

## Mnemohistory and the Reconstruction of Real Transmission: A Double Helix?

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### I.

Who was Hermes Trismegistus? I would like to use this rather banal and direct-sounding question, a question which as we know is also in certain respects highly unpromising, to put forward a fundamental consideration of method. This question of method concerns the relation of mnemohistory, as conceived by Jan and Aleida Assmann, to another form of the writing of history, a form which I will call for the moment “real transmission history”. Jan Assmann characterises mnemohistory precisely as not being concerned with what we would necessarily, as a contemporary reconstruction, describe as “the real”, but with the production of cultural memory through the “motor functions” of myth, where memory continues to be written as it is passed down, and can continue to change.<sup>1</sup> Cultural memory, according to Assmann, formulates founding histories or myths, histories which perform a social function. This is in itself sufficient reason for it to be quite irrelevant what the “real” events of the life of a founding figure such as Moses may have been, because what matters are the effects of the memory trace of a figure of this kind, through cultural processes of canonisation, of resistance, of the formation of identity.

Just as the mnemohistory of Moses can be narrated, so can that of Hermes Trismegistus, as a history of the reciprocal translation of elements of Egyptian and Greek religious cultures in Hellenised Egypt, the early construction of a canon of pseudepigraphic works, the founding function of pagan Hermetic wisdom in Renaissance philosophy, and so on and so forth. This is in fact broadly speaking what has happened. But I wonder whether this way of writing history does not sometimes give too little weight to the difference—the difference between the image of Hermes the ancient sage of tradition on the

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<sup>1</sup> Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

one hand, and the real production of the Hermetic texts by their authors and the transmission of their writings on the other.<sup>2</sup>

## II.

I want to use some philosophical terms to try to examine this difference. “Hermes Trismegistus” is an imaginary object of reference projected into the past, and always has been, from the outset. Hermes as object of reference is an ancient Egyptian sage who lived at the time of Abraham or Moses, dated at the time as 2200 or 1500 BCE. In fact, however, as we know, the texts attributed to Hermes as author were written in the first few centuries CE, principally in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, but some also in the 1st century BCE.<sup>3</sup> The pseudepigraphic fiction was generally taken at face value up until the seventeenth century, when it was recognised that these writings were not authentic, and from this point on further Hermetic discourse was at least marginalised.<sup>4</sup>

If we call on the philosophical theory of reference here, it tells us that a proper name (such as “Hermes”) can refer in different ways. By a definite description for instance: Hermes is the author of the Hermetic texts. In this sense the name would refer to an author or a group of authors in late Hellenistic Egypt. But Saul Kripke has pointed out problems with this kind of reference, describing proper names as “rigid designators” which would necessarily remain the same in all possible worlds, even when a characterisation such as “author of the Hermetic texts” changes. One would need to imagine this as a causal chain extending from an original act of naming (someone is named “Hermes”) to its use in language today.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> I build here on my former essay “A Reference Theory of Globalized Ideas”, *Global Intellectual History* 2/1 (2017): 67–87.

<sup>3</sup> Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes. A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> Martin Mulsow, ed., *Das Ende des Hermetismus. Historische Kritik und neue Naturphilosophie in der Spätrenaissance. Dokumentation und Analyse der Debatte um die Datierung der hermetischen Schriften von Genebrard bis Casaubon (1567–1614)* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Saul A. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1980).

Precisely this idea of naming is of course problematic when dealing with a non-existent figure such as Hermes Trismegistus, who has been assembled from elements of the ancient Egyptian deity Thoth and the ancient Greek messenger of the gods Hermes.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, I think we should not abandon the model of a causal chain extending from the first uses of the name to the present day; we need this model in precisely such a difficult case as this, so as not to lose our way in the thicket of mutating descriptions.

