIX, after the long defence of planetary images, used in a "natural" way, in the preceding chapter. This universal image or "figure of the world" (*mundi figura*) may be made in brass, combined with gold and silver. (These are the metals of Jupiter, Sol, and Venus.) It should be begun in an auspicious time, when Sol enters the first degree of Aries. It should not be worked at on the Sabbath, the day of Saturn. It should be completed in Venus "to signify its absolute beauty". Colours as well as lines, or lineaments, should be inserted into the work. "There are three universal and singular colours of the world, green, gold, and blue, dedicated to the Three Graces of heaven", which are Venus, Sol, and Jupiter. "They judge therefore that in order to capture the gifts of the celestial graces, these three colours should be frequently used, and into the formula of the world which you are making should be inserted the blue colour of the sphere of the world. They think that gold should be added to the precious work made like the heaven itself, and stars, and Vesta, or Ceres, that is the earth, dressed in green."<sup>1</sup>

There is a good deal which I have not been able to understand in this description. The figure seems to refer to a New Year as a new birthday of the world, or even to the first birthday of the world, the creation (Pico della Mirandola's *Heptaplus* is mentioned). But in general it may be said that the making of this magical or talismanic object belongs into the context of the *Libri de vita* as a whole which have all been concerned with various techniques for drawing down, or drinking in, the influences of the Sun, of Venus, and of Jupiter, as health-giving, rejuvenating, anti-Saturnian powers. The object described, or hinted at (for the description is very vague) would seem to be a model of the heavens constructed so as to concentrate on drawing down the fortunate influences of Sol, Venus, Jupiter. Certainly the colours of these planets are to predominate in it, and it may probably be presumed that their images are depicted in it. The inclusion of Ceres in green as the earth is understandable, but Vesta is strange.

Such an object, Ficino seems to say, may be worn, or placed opposite to be looked at,<sup>2</sup> suggesting that it is perhaps a medal, perhaps an elaborate jewel.

<sup>1</sup> Ficino, p. 559.

<sup>2</sup> "uel gestabit, uel oppositam intuebitur" (*ibid.*, *loc. cit.*).

He then says that the figure of the world may be constructed so as to reproduce the motion of the spheres, as was done by Archimedes, and has been done recently by a Florentine called Lorenzo. He is here referring to the astronomical clock made by Lorenzo della Volpaia<sup>1</sup> for Lorenzo de' Medici which contained representations of the planets. Such a figure of the world, says Ficino, is made not only to be gazed at but to be meditated upon in the soul. It is obviously a different kind of object to the one previously hinted at. It is a cosmic mechanism.

Finally, someone may construct, or will construct:

on the domed ceiling of the innermost cubicle of his house, where he mostly lives and sleeps, such a figure with the colours in it. And when he comes out of his house he will perceive, not so much the spectacle of individual things, but the figure of the universe and its colours.<sup>2</sup>

I understand this to mean a painting on the ceiling of a bedroom, a painting which is also still a figure of the world, with perhaps still the figures of the Three Graces, the three fortunate planets, Sol, Venus, and Jupiter predominating, and their colours of blue, gold, and green as the leading colours of the painting or fresco.

These various forms of the "figure of the world" are thus artistic objects which are to be used magically for their talismanic virtue. They are attempting to influence "the world" by favourable arrangements of celestial images, so as to draw down favourable influences and exclude non-favourable ones. In short, these unfortunately so vaguely hinted at works of art are functional; they are made for a purpose, for magical use. By arranging the figure of the world and its celestial images with knowledge and skill, the Magus controls the influences of the stars. Just as Hermes Trismegistus arranged the images in the City of Adocentyn, which was planned as an image of the world, so as to regulate the astral

<sup>1</sup> See A. Chastel, *Marsile Ficin et l'Art*, Geneva-Lille, 1954, p. 95. Lorenzo della Volpaia's clock is referred to by Poliziano, Vasari and others (references in Chastel, *op. cit.*, pp. 96-7, note 16). Chastel thinks that the whole of the passage on making an image of the world in the *De vita coelitus comparanda* is a description of Della Volpaia's clock. I do not think that this is the case. Ficino is describing three different kinds of objects made to represent the figure of the world, one type being the cosmic mechanism of which Della Volpaia's clock is an example.

