Noel Putnik

TWO CONFLICTING NOTIONS OF ASCENSION IN CORNELIUS AGRIPPA'S *DE OCCULTA PHILOSOPHIA*

MA Thesis in Medieval Studies

Central European University

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by

Noel Putnik

(Serbia)

Thesis submitted to the Department of Medieval Studies,

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Accepted in conformance with the standards of the CEU

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I, the undersigned, **Noel Putnik**, candidate for the MA degree in Medieval Studies declare herewith that the present thesis is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright. I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

Budapest, 29 May 2007

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Signature

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Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to examine the notion of ascension (deification, elevation) in the work of Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486-1535), particularly in his magical-philosophical treatise *De occulta philosophia libri tres* (Three books of occult philosophy). In my opinion, the theme of ascension is one of the central concepts in Agrippa's thought. Given the main topic of my work and the diversity of influences that shaped Agrippa's philosophical output, I have formulated my research question as follows: How did the German humanist understand the process of ascension, or deification, in the context of the various spiritual paradigms he relied upon, and did it not result in two opposing and conflicting models that he ought to have reconciled?

Ascension is one of the central themes in religious thought generally, as it deals with the existential position of man in this world, his ontological status and relationship with God, the question of his coming to the world and the possibility of his leaving it, usually conceived of as a kind of "return." In treating this subject I rely upon the general formulation of ascension given by Moshe Idel, namely that it a kind of *personal transformation* fostered by various rites, techniques, exercises, methods, and processes with the primary intention "to remove sin, corporeality, lust or imagination so that the pure or purified core of the aspirant is then capable of touching or being touched by the divine."[1] In addition, I rely upon Ioan Petru Culianu's general discussion on the *ascensus* of the soul, both *in corpore* and *in spiritu*, and both within one's lifetime (the so-called cathartic elevation) and after death (the eschatological elevation).[2]

[1] Moshe Idel, *Ascensions on High in Jewish Mysticism. Pillars, Lines, Ladders* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2005), 23.
[2] Ioan Petru Culianu, *Psychanodia I* (Leiden: Brill, 1983), 10-15.

Formulated as such, the theme of ascension belongs mainly to the realm of religious mysticism, and I am indeed primarily interested in the religious side of Agrippa's thought and work, bearing in mind, however, that history has not granted him the position of a mystic. Agrippa's religious thought has been in the focus of scholarly interest for a while now and it is my intention to use that impetus for my own examination. On the other hand, I will take into consideration that there is yet another aspect or mode of ascension in Agrippa other than purely mystical or spiritual, the one that above all aims at the ascent to power and counts on man's ability *to become like God* and acquire divine prerogatives of creating and manipulating nature. For the sake of my analysis, I will introduce two tentative categories of "magical" and "spiritual" ascension with the initial presumption that there are enough reasons to consider such a distinction, but with the idea that these two are not and cannot be entirely different in kind.

The choice of my research question follows the line of the long-standing scholarly debate over Cornelius Agrippa and his apparently "split position" or "inner conflict." The Renaissance magus who at certain points scorned and rejected his involvement in magic and later took it up again (if he ever made a break), while displaying a genuine and exemplary vigor in pursuing Christian virtues throughout his life, has never ceased to puzzle the students of his thought. I will not even try to offer any "solutions" or "answers" to that puzzle, for the sole purpose of this thesis is to highlight the question of Agrippa's "conflict" from a specific point of view, with regard to his attitude towards the problem of ascension. Moreover, I need to emphasize that the question of two postulated conflicting notions of ascension in Agrippa does not fully correspond to the commonly drawn borderline between his

magical and skeptical-devotional writings, as the traces of both notions can be found scattered – and often tied to each other inextricably – throughout his works.

Given that Agrippa's intended program of spiritual reform and synthesis of different spiritual traditions was by no means an isolated phenomenon in his time, I believe that the consideration of Agrippa's view on the problem of ascension is important for a better orientation to the confusing spiritual map of the early sixteenth-century Renaissance. Preceded and influenced by the Florentine Neoplatonism of Marsilio Ficino, the Christian cabala of Pico della Mirandola and Johannes Reuchlin, the magical theology of Johannes Trithemius, but also by the biblical humanism of Erasmus and John Colet and to some extent the radical ideas of Luther and other reformists, Agrippa played a significant role in a period which for many reasons can be called transitional. It was marked by both a strong crisis of religious identity and a fervent need for religious reform, for the sake of which many resorted to the reinterpretation of ancient doctrines as a means of "enriching" the existing system of spiritual paradigms and values.

My interest in this topic stems, on one hand, from a general interest in transitional periods of history and, on the other, from the utter failure of the attempted Renaissance synthesis and the negative image of it in the eyes of many historians of philosophy and religion. Thus, for instance, Joseph Leon Blau considered the use of cabala by Renaissance Christian thinkers to be "a fad of no lasting significance" and "a blind alley,"[3] whereas Gershom Scholem went even further in criticizing any attempts at creating "some sort of universal religion" based on the assumption "that there is such a thing as an abstract mystical religion" that tends "to abandon the fixed

[3] Joseph Leon Blau, *The Christian Interpretation of the Cabala in the Renaissance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944), 1.

forms of dogmatic and institutional religion."[4] This criticism, although primarily aimed at modern universalistic and theistic trends, reflects Scholem's identical attitude towards the Renaissance synthesizers and, moreover, points to a more general problem of the significance and value of "unofficial" doctrinal interactions between different religions and spiritual traditions. The range of questions involved is broad: What makes a religion become "worn-out" and lose its *mysterium tremendum*? What is it that makes one feel entitled to or capable of "enriching" it? How far can one go in this process of enriching and still consider oneself a true adherent to the same creed? And so on. Far from expecting to answer these questions, I am implying what lies beneath the question of ascension and why it should be considered a highly relevant question in our own time, marked by new religious syncretism.

My thesis consists of three chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter gives a general outline of Agrippa's life and writings with regard to their historical context. It also delineates and explains my choice of the primary sources. As mentioned above, the main source analyzed is the *De occulta philosophia*, and taken into consideration are also two other crucially important writings of Agrippa, the *De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum atque artium, atque excellentia verbi Dei declamatio* (Declamation on the uncertainty and vanity of sciences and arts, and the excellence of the word of God) and *Liber de triplici ratione cognoscendi Deum* (On the three ways to know God). In several instances, Agrippa's correspondence has been referred to as well. While in the cases of the *De occulta philosophia* and the *De triplici ratione* I have been able to use critical editions, both provided by Vittoria Perrone Compagni, the *De vanitate* and Agrippa's correspondence have been available to me only in the

[4] Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 6.

standard non-critical editions of his *Opera*. The first chapter closes with a brief outline of the twentieth-century scholarship on Agrippa.

In the second chapter I introduce the methodology and context of my analysis, and then proceed to the analysis itself. Various aspects of ascension are analyzed as they appear primarily in the *De occulta philosophia*, but also in the other two writings mentioned above. I have divided these aspects into two categories according to the themes I consider crucially important for the treatment of my research question. Under the category of "the cosmological prerequisites for ascension" I analyze Agrippa's views on the questions of emanation, the cosmic hierarchy, and universal correspondences, while under the category of the "anthropological aspects of ascension" I analyze his treatment of the *homo imago Dei* doctrine, man's fall into the world, and his "ontological dignity" that makes his ascension possible.

The third chapter brings another concept into the analysis, that of *imitatio*. With regard to the conclusions based on the examination from the previous chapter, I proceed with a brief analysis of the two apparently opposed spiritual currents lying behind the two notions of ascension, namely the Christian on the one hand, and the Neoplatonic/hermetic on the other, with Jewish mysticism as a case in between, however closer to the latter. (Certainly, Neoplatonism and hermeticism cannot be taken as a single "spiritual current," but with regard to the problem of ascension they show significant similarities). I contrast these two currents using the existing concept of *imitatio Christi*, which I believe influenced Agrippa to a large extent, and provisionally introducing an opposing concept of *imitatio Dei Patris* – again, as in the case of two types of ascension, to increase the clarity of my analysis.

The conclusion summarizes the main argument of my thesis, namely that Agrippa's notion of ascension as put forward in the *De occulta philosophia* is of

clearly Neoplatonic and hermetic origin, emphasizing one's personal initiative and effort in the process of deification, and implying the purely non-corporeal nature of it. On the other hand, I argue that there are a number of instances in the writings examined that clearly indicate the orthodox Christian understanding of ascension, in which the emphasis is on the *descending* grace of God and an unbridgeable ontological gap between God and man. Thus, what appears as the final picture is an irresolvable ambiguity of Agrippa's notion of ascension, a situation quite peculiar to the German humanist.

Finally, I would like to point out that my approach to the examination of Agrippa's concept of ascension has been significantly shaped and influenced by Professor György E. Szőnyi and his study of the doctrine of exaltation, for which I am very grateful to him.

Agrippa and His Writings in Their Historical Context

Although it cannot be claimed that any single moment in history has been static and devoid of some kind of tension, one could say with certainty that the time in which Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa (1486-1535) lived was particularly turbulent and in many ways crucial for European history in the following centuries. It was, above all, a time of religious and intellectual crisis, in which bold spirits such as Martin Luther set an entirely new course for Western Christianity, humanists led by Erasmus of Rotterdam attempted a reform of the Church from within, and the followers of synthesizers such as Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola further developed their teachers' programs of reconciling different spiritual traditions. It is within the framework of these dynamic circumstances and diverse influences that Agrippa's complex and multilayered thought should be considered. This chapter will, therefore, provide some basic information on Agrippa and his work, at least those aspects of it that I consider relevant for the subject matter.

After a short biographical sketch, I will give a detailed outline of the main primary source I will be dealing with – Agrippa's *De occulta philosophia libri tres* (Three books of occult philosophy)[5] – as well as a few other works of his that I will occasionally refer to in the course of my analysis. Given the size and scope of this thesis, I have decided to take into consideration only two of them: the *De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum atque artium, atque excellentia verbi Dei declamatio* (Declamation on the uncertainty and vanity of sciences and arts, and the excellence of the word of God) and the *Liber de triplici ratione cognoscendi Deum* (On the three ways to know God).[6]

[5] Hereafter: *De occulta philosophia*.
[6] Hereafter: *De vanitate* and *De triplici ratione.*

These three works, with occasional references to Agrippa's correspondence, will form the corpus of the primary sources I intend to investigate, with strong emphasis on the *De occulta philosophia*. At the end of this chapter, I will give a brief and basic overview of the relevant scholarly approaches.

1.1 Agrippa's life

This sketch is to a large extent based on Agrippa's main biographer, Charles Nauert, who is frequently referred to by scholars dealing with Agrippa in their accounts of his life.[7] Cornelius Agrippa was born in Cologne in 1486 to a distinguished family which, he claimed, had a long tradition of serving the Hapsburgs. He matriculated at the University of Cologne in 1499 and received the degree of *magister artium* in 1502. During that period, Agrippa could have been under a strong influence of the famous scholar Johannes Rack von Sommerfeld (Aesticampanus, 1460-1520), who lectured on Pliny the Elder and his *Naturalis Historia*. It was most probably Agrippa's early studies of Pliny, as well as of Albertus Magnus, that stirred his interest in natural philosophy and *magia naturalis* related to it. Another learned member of the Cologne University at that time, Anderas Canterius, lectured on the renowned Catalonian philosopher and mystic Ramon Lull (1232-1316), and influenced Agrippa profoundly in that regard.[8] An interesting and important detail concerning Agrippa's early education is a remark in his letter to the abbot Trithemius

[7] Charles Nauert, *Agrippa and the Crisis of Renaissance Thought* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965), 8-115 (Hereafter: Nauert, *Agrippa*). See also Cornelius Agrippa, *De occulta philosophia libri tres*, ed. V. Perrone Compagni (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 1-10; Marc Van der Poel, *Cornelius Agrippa, the Humanist Theologian and his Declamations* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 15-49; Christopher I. Lehrich, *The Language of Demons and Angels. Cornelius Agrippa's Occult Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 25-32. The two chief nineteenth-century biographers of Agrippa, Henry Morley and Auguste Prost, have remained out of my reach during this research. Morley's views have been partly accessible to me in Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, tr. James Freake, a commentary by Donald Tyson (St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 1997), xv-xxxvii.

[8] In his mature years Agrippa was very critical of some of his professors for their scholastic rigidness, see Van der Poel, *Agrippa, the Humanist Theologian*, 15, 45.

that he had been interested in and earnestly studied occult phenomena since his childhood.[9]

In early 1507 Agrippa moved to Paris, probably to continue his studies there, or, according to another conjecture, to pursue a diplomatic mission on behalf of Emperor Maximilian I.[10] This year also marks the beginning of his surviving correspondence. In Paris Agrippa entered the circle of French enthusiast humanists such as Symphorien Champier and Charles de Bouelles, and it was probably during his stay there that he gathered around himself a group of like-minded men interested in occult disciplines in the form of a secret society.[11] Some of the members of that ever-expanding elite society, who became Agrippa's close friends, helped him throughout his life in numerous troubles and calamities. By the time of his stay in Paris, he was already closely acquainted with Marsilio Ficino's works on hermeticism, as well as with those of Pico della Mirandola and Johann Reuchlin on the Christian cabala. These two currents of thought marked the direction Agrippa would never depart from.

In 1509 he got the opportunity to give a course of lectures at the University of Dôle on Reuchlin's cabalistic treatise *De verbo mirifico* (1494). This brought him an accusation from the local Franciscans of being a judaizing heretic and spoiled his hopes for the academic career. This was the beginning of a long series of clashes between Agrippa and clergymen that influenced his fate greatly throughout his life.

The year 1510 was of great significance for Cornelius Agrippa as he met two persons who profoundly influenced him: Johann Trithemius, the abbot of Sponheim

[9] Agrippa, *Epistolae*, 1, 23, n.d., in *Henrici Cornelii Agrippa ab Nettesheim, armatae militiae equitis aurati et iuris utriusque ac medicinae doctoris operum pars posterior* (Lyon: per Beringos fratres, n.d.), 702-3 (hereafter: *Opera*).

[10] What Agrippa did between the year of graduation (1502) and that of his moving to Paris is not known, but it is generally assumed that during this period he entered the service of the Habsburg family, first as an undersecretary, and later, in his Italian period, as a soldier.

(at that time residing in the monastery of St. James in Würzburg), a distinguished theologian and humanist already famed for his knowledge of the occult, and John Colet, a leading English humanist and dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London. Early that year, or at the end of 1509, Agrippa visited Trithemius in Würzburg and discussed different occult matters with him. The abbot encouraged his young protégé in his studies and advised him concerning a magical treatise Agrippa was writing at that time. This treatise was the juvenile draft of the *De occulta philosophia*, which Agrippa dedicated to his spiritual tutor several months later.[12] He was only twenty-three at that time.

If Trithemius fostered Agrippa's further interest in the occult, John Colet did the same for Biblical studies. Namely, sometime later that year, Agrippa was sent to London – this time probably on a diplomatic mission, as he himself mentions – and there he met John Colet, with whom he studied Scriptures, especially the Epistles of St. Paul.[13] Commenting on this curious mixture of apparently opposite influences of Trithemius and Colet, whom Agrippa also regarded as his spiritual teacher, Charles Nauert points out:

> These studies with the Dean of St. Paul's are important because they show that Agrippa was early exposed to that emphasis on a simple Biblical religion (yet one within the Roman tradition) that characterized not only Colet but many of the northern humanists. Very probably there was a direct connection between Agrippa's Biblical studies at London and his enthusiasm for occult learning, with cabalistic exegetical methods serving as the link between the two kinds of study.[14]

[11] On the character and members of that society, which might have included Champier and de Bouelles, see Nauert, *Agrippa*, 18-24.
[12] On the master-apprentice relationship between Trithemius and Agrippa, and their joint endeavor to cleanse magic from its ill fame, see also Noel Brann, *Trithemius and Magical Theology. A Chapter in the Controversy over Occult Studies in Early Modern Europe* (New York: SUNY Press, 1999), 152-156.
[13] Nauert, *Agrippa*, 31-32. Van der Poel, *Cornelius Agrippa, the Humanist Theologian*, 21.
[14] Nauert, *Agrippa*, 31.

The significance of Colet's influence can best be gauged by the fact that throughout the following years Agrippa earnestly worked on a commentary of the Epistle to the Romans, carrying it wherever he traveled.

Serving Emperor Maximilian I either as a military officer or as an envoy, Agrippa spent the period from 1511 to 1518 in Italy steeped in the chaos of the French-Italian wars.[15] This gave him an opportunity, just like Erasmus before him, to be exposed to the Renaissance culture of Italy. A large part of Agrippa's stay there (whenever he was not in the emperor's or someone else's service) was dedicated to his lifelong desire for a settled academic career. Thus, for instance, he was twice a lecturer at the University of Pavia: first in 1512, when he probably lectured on Plato's *Symposium*, and again in 1515, when he taught a course on the *Pimander*, the first dialogue in the *Corpus Hermeticum*. Sometime between 1515 and 1517 he also lectured at the University of Turin, perhaps on the Epistles of St. Paul.[16] It was during the flight from Pavia, after the French victory at Marignano in 1515, that Agrippa lost his incomplete commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans, found later by a student of his, Christoph Schylling of Lucerne, but ultimately lost again.[17]

Just as in France, Agrippa got in touch with Italian occultists and formed a group in which he figured as a leader and an authority in the field. He might have met Paolo Ricci, the converted Jew and an important translator of cabalistic and Talmudic treatises. The strong influence of cabala upon Agrippa and his friends was very much due to the abundance of that kind of literature in Italy after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492. This influence can be clearly seen in a treatise entitled *Liber de triplici ratione cognoscendi Deum* that he wrote in 1516 and dedicated to Guglielmo

[15] On the particulars of Agrippa's stay in Italy see Nauert, *Agrippa* , 35-54; and also idem, "Agrippa von Nettesheim in Renaissance Italy. The Esoteric Traditions," *Studies in the Renaissance* 6 (1959): 195-215.
[16] Nauert, *Agrippa*, 51.