To assist in applying reference theory to this case I would like to bring in the idea of referential over-extension (*Überreichweite*): when a writer of, say, the fifteenth century, such as Marsilio Ficino, refers to Hermes, from a temporal point of view his reference overshoots the mark, because he believes that Hermes lived, let us say, around 1500 or 2000 BCE, while the author or authors of the *Corpus Hermeticum* which Ficino is translating lived around, say, 200 CE. We can now follow on the one hand the projections or over-extensions (and in doing so we are very close to the cultural memory), but also on the other hand trace the real reference which was not known to Ficino. But is this second reference not completely irrelevant for him? My answer is that it is not, because there is a causal chain of transmissions leading from the authors of the early centuries CE to Ficino, a causal chain as an eventual result of which he takes Hermes to be very ancient, even without needing to know in detail the operations of this chain. On the contrary—if these operations had been known to him, his reference would not have overreached.

### III.

But this is just the greatly simplified version of this history. Hermeticism appears at first sight as something that plays out between Egypt and Europe: a corpus of texts is written in Egypt during the Hellenistic period; in the fifteenth century these texts arrive in central Europe via Byzantium, where they are translated by Ficino and begin their triumphal entry into the cultural memory of the western modern period.

But if we look at the transmission history of the Hermetica, as traced in the research of Garth Fowden, Christian Bull, Florian Ebeling, Kevin van Bladel

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<sup>6</sup> On the naming of non-existing entities see also Saul A. Kripke, *Reference and Existence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

and others, the picture is a great deal more complicated. The literature surrounding Hermes may have arisen from so-called aretologies, in which Egyptian priests explicated Egyptian religion for non-Egyptian readers, and in particular the attributes and doctrines of the individual god they served. Garth Fowden has drawn attention to an aretology relating to Asclepius, a fragment of which is found on the reverse of the Oxyrhynchus papyrus 1381. In this text the author speaks in a very personal way—whether rhetorically or authentically—of his crises and how they have motivated him to the writing of texts, and he says: “I set forth truly in a physical treatise [...] the history of the Creation of the World”.<sup>7</sup> His veneration of the god Imouth, who in the context of the reciprocal translation of polytheisms in the Hellenistic period was equated with the Greek god of healing Asclepius, but who also possessed some attributes of Hermes, shows clearly that aretological texts and theological-philosophical speculations should be seen in close relation to each other.

We can surmise that the first Hermetic texts arose in this way, in the context of contact between the Greek and Egyptian cultures, taking up ancient Egyptian doctrines, but formulating them in the context of the new situation. Earlier there had apparently been a long transmission in ritual contexts in which the ancient doctrines were handed down.<sup>8</sup> The Hermetic texts, written in Greek, were then distributed throughout the Mediterranean region and found their way into Latin literature, and later into Christian Latin writing, but also into Persian literature for example. Kevin van Bladel has shown that many of the later Arabic Hermetica are likely to have been translated from Middle Persian, or at least have some of their roots in that culture. But why did the texts come to Persia? Van Bladel suggests that “the reputation of Hermes as an ancient sage, and even works of Hermes, had reached the Sasanian court because of his connection with ‘their own’ Persian Ostanos, who was reputed to have transmitted the teachings of Hermes”.<sup>9</sup> We see here, if we have not already, that the transmission history, of course, cannot be separated from the mnemohistory, since if Hermes had not been a figure with referential over-

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<sup>7</sup> Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, 51. See also Joachim Friedrich Quack “Ich bin Isis, die Herrin beider Länder. Versuch zum demotischen Hintergrund der memphitischen Isisaretologie”, in *Egypt – Temple of the Whole World / Ägypten – Tempel der gesamten Welt. Studies in Honour of Jan Assmann*, ed. Sibylle Meyer (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 319–66.

<sup>8</sup> Christian H. Bull, *The Tradition of Hermes Trismegistus: The Egyptian Priestly Figure as a Teacher of Hellenized Wisdom* (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> Kevin van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes. From Pagan Sage to Prophet of Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 57.

extension—a projection back into the past—he would never have found his way to Persia at all.