<sup>2</sup> Ficino, *loc. cit.*

influences on the inhabitants in such a way as to keep them healthy and virtuous, so Ficino's "figures of the world" would be calculated to regulate the influences in the direction indicated in the *Libri de Vita*, towards a predominance of Solar, Jovial, and Venereal influences and towards an avoidance of Saturn and Mars.

The point in the description of the "figures of the world" to which I want to draw particular attention in view of later developments in this book is that these figures are not only to be looked at but reflected or remembered within. The man who stares at the figure of the world on his bedroom ceiling, imprinting it and its dominating colours of the planets on memory, when he comes out of his house and sees innumerable individual things is able to unify these through the images of a higher reality which he has within. This is the strange vision, or the extraordinary illusion, which was later to inspire Giordano Bruno's efforts to base memory on celestial images, on images which are shadows of ideas in the soul of the world, and thus to unify and organise the innumerable individuals in the world and all the contents of memory.

In his article on "Botticelli's Mythologies", E. H. Gombrich quotes a letter from Ficino to Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, in which Ficino tells the young Lorenze that he is giving him an "immense present".

For anyone who contemplates the heavens, nothing he sets his eyes upon seems immense, but the heavens themselves. If, therefore, I make you a present of the heavens themselves what would be its price?<sup>1</sup>

Ficino goes on to say that the young man should dispose his "Luna", that is, his soul and body, in such a way as to avoid too much influence from Saturn and Mars, and to obtain favourable influences from the Sun, Jupiter, and Venus. "If you thus dispose the heavenly signs and your gifts in this way, you will escape the threats of fortune, and, under divine favour, will live happy and free from cares."

Gombrich discusses the "Primavera" (Pl. 2) in relation to such a

<sup>1</sup> Ficino, p. 805; cf. E. H. Gombrich, "Botticelli's Mythologies: a study in the Neoplatonic symbolism of his circle", *J.W.C.I.*, VIII (1945), p. 16.

disposition of the stars, suggesting that the Mercury on the extreme left is a planetary image, raising and dismissing the possibility that the Three Graces might be Sol, Jupiter, and Venus, and emphasising that the central figure is certainly a Venus. What I have now to suggest does not conflict with the general line of his approach.

Surely, the "immense present" which was a "present of the heavens themselves" which Ficino sent to Pierfrancesco was a construction of a similar nature to that described in chapter XIX of the *De vita coelitus comparanda* on "making a figure of the universe". It was an image of the world arranged so as to attract the favourable planets and to avoid Saturn. The "present" was probably not some actual object but advice as to how to make, internally in the soul or the imagination such a "figure of the world" and to keep the inner attention concentrated on its images, or possibly also how to have a real object or talisman designed to be used for reflection in the mind. Though painted earlier than the *De vita coelitus comparanda* was written, or at least published, Botticelli's "Primavera" is surely such an object, designed with such a purpose.

Far be it from me to attempt yet another detailed interpretation of the figures in the "Primavera". I want only to suggest that in the context of the study of Ficino's magic the picture begins to be seen as a practical application of that magic, as a complex talisman, an "image of the world" arranged so as to transmit only healthful, rejuvenating, anti-Saturnian influences to the beholder. Here, in visual form is Ficino's natural magic, using grouping of trees and flowers, using only planetary images and those only in relation to the "world", not to attract demons; or as shadows of Ideas in the Neoplatonic hierarchy. And, whatever the figures on the right may represent mythologically, is it not the *spiritus mundi* which blows through them, blown from the puffed cheeks of the aerial spirit, made visible in the wind-blown folds of the draperies of the running figure? The *spiritus* which is the channel for the influences of the stars has been caught and stored in the magic talisman.

How different is Botticelli's Alma Venus, with whom, as Ficino advises, we walk in the green and flowery meadows, drinking in the scented air, laden with *spiritus*—how different she is from the prim little talisman Venus, with an apple in one hand and flowers in the other! Yet her function is the same, to draw down the



Venerable spirit from the star, and to transmit it to the wearer or beholder of her lovely image.