Paleologo, marquis of Monferrato, one of his patrons at the time. Another short text probably dating to Agrippa's Italian period is his *Dehortatio gentilis theologiae* (A dissuasion against pagan theology), written as a discouragement to some friends of his not who inquired about the teachings of Hermes Trismegistus.

Always in search of powerful patrons and a settled position, which involved him more and more in a courtly lifestyle, Agrippa left Italy disappointed and moved to the free imperial city of Metz, where he accepted the office of *orator* and *advocatus* in 1518. By that time Luther had already initiated his struggle for reform, which Agrippa began to follow with a lively interest.[18] During the two-year period of his stay in Metz two important episodes occurred: Agrippa rescued a peasant woman accused of witchcraft, and he debated with local theologians and clergy over a brief treatise written by Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples concerning the controversy over the monogamy of St. Anne. Both cases made him a dire enemy of the local Dominicans and Franciscans and he was more or less compelled to leave Metz in 1520.

After a few restless years of changing positions, patrons, and places of residence (Cologne 1520, Geneva 1521-1523, Freiburg until 1524), in 1524 Agrippa moved to Lyon, where he accepted the position of physician to Louise of Savoy, the queen mother of France. The queen proved to be both contemptuous of her physician and parsimonious when it came to the issue of his salary. Trapped in various intrigues and intricacies of courtly life, regarded as a courtly astrologer (a position he abhorred), and with practically no salary at all for years, Agrippa grew increasingly bitter and

[17] Ibid., 40, 42, 64.

[18] There is no evidence that Agrippa ever publicly renounced his loyalty to the Roman Catholic Church. Luther's ideas did not really match the spirit of pre-Reformation humanism. See Van der Poel, *Agrippa, the Humanist Theologian*, 133-136, on his explicit allegiance to Rome. However, on his not readily identifiable position on the confusing map of different reformatory movements and ideas, see Paola Zambelli, "Magic and Radical Reformation in Agrippa of Nettesheim," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 39 (1976): 69-103.

frustrated.[19] To what extent these circumstances influenced the writing of his equally bitter declamation *De vanitate*, which was finished in Lyon in 1526, is a matter of interpretation, but he was ultimately happy to resign and leave France at the end of 1527, his relationships with the queen having worsened dramatically.

The next five years, from 1528 to 1532, Agrippa spent in the Low Countries, mostly in Antwerp, where due to the help of his loyal friends he obtained the position of advisor and historiographer to Margaret of Austria, governor of the Low Countries. This period is of particular importance as it was only then that Agrippa, in 1529, obtained an imperial *privilegium* to publish several of his works, most importantly the *De occulta philosophia* and the *De vanitate*, which were published in the following years. Yet another conflict with the clergy broke out as the theologians from the Faculty of Theology at Sorbonne (and later at Louvain) condemned *De vanitate* as an offensive work against the official doctrine of the Church and in favor of Lutheranism. Once again, Agrippa lost his position and had to leave the city. After a brief imprisonment for debt in 1531, he visited his hometown, Cologne, and found a temporary refuge there under a new patron, the Archbishop elector Hermann von Wied, to whom he dedicated the first book of his *De occulta philosophia*. The printing of that work was long hampered by the Dominicans of Cologne (in 1531 only the first book was published), but the integral version finally appeared in 1533.

Agrippa's surviving correspondence ends in the second half of 1533, which makes a reconstruction of the final stage of his life problematic. Apart from a number of fantastic, often intentionally malicious reports depicting Agrippa's last moments in Faustian colors, the account of Johann Weyer, his student from the Antwerp days,

[19] How frustrating the position of a courtly astrologer or magician could be for a philosophically minded person not interested in courtly intrigues is aptly indicated by Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 96-100. Agrippa's correspondence from the Lyon period is remarkably bitter.

provides a favorable and balanced view with a few additional facts.[20] One is Agrippa's unexplained journey to France in 1535, where Francis I, the son of the late queen mother Louise of Savoy, had him arrested for some old offences against her.[21] He was soon released with the help of his friends, but several months later got sick and died in Grenoble, at the age of forty-eight. Somewhat paradoxically, he was buried in the local Dominican church.

1.2. De occulta philosophia libri tres

The largest and most complex among Agrippa's works, *De occulta philosophia,* is a summa of practically all the esoteric doctrines and magical practices accessible to the author. These vast and diverse materials are organized within a tripartite structure that corresponds to a Renaissance typology of magic based on the Neoplatonic notion of a cosmic hierarchy.[22] Thus the first book deals with natural magic corresponding to the physical realm, the second with celestial or mathematical magic corresponding to the celestial realm, and the third with ceremonial or intellectual magic corresponding to the intellectual realm of the created world.

Each of these three parts embraces a number of doctrines and practices coming from different esoteric traditions that Agrippa expounds and connects according to his hierarchical scheme. Furthermore, each element is subject to the main idea of the work, namely that magic is the most sublime philosophy by no means inferior to religion, which enables one "to ascend by the same degrees through each world, to the

[20] Weyer gave a biographical sketch of Agrippa in his work *De praestigiis daemonum*, portraying him as a sober and honorable person. See also Agrippa, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy,* xxxiv-xxxv.
[21] According to Henry Morley, referred to by Donald Tyson in Agrippa, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, xxxiv, Emperor Charles V sentenced Agrippa to death at the urging of the Dominicans, and then changed his sentence into exile to France. Nauert, *Agrippa* 113-115, does not mention this sentence and leaves the question of Agrippa's final journey to France open.
[22] Lehrich, *The Language of Demons and Angels*, 36. György E. Szőnyi, *John Dee's Occultism: Magical Exaltation Through Powerful Signs* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004), 110-12.

same very original world itself, the Maker of all things, the First Cause" (*per eosdem gradus, per singulos mundos, ad eundem ipsum archetypum mundum, omnium opificem et primam causam…conscendere*) [23] This idea justifies the intention of the author to rehabilitate and re-establish magic in its incorrupt form, as Agrippa declared in a letter to Trithemius attached to the first book of *De occulta philosophia*.

The first book contains a general definition of magic (ch. 2), a theory of the four elements and the occult virtues depending upon them (ch. 3-10), and a theory of emanation through the medium of Ideas, the World Soul, and the rays of the stars (ch. 11-14). This is further elaborated by introducing a complex system of natural correspondences or the sympathies and antipathies inherent in such a hierarchically structured world (ch. 15-21). Here Agrippa explains how a magician should seek the occult virtues of things in the realms of herbs, animals, stones, and so on. As all these virtues have their astrological correspondences, the author systematically deals with each planet, from the sun to the fixed stars and their constellations (ch. 22-32), explaining which things are subject to which celestial objects. This is followed by a discussion of various mixtures of elements and virtues and numerous ways to exploit them (ch. 34-59). Several chapters are dedicated to the mind and its passions and potentials (ch. 60-68), and the closing part treats speech and the power of both the spoken and written word (ch. 69-74).

The second book discusses celestial or mathematical magic through its basic elements – numbers and planets – within the philosophical framework of cosmic harmony and proportion; thus it also deals with celestial images, geometry, bodily proportions, and music. Chapters 2-21 are dedicated to numbers, their symbolism,

[23] *De occulta philosophia* I 1, 3 (85). Hereafter, I will refer to Agrippa's work in the following way: the abbreviated original title, the book and chapter number, the page number in James Freake's English translation, and the page number (given in parentheses) of the original text in Perrone Compagni's critical edition (see footnote 7). Where necessary, I will modify Freake's translation.

their "force," and correspondences with the phenomena of the other worlds, down the ladder from the original to the infernal world. Having given a set of magical tables and seals for each planet (ch. 22), the author moves on to discuss various related topics: geometrical figures, sound and musical harmony, the proportion of man's body, and so on (ch. 23-28). In chapters 29-52 Agrippa deals with astrology proper and with talismanic magic related to it, describing various images and seals that represent celestial objects or abstract concepts. The closing chapters (ch. 55-59) offer an analysis of the World Soul and a list of the celestial souls and their symbolic names. Interestingly, the last chapter (60) figures as a prologue to the third book, as it introduces the idea of magical ascension by invocation and prayer.

The third book deals with those aspects of magic which are closely related to religious practices and attitudes. Thus it could be argued that, from the point of view of Agrippa's declared intentions, it is the central part of the whole work. It prescribes how an ideal religious magus should utilize his knowledge of the divine to attain the highest realm of the world. The book begins with an important clarification of the relationship between religion and magic (ch. 1-6), followed by a general discussion of the nature of God and divine names (ch. 7-14). Subsequently, the nature and names of intelligences, demons, and angels are discussed (ch. 15-22). In chapter 23 the author speaks about the language of angels, and then proceeds to different methods of deriving angelic and demonic names (ch. 24-28) and their characters and seals (ch. 29-31). Chapters 32 and 33 offer a rather general view of techniques of summoning and exorcizing spirits, while chapters 34 and 35 discuss the lower orders of demonic beings. Several chapters (ch. 36-44) deal with crucial problems of spiritual anthropology – such as the *homo imago Dei* doctrine, the relationship between the soul and the body, and so on – including the implicitly related question of

necromancy. In chapters 45-53 the author discusses different types of prophetic madness and ecstasy, while in the closing chapters (54-64) he speaks about different preparatory requirements for a proper magical operation, such as ritual purity, sacrifices, and so on. In the last chapter (65), which is entitled "The conclusion of the whole work," Agrippa admits that he intentionally obscured the subject matter of his work in order to protect it from the wicked and incredulous.

Agrippa's *De occulta philosophia* is a monumental synthesis of various magical traditions, from late Hellenistic hermeticism, through medieval magic and cabala to the doctrines of Florentine Neoplatonism and Christian cabalism. It is neither an original contribution to the studies of magic nor a practical manual of it, but its encyclopedic structure makes it the most comprehensive magical summa written in the Renaissance. However, the final form and content of this work are the result of a long and complex creative process, as the juvenile draft that Agrippa presented to Trithemius in 1510 differs much from the final version published in 1533.[24] The former is considerably shorter and structured differently. As Christopher Lehrich points out, "two of Agrippa's most important sources, Reuchlin's *De arte cabalistica* and Francesco Zorzi's *De harmonia mundi*, had not been written in 1510, and their incorporation dramatically expands the text."[25] It is certain that more than two decades of revising and rewriting the text, with an ever increasing body of reference literature, make it extremely difficult to analyze from the viewpoint of its consistency. This problem remains entirely beyond the scope of my thesis, and the only version of the *De occulta philosophia* I will examine is the one from 1533 as given in Vittoria Perrone Compagni's critical edition.

[24] This version is preserved in its original form at the University Library of Würzburg, cf. Henricus Cornelius Agrippa, *De occulta philosophia libri tres*, Würzburg, Universitätsbibliothek, ms. M.ch.q.50. It was used by Vittoria Perrone Compagni for her critical edition of the work.
[25] Lehrich, *The Language of Demons and Angels*, 39.

1.3 Other works considered

Given the main task of this thesis – to examine Agrippa's notion(s) of ascension – it could be argued that my selection of the auxiliary sources leaves out some other important works of Agrippa that shed additional light on the problem, such as the already mentioned *Dehoratio gentilis theologiae*, the *Dialogus de homine* (Dialogue on the human race, 1515), or the *De originali peccato disputabilis opinionis declamatio* (Declamation of a disputable opinion on the original sin, 1518). Once again, this work, due to its scope, cannot afford an overall analysis that the problem of ascension in Agrippa deserves. Therefore I have decided to take into account at least a few writings that supplement the *De occulta philosophia* in depicting the two apparently divided sides of Agrippa – the *De vanitate*, depicting the side of "Agrippa the Christian" contrasted to "Agrippa the pagan magus" of the *De occulta philosophia*, and the *De triplici ratione* depicting an image of the author that in this sense might be called "mixed." Needless to say, such a division is provisory and should not be taken too literally.

1.3.1 De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum atque artium, atque excellentia verbi Dei declamatio

Usually regarded as Agrippa's second main work, it is much smaller and simpler in structure, just as it was much better known in his time than the *De occulta philosophia*. Furthermore, it did not have such a prolonged and difficult birth as Agrippa's magical encyclopedia; written in 1526, it was published as early as 1531, only to be condemned as heretical in the same year by the Sorbonne theologians and

soon afterwards by the Faculty of Theology at Louvain as well.[26] It is a highly sarcastic treatise consisting of a prefatory letter to the reader and a hundred and three short chapters in which the author radically denies that it is possible for human reason to reach any positive knowledge about the Absolute. This denial pertains to all known arts and disciplines: grammar, poetry, historiography, rhetoric, and logic (chapters 3-7), mathematics, arithmetic, geometry (chapters 11, 12, 16, 22), natural philosophy, metaphysics, ethics (chs. 49, 53, 54), architecture, astronomy, medicine (ch. 28, 30, 82-86), and so on. At the beginning of his preface, the author asserts that there is nothing in this world which is not corrupted, nor any learning which is not abused, and goes on to demonstrate it. All human knowledge is useless, and learning plays no part in salvation. What puzzles the reader acquainted with the esoteric side of Agrippa's opus is his equally bitter and ironical rejection of magic, cabala, alchemy, and different types of divination (chs. 32-47), although his criticism of magic is not so much aimed at its epistemological value as it raises the question of *discessio spirituum.*[27] Closely related to this is the famous retraction of the *De occulta philosophia* given in chapter 48. I will devote more attention to this problem in the second chapter, below.

What really brought about the condemnation of the *De vanitate* was its clearly anticlerical and anti-scholastic tone. Agrippa's poisonous attacks on monks, theologians, and Church magistrates (chs. 56-62), as well as his severe criticism of the "pagan" background of the Church images, statues, and ceremonies (57-60), made it

[26] Van der Poel, *Agrippa, the Humanist Theologian*, 116-152. For a general introduction to the work see also Lehrich, *The Language of Demons and Angels*, 32-36; Szőnyi, *John Dee's Occultism*, 120-127; and Frances A. Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 41-44.

[27] Szőnyi, *John Dee's Occultism*, 123. Agrippa is careful to emphasize the difference between *goetia*, or black magic, and *theurgia*, "magic of divine things," which is supposed to be governed by good angels.

easy for his Sorbonne opponents to condemn this work.[28] However, Agrippa goes even further in his assertion of the erroneous nature of humans and extends it to the key figures of the Old and New Testament: Moses, David, the apostles, the evangelists, and the prophets were all men and lacked in certain respects the knowledge of the truth, and in certain respects they have been found out to be mendacious.[29] Referring to St. Paul (Romans 3:4), he postulates a radically negative claim that "every human being is a liar" (*omnis homo mendax*).[30] Thus, two currents of his criticism – that of various institutional abuses of the Christian religion, and the epistemological insufficiency of human learning – join together in what Lehrich defines as part of the genre of skeptical and satirical reformist works of the period.[31]

However, apart from its skeptical tone, usually regarded as Pyrrhonist, Agrippa's humanist declamation, just like Erasmus's *Praise of Folly* (*Encomium moriae*), to which it is often compared, bears yet another message, that of the essential importance of faith. The failure of the prophets or the evangelists is not the failure of the Holy Spirit (ch. 99); only God himself and Christ can teach us the knowledge of the Word of God (ch. 100, entitled *De verbo Dei*); the Scripture is the only receptacle of truth, but in order to understand it one needs faith (ibid.); truth is already within us and we should seek it there (ch. 103). This aspect of the *De vanitate* has often been compared to Nicholas of Cusa's *On Learned Ignorance* (*De docta ignorantia*), suggesting that the author advocates a kind of mystical *via negativa* supported by the principle of *sola fides* as the proper means to attain illumination.[32]

[28] See Van der Poel, *Agrippa, the Humanist Theologian*, 269-274 for the list of passages from *De vanitate* condemned by the Sorbonne.
[29] *De vanitate*, chapter 90, *Opera*, 294.
[30] *De vanitate*, chapter 59, *Opera* 109-10.
[31] Lehrich, *The Language of Demons and Angels*, 36.
[32] Ibid., 33; Szőnyi, *John Dee's Occultism*, 123-125; Van der Poel, *Agrippa, the Humanist Theologian*, 153, 57; Yates, *The Occult Philosophy*, 42-4.

Finally, it should be mentioned that a considerable part of the scholarly debates over the *De vanitate* has been dedicated to the question of its "true" purpose. As Van der Poel points out, due to Agrippa's centuries-long reputation of being a charlatan, his declamations were often interpreted as rhetorical exercises, literary paradoxes without serious content. This was especially so in the case of *De vanitate* and such an attitude is not entirely absent from modern scholarship, even though, in my opinion, Van der Poel has managed to demonstrate the opposite. In his words,

> [*D*]*eclamatio* is a genre that illustrates how the humanists used the ancient theory of eloquence as a means to open up serious discussion and public exchange of ideas about current problems which the authoritative circles…tended to ignore.[33]

This is the way in which I have approached Agrippa's *De vanitate.*

1.3.2 Liber de triplici ratione cognoscendi Deum

This is the longest and most important among the works from Agrippa's Italian period, written in 1516, but not published until 1529.[34] It is also, as Vittoria Perrone Compagni points out, perhaps the first integral and autonomous exposition of Agrippa's philosophical and religious views.[35] As the title of this six-chapter-long treatise suggests, God has given man three ways of obtaining the knowledge of him. These three ways – or "books" (*libri*), as Agrippa calls them – conceptually correspond to a common theological division of mankind into three groups: the pagans (*gentes*), the Jews as the recipients of the Old Testament, and the Christians as

[33] Marc Van der Poel, "The Latin Declamatio in Renaissance Humanism," *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 20, No. 3 (1989): 471-478, quote on 478. For a general overview and an extended discussion of the problem see idem, *Agrippa, the Humanist Theologian*, 153-184.

[34] For a general introduction to the work, see Vittoria Perrone Compagni, *Ermetismo e Cristianesimo in Agrippa. Il De triplici ratione cognoscendi Deum* (Florence: Edizioni Polistampa, 2005), 52-77, and Nauert, *Agrippa in Renaissance Italy*, 203-205.