From the founding of the Sasanian dynasty onwards, and in particular from the reign of Adarshir's son Shapur I, efforts were made in Persia to foster the Persian tradition of ancient wisdom, which was in fact by then largely lost, and even to recreate it in certain ways. Conversely, in the non-Persian Mediterranean region of this time, the late third century, numerous pseudepigraphs written in Greek were in circulation, supposedly by ancient Persian authors such as Zoroaster, Zostrianus, Nicotheus, Allogenes und Messus. We can speculate that the Sasanian demand for pseudepigraphs and the Hellenistic readiness to produce them reciprocally reinforced and stimulated each other.<sup>10</sup>

There were at that time models which were already 500 years old, which combined and interleaved Egyptian and ancient Persian wisdom. Probably around 200 BCE, Bolos of Mendes had adopted the figure of the Persian sage Ostanos from pseudepigraphic legends. According to Bolos, this Ostanos had travelled to Egypt to learn its wisdom. This was the early phase of Hellenism, in which other peoples also had problems of cultural superiority in relation to the Egyptians. The Jewish writers Eupolemus, Pseudo-Eupolemus and Artabanus for instance discussed whether their Moses was in fact better than the Egyptian sages, and already possessed all forms of knowledge.<sup>11</sup>

#### IV.

We can see that we need to practise transmission history and mnemohistory alongside each other: without the reconstruction of real transmission, mnemohistory, which bases itself only in the subjective (or collectively subjective) assumptions of reference and ascriptions of meaning, would run the risk of losing sight completely of indirect routes of transmission (there is no mention of Persia in the texts, for instance). Conversely, the routes of transmission can only be understood through the mnemohistorical components: it is precisely because Hermes was able to perform, indirectly via

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<sup>10</sup> This may be a special case of “allelopoiesis” in the sense of Johannes Helmrath. See Helmrath in this issue of *Aegyptiaca*.

<sup>11</sup> Arthur J. Droge, *Homer or Moses? Early Christian Interpretations of the History of Culture* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1989).

Ostanes, a founding function in the cultural memory of the Sasanians that his texts were translated and transcribed there. I would like to term this methodological pairing a “double helix”: as with Watson and Crick’s genetic discovery, we must keep in mind two strands which remain subtly and complexly related to each other.

How these relations appear in any particular case is by no means a simple matter, because at each point of intersection in the long history of Hermeticism there were always people who not only transcribed or translated Hermetic texts, or integrated them into their own systems of thought, but who also reflected on the reference of the name “Hermes”.<sup>12</sup> And in doing so they not infrequently separated the syndrome “Hermes” into several distinct strands, because they took Hermes to be a composite figure. It was a question of distinguishing the different people who had gone under this name.

This means that already at an early stage, and despite the general over-extension, cultural memory itself took an internally differentiated form resulting from an analytic component. This differentiated form could, according to the particular moment, be somewhat euhemeristic, astrological or philologically critical, or all at the same time. Not least, this differentiation also allowed the resolution of contradictions which arose as a result of inconsistencies within the literature of the tradition.

To give some examples: in the middle of the seventeenth century—and therefore after the “exposure” of the pseudepigraphy by Isaac Casaubon—Athanasius Kircher takes it that there are three people who have borne the name of Hermes: the first is identical with the biblical Enoch, and was an Egyptian priest. The second, according to Kircher, lived in Thebes after the Flood in the third generation after Ham and was a royal scribe, or perhaps even the King himself, who restored the original truth of the Patriarchs. The third Hermes of the three was the eighth king of Egypt, also named Horus or Thoth.<sup>13</sup>

In the late sixteenth century, Annibale Rosselli wrote of a total of five different Hermes:

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<sup>12</sup> On the long history of hermeticism see Florian Ebeling, *The Secret History of Hermes Trismegistus* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> Athanasius Kircher, *Oedipus aegyptiacus*, 3 vols. (Rome: Mascardi, 1652–54). See Daniel Stolzenberg, *Egyptian Oedipus: Athanasius Kircher and the Secrets of Antiquity* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2013).