Ficino's Orphic magic<sup>1</sup> was a return to an ancient *priscus theologus*, like his talismanic magic with its disguised, or revised, return to Hermes Trismegistus. Orpheus comes second after Trismegistus in the Ficinian lists of *prisci theologi*. The collection of hymns known as the *Orphica*, which was the main though not the only source of Orphic hymns known to the Renaissance, dates probably from the second or third century A.D., that is from roughly the same period as the *Hermetica*. They were probably hymns used by some religious sect of the period. Their content is usually to call upon a god, particularly the Sun, by his various names, invoking his various powers, and there is more than a touch of the magical incantation in them. Ficino and his contemporaries believed that the Orphic hymns were by Orpheus himself and were of extreme antiquity, reflecting the religious singing of a *priscus magus* who lived long before Plato. Ficino's revival of Orphic singing has deep importance for him because he believes he is returning to the practice of a most ancient theologian and one who foresaw the Trinity.<sup>2</sup> It thus has underlying it the same type of historical error as that which induced his profound respect for the *Hermetica*.

Ficino used to sing the Orphic songs, accompanying himself probably on a *lira da braccio*.<sup>3</sup> They were set to some kind of simple monodic music which Ficino believed echoed the musical notes emitted by the planetary spheres, to form that music of the spheres of which Pythagoras spoke. Thus one could sing Sun hymns, or Jupiter hymns, or Venus hymns attuned to those planets, and this, being re-enforced by the invocation of their names and powers, was a way of drawing down their influences. The *spiritus* theory also lies behind this vocal or aural magic, as it does behind the sympathetic and talismanic magic. The Orphic magic is thus exactly parallel to the talismanic magic; it is used for the same reasons, to draw down chosen stellar influences; its medium or channel is again the *spiritus*. The only difference between the two magics, and it is of course a basic one, is that one

<sup>1</sup> On Ficino's Orphic magic, see Walker, pp. 12-24.

<sup>2</sup> See Walker, "Orpheus the Theologian and the Renaissance Platonists", *J.W.C.I.*, XVI (1953), pp. 100-20.

<sup>3</sup> Walker (*Spiritual and Demonic Magic*), pp. 19, 22.

is visual, working through visual images (the talismans) whilst the other is aural and vocal, working through music and the voice.

Walker thinks that the incantatory and aural magic which is described in the *De vita coelitus comparanda* is really the same as the Orphic singing, though this is not expressly stated.<sup>1</sup> The two branches of Ficino's magic—sympathetic magic with natural groupings and talismans, and incantatory magic with hymns and invocations—are certainly both represented in that work.

The incantatory magic raises the same problem as the talismanic magic, namely, is it a natural magic, addressed to the gods as powers of the world, or a demonic magic, invoking the demons of the stars. The answer here is probably the same as in the case of the talismanic magic, namely that Ficino regarded his incantations as purely natural magic. At least we have Pico della Mirandola's word for it that the Orphic singing is natural magic for he calls it by this name in one of his *Conclusiones Orphicae*:

In natural magic nothing is more efficacious than the Hymns of Orpheus, if there be applied to them suitable music, and disposition of soul, and the other circumstances known to the wise.<sup>2</sup>

And in another of his Orphic Conclusions, Pico definitely states that the names of the gods, of which Orpheus sings, are not those of deceiving demons but "names of the natural and divine virtues"<sup>3</sup> diffused throughout the world.

To complete our view of Ficino's natural magic, we thus have to think of him drawing down the stellar influences by musical incantations as well as by sympathetic arrangement of natural objects, talismans, exposing oneself to the air, and so on, for the *spiritus* is caught by planetary songs as well as in the other ways described. There may be an even closer connection between the Ficinian talismans and the Ficinian incantations, for in chapter XVIII, after his long and involved defence of his talismans, he seems to say that these are made "beneath a harmony similar to the celestial harmony"<sup>4</sup> which excites their virtue. I do not know whether this passage can be taken to mean that a Ficinian talisman or talismanic type of picture, was made, or painted, to the

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> Pico, p. 106; quoted by Walker, p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> Pico, p. 106. See below, p. 90.