[35] Perrone Compagni, *Ermetismo e Cristianesimo*, 52. The *Dialogus de homine*, another important work from that period closely related to *De triplici ratione*, contains the basics of Agrippa's theological thought as well, but is not taken into detailed consideration in this thesis. See ibid., 37-51; Van der Poel, *Agrippa, the Humanist Theologian*, 51.

the recipients of the New Testament. Thus, first comes the book of the created world given to pagans (*liber creaturarum praepositum gentibus*), in other words, the knowledge of God from nature as revealed to the *prisci theologi*; the second, a step closer to perfection, is the book of laws and vows given to the Jews (*liber legis et eloquiorum quem* [*Deus*] *dedit Iudaeis*); finally, the third and the most perfect, the book of the Gospels is given to the Christians, who came to know God through his own son (*liber Evangelii datum Christianis, qui cognovimus Deum per ipsum Dei Filium*).[36] The first two ways only lead to the third one as a kind of *praeparatio evangelica* – certainly an orthodox idea from the Christian point of view.

Agrippa's views, however, become problematic from the standard theological standpoint when they come to the interpretation of the Scripture. In the fourth chapter, which discusses the *liber secundus*, Agrippa brings forth his crucial conviction: Moses received a twofold revelation, literal and spiritual (*duplicem legem, videlicet literalem et spiritualem*), and had only the first one written down, whereas the second was delivered to "seventy sages" orally, to be further transmitted in the same way and only to adepts (*septuaginta sapientibus…viva voce…ut quisque eorum ordine perpertuo suis successoribus viva voce revelarent*).[37] This "parallel spiritual tradition" has, on the one hand, come to be known as cabala, and on the other, as the hermetic tradition, which owes its existence to Hebrew contacts with ancient Egypt. These two currents of spiritual tradition are necessary for a proper interpretation of the Scripture, just as simple faith devoid of scholastic delusions is necessary for its practical implementation. This approach opens room for various magical considerations, at the same time not abandoning the standpoint of a Christian. As Perrone Compagni points out,

[36] Perrone Compagni, *Ermetismo e Cristianesimo*, 102-104.
[37] Ibid., 120-122.

> What really characterizes this work in comparison to Agrippa's previous production is a simultaneous presence of two speculative currents which, in their obvious incompatibility, give a more accurate expression of Agrippa's thought… One should, therefore, regard the *De triplici* as a model from which spring both the *De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum et artium* and the second redaction of the *De occulta philosophia*… This work, written in 1516, is also the first instance of explicit reunion of the two fundamental authorities for Agrippa's "Christianity": Hermes the prophet, and the Apostle Paul.[38]

As such, the *De triplici ratione* can be of significant help in any comparative approach to the two main works of Cornelius Agrippa.

1.4. Overview of relevant scholarly approaches

Far from being an exhaustive overview, this part of the chapter will only point out several major types of scholarly attitude toward Agrippa himself and his opus, which have both been assessed quite differently by scholars – ranging from praise for intellectual value and humanist achievements to utter disqualification.

Probably as a reflection of his centuries-long reputation of being a charlatan, Agrippa received surprisingly bad treatment in Thondike's famous encyclopedic work.[39] For Thorndike, "he was to a large extent a dabbler and trifler who did not adhere to any given interest for long,"[40] whereas his *De occulta philosophia* is "a disappointing work," which became so popular not because of any intrinsic value, but because it was generally prohibited and gave vent to the leading intellectual currents of the time.

[38] Perrone Compagni, *Ermetismo e Cristianesimo*, 52: "Ciò che invece la caratterizza rispetto alla produzione precedente è la presenza contemporanea di due direttrici speculative che constituiscono – nella loro apparente incompatibilità – l' espressione più fedele della riflessione agrippiana… Si potrebbe dunque vedere nel *De triplici* il modello da cui scaturiranno sia il *De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum et artium,* sia la seconda redazione del *De occulta philosophia*… Ma lo scritto del 1516 rappresenta anche il primo luogo di esplicito ricongiungimento delle due autorità fondamentali del 'cristianesimo' di Agrippa: il profeta Ermete e l' apostolo Paolo." Translation mine.
[39] Lynn Thorndike, *History of Magic and Experimental Science* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1923-1958), Vol. 5, 129-138.
[40] Ibid., 133.

This type of scholarly attitude was echoed in a chapter Frances Yates dedicated to Agrippa in her *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (1964).[41] It makes it clear that right from the beginning Agrippa's position within the so-called Yates thesis was not equal to those of Pico della Mirandola, Marsilio Ficino and Bruno. The chapter begins with a somewhat vague and sarcastic excuse for having to deal with Agrippa at all, based on the fact that "Giordano Bruno…, *incidentally*, made great use of this *trivial* work."[42] The very first sentence is a curious disclaimer: Agrippa is by no means the most important of the magicians of the Renaissance, nor is his *De occulta philosophia* a text-book of magic at all. Finally, Yates evidently follows Thorndike by suggesting that Agrippa probably wrote his *De vanitate* as a safety device in case of theological disapproval of his magic, thus dismissing the whole problem of the retraction in a single paragraph.[43]

However, Yates's treatment of Agrippa in *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* (1979) indicates a change of attitude towards him, resulting in a shift of his position within the Yates canon. This time Agrippa is depicted as a serious religious reformer much closer to Erasmus than to a Thorndikean trifler, as a man who tried to offer "a more powerful philosophy" to troubled Christianity.[44] Thus his honorary position is secure next to Pico, Reuchlin, and Francesco Zorzi. His *De vanitate scientiarum* is no longer a façade, but an "amazing work" possibly united with the *De occulta philosophia* on a deeper level, at the point of a mystical *docta ignorantia*.[45] What could have happened in the meantime to effect such a substantial change in Yates's assessment of the German humanist? My perception is that it could

[41] Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London: Routledge Classics, 2002), 146-160.
[42] Ibid., 147. Italics mine. "This trivial work" is Agrippa's *De occulta philosophia.*
[43] Ibid., 147.
[44] Yates, *The Occult Philosophy*, 37-47.
[45] Ibid., 42-4.

have been the activity of a younger generation of scholars including Charles Nauert and Paola Zambelli, whose studies of Agrippa certainly suggested a personality of a higher stature and greater historical importance than Thorndike portrayed.[46]

Once a more affirmative attitude towards Agrippa was established, the question of his apparently "split position" (Christian magus vs. Christian skeptic) has come to the fore, becoming a kind of cornerstone for determining and polishing one's scholarly opinion on Agrippa. The inherent contradictions of his views, as reflected in the *De occulta philosophia* and the *De vanitate*, have provoked a number of interpretations. The easiest way to deal with these contradictions has been to reduce their relevance to the minimum. As Nauert points out, "most recent students of Agrippa's thought have attained a resolution of this problem by largely discounting one or another of these two major elements [magic and Christian skepticism]."[47] This can be done either by disregarding the *De occulta philosophia*, as Thorndike did, or by interpreting the *De vanitate* as a mere stylistic exercise which, in Wayne Shumaker's words, is "less a sober confession than a massive rhetorical achievement."[48]

Another highly influential interpretation has recognized in Agrippa's "split position" a relationship between the humanist skepticism and the birth of modern science.[49] On the other hand, speaking about "a real difference of attitude between the

[46] Beside her other contributions, including a thorough re-evaluation of Agrippa's philosophical position, Zambelli is important for her philological studies of Agrippa, see, e.g., Paola Zambelli, "Cornelio Agrippa, Scritti inediti e dispersi pubblicati e illustrati," *Rinascimento* 2, No. 5 (1965): 198-248. However, apart from the article referred to in footnote 18, her work has remained out of my reach during this research. Hence I rely upon the perception of her work by the following generation of scholars, most notably Vittoria Perrone Compagni.

[47] Charles G. Nauert, "Magic and Skepticism in Agrippa's Thought," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 18, No. 2 (1957): 161-182, quote from 162.

[48] Wayne Shumaker, *The Occult Sciences in the Renaissance. A Study in Intellectual Patterns* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 134. On this kind of interpretation, shared also by Barbara C. Bowen, "Cornelius Agrippa's *De vanitate*: Polemic or Paradox?" *Bibliothèque d'humanisme et renaissance* 34 (1972): 249-256, see footnote 32.

[49] For a more detailed overview of this kind of interpretation coming from Nauert, Yates, and some other scholars of the so-called Warburg School, see the next chapter, below.

two books which indicates an unresolved conflict in Agrippa's mind," D. P. Walker has emphasized yet another type of contradiction, inherent in Agrippa's very understanding of magic: regardless of his efforts to "Christianize" it, Agrippa's Neoplatonic magic remained purely demonic and irreconcilable with Christianity.[50] Thus his effort to expand Marsilio Ficino's apparently harmless natural magic has only brought Ficino into bad company, concludes Walker.[51]

Walker's line of thought has been taken up recently by Michael H. Keefer, who adheres to the idea of some kind of "crisis" or "split" in Agrippa.[52] The dichotomy that he perceives is in the realm of magic itself, with regard to its being "black" or "white." By emphasizing the archetype of Simon Magus as the focus of Agrippa's self-critical introspection in the *De vanitate* (ch. 48), he touches upon the central problem of ascension by magical means: whether it is a sacred or a demonic enterprise.[53]

If, concerning the question of Agrippa's "conflict" and philosophical views, Walker, Nauert, and Keefer might be termed "separatists," then, as an opposite and also provisory label, a number of present-day scholars dealing with the German humanist could be labeled "unionists." Namely, contrary to the idea that the two supposed sides of Agrippa's personality were sharply *separated* and conflicted, these scholars have, using different methods, arrived at the conclusion that there ought to have been a deeper *unity* of the philosophical conviction and the author's intention behind both the *De vanitate* and the *De occulta philosophia*. Furthemore, it would appear that the same kind of harmony, even if not readily noticeable, pervades all the

[50] D. P. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic From Ficino to Campanella* (London: The Warburg Institute, 1958), 91.
[51] Ibid., 96.
[52] Michael H. Keefer, "Agrippa's Dilemma: Hermetic 'Rebirth' and the Ambivalences of *De vanitate* and *De occulta philosophia*," *Rennaisance Quarterly* 41, No. 4 (1991): 614-653.
[53] Ibid., 650; see also Szőnyi, *John Dee's Occultism*, 128-131.

other writings of Cornelius Agrippa, securing him a more stable position in the intellectual history of Europe. As I am going to deal with the work of these scholars in more detail below, here I will give only a brief account of their approaches to the "Agrippa's dilemma."

Pointing out that what lies behind this "dilemma" is the paradoxical nature of a person whose religious and cultural choices are extremely difficult to classify – thereby implying that the problem of contradiction lies with the interpreter – Vittoria Perrone Compagni emphasizes the religious core of Agrippa's thought.[54] She concludes that the linking element of the *De vanitate* and the *De occulta philosophia* is the idea of the primacy of faith and God as the only source of truth and illumination.[55]

Focusing on Agrippa as an intellectual of the early sixteenth century and on his non-magical works, Marc Van der Poel analyses the rhetorical strategies and theological implications of these works and comes to a conclusion that "a careful reading [of his writings] reveals that Agrippa's Neoplatonic way of thinking is what brings coherence and cohesion to his writings."[56] Another cohesive element of Agrippa's thought, as pointed out by Perrone Compagni as well, is the primacy of faith, of the Lutheran dictum *sola fide* in one's search for illumination.[57]

Contrary to Van der Poel, Christopher I. Lehrich deals with Agrippa's magical thought, but through a complex linguistic interpretation of the *De occulta philosophia* arrives at the same conclusion, namely that what characterizes that thought is

[54] Agrippa, *De occulta philosophia*, 11, 29. On the problem of various distortions of a scholarly interpretation by subjective projection see Hildred Geertz, "An Anthropology of Religion and Magic," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 6, Vol. 1 (1975): 73-75.
[55] Ibid. See also Perrone Compagni, *Ermetismo e Cristianesimo*, 52.
[56] Van der Poel, *Agrippa, the Humanist Theologian*, 263.
[57] Ibid.

"coherence, consistency, and sophistication." [58] Accepting Van der Poel's interpretation of Agrippa's retraction as most convincing, Lehrich also asserts a coherency of the *De vanitate* and the *De occulta philosophia* in the light of Agrippa's concern to separate *magia bona* from *magia mala*.[59]

Noel Brann pursues the same idea of the rehabilitation of magic as the common driving force behind Agrippa's radically different approaches. He perceives no real dichotomy between the *De occulta philosophia* and the *De vanitate*.[60] As a matter of fact, the *De vanitate* appears to be a double-layered writing, if one can so interpret Brann's suggestion that, for instance, when Agrippa mocked the steganographical techniques of Trithemius, he had in mind only the corrupt forms of it. In other words, what at first appears to be a retraction of magic might actually be a criticism of its abuse and an implicit call for its reform.

[58] Lehrich, *The Language of Demons and Angels*, 215.
[59] Ibid., 41-2. Van der Poel, *Agrippa, the Humanist Theologian*, 51-55.
[60] Brann, *Trithemius and Magical Theology*, 157-161.

2. The Theme of Ascension in the *De occulta philosophia* with Regard to Agrippa's other Works

2.1 The focus of the analysis and the approach applied

In this chapter I will first delineate the proposed approach to and limits of the textual analysis of the *De occulta philosophia*, and then proceed to the analysis itself. Given that one of the main concerns for Cornelius Agrippa – or, more appropriately, for both the magus and the skeptic projected as the authors behind Agrippa's two main works – was how to attain the state of mystical unity with God or at least some kind of prelapsarian spiritual and intellectual position, I have formulated my research question as follows: How does Agrippa understand this process of ascension, or deification, and would it not result in two opposing and conflicting models that he ought to have reconciled? Formulated in this way, the research question necessarily guides my approach to the text and, moreover, determines what I will be looking for in it. Some weak points of such an approach are to a large extent due to the format and the scope of this study, as the complexity and vastness of the proposed topic do not allow easy and safe simplifications. I also need to specify what problems have *not* been dealt with in the course of this analysis.

Speaking about different approaches to a text like the *De occulta philosophia*, Christopher I. Lehrich says:

> There are two ways to perform an analysis by close reading of a text like *DOP*. First, one might construct a kind of parallel exegesis, with running commentary alongside a new, corrected translation. The advantage of this method is that every section of the work is considered, nothing left out… Second, one can begin with a few axes to grind, a few issues at stake, and selectively analyze those pieces of the work which seem relevant; so long as the scholar's predetermined queries are passably compatible with those of the work in question, this produces an analysis which sacrifices coverage (and tedium) for depth.[61]

[61] Lehrich, *The Language of Demons and Angels*, 213.

These words summarize my idea of a limited, narrowly focused study of the text with regard to "those pieces of the work which seem relevant." The "ax to grind" in this case is Agrippa's notion of ascension viewed in the perspective of its anthropological and theological implications, given that, as I have already mentioned, this notion more or less obviously shows two distinct and opposed facets. The efforts of some present-day scholars to melt those two facets into one coherent and systematic thought, however firmly grounded and elucidating, still do not rule out the evident tension inherent in that thought.

As I am mostly interested in the religious context of Agrippa's thought and in the relationship between religion and magic as perceived by Agrippa, I need to emphasize that I have not dealt with the problem of definitions, namely, how to define magic compared to religion. The definition of magic, whether as opposed to religion or to science, that "hoary old problem in the history of religions and anthropology,"[62] remains fully beyond the scope of this work. Apart from how Agrippa himself understands it, I have mostly referred to a common negative definition of it based on opposition: *magic as illicit religion*, as "a supplement of religion, unnecessary and exterior, despised, but always a haunting and needed figure on the margins of religion."[63]

It might seem that this view introduces the opposition between magic and religion as perceived by Keith Thomas, but his interpretation does not fit well with the purpose of my work for several reasons. First, he views magic in the light of Malinowski's functionalism as "always turn[ing] round specific, concrete and detailed problems," as opposed to religion, which "refers to the fundamental issues of human

[62] Ibid., 223.
[63] Ibid. About the advantages and weaknesses of this Durkheim-Mauss definition, convenient because it partly corresponds with Luther's criticism of the "magical" practices of Catholicism, see also 3-11 of Lehrich's work.

existence."[64] Consequently, magic "never offered a comprehensive view of the world, an explanation of human existence," it was never "a comprehensive body of doctrine."[65] This type of a utilitarian approach is due to the fact that Thomas dealt mainly with the popular perception of magic and cannot be applied in the case of thoroughly educated and philosophically minded persons such as Agrippa. In Agrippa's case, it is precisely his magical *system*, deeply rooted in the pre-modern world view, which comes to the fore. Due to the enormous possibility of interpretations concerning the nature of magical beliefs and the intention of magical practices, I have embraced yet another standpoint, that of Kieckhefer, who gives a flexible formulation of magic as "a crossing point where religion converges with science, popular beliefs intersect with those of the educated classes, and the conventions of fiction meet with the realities of daily life."[66]

Another problem that I have certainly not presumed to "solve" is that of Agrippa's apparently conflicted intentions, as outlined in the following passages (by "intentions" I mean those that he must have had while writing his two major works, for any such enterprise obviously cannot be "unintentional"). Since the notion of "the author's true meaning" has long been discredited, making the real intentions and ideas of the author inaccessible, I only refer to some of the existing *interpretations*, which often differ considerably even in the case of scholars whose more general opinions on Agrippa are congruent. The problems of interpreting or constructing the meaning of the text are, in Agrippa's case, such that it led Michael Keefer to conclude: "On the surface level, the question which his equivocations on the subject of magic pose for us

[64] Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 761.
[65] Ibid. For a criticism of Thomas' interpretation see Geertz, "An Anthropology of Religion and Magic, 71-89." The author suggests that magical beliefs derive from a coherent and general worldview just as religion ones do. See also Fritz Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), 14-19.
[66] Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 1-18, quote on 1.

is insoluble: his violent oscillations back and forth, his praise and condemnation of magic, his boasts, his threats, and his recantations, are quite simply unintelligible."[67]

Basing my approach to some extent upon Lehrich's "textual methods for the study of renaissance magic,"[68] which suggest a shift of the analytical focus from the writer to the text itself, I have conducted "a close reading" of certain passages of the *De occulta philosophia* with occasional references to the *De vanitate* and the *De triplici ratione*. In the course of this reading, I have taken the writer's words as responses to certain deeply rooted cultural, psychological, and spiritual paradigms of his time, even when (or particularly when) they appear in the form of humanist irony, for the purpose of masking unorthodoxy, or as plain jokes. This is not to say that I have taken them as self-evident, but with the awareness that "no human utterance can be seen as innocent, that, indeed, any set of words could be analyzed to reveal not just an individual but a historical consciousness at work."[69]

The focal points of my interest have been all those loci that discuss or mention the concept of ascension (elevation, deification) as one of the central ideas in the writings of Agrippa and many of his contemporaries. Ascension can be understood as significantly dual in its nature: ascension to divine powers or ascension to God himself in an attempt to reach some form of mystical unity with God. What makes the difference between these two modes of ascension is the question of motivation. In simplified terms, one can either long for God out of love and devotion, or strive for a godlike position out of one's hunger for power. Both concepts can be relatively easily extracted from a number of Agrippa's statements in both of his major works, but the problem is how to understand and interpret them in juxtaposition.