Ancient sources tell us there have been five Hermes. The first was born of Caelus (heaven) as father and Dies (day) as mother. The second was the son of Valens and Pheronide. The third was the offspring of the third Jupiter and Maia. The fourth, whose name the Egyptians think it wrong to utter, was the son of father Nile, and is said to have killed Argus and therefore been ruler of Egypt and given laws and learning to the Egyptians.<sup>14</sup>

The fifth is the one worshipped by the Pheneatæ, who is said to have slain Argus, and on that account to have fled to Egypt, where he taught the inhabitants laws and letters. The Egyptians call him Theuth.

If we look more closely, we see that Rosselli is drawing here on Cicero's *De Natura Deorum*, a text which makes no reference to Hermetica, though it already assumes the reciprocal translation of Hermes and Thoth.<sup>15</sup>

And a third example: in the early sixteenth century, and as Kircher did later, Agrippa von Nettesheim and Ludovico Lazarelli affirmed the identity of Enoch with Hermes Trismegistus.<sup>16</sup> It is interesting that Agrippa explicitly cites here Abraham Avenazar, as he calls him—that is Abraham Ibn Ezra, the twelfth-century Jewish exegete and astrologer. It is useful therefore to take account of this Jewish tradition of commentary, although Ibn Ezra himself is strongly connected as an astrologer not only with Jewish but also with Arab traditions, to which we will come shortly.<sup>17</sup> In Islam, the Qur'anic Idris is identified with the Biblical Enoch.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Annibale Rosselli, *Pymander Mercurii Trismegisti cum commento Fratris Hannibalis Rosseli Calabri* (Cracow: Lazari, 1585), preface to book IV: “Quinque fuisse Mercurios, antiquitas docet. Primo quidem coelo patre, die matre natum. Secundo vero Valentis, et Pheronidis filium. Tertium Iove tertio natum, et Maia. Quartum, Nilo patre, quem Aegyptii nefas habent nominare, qui dicitur Argum interfecisse, et ob eam causam Aegypto praefuisse, legesque atque literas Aegyptiis tradidisse.” On Rosselli see Maria Muccillo, “Der ‘scholastische’ Hermetismus des Annibale Rosselli und die Trinitätslehre”, in *Das Ende des Hermetismus*, ed. Martin Mulsow, 61–101.

<sup>15</sup> Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* 1.56.

<sup>16</sup> Agrippa von Nettesheim, “Oratio habita Papiæ in praelectione Hermetis Trismegisti”, in *Opera* II (Lyon: Beringos, s.a.), 1089–101.

<sup>17</sup> See Dov Schwartz, *Studies on Astral Magic in Medieval Jewish Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

<sup>18</sup> Van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes*, 164–84.

V.

What method can we now use to examine this complication of lines of reference at different times, each of which refers back to earlier sources? My answer is: through a consistent and thorough reconstruction of the double helix. Both the reference behaviour and the content of what was connected with Hermes have their transmissions. We could with David Armitage, speak of a practice of “serial contextualism”; contextualism within intellectual reconstruction in general, of course, in order to understand, by looking at the circumstances as to why a theorist at a particular time thinks what he or she thinks, what they are responding to and what they are trying to achieve with their texts.<sup>19</sup> But to practise this serially means to contextualise in this way at each point of intersection in the descent of the texts, and not, as so often happens, only at the start or end point of the process. In the case in question this means we need to contextualise not only the milieu of Memphis or Alexandria in the third century, or the end stage of, say, the Rome of Athanasius Kircher during the Counter-Reformation, but also all points in between, and in a double sense; firstly in terms of the subjective reference behaviour (of the mnemohistory), and secondly in terms of the real transmission, and often therefore also of the transmission of the impregnation of reference behaviour.

VI.