<sup>4</sup> Ficino, p. 558.

accompaniment of suitable Orphic incantations which helped to infuse the *spiritus* into them.

In spite of all his precautions, Ficino did not avoid getting into trouble for the *Libri de vita*, as we learn from his *Apologia*<sup>1</sup> for that work. People had evidently been asking questions such as, "Is not Marsilius a priest? What has a priest to do with medicine and astrology? What has a Christian to do with magic and images?" Ficino counters by pointing out that in ancient times, priests always did medicine, mentioning Chaldean, Persian, and Egyptian priests; that medicine is impossible without astrology; that Christ Himself was a healer. But above all he emphasises that there are two kinds of magic, one demonic magic which is illicit and wicked, the other natural magic, which is useful and necessary. The only kind of magic which he has practised or advised is the good and useful kind—*magia naturalis*.<sup>2</sup>

How elegant, how artistic and refined is this modern natural magic!<sup>3</sup> If we think of the Neoplatonic philosopher singing Orphic hymns, accompanying himself on his *lira da braccio* decorated with the figure of Orpheus taming the animals, and then compare this Renaissance vision with the barbarous mutterings of some invocation in *Picatrix*, the contrast between the new magic and the old is painfully evident.

Beydelus, Demeymes, Adulex, Metucgayn, Atine, Ffex, Uquizuz, Gadix, Sol, Veni cito cum tuis spiritibus.<sup>4</sup>

How remote is the gibberish of this demonic invocation to Sol in *Picatrix* from Ficino and his "natural" planetary songs! Or if we think of the flowers, jewels, scents with which Ficino's patients are advised to surround themselves, of the charmingly healthy and wealthy way of life which they are to follow, and compare this with the filthy and obscene substances, the stinking and disgusting mixtures recommended in *Picatrix*, the contrast is again most striking between the new elegant magic, recommended by the fashionable physician, and that old dirty magic. Again, it would

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 572-4. On the *Apologia*, see Walker, pp. 42 ff., 52-3.

<sup>2</sup> Ficino, p. 573; cf. Walker, p. 52.

<sup>3</sup> E. Garin (*Medioevo e Rinascimento*, p. 172) draws a contrast between mediaeval "bassa magia" and "magia rinascimentale".

<sup>4</sup> Sloane, 1305, f. 152 verso.

seem that the primitive talismanic image might be expanded by Renaissance artists into figures of immortal beauty, figures in which classical form has been both recovered and transmuted into something new.

And yet there is absolute continuity between the old magic and the new. Both rest on the same astrological presuppositions; both use in their methods the same groupings of natural substances; both employ talismans and invocations; both are pneumatic magic, believing in the *spiritus* as the channel of influence from the above to the below. Finally, both are integrated into an elaborate philosophical context. The magic of *Picatrix* is presented in a framework of philosophy; and Ficino's natural magic is fundamentally related to his Neoplatonism.

We have, in short, to think of Renaissance magic as both in continuity with mediaeval magic and also the transformation of that tradition into something new. The phenomenon is exactly parallel with that other phenomenon which Warburg and Saxl discovered and studied, namely how the images of the gods were preserved through the Middle Ages in astrological manuscripts, reached the Renaissance in that barbarised form, and were then reinvested with classical form through the rediscovery and imitation of classical works of art.<sup>1</sup> In the same way, astral magic comes down in the mediaeval tradition and is reinvested with classical form in the Renaissance through the rediscovery of Neoplatonic theurgy. Ficino's magic, with its hymns to the Sun, its Three Graces in an astrological context, its Neoplatonism, is closer in outlook, practice, and classical form to the Emperor Julian than it is to *Picatrix*. Yet the substance of it reached him through *Picatrix*, or some such similar text-books, and was transformed by him back into classical form through his Greek studies. One might say that the approach through the history of magic is perhaps as necessary for the understanding of the meaning and use of a Renaissance work of art as is the approach through the history of the recovery of classical form for the understanding of its form. The Three Graces (to take this perennial example) regained their classical form through the recovery and imitation of the true

<sup>1</sup> See Warburg's *Gesammelte Schriften*; Saxl's catalogues of illustrated astrological manuscripts and other writings (for bibliography, see F. Saxl, *Lectures*, Warburg Institute, University of London, 1957, I, pp. 359-62); and cf. J. Seznec, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods*, pp. 37 ff.