[67] Keefer, *Agrippa's Dilemma*, 650.
[68] Lehrich, *Language of Demons and Angels*, 18. On his methodology see 18-24 of this work.
[69] Daniel Boyarin, "Apartheid Comparative Religion in the Second Century: Some Theory and a Case Study," *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 36, 1 (2006): 3-34.

Partly with the intention of finding a suitable semantic expression for this duality, György E. Szőnyi has introduced the term *exaltatio* into the context of magical deification, pointing to its ambivalent meanings: *exaltatio bono sensu* equals the orthodox notion of spiritual elevation, whereas *exaltatio in malam partem* denotes the same as *superbia*, "a change of status or condition the opposite of which is humility."[70] It is along this line of reasoning that my analysis of Agrippa's idea of ascension has been directed.

2.2. The inconsistency of Agrippa's spiritual program

The author of the *De occulta philosophia* makes it clear that his mission is to restore magic to its "original," antique forms, and that he intends to do so by rejecting the current versions of "corrupted" magic, detached from its theoretical context and practiced with anti-natural intentions.[71] This program is explicitly expressed in the dedicatory letter of the twenty-three-year old Agrippa to Abbot Trithemius, where its pious character and the linking of magic with Christianity are obvious. Agrippa starts with an intriguing question, "one great question amongst the rest," wondering how it was possible that:

> magic, whereas it was accounted by all ancient philosophers the chiefest science, and by ancient wise men and priests was always held in great veneration, came at last after the beginning of the Catholic Church to be always odious to, and suspected by, the holy Fathers, and then exploded by divines, and condemned by sacred canons, and moreover by all laws and ordinances forbidden.
>
> [*Quaestio erat*] *cur magia ipsa, cum olim primum sublimitatis fastigium uno omnium veterum philosophorum iudicio teneret et a priscis illis sapientibus et sacerdotibus summa semper in veneratione habita fuerit, deinde sanctis Patribus a principio nascentis Ecclesiae catholicae odiosa semper et suspecta, tandem explosa a theologis,*

[70] Szőnyi, *John Dee's Occultism*, 34-37.
[71] Agrippa, *De occulta philosophia*, 15 (Perrone Compagni's introduction). For what Agrippa exactly understands by the term *natural magic*, as contrasted to the views of Marsilio Ficino and Johannes Trithemius, see Lehrich, *The Language of Demons and Angels*, 45-91.

> *damnata a sacris canonibus, porro omnium legum e placitis fuerit proscripta*.[72]

Agrippa does not hesitate to proclaim the answer, and in doing so he views magic in relation to the *orthodoxa religio* and God. Magic had degenerated because:

> Many false philosophers crept in, and these under the name of magicians, heaping together through various sorts of errors and factions of false religions many cursed superstitions and dangerous rites and many wicked sacrileges out of orthodox religion, even to the persecution of nature and destruction of men and injury of God, set forth very many wicked and unlawful books…to which they have by stealth prefixed the most honest name and title of magic.
>
> *Subintroierunt multi pseudophilosophi ac mentito nomine magi, qui per varias errorum sectas et falsarum religionum factiones multas admodum execrandas superstitiones atque ferales ritus, multa etiam ex orthodoxa religione scelerata sacrilegia in naturae persecutionem hominumque perniciem ac Dei iniuriam congerentes, multos admodum… reprobatae lectionis libros ediderunt, quibus magiae honestissimum nomen atque titulum furto et rapina praefixerunt*.[73]

These words imply that there once had been such a thing as pious and lawful magic. This clearly unorthodox idea, when expressed with such a strong feeling for "orthodoxy," immediately raises the question: Which spiritual tradition is Agrippa pointing to? The answer is what Charles Nauert terms "a myth of a continuous esoteric tradition," according to which "the revelation given to Moses supposedly included an esoteric interpretation which passed into cabala of the Jews and into the Hermetic literature of the Egyptians,"[74] and from there into Christianity and the philosophical mysticism of the Pythagoreans and the Platonists, respectively. Sharing this belief with many of his fellow humanists, such as Ficino, Pico, and Reuchlin, the author of the *De occulta philosophia* wants to go beyond "corrupt" medieval magic and reach that long lost and forgotten well of ancient wisdom.

[72] The letter to Trithemius from April 8 1510, *De occulta philosophia*, liii (68).
[73] Ibid.
[74] Nauert, "Magic and Skepticism in Agrippa's Thought," 167.

However, there is no question of discontinuity here. As a number of scholars have pointed out, both the early and the mature Agrippa extensively rely upon and refer to medieval authors such as, for instance, pseudo-Albertus, William of Auvergne, Roger Bacon, and Pietro d' Abano. This is what Frank L. Borchardt calls "a profound conservatism at the core of popular and applied magic," emphasizing the notion of competition between the "old" (medieval) magic and the "new one" (at the same time, paradoxically, "the oldest"), uncontaminated by intervening commentators and triflers of all sorts – the *magia renovata* of the Florentine Neoplatonists, Reuchlin and Agrippa.[75] Yet, what he sarcastically terms the phenomenon of "the 'my magic is white, yours isn't' preemptive polemic" apparently was not strong enough to cause a true discontinuity between the medieval and early modern ideas and practices of magic. On that basis Borchardt criticizes D. P. Walker and (the earlier) Frances Yates for their attempts to introduce substantial difference between the "Italian contemplative magic" and the "crudely operative German magic" represented by Agrippa.[76]

From the above-said one can conclude that the early Agrippa's intention of *magia renovata* is far from being as clear and self-evident as he expresses it in his letter to Trithemius. The question of consistency becomes even more problematic concerning the author of the final, published version of the *De occulta philosophia*. By then, Agrippa had already written (and published) his deeply skeptical and recanting treatise the *De vanitate* and, less known but equally passionate, the *Dehortatio gentilis theologiae*. This brings forth the famous problem of Agrippa's retraction: Why did he, having written and published his strongly recanting *De*

[75] Frank L. Borchardt, "The *Magus* as Renaissance Man," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 21, No. 1 (1990): 57-76.

vanitate, nevertheless revert to his extremely "credulous" *De occulta philosophia* and make great efforts to rewrite and publish it? Or, vice versa, if there was a lifelong continuity of his interest and belief in magic, how to account for his in-between literary recantation?

As already suggested, the thesis "Agrippa the charlatan," as well as that suggested by Yates – *De vanitate scientiarum* as a safety device in case of theological disapproval – are nowadays considered to be ruled out.[77] The former simply escapes the problem by not taking Agrippa too seriously, whereas the latter cannot explain the fact that Agrippa's *De vanitate* was attacked almost equally by theologians and clergy as his *De occulta philosophia*, just as he defended the two writings with the same vigor.

Equally unsatisfying and somewhat simplifying are claims such as, for instance, that of Borchardt, that an already disillusioned Agrippa was driven to publish his magical work by "a need for funds," or for material gain in general.[78] Borchardt, however, admits that "whatever moved Agrippa, it was not likely to have been insincerity" and goes on to suggest as a possible explanation Agrippa's "thorough ambivalence about the world," thus arriving at the widely debated idea of the crisis of early modern thought in a form of skepticism and disillusionment with medieval thought.[79]

The complexity of the problem can perhaps best be illustrated with the example of Agrippa's famous retraction of the *De occulta philosophia* and his

[76] Ibid., 59, quoting D. P. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic*, 75-81, and Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno*, 104. The expression "my magic is white, yours isn't" is originally Walker's, whereas "crudely operative" comes from Yates.
[77] Yates, *Giordano Bruno*, 147.
[78] Borchardt, "The *Magus* as Renaissance Man," 71; however, see Nauert, "Magic and Skepticism in Agrippa's Thought," 164, where he shows on the example of Agrippa's own words that "[h]e certainly was not entirely free from a desire to profit by the credulity of others."
[79] Borchardt, "The *Magus* as Renaissance Man," 71.

magical past as a whole. The retraction is, at least at first glance, given clearly and determinedly in chapter 48 of his *De vanitate*:

> I also as a young man wrote on magical matters three books in a sufficiently large volume, which I have entitled *Of Hidden Philosophy*, in which books whatsoever was then done amiss through curious youth, now being more advised I will that it be recanted with this retraction, for I have in times past consumed very much time and substance in these vanities.
>
> *Verum de magicis scripsi ego iuvenis adhuc libros tres, amplos satis volumine, quos de Occulta philosophia nuncupavi: in quibus quidquid tunc per curiosam adolescentiam erratum est, nunc cautior hac palinodia recantatum volo: permultum enim temporis et rerum in his vanitatibus olim contrivi.*[80]

This solemn statement, as if coming from an inquisitorial document, would in itself have been enough for one to accept the line of interpretations emphasizing the idea of disappointment and even religious crisis experienced by the mature Agrippa. It was certainly enough for Nauert to postulate three stages of the gradual development of Agrippa's mind, characterized by two distinct tracks of doubt. In the first stage, as represented by the *De occulta philosophia*, he "already doubted the power of unaided human reason to grasp reality but found refuge from intellectual anarchy by an appeal to the wisdom of an occult Antiquity."[81] In the second stage, even this wisdom was affected by his doubts and he rejected the validity of the occult lore, while at the same time he experienced the growth of his early doubts about the validity of human reason. Finally, "Agrippa recoiled from the glimpse he had had of utter intellectual anarchy" and attempted a "reconstruction," which followed three lines: a fideistic appeal to the Gospels as the only source of truth; an escape doctrine that magical writings contained a deeper meaning open only to the man illuminated by God's grace; and a skeptical attitude towards the reality of sense perception leading to the logic of

[80] *Opera*, 82. The English translation by James Stanford, as given in Lehrich, *Language of Demons and Angels*, 40.
[81] Nauert, "Magic and Skepticism in Agrippa's Thought," 182. See also idem, *Agrippa*, 157-193.

"hinting that one might in practice follow any abstract system as long as it met the pragmatic test of facts," in which Nauert saw a seed of modern scientific epistemology.

This perhaps too well-constructed argumentation, rejected or revised by most of the present-day scholars dealing with Agrippa, has found an interesting supporter in Borchardt, who developed it into a *systematic pattern* of "virtually universal disappointment in magic expressed, sooner or later, by the magicians themselves," and gave it clear religious significance by terming it "the problem of conscience faced by the Renaissance *magi*."[82]

However, the recantation has yet another part, possibly not as single-minded as the previous one:

> [A]ll they that presume to divine and prophesy not in the truth, not in the virtue of God, but in the illusion of devils, according to the operation of wicked spirits, and exercising deceits of idolatry, and showing illusions and vain visions, which suddenly ceasing, they avaunt that they can work miracles, by Magical vanities, exorcisms, enchantments, drinks of love, Agogimes, and other devilish works,…all these with Iamnes and Mambres and Simon Magus shall be condemned to the pains of everlasting fire.
>
> *Quicunque enim non in veritate, nec in virtute Dei, sed in elusione daemonum, secundum operationem malorum spirituum, divinare et prophetare praesumunt, et per vanitates magicas, exorcismos, incantationes, amatoria, agogima, et caetera opera daemoniaca,…omnes hi cum Iamne et Mambre, et Simone mago aeternis ignibus cruciandi destinabuntur.*[83]

Some scholars, such as Van der Poel and Lehrich, have interpreted this as condemning only *magia mala* and those who practice it, rather than condemning magical practices themselves, thus leaving room for a "pious" non-demonic magic.[84] As already pointed out, this kind of multilayered reading of the *De vanitate* –

[82] Borchardt, "The *Magus* as Renaissance Man," 58.
[83] *De vanitate*, chapter 48, in *Opera*, 82. Translation by James Stanford.
[84] Lehrich, *Language of Demons and Angels*, 41-42; Van der Poel, *Agrippa, the Humanist Theologian*, 51-55.

suggesting that the retraction is not what it appears to be and that Agrippa was, so to speak, a subversive or at least very subtle writer – has become a common approach of most of the present-day Agrippan scholars.

2.3. Basic conceptual framework

In the following section I will examine Agrippa's treatment of the notion of ascension within the basic conceptual framework of religion and magic. I will also discuss the concept of *operatio* as the fundamental means of achieving magical ascension. At this point of the analysis I need to repeat my remark from the Introduction that in dealing with the research question I have introduced a provisory distinction between "magical ascension" and "spiritual ascension," where only the latter corresponds to the more or less widely accepted understanding of this notion as formulated by Ioan Petru Culianu and Moshe Idel.[85] Thus, in contrast to the clearly pious desire of a mystic to become "capable of touching or being touched by the divine,"[86] the emphasis of the magical ascension is on gaining superhuman powers, for whatever reason. Here the term "ascension" is taken more broadly to denote changes that are supposed to occur in the personality of the magician in the process of acquiring those powers. Whether these changes would be only psychological or imply a kind of mystical journey *in corpore* or *in spiritu* is a question that comes down to the more general problem of the relationship between magic and mysticism. I can only say that, in my perception, Agrippa in his *De occulta philosophia* speaks of both modes (or aspects) of ascension, with emphasis on the magical one. In the following analysis I have had in mind both aspects of it, implying that magical ascension, as seen by Agrippa, does include some kind of mystical journey that could be termed

[85] Culianu, *Psychanodia I*, 5-15; Idel, *Ascensions on High*, 23-28.

"ecstatic," meaning that it takes place during the life of the performer and figures as an anticipation of the eschatological, post mortem ascension.[87] Once again, I emphasize that my distinction is only tentative as it is not possible to draw a clear line between the two supposed aspects of ascension.

2.3.1. Conscendere ad archetypum mundum. Man the Operator.

Agrippa introduces the idea of ascension in the very first sentence of the *De occulta philosophia* as a natural possibility in a hierarchically structured universe:

> Seeing there is a threefold world, elementary, celestial, and intellectual, and every inferior is governed by its superior, and receiveth the influence of the virtues thereof…magicians conceive it no way irrational that it should be possible for us *to ascend by the same degrees* through each world, to the same very original world itself, the Maker of all things, and First Cause, from whence all things are, and proceed.
>
> *Cum triplex sit mundus, elementalis, coelestis et intellectualis, et quisque inferior a superiori regatur ac suarum virium suscipiat influxum… non irrationabile putant magi nos* per eosdem gradus, *per singulos mundos, ad eundem ipsum archetypum mundum, omnium opificem et primam causam, a qua sunt omnia et procedunt omnia, posse* conscendere.[88]

A magus should engage in this apparently religious program through the process of magical *operatio*. What this process means exactly the author briefly explains in the ensuing lines: it means "collecting virtues from the threefold world" (*a triplici mundo virtutes colligere*), "joining them together" (*connectere*), and "ratifying and confirming all these through the sacred ceremonies of religions" (*haec omnia per religionum sacras ceremonias corroborare atque confirmare*).[89]

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[86] Idel, *Ascensions on High,* 23.
[87] Culianu, *Psychanodia I,* 18.
[88] *De occulta philosophia*, I 1, 3 (72). Emphasis mine.
[89] Ibid. This leads the author to a brief synopsis of the work, organized according to the threefold division of magic into natural, celestial, and intellectual. Note the plural *religionum*, which Freake rendered as a singular. On Agrippa's "cosmopolitism" see the following section, below.