We will find that individual strands move apart from each other for long periods, especially in a conglomeration as highly complex as the Hermetic tradition. Kircher, for instance, was a recipient of the strand of Renaissance Hermeticism, which itself grew, through figures such as Psellos and Plethon, out of Byzantine Hermeticism and the Byzantine tradition.<sup>20</sup> But Kircher was also an inheritor of the strain of Arabic Hermetica (the so called “technical”, more magical, alchemical and astrological texts), because in the mid-seventeenth century, literature in Arabic could be read for the first time in

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<sup>19</sup> David Armitage, “What’s the Big Idea? Intellectual History and the Longue Durée” *History of European Ideas* 38, (2012): 493–507.

<sup>20</sup> See Cesare Vasoli, “Der Mythos der ‘Prisci Theologi’ als ‘Ideologie’ der ‘Renovatio’”, in *Das Ende des Hermetismus*, ed. Martin Mulsow, 17–60; Paul Magdalino and Maria Mavroudi, ed., *The Occult Sciences in Byzantium* (Geneva: La Pomme d’or, 2006).



Europe. As a result, as Daniel Stolzenberg has shown, the passages on Hermes by Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, an Egyptian polygraph of the fifteenth century, reached Kircher's hands. Kircher quotes a text by al-Suyūṭī on the naming of the Nile which cites older sources—Ahmad ibn Jusuf at-Tifasi, a thirteenth century Tunisian writer, and Ka'b al-Aḥbār, a Jewish convert to Islam, who both attested to the identical nature of Idris, Hermes and Osiris.<sup>21</sup> This Arabic-Jewish literature on Egypt, under which heading we can also include Agrippa's source Ibn Ezra, originates ultimately from a single point, from which the legend of the three-fold historical Hermes was carried forward: this single point was the great tenth-century astrologer Abu Ma'shar.

Abu Ma'shar was himself a reader of Hermetic texts, and speculated on the identity of the author of these writings. As van Bladel has shown, in his *Kitāb al-Ulūf*, the "Book of Thousands", Abu Ma'shar combines the view of his late eighth century predecessor Ibn Nawbaḥt that Hermes was a king of Babylon, with accounts of a two-fold Hermes originating in late antiquity and transmitted by the Byzantine chronographs from works by the Egyptian monks Pandorus and Annianus. Abu Ma'shar put forward his views against a background of Indian and Persian astronomical and astrological calculations of periods in world history, lending his proposals a large measure of scientific authority.<sup>22</sup>

So Abu Ma'shar "scientificises" the diversity of sources available to him from different cultures. The result is the theory that Hermes was a composite figure combining three individuals of the same name who had merged in later cultural memory into a single figure: 1) Hermes, an antediluvian prophet, identical with Enoch/Idris; 2) Hermes, a King of Babylon in the time after the Flood; and 3) Hermes, an Egyptian writer versed in alchemy and the teacher of Asclepius. The second of these, the King of Babylon, became the King of Thebes in Kircher's account, probably because later generations could no longer see what Hermes might have to do with Babylon. But Abu Ma'shar's source Ibn Nawbaḥt was heavily dependent on Middle Persian writers who drew on the indigenous Persian Hermeticism referred to earlier. For these Persians, Babylon was of course an "Iranian" city.

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<sup>21</sup> On al-Suyūṭī and Kircher see Daniel Stolzenberg, *Egyptian Oedipus*, 154–9.

<sup>22</sup> Van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes*, 122–32. See also David Pingree, *The "Thousands" of Abū Ma'shar* (London: Warburg Institute, 1968).

## VII.

We could now, alongside the Islamic, trace the Jewish strand of reference behaviour, but as we have seen, it is often seamlessly contiguous with the Islamic one. The Sabians in Harran, who until as late as the period around 1000 retained a tradition of ideas and customs derived from pagan late antiquity, are known to have revered Hermes as one of their prophets.<sup>23</sup> This became a model for the later Islamic practice of identifying Hermes with Idris, who is mentioned in the Qur'an and who is in turn identified with the biblical patriarch Enoch—thereby elevating the figure of Hermes. It is easy to understand how Jewish writers drawn to Hermetic ideas would have backed this claim. We see once more how closely reference behaviour aligns with interests bound up in meanings, and the extent to which real transmission is steered by mnemohistorical attitudes.