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classical form of the group. They perhaps also regained their talismanic virtue through the renaissance of magic.

And yet, just as a pagan Renaissance work of art is not purely pagan but retains Christian overtones or undertones (the classical example of this being Botticelli's Venus who looks like a Virgin), so it is also with Ficino's magic. This cannot be regarded as a purely medical practice which he kept quite separate from his religion because, as D. P. Walker has emphasised, it was in itself a kind of religion. Walker has quoted a passage from Ficino's close disciple and imitator, Francesco da Diaceto in which this comes out most clearly.<sup>1</sup> Diaceto describes how one who wishes to acquire "solarian gifts", should robe himself in a mantle of solarian colour, such as gold, and conduct a rite, involving burning of incense made from solar plants, before an altar on which is an image of the sun, for example "an image of the sun enthroned, crowned, and wearing a saffron cloak, likewise a raven and the figure of the sun." This is the solar talisman in the *De vita coelitus comparanda* which we thought might be derived from *Picatrix*.<sup>2</sup> Then, anointed with unguents made from solar materials he is to sing an Orphic hymn to the Sun, invoking him as the divine Henad, as the Mind, and as the Soul. This is the Neoplatonic triad under which the Emperor Julian worshipped the Sun. As Walker says the triad is not actually mentioned in the *De vita coelitus comparanda*. But it is alluded to by Plotinus in that passage in the *Enneads* on which Ficino's work is a commentary, as the example of the hierarchy of the Ideas.<sup>3</sup> Diaceto's solar rites thus bring out something which is implicit in the *De vita coelitus comparanda* and they probably reflect Ficino's own practices. If so, Ficino's magic was a religious magic, a revival of the religion of the world.

<sup>1</sup> Francesco da Diaceto, *Opera omnia*, ed. Bâle, 1563, pp. 45-6; cf. Walker, pp. 32-3. On Diaceto, see Kristeller, *Studies*, pp. 287 ff.

<sup>2</sup> See above, p. 71. In this passage, the talismanic image of the sun is almost reverting to a "statue", worshipped with rites as in the *Asclepius*.

<sup>3</sup> "The sun of that sphere . . . is an Intellectual-Principle, and immediately upon it follows the Soul depending from it . . . the Soul borders also upon the sun of this sphere, and becomes the medium by which it is linked to the over-world"; Plotinus, *Ennead*, IV, 3, XI; McKenna's translation, p. 270.



I(a) The Zodiacal Sign Aries with its three Decans.



I (b) The first Decan of Aries.

Francesco del Cossa, Palazzo Schifanoja, Ferrara (p. 57).



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How could a pious Christian reconcile such a revival with his Christianity? No doubt the Renaissance religious syncretism, by which the Neoplatonic triad was connected with the Trinity would account for regarding sun-worship theoretically and historically as a religion having affinities with Christianity, but this would hardly account for the revival of it as a religious cult. The moving force behind this revival was probably, as Walker has suggested, Ficino's deep interest in the Egyptian magical religion described in the *Asclepius*. It was on this, and only secondarily on Plotinus, that the *De vita coelitus comparanda* was a commentary, seeking to justify it by finding a "natural" and Neoplatonic basis for it.

By the time that the *Libri de vita* were published, in 1489 Hermes Trismegistus would have been safely ensconced inside the Duomo at Siena, proudly displaying the quotation from his *Asclepius* in which he prophesied the Son of God, and being urged to take up again the Egyptian laws and letters. Lactantius has much to answer for, for it was his interpretation of Trismegistus as a holy Gentile prophet which Ficino adopted, and which he thought that he found marvellously confirmed in the *Pimander*. And it is this which may have encouraged him to take up magical religion, which he did not do, as we have seen, without much fear and trembling and anxious avoidance of demons.

When Hermes Trismegistus entered the Church, the history of magic became involved with the history of religion in the Renaissance.