It appears that, for Agrippa, ascension implies a shift of one's position in the so-called Great Chain of Being *during one's lifetime*. Ascension fostered by faith makes the mind divine (*mentem redditque divinam*)[90] as one becomes able "to ascend to the scrutiny of secret things and to the power of wonderful workings, or miracles" (*ad rerum secretarum scrutinia atque ad mirabilium operationum virtutem scandere possumus*).[91]

Consequently, "man is made somewhat the same with the superior beings and enjoys the same power with them" (*efficitur homo aliquid idem cum superis eademque potestate fruitur*.[92] It is important to note that this ontological shift, whereby one attains superhuman powers, is conceded and favored by God:

> [N]othing is more pleasant and acceptable to God, than a man perfectly pious, and truly religious, *who so far excelleth other men, as he himself is distant from the immortal gods*; therefore we ought, being first purged, to offer and commend ourselves to divine piety and religion…
>
> *Nil Deo gratius et acceptius quam homo perfecte pius ac vere religiosus,* qui tam homines caeteros praecellit, quam ipse a diis immortalibus distat. *Debemus nos igitur prius quidem purgatos offere et commendare divinae pietati et religioni*…[93]

Thus it is evident that Agrippa formulates his program of magical ascension as a kind of spiritual enterprise strongly motivated by religious sentiments. But, what would be the aim of a man desiring to become "somewhat the same" with the superior beings? The reader of the *De occulta philosophia* is repeatedly confronted with one clear answer: To develop superhuman powers and be able to perform miraculous works. In a chapter entitled "How by these guides the soul of man ascendeth up into the divine nature, and is made a worker of miracles" (*Quomodo his ducibus anima humana*

[90] Ibid., III 1, 441 (402).
[91] Ibid., III 3, 448 (407).
[92] Ibid., III 5, 453 (413). Emphasis mine.
[93] Ibid., III 1, 441 (402-3)

scandit in naturam divinam efficiturque miraculorum effectrix) Agrippa gives a straightforward account of what magical ascension results in:

> Hence it comes to pass that though we are framed a natural body, yet we sometimes predominate over nature, and cause such wonderful, sudden and difficult operations, as that evil spirits obey us, the stars are disordered, the heavenly powers compelled, the elements made obedient; so devout men and those elevated by these theological virtues, command the elements, drive away fogs, raise the winds, cause rain, cure diseases, raise the dead…
>
> *Hinc provenit nos in natura constitutos aliquando supra naturam dominari operationesque tam mirificas, tam subitas, tam arduas efficere, quibus obediant manes, turbentur sidera, cogantur numina, serviant elementa; sic homines Deo devoti ac theologicis istis virtutibus elevati imperant elementis, pellunt nebulas, citant ventos, cogunt nubes in pluvias, curant morbos, suscitant mortuos…*[94]

That Agrippa does not see the "utilitarian" side of ascension as something entirely different from, or opposite to, the "spiritual" side of it is indicated by his claim that for a truly illuminated soul it is only natural to perform works of magic and that this is how the miracles of the prophets and the apostles should be explained. Immediately after his enumeration of miracles accomplishable by a deified magician, the author adds: "So the prophets, apostles, and the rest, were famous by the wonderful power of God" (*sic prophetae, sic Apostoli, sic caeteri viri Dei maximis claruere potentiis*).[95] This is stated even more elaborately in the *De triplici ratione*, in a passage in which Agrippa "Christianizes" the well-known statement from the *Asclepius*, a late Hellenistic hermetic text, that "man is a great miracle" (*magnum miraculum homo*):

> Surely the Christian man is a great miracle; though bound by the world, he dominates over it and performs deeds similar to those of the very Creator of the world; these deeds are commonly called miracles, the root and foundation of all of them being faith in Jesus Christ. Through faith alone man is made somewhat the same with God and enjoys the same power with him.

[94] Ibid., III 6, 455 (414).
[95] Ibid.

> *Magnum certe miraculum est homo Christianus, qui in mundo constitutus, supra mundum dominatur operationesque similes efficit ipsi Creatori mundi; quae opera vulgo miracula appellantur, quorum omnium radix et fundamentum fides est in Iesum Christum. Per hanc solam efficitur homo idem aliquid cum Deo eademque potestate fruitur.*[96]

Furthermore, it is exactly on the basis of this conviction, as Nauert points out, that Agrippa attacked the corruption of the church in his time: if the leaders of the church were unable to perform miraculous works like the apostles and their immediate successors, it meant that they did not possess the pure and spiritual knowledge of the Revelation any longer and were, consequently, not capable of ascension.[97]

If the "miracle working" aspect of ascension can be seen as possibly utilitarian from the viewpoint of a magician, the author of the *De vanitate* makes it clear that for him the idea of ascension bears a more spiritual connotation, whether one achieves it through magic or pure faith. Having divided all magic into black (*goëtia*) and white (*theurgia*), and having asserted that the main problem of *theurgia* is how to discern between the good and the bad superhuman agents, Agrippa refers to the authority of the Neoplatonist Porphyry for the claim that ascension is possible through theurgy:

> Now Prophyry discusses this theurgy, or magic of the divine, at length and finally concludes that by means of theurgic consecrations the human soul can become capable of reaching the spirits and angels, and of seeing gods.
>
> *Verum de hac Theurgia, sive divinorum magia, plura disputans Porphyrius, tandem concludit Theurgicis consecrationibus posse quidem animam hominis idoneam reddi ad susceptionem spirituum & angelorum, ad videndos deos.*[98]

On the other hand, the achievement of those who ascend by pure faith, as exemplified by some well-known biblical figures, is depicted in more eschatological tones:

[96] *De triplici ratione* 6, 16, in Perrone Compagni, *Ermetismo e Cristianesimo*, 146. Translation mine. Note striking similarities with some of the above-quoted passages from the *De occulta philosophia*.
[97] Nauert, *Agrippa in Renaissance Italy*, 207; Perrone Compagni, *Ermetismo e Cristianesimo*, 154.
[98] *De vanitate*, chapter 46, in *Opera*, 77. Translation mine.

> Many have, while still in this lifetime, pursued the same [path] empowered by the deifying spirit, such as Enoch, Elijah, and Moses, whose bodies have been transformed into a spiritual nature and have never met their ruin.
>
> *Multi hoc ipsum virtute deifici spiritus in hac vita consecuti sunt, Enoch & Helias & Moyses; quorum corpora transmutata in naturam spiritualem non viderunt corruptionem.*[99]

The question is whether these two passages suggest two distinct concepts of ascension, the former being on a lower level than the latter, or only different aspects of one and the same process. In other words, does the author of the *De vanitate* differentiate between a magical (temporary) ascension and a spiritual one, which would imply a definite ontological shift, without returning to an earthly existence?

One more important point to make here is that ascension, as seen by the author of the *De occulta philosophia*, is achieved by *the magician's own will and effort* – the concept Frances Yates calls "Man the operator."[100] Reflecting upon the change of perspective of the Renaissance magus, she notes that he is "no longer only the pious spectator of God's wonders in the creation, and the worshipper of God himself above the creation, but Man the operator, Man who seeks to draw power from the divine and natural order."[101] This idea lies in the core of Agrippa's notion of ascension as set forth in the *De occulta philosophia*.

[99] *De vanitate*, chapter 45, in *Opera*, 76. Translation mine.
[100] Yates, *Giordano Bruno*, 161; Lehrich, *Language of Demons and Angels*, 66-67.
[101] Yates, *Giordano Bruno*, 161.

2.3.2 Magic and religion

As implied in the previous section, there appears to be no clear boundary between magic and religion for Agrippa, both serving as the basic conceptual framework for *operatio* and *ascensio*. Here "religion" refers both to Christianity and to pagan and heathen religions. They all share a common supernatural origin with magic, being nothing but different branches of one and the same ancient revelation. This conviction, as Walker emphasizes, gives Agrippa the ground for "treating magic, pagan religion and Christianity as activities and beliefs of exactly the same kind,"[102] once the formal declarations of orthodoxy are left behind. At the same time, it is the backbone of Agrippa's call for the rehabilitation of magic, for he regards it, in its pure form, as "the most perfect, and chief science, that sacred and sublime kind of philosophy" (*haec perfectissima summaque scientia, haec altior sanctiorque philosophia*) which contains "the most profound contemplation of most secret things" (*profundissimam rerum secretissimarum contemplationem…complectitur*).[103] It is a "science," the author explains, as it embraces both natural and mathematical philosophy, and it is "sacred" as it teaches about God, the soul, sacred rites institutions, rites, mysteries, and so on (Agrippa calls this part of magic "theology").[104]

At the beginning of the third book (ch. 3.1-9), in the context of the theological aspect of magic, Agrippa elaborates his approach to religion. It appears to be somewhat functionalistic and utilitarian, for the author considers religion, at least to some degree, to be a kind of *praeparatio magica*. In the chapter entitled "Of the necessity, power and profit of religion" (*De necessitate, virtute et utilitate religionis*) he asserts that it is the theological part of magic "which teacheth us…how we ought

[102] Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic*, 96.
[103] *De occulta philosophia*, I 2, 5 (86).

to obtain the truth by divine religion" (*quae nos docet…quomodo veritatem religione divina debeamus adipisci*) and, on a more practical level, "how rightly to prepare our mind and spirit, by which only we can comprehend the truth" (*quomodo animum et mentem, qua sola possumus veritatem comprehendere, rite debeamus excolere*).[105] This is where religion comes forward:

> [F]or it is a common opinion of the magicians, that unless the mind and spirit be in good case, the body cannot be in good health… But a firm and stout mind (saith Hermes) can we not otherwise obtain, than by integrity of life, by piety, and last of all, by divine religion: for holy religion purgeth the mind and maketh it divine…
>
> *Est enim magorum vulgaris sententia quod, nisi mens atque animus bene valuerint, corpus bene valere non posse… Firmam autem et robustam mentem, ut inquit Hermes, consequi non aliunde possumus quam a vitae integritate, a pietate, a divina denique religione. Religio enim sacra mentem purgat redditque divinam…*[106]

The proper religious attitude is important because it protects the magician against evil spirits and makes his magic "good." Whoever neglects religion, says Agrippa, is often deceived by the demons. Hence religion becomes a vital part of ceremonial magic both as means of purification and as a safeguard. This is the context in which Agrippa's expressions such as "to operate through religion" (*operari per religionem*) should be understood.[107] To operate through religion means to be able "by praying, consecrating, sacrificing, invocating, to attract spiritual and celestial powers, and to imprint them on those things thou pleasest, and by it to vivify any magical work" (*orando, consecrando, sacrificando, invocando, virtutes spirituales atque coelestes attrahere et rebus tuis quibus velis imprimere omneque scientiae magicalis opus ea ipsa vivificare*).[108] Thus Agrippa's ceremonial magic is strongly religious in its core

[104] In almost the same wording Agrippa formulates the religious aspects of magic in *De vanitate,* chapter 41, *Opera,* 70: it embraces all philosophy and mathematics, and adds *vires religionum* to them.
[105] Ibid., III 1, 441 (402).
[106] Ibid.
[107] *De occulta philosophia,* III 6, 455 (414).
[108] Ibid., III 3, 449 (408).

and functions, as Perrone Compagni points out, as a reinforcement and safeguard of both natural and celestial magic.[109] However, even though it is the most powerful of all types of magic, it cannot be practiced alone, warns Agrippa, since the magician is partly an earthly creature and "without the mixture of other powers…he is swallowed up by the divine power" (*sine admixtione aliarum virtutum…absorbetur a numine*).[110]

It is evident throughout these passages that the author's idea of piety and sanctity goes beyond his understanding of what religion is, for he defines it as "a certain discipline of *external* holy things and ceremonies by which…we are admonished of *internal* and spiritual things" (*est itaque religio disciplina quaedam* externorum *sacrorum ac ceremoniarum… per quam rerum* internarum *et spiritualium…admonemur*).[111] And the true realm of "internal and spiritual things" for the author of the *De occulta philosophia* is, of course, magic. It is interesting to note, however, that Agrippa uses precisely the same formulation of religion as something "external" in the *De vanitate* with exactly the same wording as in the corresponding passage from the *De occulta philosophia*.[112]

What binds religion and magic as a necessary prerequisite for any pious achievement and magical operation (and hence for ascension) is *faith*, which Agrippa regards as the highest of all the three guides of religion – love, hope, and faith (ch. 3.5). Faith is not a merely a state of mind; it is an archetypal virtue that descends to our intellect "by reflection from the first light" (*superne a primo lumine descendat*) and is, consequently, the key to ascension: "For faith is the root of all miracles, by which alone (as the Platonists testify) we approach to God and obtain the divine power and protection" (*Est enim fides omnium miraculorum radix, qua sola, ut*

[109] Ibid., 18. See also Yates, *The Occult Philosophy*, 41.
[110] *De occulta philosophia*, III 6, 455 (415).
[111] Ibid., III 4, 450 (409). Emphasis mine.
[112] *De vanitate*, chapter 61, in *Opera*, 102.

Platonici testantur, ad Deum accedimus divinamque adsequimur protectionem virtutemque).[113]

Another peculiar side of Agrippa's understanding of religion is his distinction between religion proper and superstition (ch. 3.4), although he considers both to be crucial in ceremonial magic, ruling every magical operation (*duo sunt quae regunt omnem ceremonialis magiae operationem, religio videlicet et superstitio*).[114] The line between the two is somewhat blurred as the author does not provide any criteria for distinguishing them. For him, all worship which is different from "the true religion" is simply superstition. Just as the essence of religion is faith, in the case of superstition it is credulity, which implies that the criteria for distinction are highly subjective. Agrippa gives the examples of excommunicating locusts and baptizing bells and images, which some scholars take as possible references to widespread "magical" practices in the church.[115]

Another line that Agrippa draws is between Christianity as the only religion "allowed by God" and other religions. However, as with superstition, the author immediately blurs that line by asserting that

> The rites and ceremonies of religion, in respect of the diversity of times and places, are divers. Every religion hath something of good, because it is directed to God the creator: and although God allows the Christian religion only, yet other worships which are undertaken for his sake, he doth not altogether reject and leaveth them not unrewarded, if not with an eternal, yet with a temporal reward…
>
> *Religionis autem ritus ceremoniaeque pro temporum regionumque varietate diversi sunt et unaquaeque religio boni aliquid habet, quod ad Deum ipsum creatorem dirigitur. Et licet unam solam christianam religionem Deus approbet, caeteros tamen eius gratia susceptos cultus non penitus reprobat; et, si non aeterno, temporaneo tamen praemio irremuneratos non reliquit*…[116]

[113] Ibid., III 5, 453 (413).
[114] Ibid., III 4, 450 (409). Credulity of the superstitious is equally capable of empowering one's mind and elevating one's spirit as is the faith of those who adhere to a "true" religion.
[115] Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic*, 94.
[116] *De occulta philosophia*, III 4, 450 (410).

What follows as a logical consequence of this kind of religious "cosmopolitism" is the claim that both Christianity and heathen religions, through the medium of faith, can be the basis for magical miracle working. Even though the author makes a passing effort to reassert his orthodoxy, warning against "all whose religion was perverse and polluted idolatry (*quorum religio omnis perversa erat et idololatria inquinata*),[117] the reader is ultimately left with the impression that "magic and religion, Christian or pagan, are for Agrippa of the same nature."[118]

On the basis of all the above said, it is safe to conclude that, for Agrippa, even superstition and various pagan or heathen religions could provide the required basis for magical ascension, as long as they are able to influence the mind of the operator. Only incredulity and diffidence are to be avoided, as they undermine every magical operation, both in superstition and in true religion.

2.4 Cosmological prerequisites for ascension

In order to establish a worldview within which to attempt his grand synthesis of different spiritual and esoteric traditions, Agrippa introduces the concepts of a cosmic hierarchy and correspondences at the very beginning of the *De occulta philosophia,* expressed through his tripartite division of the world into intellectual, celestial, and elementary. Consequently, he develops his threefold typology of magic with the ambition of embracing all known forms of it. This typology provided a theoretical basis for his repeated claim that studying magic requires, so to speak, a

[117] Ibid., III 4, 451 (411).
[118] Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic*, 93. Walker calls this a "remarkably thorough-going syncretism" and points out that throughout the third book of the *De occulta philosophia* the same attitude toward Christian and pagan prayers and ceremonies can be noticed: that they are all examples of the same basic activity. This activity, not specified by Walker, could be termed spiritual ascension.

holistic approach, in which neither natural philosophy and mathematics nor religion should be neglected.

Furthermore, such a worldview, based on hierarchies and correspondences, provides a necessary theoretical framework for conceiving and developing an idea of ascension. It is a typical example of the so-called organic world model, characteristic of pre-modern times, as opposed to the Cartesian, seventeenth-century mechanistic model of the universe. The former was likened to a macrocosmic living organism with the active presence of God, whereas the latter was compared to a machine or a clock only initially wound up by God and left to run on its own.[119]

2.4.1 Emanation and the cosmic hierarchy

In simplified terms, in order for ascension to be possible at all there should be some kind of ladder or rope leading upwards. As G. E. Szőnyi has pointed out, in a uniform or horizontal cosmos there is no transcendental sphere and, consequently, no possibility of, or even need for, ascension. For Agrippa in his time, of course, any world model other than the vertical one would have been hardly conceivable. He establishes a logical and causal connection between the possibility of ascent and the factual descent of the divine virtues through the process of emanation (the opening causal *cum*).[120] It is precisely the latter that enables the former and, which is equally important, makes it a natural or "rational" idea, as the author puts it.

Agrippa's scheme of emanation is clearly Neoplatonic: there is a first cause (*prima causa*) or the maker of all things (*omnium opifex*), from whom all things are

[119] For a detailed discussion on the organic world model see Szőnyi, *John Dee's Occultism*, 24-34; Bert Hansen, "Science and Magic" in *Mathematics and its Applications to Science and Natural Philosophy in the Middle Ages: Essays in Honor of Marshall Clagett*, E. Grant, J. E. Murdoch, ed. (Cambridge: CUP, 1987), 483-506; Yates, *Giordano Bruno*, 130-45.
[120] *De occulta philosophia*, I 1, 3 (85). The words *cum triplex sit mundus* ("since the world is threefold") effectively introduce the image of the steps of a cosmic ladder that it is possible to climb.

and proceed (*a qua sunt omnia et procedunt omnia*). The first cause conveys the virtues of his omnipotence upon the world through a hierarchical chain of being consisting of angels, the heavens, stars, elements, animals, plants, metals, and stones (*per angelos, coelos, stellas, elementa, animalia, plantas, metalla, lapides, Suae omnipotentiae virtutes exinde in nos transfundat*). As previously mentioned, one of the divine virtues that descend, and the most important of all, is faith. All the levels created by emanation are united under the rule of dependence; every inferior is governed by its superior and receives the influence from above (*quisque inferior a superiori regatur ac suarum virium suscipiat influxum*).[121]

Such a structure allows for the possibility of influence and communication between the worlds, as they are built of the same ingredients, however increasingly less subtle and less spiritual. The same principles pervade those beings or objects from all three levels that are connected by way of the descending virtues. The task of the magician is to locate these connections and use them to exert influence on the levels different from his own. This is what makes possible disciplines such as alchemy, astrology, and magic in general, but also another ambition of a philosophically minded magician: "to ascend by the same degrees through each world" (*per eosdem gradus, per singulos mundos, conscendere*) and achieve deification by coming in contact with the first cause.