## VIII.

We are now approaching the end, having taken a route which I hope has not been too confusing, although it has still abbreviated the history and presented only a selection of stages and authors. But we may now be in a position to draw some general conclusions concerning what I have called the double helix of mnemohistory and the real transmission history.

We have seen that the history of Hermeticism cannot be written as an Egyptian-European one, even if this is how it appears at first from the point of view of mnemohistory. Rather, the double helix passes through a variety of cultural fields; besides the Hellenistic-Egyptian there are the Coptic, Byzantine, Persian, Arab-Islamic and Judaeo-Arabic, before it arrives via various channels in Europe. Here it is very selectively received by different authors; the school of Paracelsus for instance tended to take up the “technical” Hermetica more than the “learned” and “philosophical” aspects. The double helix is also drawn into the machinery of Confessionalisation—which for the sake of simplicity I have so far left to one side. The Catholics found it easier to accept pre-Christian prophets than did the Protestants, from whose side philological criticism was brought to bear by writers such as Matthieu Beroalde and then

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<sup>23</sup> Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, *The Last Pagans of Iraq: Ibn Wahshiyya And His Nabatean Agriculture* (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

Isaac Casaubon.<sup>24</sup> But both Kircher and Ralph Cudworth repeatedly made use of the possibilities for differentiation offered by the composite nature of the figure of Hermes to insist, alongside later strata they were obliged to acknowledge, on earlier and more authentic textual elements.

A complex mnemohistory is therefore—and I think Jan Assmann will not disagree—eminently transcultural: it must deal with different cultural memories, assuming we allow this use of the plural, presupposing as it does single cultures such as the Persian, with their own functions of formation of identity through memory.

Precisely for complex transmissions over the *longue durée*, the view in terms of the double helix seems to me indispensable, a perspective which does not neglect to pay attention to the “real”, even where it exerts no cultural effects. We need this real as a signpost at least, as I have said, so as not to be blind to specific detours of transmission. A transcultural or even global history of ideas does well any rate to keep asking questions of reference and to study the impregnation of reference behaviour by the reception of particular transmissions.

Another aspect that should not be left aside in this is the deconstruction of teleology. We are used to seeing Hermeticism as arriving where we are, in Europe or in the West. But it really doesn't have to be that way. We can for instance also observe how Hermetic elements arrive in Mughal India via Sufi traditions, and perhaps how they are contrasted or amalgamated with Hindu teachings there, by figures such as Darah Sukoh.<sup>25</sup> So other lines can be traced in the history of ideas, not just those which end in Europe and in the “scientific revolution”.

## IX.

This gives me in conclusion the opportunity to mention one final aspect. What is the relation of this mnemohistory of Assmann's, enriched with real transmissions to form a double helix, to Aby Warburg's ideas on transmission?

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<sup>24</sup> Anthony Grafton, “Protestant vs. Prophet: Isaac Casaubon on Hermes Trismegistus”, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 46 (1983): 78–93.

<sup>25</sup> On Darah Sukoh see Jonardon Ganeri, *The Lost Age of Reason: Philosophy in Early Modern India 1450–1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 22–30.

What we could certainly take from Warburg is an expansion, both through the aspect of the image (and of gestures) and through the aspect of emotional energy. This seems at first sight particularly productive for Hermeticism too. Because Hermeticism belongs of course to those orientalising currents which for Warburg monstrously distorted the “humane” world of the Greek gods with its “clear language of forms”, charging it with “demonic” energy.<sup>26</sup> But we must take care. I am not sure that we should adopt today this East-West opposition of Warburg’s, with its clear judgements of value. To do so would annul a great many efforts to de-exoticise the “esoteric” strands in the history of ideas and to recognise them in terms of their own logic. It is not for no reason that we are more at ease today discussing the one strand of Hermetica as “technical” rather than as “magical”. But Warburg’s methodological initiatives can be implemented productively, even without this tendency.