In his exposition of the theory of emanation, Agrippa significantly aligns himself with the Platonists. First, he says,

> It is the unanimous consent of all Platonists that as in the original and exemplary world all things are in all, so also in this corporeal world all things are in all [nevertheless, in different modes, according to the nature of the recipients]; so also the elements are not only in these inferior bodies, but also in the heavens, in stars, in devils, in angels, and lastly in God, the maker and original example of all things.

[121] Ibid.

> *Est Platonicorum omnium unanimis sententia, quemadmodum in archetypo mundo omnia sunt in omnibus, ita etiam in hoc corporeo mundo omnia in omnibus esse, modis tamen diversis, pro natura videlicet suscipientium: sic et elementa non solum sunt in istis inferioribus, sed et in coelis, in stellis, in daemonibus, in angelis, in ipso denique omnium Opifice et Archetypo.*[122]

This statement opens the question of Agrippa's understanding of the ontological relationship between the Creator and the created, i.e., whether the claim that "all things are in all" and that, consequently, the same elements are both in God and his creation somewhat blurs the ontological gap so peculiar to Christianity.

Another instance of Agrippa's explicit alignment with Platonism is in a chapter describing the process of emanation through Ideas, the World Soul, and the rays of the stars.[123] Having given a Platonic account of the multiplication of the Ideas abiding in God and their gradual descent into increasingly gross forms, the author concludes that "every species hath its celestial shape, or figure that is suitable to it, from which also proceeds a wonderful power of operating, which proper gift it receives from its own Idea, through the seminal forms of the Soul of the World" (*quaelibet species habeat figuram coelestem sibi conventientem, ex qua etiam provenit sibi mirabilis potestas in operando, qualem per rationes animae mundi seminales propriam ab idea sua suscipit dotem*).[124] In other words, it is a common ontological "backbone" of the hierarchically structured universe that makes any magical *operatio* possible.

2.4.2 The principle of correspondences

In a living cosmos, organically connected with its Creator and pervaded by his spirit, everything is connected with everything, as stated in the above-quoted passage.

[122] Ibid., I 8, 26 (101). The words in square brackets are omitted in Freake's translation.

This is what constitutes the principle of correspondences, or analogies, which is another important characteristic of the pre-modern world model. Different aspects of the created world are, according to Agrippa, interrelated either on the basis of being composed of the common four elements (however, on different levels of subtlety) or being pervaded by the "occult virtues," which are called thus "because their causes lie hid, and man's intellect cannot in any way reach and find them out" (*quia causae earum latentes sunt, ita quod humanus intellectus non potest eas usquequaque investigare*).[125] In either case, a skilled person, a physician or a magician, is able to track the relations between things and use them to exert a certain influence upon someone or something outside themselves. Agrippa speaks of these relations in terms of natural sympathies and antipathies, or "friendship" and "enmity." That is another crucial element of his formulation of magic:

> [Magic] instructs us *concerning the differing and agreement of things amongst themselves*, whence it produceth its wonderful effects by uniting the virtues of things the application of them one to the other, and to their inferior suitable subjects, joining and knitting them together thoroughly by the powers and virtues of the superior bodies.
>
> [Q]uomodo res inter se different et quomodo conveniunt *nos* [*magica facultas*] *instruit, hinc mirabiles effectus suos producens, uniendo virtutes rerum per applicationem earum ad invicem et ad sua passa congruentia, inferiora superiorum dotibus ac virtutibus passim copulans and maritans.*[126]

The concept of "friendship" and "enmity" is further aptly illustrated with examples from astrology (different planetary constellations), zoology, botany, mineralogy, etc.

[123] *De occulta philosophia*, I 11, 35-6 (107-8).
[124] Ibid., I 11, 35 (107).
[125] Ibid., I 10, 32 (105).
[126] Ibid., I 2, 5 (86). Emphasis mine. The words *copulans* and *maritans* clearly point, even though not openly refer, to Pico della Mirandola's conception of the magus as someone who "weds earth to heaven, that is, lower things to the endowments and powers of higher things," see Pico della Mirandola, "Oration On the Dignity of Man" in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, ed. Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller, John Herman Randall, Jr. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1956), 223-54, quote on 249.

The magician should study and learn how to use both types of relationship in his *operatio*.

Yet another level of correspondences is between the macro- and microcosms, in other words, the universe and man. This leads to the problems of anthropology, to which Agrippa dedicated large parts of the *De occulta philosophia*, especially in the second and the third book.

2.5 Anthropological aspects of ascension

In this section I will analyze Agrippa's treatment of the questions concerning man's ontological position in the created world and in relation to God. These are, primarily, the nature and properties of the soul and its relation to the body, man's prelapsarian status, his Fall into the created world, and his unique position in that world which leaves the possibility of ascent open to him.

2.5.1 The *homo imago Dei* doctrine. The Fall

The basis of man's ability to achieve deification, explains Agrippa, is his likeness to God. Among all the created beings, man is the only one to whom the dignity of the divine image has been granted (*hoc est peculiare hominis donum, a quo haec dignitas divinae imaginis sibi propria est et cum nulla alia creatura communis*).[127] This idea is certainly orthodox and peculiar to all variants of Christian mysticism, going back to the key "man-making" passage in the Old Testament (Genesis 1:26): "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness."[128]

[127] *De occulta philosophia*, III 36, 580 (509-10). This chapter, which is entitled "Of man, how he was created after the image of God" (*De homine quomodo creatus ad imaginem Dei*), introduces an important series of chapters on this issue.

[128] Bible quotes are given according to King James Version, see http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search =Genesis%201:26;&version=9 (last accessed: May 20, 2007). For a general discussion

However, at the beginning of his own exposition of the *homo imago Dei* doctrine, Agrippa does not refer to this passage or to the Judeo-Christian tradition at all, but to the authority of Hermes Trismegistus. According to the hermetic version, man is not the immediate image of God, but the image of another image, the world:

> The most abundant God (as Trismegistus saith) hath framed two images like himself, viz. the world and man, that in one of these he might sport himself with certain wonderful operations: but in the other, that he might enjoy his delights.
>
> *Exuperantissimus Deus, ut Trismegistus ait, duas sibi similes finxit imagines, mundum videlicet atuque hominem, in quorum altero luderet miris quibusquam operationibus, in altero vero deliciis fruerentur.*[129]

The author once again asserts that man is not the immediate image of God, but that "as the world is the image of God, so man is the image of the world" (*sicuti imago Dei mundus est, sic imago mundi homo est*), in other words, that he is "the image of the image" (*quasi imaginis imago*).[130] This leads to two important conclusions: that the world is a living and rational creature (a point discussed in section 2.4.2), and that man, being the image of the world, should be understood as the Microcosm, or the "Lesser World" (*iccirco microcosmous dictus est, hoc est minor mundus*).[131]

The notion of man as the Lesser World is important because it implies that man "contains in himself all that is contained in the greater world" (*in seipso habet totum quod in maiori mundo continetur*), which enables him not only to "comprehend all the parts thereof" but also to "receive and contain even God himself" (*non solum homo alter mundus effectus ipsius partes omnes in se complectitur, sed etiam ipsum*

on the role of the *imago Dei* doctrine in Christian mysticism concerning deification, see Wolfgang Riehle, *The Middle English Mystics* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul: 1981), 142-151.

[129] *De occulta philosophia*, III 36, 579 (507).

[130] Ibid.

[131] Ibid. This is a direct reference to the *Asclepius*, I 10, see Brian P. Copenhaver, *Hermetica. The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a new English translation with notes and introduction* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), 72-73. There, God is denoted as "the first god," the world as "the second," and mankind as "the third god."

Deum concipit et continet).[132] This hermetic standpoint is further supported by its Christian counterparts such as St. Paul's concept of man's soul as the temple of God and Augustine's theory of *vestigia trinitatis*.[133] However, it apparently leads to a fine blurring of the sharp ontological boundary between God and man peculiar to Christianity, as can be gathered from the following words: "Neither is there anything found in man, nor any disposition, in which something of divinity may not shine forth; neither is there anything in God which may not also be represented in man" (*nec reperitur aliquid in homine, non ulla dispositio, in quo non fulgeat aliquid divinitatis, nec quicquam est in Deo, quod ipsum non etiam repraesentetur in homine*).[134]

For Agrippa, man's likeness to God is the basis for both magical and spiritual ascension and it is precisely at this point that one can perceive how these two aspects overlap and intersect:

> [B]y how much the more everyone shall know himself, by so much he obtaineth the greater power of attracting it [the perfection of magical art], and by so much operateth greater and more wonderful things, *and will ascend to so great a perfection that he is made the son of God, and is transformed into that image which is God and is united with him*, which is not granted to angels, the world, or any creature, but to man only, viz. to have power to be made the son of God and to be united to him.
>
> [*Q*]*uanto autem magis quisque seipsum cognoscet, tanto maiorem vim attrahendi consequitur tantoque maiora et mirabiliora operatur* ad tantamque ascendet perfectionem, quod efficitur filius Dei transformaturque in eandem imaginem quae est Deus et cum ipso unitur, *quod neque angelis neque mundo nec cuiquam creaturae datum est, nisi soli homini, posse scilicet filium Dei fieri et uniri Deo.*[135]

The result of ascension is, therefore, twofold: on the one hand, it is becoming the son of God and uniting with him, and on the other, ascending to perfect power, which

[132] *De occulta philosophia*, III 36, 579-580 (508).
[133] Ibid., III 36, 580-1 (508-9), referring to I Corinthians 3:16 and Augustine's *De trinitate* 10.2.
[134] *De occulta philosophia*, III 36, 580 (509).
[135] Ibid. Emphasis mine. The whole passage from *efficitur filius Dei* onwards, according to Perrone Compagni, is a paraphrase from Francesco Zorzi's *De harmonia mundi totius cantica tria* (1525), but, as usual, Agrippa does not refer to his contemporary sources.

gives man the opportunity to *act* like God. Perhaps this duality should not be expressed in the form of opposition, as it is clear that the author does not see it as such.

That the divine likeness of man is the source of his power over nature and his ability for magical ascension, Agrippa explains through the theory of "divine characters" or "seals" that are imprinted on every man. These seals provide man both with "a certain active terror" (*terrore quodam activo*), which makes inferior creatures fear and respect him, and with "gentleness" and "clemency" (*placida mansuetudine*, *clementia*), which make him loved by them.[136] These two seals, which are represented by the *sefirot Geburah* (the left hand or sword of God) and *Chesed* (the right hand or scepter of God), are imprinted on man through the chain of divine emanations:

> From these divine numerations, by the intelligences and stars, seals and characters are imprinted on us, to everyone according to his capacity and purity, which signs the first created man without doubt possessed in all integrity and fullness, *when all creatures, being attracted by secret gentleness and subjected by terror, came to him as to their Lord*, that he might give them names; but after the sin of prevarication he fell from that dignity with all his posterity.
>
> *Ab his divinis numerationibus per intelligentias et stellas nobis imprimuntur signa et characteres unicuique secundum capacitatem et puritatem suam; quae signa primus protoplastes in omni integritate et plenitudine proculdubio possidebat*, quando placida mansuetudine attracta et terrore subiecta venerunt ad eum cuncta animantia veluti ad dominum*, ut eis nomina imponeret. Verum post praevaricationis peccatum a dignitate illa decidit cum omnibus posteris suis*.[137]

It is important to note here that, in his mention of the "name-giving" passage (Genesis 1:19), Agrippa puts emphasis on the God-like power of the prelapsarian man and on the loss of that power after the Fall.

Agrippa's view on the composition of man is common concerning its biblical background: man consists of the body and the soul; when he dies, the body returns

[136] *De occulta philosophia*, III 39, 591 (520).
[137] Ibid. Emphasis mine.

into the earth, from which it was taken, and the soul goes to the heavens.[138] In his account of the soul, however, he mostly refers to "Plotinus and all the Platonists, after Trismegist" (*Plotinus itaque et Platonici omnes post Trismegistum*), who divided the soul into three parts, namely the mind (*mens*) as the superior portion, the reason (*spiritus rationalis*) as the middle portion, and the sensitive soul (*anima sensitiva*), also called the "image" or "idol," as the inferior portion.[139] The mind always strives towards the divine; the image is always directed towards matter; reason figures as a medium between the two and is therefore unstable and prone to the influences of either the mind or the image: "Man's soul consisteth of a mind, reason and imagination; the mind illuminates reason, reason floweth into the image: all is one soul. Reason, unless it be illuminated by the mind, is not free from error" (*Anima humana constat mente, ratione, et idolo: mens illuminat rationem, ratio fluit in idolum, omnia una est anima. Ratio, nisi per mentem illuminetur, ab errore non est immunis*).[140] This makes the reason, as the seat of free will, responsible for man's destiny: the necessary requirement for ascension is that the reason turns to the mind as the part of man that is closest to the divine.[141]

If the reason successfully turns to the mind and joins it, the path to ascension, both magical and spiritual, is open, as Agrippa puts it emphatically in one of the most detailed and most dazzling accounts of ascension in his work:

> [T]he soul, if it hath done well, rejoiceth together with the spirit and, going forth with its aerial chariot, passeth freely to the quires of the heros, or reacheth heaven, where it enjoys all its senses and powers, a perpetual blessed felicity, a perfect knowledge of all things, as also the divine vision and possession of the kingdom of heaven, and, being

[138] Ibid., III 41, 594 (522). Here Agrippa refers to Ecclesiastes 3:20-1.
[139] Ibid., III 36, 581 (510).
[140] Ibid., III 43, 609 (538).
[141] See also Perrone Compagni, *Ermetismo e Cristianesimo*, 14-5. Perrone Compagni points out that Agrippa's tripartite division of the soul is taken over from Reuchlin's *De verbo mirifico* and from Ficino's *Theologia Platonica*.

made partaker of the divine power, bestows freely divers gifts upon these inferiors, as if it were an immortal god.

Anima vero, si bene operata fuerit, congaudet menti et cum aethereo suo vehiculo egrediens libera ad heroum choros transcendit aut superos petit, ubi omnibus sensibus et potentiis suis perpetua felicitate beata, perfecta omnium rerum cognitione insuper et divina visione ac regni coelorum possessione fruitur divinaeque potestatis particeps, in inferiora haec benefica varia dona largitur ceu immortalis deus.[142]

In his *De occulta philosophia* Agrippa does not speak much about man's Fall from Paradise. One such short instance has already been quoted: "But after the sin of prevarication he fell from that dignity with all his posterity" (*Verum post praevaricationis peccatum a dignitate illa decidit cum omnibus posteris suis*).[143] The reason for this, I think, is that Agrippa had already dedicated other writings to the questions of Fall and Original Sin, most notably the *Dialogus de homine* and the *De originali peccato*, whereas the program of the *De occulta philosophia* is entirely different. Instead of analyzing and diagnosing the problem, to use Christopher Lehrich's words, Agrippa in his latter work offers a synthetic solution to it, the program of magical reform.[144]

A detailed and rather standard biblical account of the Fall can be found in the first chapter of the *De triplici ratione*. Having created various types of beings, God prescribed their limits to all of them, but some of the angels, led by Satan, were not satisfied with their sublime position and wanted a higher status.[145] It is highly rewarding to examine the words Agrippa puts into Satan's mouth:

> I will ascend to the heavens and exalt my throne above the stars of God. I will sit upon the mountain of the testament on the northern side. I will ascend above the high clouds and be similar to the Highest one.

[142] *De occulta philosophia*, III 41, 594 (523). Note the expression *bene operata fuerit* (literally, "if it will *operate* well"), a technical term from the vocabulary of magic applied in the context of ascension.
[143] Ibid., III 39, 591 (520).
[144] Lehrich, *Language of Demons and Angels*, 217-19. See also Perrone Compagni, *Ermetismo e Cristianesimo*, 52, where the author speaks of two complementary currents of Agrippa's thought: "il testo scettico come versante critico e individuazione delle cause della corruzione" and "il testo magico come versante propositivo dello stesso programma di riforma."
[145] *De triplici ratione* I 3, in Perrone Compagni, *Ermetismo e Cristianesimo*, 92-96.

> *In coelum ascendam, super astra Dei exaltabo solium meum, sedebo in monte testamenti in lateribus aquilonis. Ascendam super altitudinem nubium et similis ero Altissimo*.[146]

As is evident, this biblical quotation bears two mentions of the verb *ascendere* and the idea of one becoming similar to God. However, the context is radically different than in all the passages quoted above. Even though it is clear whom Agrippa's condemning voice is referring to, it might not be so clear what makes the fallen angel different from the magician when it comes to the question of their motivation, at least from the standpoint of a straightforward Christian.

Once Satan, "that first transgressor of the divine will," had fallen into this world, he tempted and influenced man, who committed the same sin and was expelled from the Garden of Eden "into this valley of misery and ignorance and made liable to death" (*in hanc vallem miseriae, ignorantiae mortique factus est obnoxious*).[147] This is how man's tenebrous existence in this world began. However, it is only in such an existential position that one can think of returning to the previous state, as there can be no ascent without a preceding fall. As discussed above, this was strongly foreshadowed by the opening sentence of the *De occulta philosophia*.

2.5.2 Dignificatio. Dignitas hominis

What marks the type of ascent advocated by Agrippa, considered either in its magical or spiritual aspects, is its *active* character, as opposed to a more "passive" type of ascent peculiar to the Christian mysticism, in which the essential component is God's grace. In simplified terms, the magician is supposed to *do something*, to make his own effort, in order to ascend, with various religious elements serving only as an

[146] Ibid. Translation mine. It is a quotation from Isaiah 14:13-14.
[147] Ibid., 94-96.

auxiliary means. In this perspective, whether the magician's effort can be successful at all depends on the question of man's inborn capacity for deification. In other words, the question is whether man has retained some of his prelapsarian God-like qualities that could be woken from their dormant state. Agrippa's response to that question is strongly affirmative:

> [F]or there is even in our own selves the apprehension and power of all things; but we are prohibited so as that we little enjoy these things by passions opposing us even from our birth, and vain imaginations and immoderate affections, which being expelled, the divine knowledge and power presently take place.
>
> *Inest enim nobis ipsis rerum omnium apprehensio et potestas; prohibemur autem quo minus his fruamur per passiones ex generatione nobis obstantes, per imaginationes falsas et appetitus immoderatos; quibus expulses, subito adest divina cognitio atque potestas.*[148]

This inborn "apprehension and power of all things" is what Agrippa calls the "natural dignity" (*naturalis dignitas*) of a qualified magician. As discussed above, of all the created beings, it has been granted to humans only.[149] Natural dignity implies that man's mind (*mens*) is pure from carnal and sensual influences, which allows it to be "the worker of wonders" (*mirandorum operator*). As this is usually not the case, and the mind is "overwhelmed by too much commerce with the flesh and busied about the sensible soul of the body" (*nimio carnis demersus commercio et circa sensibilem corporis animam occupatus*),[150] one should resort to another way of dignification, through religion and its holy rites:

> Therefore it is meet that we who endeavor to attain to so great a height should especially meditate of two things: first, how we should leave carnal affections, frail sense, and material passions; secondly, by what way and means we may ascend to an intellect pure and conjoined with the powers of the gods, without which we shall never happily ascend to the scrutiny of secret things, and to the power of wonderful workings; for in these dignification consists wholly.

[148] *De occulta philosophia*, III 3, 449 (408).
[149] See footnote 135.
[150] *De occulta philosophia*, III 3, 448 (407).

> *Oportet nos itaque, qui ad tantam celsitudinem nitimur, duo potissimum meditari: unum videlicet qua ratione affectus carnales caducumque sensum materialesque passiones deseramus; alterum qua via et quo modo ad purum ipsum intellectum deorumque virtutibus coniunctum ascendamus – sine quibus haud feliciter unquam ad rerum secretarum scrutinia atque ad mirabilium operationum virtutem scandere possumus. In his enim tota consistit dignificatio.*[151]

The religious dignification is twofold; it is achieved by learning (*doctrina*) and practice (*opere*). The former implies that the magician should diligently engage in the study of theology;[152] the latter aims at different practical issues such as ritual purity, expiations, consecrations, and so on, treated at length in the second part of the third book.

Thus, both ways, natural and religious dignification, lead to the same goal of re-establishing one's lost prelapsarian position. As Charles Nauert points out:

> The enlightened soul, the soul which had attained a true understanding of God's revelation, would not only regain mastery over its own body but would also win power over all nature… It was precisely this power over nature which Adam had lost by original sin, but which the purified soul, the magus, now could regain.[153]

To return once again to the question of natural dignification, it seems to me that Agrippa understands it in two ways. In a narrower sense, he speaks of a certain "best disposition of the body and its organs" (*corporis organorumque optima dispositio*) that should dignify the prospective magician. He should be "without sickness, ingenious, comely, perfect in all his members, of a quick spirit" (*incolumem,*

[151] Ibid., III 3, 448 (407). See also *De triplici ratione* V 16, Perrone Compagni, *Ermetismo e Cristianesimo*, 142-144, for a very similar argument and wording, and Nauert, *Agrippa*, 48, for an elucidating interpretation of the passage.
[152] *De occulta philosophia*, III 7, 457 (414). The chapter bears the title "That the knowledge of the true God is necessary for a magician, and what the old magicians and philosophers have thought concerning God" (*Necessariam esse mago veri Dei cognitionem et quid de Deo veteres senserunt magi atque philosophi*). On Agrippa's peculiar understanding of the term "theology" see Van der Poel, *Agrippa, the Humanist Theologian*, 55-58.
[153] Nauert, *Agrippa*, 48.

ingeniosum, decorum, integrum, animo solertem).[154] In a broader sense, however, Agrippa refers to the idea of man's unique position in the world discussed above, as he is the only creature whom God has granted to be in his image and likeness. Not even the angels and intelligences enjoy this privilege. They are, so to speak, fixed in their position in the Great Chain of Being and cannot hope for an ontological shift brought about by the process of ascension. The origin of this idea is clearly hermetic, to be found in the *Asclepius*, in a passage in which Hermes Trismegistus explains man's position to his audience: "Because of this, Asclepius, a human being is a great wonder, a living thing to be worshipped and honored: for he changes his nature into a god's, as if he were a god… He is everything, and he is everywhere."[155]

Much closer to Agrippa's own time, the idea of man's ontologically undefined and hence absolutely free position in the world was developed by Pico della Mirandola in his concept of "the dignity of man."[156] It is man's absolutely free will, argued Pico, which enables him to model his existence according to his own desires. In Pico's account of man's creation, God says to the newly created being:

> Neither a fixed abode nor a form that is thine alone nor any function peculiar to thyself have we given thee, Adam, to the end that according to thy longing and according to thy judgment thou mayest have and possess what abode, what form, and what functions thou thyself shalt desire. The nature of all other beings is limited and constrained within the bounds of laws prescribed by Us. Thou, constrained by no limits, in accordance with thine own free will, in whose hand We have placed thee, shalt ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature.[157]

These are the requirements for the unrestricted magical ascension Agrippa proposes, and the references to Pico in his work are numerous, if not credited. One such

[154] *De occulta philosophia*, III 3, 448 (407). The nature of these requirements resembles "certain conditions of admission into the circle of the Merkabah mystics," where "the novice is judged in accordance with physiognomic and chiromantic criteria," Scholem, *Mayor Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 48. Similar ideas of the "natural disposition" of the candidate have been peculiar to esoteric societies throughout history and have survived, for instance, although declaratively, in the present-day Freemasonry.
[155] *Asclepius*, 6, in Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 69-70. See *De occulta philosophia*, III 36, 580 (509).
[156] Pico, "On the Dignity of Man," 215-254.

instance is calling man "every creature" (*vocatur homo omnis creatura*).[158] Man is constrained by no limits and free to choose his own ontological position. The question is only: How far does this freedom extend?

3. Two Traditions of *Imitatio* Behind Agrippa's Doctrine of Ascension?

The purpose of the previous chapter was to point out various, apparently not always compatible, aspects of ascension as perceived by Cornelius Agrippa in his *De occulta philosophia* and in the two of his other works, the *De triplici ratione* and the *De vanitate*. For the sake of clarity, I have introduced a provisory distinction between the "magical" and "spiritual" aspects of ascension, where the former refers primarily to the magician's ascent to power, and the latter to the mystic's ascent to the realm of the divine. The distinction, above all, aims at the motivation and intention of the practitioner, although one is hard-pressed to conclude that there can be no clear-cut boundary between the two modes of ascension.[159]

[157] Ibid., 224-225. Translation by Elizabeth Livermore Forbes.
[158] *De occulta philosophia*, III 36, 580 (807), an expression taken over, according to Perrone Compagni, from Pico's *Heptaplus*, 5. 6.
[159] Take, for instance, Idel's "mystical-magical" model of ascension, in which he combines the two aspects, Idel, *Ascensions on High*, 31-2. "The first action – the ascent on high – represents the mystical phase of the model, as it allows the religious *perfectus* contact with the divine or celestial entities. His

The aim of this chapter is to briefly examine the problem of ascension in Agrippa from the perspective of different spiritual traditions that influenced him. Given that these traditions are numerous, and that the general question of their influence upon Agrippa is both highly complex and well examined, this will not be a straightforward overview of Agrippa's role models, but rather an attempt to consider them with regard to their attitude towards the problem of ascension. In order to do that, I have introduced yet another notion into my analysis, that of *imitatio*.

I believe that examination of Agrippa's doctrine of ascension can usefully be supplemented by considering the notion of *imitatio* more closely, as this important spiritual concept is undoubtedly connected with the general idea of ascension. Moreover, just as G. E. Szőnyi has pointed out in the case of *exaltatio*, this term functions semantically in two opposite directions, coinciding with the dual nature of ascension; one can imitate with the idea of "acting like," "following in the footsteps of," thus corresponding to the broadly accepted notion of *imitatio Christi*, or else, with the idea of "copying," "counterfeiting," even "replacing," "substituting," or "supplying the place of."[160] Thus, if ascension can be considered a process and a goal of that process at the same time, then *imitatio* could signify the means by which to pursue or enable that process, bearing the same fundamental ambiguity concerning the intentions of the ascendant. However, as imitation or mimesis is an immensely complex notion that has been discussed in countless philosophical and literary-historical studies so far, my observations should be taken as basic and preliminary only, rather than as exhaustive or conclusive.

bringing down of the secret lore, which in many cases has magical qualities, represents the magical aspect of this model."

[160] The meanings are given according to Charlton T. Lewis, Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 890, col. 3, under *imitor*. The same semantic ambivalence is evident in the case of the synonymous verb *aemulor*, ibid. 55, col. 1.

I have focused my analysis on the theological aspects of this notion, as derived from the historically well-established concept of *imitatio Christi*. Apart from its various connotations and diverse historical developments, I have taken that the fundamental meaning of this term, common to all variants of it, is the sense of *following the role model*.[161]

3.1 *Imitatio Christi*: the paradigm of "humility"

The concept of *imitatio Christi* can be traced throughout Agrippa's opus, particularly that part of it which can provisionally be categorized as "skeptical" and/or "devotional." Often only implied or alluded to, it is, nevertheless, sometimes explicitly mentioned, as, for instance, in the *De triplici ratione*, in a passage in which Agrippa reaffirms his strong Evangelical orientation – yet, not omitting a mention of the name of Hermes Trismegistus:

> Even Christ, the truth itself, said: "Ask and it shall be given you; knock and it shall be opened unto you; seek and ye shall find," that is, seek with faith, with firm belief (as Hermes says, "to believe is to understand"), ask with hope and with strong and unwavering expectation, praising and adoring Jesus Christ. *It is from him that the most divine knowledge descends upon our souls*, so that it enlightens us with the splendor of his spirit and moves us to perform the acts of love, along with vigils, fasts, the ardent longing, and *with the imitation of Jesus Christ throughout our lives*, just as John says: "He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked."

[161] Michaelis, "Mimeomai, mimētēs, symmimētēs," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, tr. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), Vol. 4, 659-674; Édoard Cothenet, "Imitation du Christ dans l'Écriture," *Dictionnaire de spiritualité. Ascétique et mystique doctrine et histoire*, M. Viller et al. ed. (Paris: Beauchesne, 1971), Vol. 7, 1536-62; Étienne Ledeur, "Imitation du Christ. Tradition spirituelle," ibid., 1562-87. For a particularly elucidating discussion on the general notion of mimesis see Karl F. Morrison, *The Mimetic Tradition of Reform in the West* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982), ix-xviii. Concerning Agrippa, see Hermann F. W. Kuhlow, *Die Imitatio Christi und ihre kosmologische Überfremdung. Die theologischen Grundgedanken des Agrippa von Nettesheim* (Berlin: Lutherisches Verlagshaus Berlin und Hamburg, 1967). This study has remained out of my reach during this research.

> *Dixit etiam ipsa veritas Christus: "Petite et dabitur vobis, pulsate et aperietur vobis, quaerite et invenietis", videlicet quaerendo in fide, firmiter credendo – "credere enim", ut ait Hermes, "ipsum intelligere est" – petendo denique in spe cum firma et indubia expectatione, laudando et adorando Iesum Christum,* a quo tam divinissima cognitio in animam nostrum descendit, *ut nos spiritus sui illustret lumine, pulsantes autem in operatione caritatis cum vigiliis et ieiuniis et aredenti desiderio,* in omni vita cum imitatione Iesu Christi, *quemadmodum inquit Ioannes: "Qui dicit se manere in Christo debet sicut ill ambulavit et ipse ambulare".*[162]

It is important to note that here, along with the explicit mention of *imitatio Christi*, Agrippa uses the proper theological expression of God's liberating grace: it is not the soul who ascends on its own, but the divine grace that *descends* upon the soul. I will return to the problem of direction shortly.

As Michaelis points out in his article,[163] the lexical group *mimeomai, mimētēs, symmimētēs* is comparatively rare in the New Testament, being found only in St. Paul's Epistles. One such well-known instance is Paul's call from 1 Corinthians 11:1: "Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ" (*imitatores mei estote sicut et ego Christi*).[164] Other such examples can be found in 1 Corinthians 11:1 and Philippians 3:17. As it was Paul who inaugurated the principle of *imitatio Christi*, Agrippa must have been exposed to the Pauline understanding of it in the course of studying and commenting on his epistles. The emphasis of this understanding is on following Christ's qualities such as holy simplicity, poverty, charity and, above all, unshaken faith in God, which, as mentioned earlier, is the central point of Agrippa's religious thought.

Possible traces of a much more contemporary idea of *imitatio Christi* might be those passages that express Agrippa's sense of humility and a peculiar inclination

[162] *De triplici ratione* 5, 14, in Perrone Compagni, *Ermetismo e Cristianesimo*, 134-6. Translation mine, except for the quotations from Matthew 7:7 and 1 John 2:6. Emphasis mine.
[163] Michaelis, "Mimeomai, mimētēs, symmimētēs," 666.

towards ascetic mortification. One such example is to be found in a letter to a friend, the Augustinian Aurelius ab Aquapendente, written in Lyon, in November 1527. It is significant that Agrippa first speaks of ascension resulting in deification:

> But now concerning that philosophy which you require to know, I would have you to know that it is to know God himself, the worker of all things, and to pass into him by a whole image of likeness (as by an essential contract and bond) whereby thou mayest be transformed, and made as God.… This is that true, high occult philosophy of wonderful works.
>
> *Iam vero quod ad postulatam philosophiam attinet, te scire volo, quod omnium rerum cognoscere opificem ipsum Deum & in illum tota similitudinis imagine ceu essentiali quodam contractu sive vinculo transire, quo ipse transformeris, efficiareque Deus…Haec est illa vera & summa mirabilium operum occultissima philosophia*.[165]

However, only a few lines below, speaking of the intellect as the key to this *occultisima philosophia*, he asserts that it is now captured in the corruptible flash and goes on vigorously:

> For one who wants to enter this sanctuary of secrets must die, I say *die to the world, and to the flesh*, and all senses, and to the whole man animal, not because the body is separated from the soul, but because the soul leaves the body: of which death Paul wrote to the Colossians: Ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ. And elsewhere he speaks more clearly of himself: I know a man, *whether in the body, or out of the body* I cannot tell, God knows, *caught up unto the third heaven*, etc.
>
> *Mori enim oportet*, mori, inquam, mundo & carni, *ac sensibus omnibus, ac toti homini animali, qui velit ad haec secretorum penetralia ingredi: non, quod corpus separetur ab anima, sed quod anima relinquat corpus. De qua morte Paulus scripsit Colossensibus: Mortui estis & vita vestra abscondita est cum Christo; & alibi clarius de seipso ait, Scio hominem*, in corpore vel extra corpus, *nescio (Deus scit)* raptum usque ad tertium coelum *& quae reliqua sequuntur*.[166]

At least two things are significant here. First, Agrippa speaks of the corporeal mortification with Christ as its focus (an idea peculiar to the Christian ascetics) and

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[164] The Latin translation given according to the Vulgate, http://www.fourmilab.ch/etexts/www/Vulgate/1_Corinthians.html (last accessed: May 25, 2007).
[165] *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, 681; *Epistolae* 5, 19, in *Opera*, 909. On Aquapendente and his relationship with Agrippa see Nauert, *Agrippa*, 100.
[166] *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, 681; *Opera*, 909. Freake's translation slightly modified.

then he puts it into the context of ascension, with the famous example of Paul's rapture (2 Corinthians 12:2). Furthermore, he adds Paul's important remark that it is not clear whether the rapture took place *in spiritu* or *in corpore*, but with his (Agrippa's) own insinuation that it was *in spiritu*.

Finally, a curious instance of Agrippa's humble and bitterly self-conscious confession comes forth:

> But this I will advise you, that you be not deceived concerning me, as if I at any time having received such divine things should boast of them to you, or could hope to have them granted to me, who hitherto have been a soldier, consecrated with man's blood, having been almost always belonging to the king's Court, bound to a most dear wife by the bond of flesh, exposed to all the blast of inconstant fortune, and *being crossed in my flesh, in the world, and worldly affairs*, could not obtain the sublime gifts of the immortal gods.
>
> *Verum hoc te admonitum volo, ne circa me decipiaris, ac si ego aliquando divina passus, tibi ista praedicem, aut tale quid mihi arrogare velim, vel concedi posse sperem, qui hactenus humano sanguine sacratus miles, semper fere aulicus, tum carnis vinculo charissimae uxori alligatus, omnibusque instabilis fortunae flatibus expositus,* totusque a carne, a mundo, a domesticis curis transversum actus*, tam sublimia immortalium deorum dona non sum adsecutus.*[167]

Apart from personal bitterness, caused by the circumstances of his life in Lyon, the tone of Agrippa's letter reflects a mood peculiar to an introspective Christian ascetic whose only program is to untie "the bonds of flesh" on his path of following Jesus Christ. It is my perception that Agrippa's words cannot be taken only as an expression of temporary dissatisfaction, as has been often suggested concerning his *De vanitate*. They sprang from a life-long interest in a particular form of spirituality which was evidently different from his esoteric preoccupations, and could only be emphasized by the harsh circumstances of his life in Lyon. Several instances from his biography support this claim: his study of St. Paul's Epistles with John Colet; his writings such as the *De triplici ratione*, *Dehortatio gentilis theologiae*, and *De*

vanitate; his lost commentaries on the Epistle to the Romans; and last but not least, his numerous letters such as the one quoted above.

Along with the well examined influence of Erasmus' and Colet's biblical humanism, and to some extent of Luther's radical ideas, there might have been yet another thread of a more indirect influence on Agrippa, that of Thomas à Kempis and his famed work *De imitatione Christi*. I base this assumption on the evident similarity of the general tone and predominant themes, such as the vanity of the sciences, the need to die to the world in order to be able to follow Christ, and so on. Although so far I have not found even one single mention of Thomas à Kempis in Agrippa, I believe that Thomas' idea of *imitatio Christi* is echoed in one or another way in some of Agrippa's writings, alongside the more expected Pauline notion of it.