Let us return to the idea of reference. I introduced it to allow us to distinguish the ongoing projective references of cultural memory from the real, but often only implicit points of reference. If we now think with Warburg, reference acquires an energetic charge. An “animated embellishment”—Warburg’s *bewegtes Beiwerk*—such as floating strands of hair in a painting by Botticelli, references depictions of Maenads in “pagan-demonic antiquity”. Is this a projective relation or is it a real transmission? To begin with, there is clearly a form of over-extension at work here. Warburg writes of the “Ur-realm of pagan religiosity”, expressing his view that with the “animated embellishment” very early forms of emotion are relayed, which slumber deep within the psyche and are a constant threat to reason and sober reflection.<sup>27</sup> The reference to antiquity thus also goes even further back in time, in a sense, to a primal history of humanity. But reference of this kind is always also a “body reference”, extending not just back into temporal depths, but also into one’s own affective depths. This is more individually conceived than the coherent and thorough, collectively argued theory of cultural memory, with all its virtues and drawbacks, but it is without doubt located somewhere in its vicinity.

But the real means of transmission of such pathos formulae are something which cannot be detected simply from their effects, but must be reconstructed through detailed historical work. There is indeed this other aspect to Warburg, which I have tried to separate from cultural memory. The idea of “image

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<sup>26</sup> Aby Warburg, *Gesammelte Schriften II, 1: Der Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, ed. Martin Warnke and Claudia Brink (Berlin: Akademie, 2000), 5.

<sup>27</sup> Warburg, *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, 5.

vehicles” is relevant here, as Warburg is also and to a great extent a theorist of transmission, interested in the circulation of image ideas.<sup>28</sup> He speaks of media such as Flemish tapestries, which were transportable and brought Flemish stylistic elements to Italy. Here too we could pose the question, at each station of their itinerary, of which emotional references were released in the viewers and imitators of these tapestries, and what adaptations or “energetically inverted interpretations” („energetisch invertierte Sinngebungen“), as Warburg calls them, they evoked.<sup>29</sup> So we can also contextualise serially. But this has no bearing on the circulation of the tapestries themselves, which was a matter of traders, travelling merchants and routes of transit.

## X.

We could now, and to really conclude, consider whether the history of Hermeticism in its image-related aspects could also be written with the Warburg of image vehicles and energetic charge, but against the Warburg of the devaluation of the Eastern. This would mean concentrating not principally on the texts themselves, as has been done up till now, but encompassing the whole of the imagery which has accompanied them, and which is most often found in the “technical” Hermetica (I leave out its possible objects).<sup>30</sup> The double helix would then be on the one hand a strand of manuscripts with illustrations in many different languages, but also mosaics, murals, wall painting, a strand where the transcribed texts may sometimes take other routes than the copied images; on the other hand would be a strand carrying the meanings and references which the figure of Hermes and his teaching held for those people who stood at particular points in the process of transmission, people who wondered who this Hermes was and how to locate him in the rest of the cultural cosmos. These people could have been rulers or scholars, but also, especially where the recipients of images were concerned, unlettered people, artisans or artists. And alongside the questions they asked themselves about Hermes, emotions, attitudes and opinions would also have been evoked in them. These would not necessarily have been fears or have involved a

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<sup>28</sup> See Andreas Beyer et al., ed., *Bilderfabrizzeuge. Aby Warburgs Vermächtnis und die Zukunft der Ikonologie* (Berlin: Wagenbach, 2018).

<sup>29</sup> Warburg: *Gesammelte Schriften II, 1: Der Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* (footnote 26), 4.

<sup>30</sup> See e.g. Lyndy Abraham: *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001)

potential for violence, as Warburg thought, but could be affective components of all kinds.

What matters is that the history being told can negotiate the precipices encountered in the transitions between cultures. Because it is here especially that drastic reshuffles, productive or less productive misunderstandings and adaptations can occur, and in these we can easily find that the question “who was Hermes Trismegistus?” is no longer answered with “a King of Egypt”, but with “a King of Babylon”.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Translated from the German by David Finch.