For a number of years, Thomas (1379/80-1471) was member of the Brethren of the Common Life in Deventer, where he came under a strong influence of the so-called *devotio moderna*, of which Deventer was then the center.[168] The central figure of this new devotion was the Deacon Gerard Groote (1340-1384), whose zealous personality drew a number of priests and laymen around him, forming the nucleus of an informal religious community, later crystallized in the form of the Brethren, approved by Pope Gregory XI in 1376. The movement of "new devotion" appeared as a challenge to the spiritual and moral decay of the clergy and preached a humble, pious life in poverty, chastity, and obedience, with a strong emphasis on the inner religious experience. The notion of *imitatio Christi* was central, following Jesus Christ in his holy simplicity and humility and identifying with him on the way of the Cross.

[167] Ibid. Emphasis mine. On the bitter tone of the letters from Agrippa's Lyon days see footnote 16.
[168] Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ* (London: Penguin Books, 1952), 11-23.

Explaining how it was that some of the saints were so perfect and contemplative, Thomas says:

> It is because they strove with all their might to mortify in themselves all worldly desires, and could thus cling to God in their inmost heart and offer themselves freely and wholly to Him. But we are held too firmly by our passions, and are too much concerned with the passing affairs of the world… If only we were completely dead to self, and free from inner conflict, we could savor spiritual things and win experience of heavenly contemplation.
>
> *Quia mortificari omnino ab omnibus terrenis desideriis studuerunt, et ideo totis medullis cordis Deo inhærere, atque sibi libere vacare potuerunt. Nos nimium propriis occupamur passionibus, et de transitoriis nimis sollicitamur… Si essemus nobismetipsis perfecte intenti, et exterius minime implicati, tunc possemus etiam divina sapere, et de cælesti contemplatione aliquid experiri.*[169]

Concerning the argument and the general tone, the similarity with Agrippa's words from the letter quoted above is evident and, in my opinion, beyond the mere correspondence of commonplaces. A closer comparison could reveal a number of other striking similarities, such as Agrippa's *verbum Dei* doctrine and his rejection of the epistemological value of human arts and sciences.[170]

In addition, it might not be a mere coincidence that Erasmus, Agrippa's great role model, had himself spent eleven years (1475-1486) among the Brethren of the Common Life in Deventer, during which time he was strongly influenced by the *devotio moderna*. As Lewis W. Spitz puts it, "religiously this meant an emphasis on the simplicity of truth, the spirituality and inwardness of the religious life, and the imitation of Christ."[171] This could mean that through Erasmian biblical humanism Agrippa might have come in touch with the ideas of Gerard Groote and Thomas à

[169] Ibid., 38 (chapter I, 11). Tr. Leo Sherley-Price.
[170] For the *verbum Dei* doctrine, see *The Imitation of Christ*, 30-2 (chapter I, 3) and 91-5 (chapters III, 1-3); for the rejection of human learning, see 30-2 (chapters I, 1-4).
[171] Lewis W. Spitz, *The Religious Renaissance of the German Humanists* (Cambridge: Harward University Press, 1963), 199.

Kempis. In my opinion, this line of possible influence is worth examining in a separate study.

3.2 *Imitatio Dei Patris*: the paradigm of "hubris"

If, on the one hand, *imitatio Christi* could be considered a proper Christian attitude for achieving spiritual ascension where one humbly relies upon God's descending grace, then the opposite attitude might be provisionally termed "*Imitatio Dei Patris.*" This would imply that the ascendant primarily relies on his own strength and initiative, although not excluding or rejecting divine assistance, and with the focus on the desired position rather than on the mood of submission and obedience to God. Given that it is probably impossible to make such a clear-cut distinction, the term *imitatio Dei patris* might seem too strong and misleading; therefore I use it only tentatively and for the sake of emphasizing certain points of this analysis.

Agrippa's immediate predecessors and role models in his esoteric preoccupations – Marsilio Ficino with his mild mixture of Christianity, Neoplatonism and hermeticism, the Christian cabalists Pico della Mirandola and Johannes Reuchlin, and Johannes Trithemius with his magical theology – had all inherited the same set of problems in their programs of reconciling and amalgamating different spiritual traditions. What appears as a dichotomy inherent in the concept of ascension certainly dates back to much older times.

Concerning the influence of the Jewish mystical traditions on Agrippa, it is a complex question that cannot be dealt with in this work, the more so as these traditions are far from being in mutual harmony and congruence.[172] With regard to my research question, I should point out a particularly important issue that was subject to

changes and divergences during the historical development of Jewish mysticism: the *direction* of communication between God and man. Concerning this problem, Moshe Idel makes the following important note:

> A survey of the history of the ascent to heaven in Judaism, however, reveals a rather interesting difference: in the earliest descriptions, the founding figures, the patriarchs and Moses, are never portrayed as ascending to and entering a totally different realm for the sake of a *rendez-vous* with the divine. In the Bible it is God who reveals himself by coming down to the recipients of the divine message rather than by bringing the messenger to his realm in order to receive it. In other words, the biblical apprehension of the revelation is based upon the assumption that man as a psychosomatic entity cannot transcend his mundane situation and penetrate the divine realm, while God is able to adapt himself, and perhaps also his message, to human capacity. While the way down is open, the way up is basically closed. The ascents of Elijah and perhaps of Enoch are presented in the Bible as initiated not my men, but rather by God.[173]

Idel's thesis is that one of the major developments in post-biblical Judaism is "the continuous growth of the apotheotic vector in the general economy of Judaism, a theophanic religion in its first manifestation." [174] This was already amply demonstrated by the Heikhalot or Merkabah mysticism, in which the theme of individual ascension played the central role.[175] In Merkabah mysticism, as Idel remarks, it was the initiative of the mystic that provided the starting point for the mystical journey. The importance of the individual initiative was equally present in the Zoharic cabala, the branch of Jewish mysticism that strongly influenced Agrippa, but there the focus was on the theosophical speculation rather than the practical efforts to achieve ascension.[176] Suffice it to say that, by the time of Pico, Reuchlin and Agrippa, the principle of active striving for ascension had been firmly established in the main currents of Jewish mysticism.

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[172] See Blau, *The Christian Interpretation of Cabala*, 78-88; Lehrich, *Language of Demons and Angels*, 147-59.
[173] Idel, *Ascensions on High*, 24.
[174] Ibid., 25.
[175] Ibid., 28-37; Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 40-79.

Two other closely related traditions that crucially influenced Agrippa, Neoplatonism and hermeticism, marked his thought with the same idea of the importance of one's own individual effort in the program of restoring one's lost relationship with God. As Van der Poel notes, despite all his (probably sincere) claims to orthodoxy, Agrippa was essentially a Neoplatonist:

> In the *Dialogus de homine* Agrippa gives a digest of the standard Neoplatonic anthropological notions, to which he fully subscribes and which constitute the basic premise of his theological thought. The Neoplatonists believed that in Paradise man had existed as an asexual (i.e. hermaphroditic), partly material and partly divine, being in direct relationship with God. As a result of Original Sin, the divine side of man, shaped by his affinity with God, was violated, and the harmony between the divinity and the earthliness of man was disturbed. It is man's task, in his terrestrial existence, to restore the original relationship with God *through all the means which he has at his disposal*.[177]

In my opinion, one of the most important elements that shaped Agrippa's idea of ascension was the hermetic account of his fall, which, contrary to its biblical counterpart, presents it as a willing act with no sin involved. What drove man to the earth was sheer curiosity rather than God's anger, and what kept him there was enchantment with his own reflected image rather than God's curse:

> Having all authority over the cosmos of mortals and unreasoning animals, the man broke through the vault and stooped to look through the cosmic framework, thus displaying to lower nature the fair form of god. Nature smiled for love when she saw him whose fairness brings no surfeit and who holds in himself all the energy of the governors and the form of god, for in the water she saw the shape of the man's fairest form and upon the earth its shadow. When the man saw in the water the form like himself as it was in nature, he loved it and wished to inhabit it; wish and action came in the same moment, and he inhabited the unreasoning form. Nature took hold of her beloved, hugged him all about and embraced him, for they were lovers.[178]

This is a description of a fallen god. There is no sin, there is no expulsion, and the fall is depicted almost as an incident or an act of misfortune. There is no clear ontological

[176] Ibid., 206-207.
[177] Van der Poel, *Agrippa, the Humanist Theologian*, 50. Emphasis mine.

boundary between man-god and God. Although ultimately enslaved, man retains his godlike position of one beloved by nature. Hence, although there is a natural urge for return, there is no need for penitence or redemption. The absence of the elements of sin and God's anger are peculiar to the Platonic accounts of the fall as well. There is no mediator between this world and the other, and man, being a fallen god, is expected to revive his divine nature, which alone can provide his ascent to the original world he once abandoned. In the particularly inspiring words of Andrew Louth:

> The mystical strand in Platonism (which is proper and fundamental to it) develops from this notion of man's essentially spiritual nature, from the belief of his kinship with the divine. But, for Christianity, man is a creature; he is not ultimately God's kin, but created out of nothing by God and only sustained in being by dependence on His will. There is an ontological gulf between God and his creation, a real difference of being. Only in Christ, in whom divine and human natures are united, do we find One who is of one substance with the Father. At this point Christianity and Platonism are irreconcilable…
>
> Intimately linked with this is the bearing of the doctrine of the Incarnation on mystical theology. Within the Platonic framework, the soul's search for God is naturally conceived of as a return, an *ascent* to God; for the soul properly belongs with God, and in its ascent it is but realizing its won true nature. Christianity, on the other hand, speaks of the Incarnation of God, of his *descent* into the world that he might give to man the possibility of a communion with God that is not open to him by nature. And yet man *is* made in the image of God, and so these movements of ascent and descent cross one another and remain – as a fact of experience – in unresolved tension.[179]

3.3. Magic as pious impiety

The classical emblematic figures of the two types of *imitatio* are Simon Magus and St. Peter, the former standing as the archetypal magus of the Faustian kind, and the latter as the gatekeeper of faith, as related in the Acts of Apostles 8:9-25 and in later Gnostic legends. Simon's legendary usurpation of the divine attribute *stans et non cadens* ("the one who stands and does not fall," the Standing One), which can

[178] *Poimandres*, 14, in Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 3.

refer only to God implying his absolute immovability, and the same words used by Agrippa in a particularly important passage concerning the position of the magus have led Michael H. Keefer to conclude that, at certain point, Agrippa faced the problem of the utter impossibility of reconciling two spiritual paradigms.[180] This view seems to be supported by the explicit mention of Simon Magus in Agrippa's retraction, quoted above, in which he says that Simon, along with the other diabolical figures mentioned, "shall be condemned to the pains of everlasting fire."

The passage Keefer refers to is particularly telling:

> [S]o that there is no work in this whole world so admirable, so excellent, so wonderful, *which the soul of man*, being associated to his image of divinity, which the magicians call a soul standing and not falling, *cannot accomplish by its own power without any external help*. Therefore the form of all magical power is from the soul of man standing and not falling.
>
> [*U*]*t nullum opus sit in tota mundi serie tam admirabile, tam excellens, tam miraculosum* quod anima humana *suam divinitatis imaginem complexa, quam vocant magi animam stantem et non cadentem*, sua propria virtute absque omni externo adminiculo non queat efficere. *Forma igitur totius magicae virtutis est ab anima hominis stante et non cadente*.[181]

This passage clearly bears the idea of the omnipotent man-god, as derived from the *Corpus Hermeticum*, and it is indeed curious that the *stans et non cadens* phrase appears twice. Furthermore, Keefer considers the entire hermetic doctrine of spiritual rebirth and the Simonian *imitatio Dei Patris* to be indistinguishable, and "then the whole effort is compromised: the breaking down of the oppositions has been allowed to go too far."[182] In this interpretation, Agrippa must have recoiled before the recognition of the demonic background of his sincerely pious efforts, which subsequently led to an honest and straightforward recantation.

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[179] Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition. From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), xiv. Emphasis is the author's.
[180] Keefer, "Agrippa's Dilemma," 650-652. See also Szőnyi, *John Dee's Occultism*, 128-131.
[181] *De occulta philosophia*, III 44, 614 (544). Emphasis mine.

Another scholar, Frank L. Borchardt, emphasizes the element of sincere piety in the personality of the Renaissance magus, but adds that "however pious the intentions of the *magi*, their system usurped divine prerogative" and thus subverted itself.[183] Their magic inevitably collided with the basic theological obstacle, the freedom and omnipotence of God:

> Whereas the presuppositions were pious enough…, the activity of magic itself imposed on God a set of limitation defined by the universe. If one learns all the principles of the ordering of nature, one can reach God who dwells beyond but contiguous to creation… At that moment, magic is no longer so pious, for it implies a coercive power in the hands of humanity that can finally be imposed on God. And that impiety retroactively demolishes the entire system.[184]

Given the initial piety of the magus, what followed, according to Borchardt's interpretation, was a universal pattern of disappointment in magic and guilt of conscience on the part of the magician.

This line of interpretation, viewing magic as a challenge and threat to the "totality of the relationship between man and God, between the natural and the supernatural, occupied by orthodoxies,"[185] implies a strong sense of psychological conditioning that would account for the apparently guilty conscience of the magus. However, it operates with a somewhat narrowed concept of piety, giving it solely the Christian denotation. In my opinion, it would be fruitful to deepen the examination of Agrippa's "personal inner conflict" by taking into consideration possible different types or modes of piety, or different *pieties*, with regard to their different spiritual backgrounds. Perhaps such a consideration would ease the burden of guilty conscience on the back of the Renaissance magi, provided that the guilt was sincere.

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[182] Keefer, "Agrippa's Dilemma," 650.
[183] Borchardt, "The *Magus* as the Renaissance Man," 69.
[184] Ibid., 72-3.
[185] Ibid., 72.

The purpose of this chapter was to point out exactly what Andrew Louth termed the "unresolved tension" of the movements of ascent and descent as reflected in the religious thought of Cornelius Agrippa. To accomplish that, I briefly discussed four main currents of influence upon the German humanist, namely Christian, Jewish, Neoplatonic, and hermetic. I have consciously left out two other, almost equally important, sources of influence, Islamic esoteric doctrines and medieval European magic, and also the Christian patristic tradition that influenced Agrippa, for the simple fact that I could not afford to broaden the scope of my analysis any further. However, I believe that even my brief examination of the four spiritual traditions mentioned above has at least outlined the main aspects of the problems of spiritual and magical ascension.

4. Conclusion

If anything like Agrippa's doctrine of ascension can be extracted from his writings, and I believe I have shown it can, the first conclusion would be that this doctrine is far from being readily comprehensible and coherent with regard to all the elements it embraces. Moreover, it is characterized by a constant tension and opposition between different spiritual paradigms built into its fundamentals.

For the sake of my analysis, I have introduced the categories of magical and spiritual ascension. The former, which could also be termed ascension to power, lays an emphasis on *one becoming like God* with regard to the divine prerogatives to create, operate, and manipulate nature. The latter, which corresponds to the Christian understanding of deification *stricto sensu*, lays an emphasis on *one uniting with God*

in one or another way, with the central idea of submission and surrender to God. Hence, according to the standard division, the former belongs to the realm of magic, and the latter to that of religious mysticism.

In the course of my analysis I have shown that, in the religious thought of Cornelius Agrippa, these two concepts overlapped, intertwined, and merged one in the other to the point of (to use G. E. Szőnyi's words) perfect ambiguity. In my opinion, this ambiguity is suggested already on the semantic plane, as shown in the cases of the words *exaltatio*, *imitatio*, *imitari*, *aemulatio*, *aemulari*. Moreover, I have come to the conclusion that this tentative division between the two aspects of ascension does not fully correspond to the more general division between Agrippa's magical and skeptical-devotional writings, as elements of both aspects appear throughout all of his works examined here, even if only in traces and allusions. Quite expectedly, the predominant aspect of ascension in Agrippa's *De occulta philosophia* is magical, and yet, this work, as a number of quotations have shown, does not lack statements that could easily be interpreted as mystically oriented.

Generally speaking, it is evident that the "spiritual" side of Agrippa's doctrine of ascension reveals his intimate involvement in Christianity, particularly in the biblical humanism of Erasmian type and (as several scholars have pointed out) apophatic mysticism as taught by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and Nicholas of Cusa, whereas the magical side of it points to his involvement in Neoplatonism, hermeticism, cabala, and medieval ceremonial magic. On the other hand, all the latter, with the possible exception of ceremonial magic, claim an equal right to spiritual ascension, regardless of their theological differences from Christianity. And vice versa, as Keith Thomas has shown, early and medieval Christian thought and practice were strongly marked by the presence of magic that inevitably led to at least the

implicit idea of magical ascension. Thus, Agrippa's "perfect ambiguity" is the ambiguity of the inherited traditions and paradigms, and the ambiguity of their historical interactions.

Leaving behind my provisory division and moving on to the general questions of ascension, I have come to the following conclusions. Regarding the "mechanism" of ascension, in most cases it is not possible to tell whether Agrippa had in mind ascension *in spiritu*, *in corpore*, or only *in contemplatione*. As I have implied throughout the analysis, it seems that Agrippa tends towards a more spiritual rather than corporeal understanding of the act of ascension. In that sense, it might be argued that he is more a Platonist than a Christian, but, once again, the border is thin and the soil too soft to support any strong conclusions.

I have focused my analysis on several themes with the premise that these are crucially important for the treatment of my research question. These have been categorized as the cosmological prerequisites for and the anthropological aspects of ascension. I have argued that Agrippa's notion of emanation and the cosmic hierarchy is more Neoplatonic than Christian, for he interprets it almost as an act of necessity that leaves the path upwards *naturally* open. The first is an implicit idea that derives logically from the second, as shown on the example of the opening sentence of the *De occulta philosophia*. As for the anthropological aspects, I have argued that Agrippa's treatment of the grand themes of the Judeo-Christian tradition – those of man's likeness to God, the Original Sin, and the Fall – is more Neoplatonic and hermetic than Christian. The ontological boundary between God and man is blurred; man is conceived of more as a "fallen god" than God's creature; the importance of the Original Sin is somewhat reduced, otherwise there would be no room for thoughts of magical ascension at all; finally, the body is viewed more as the Platonic "cage of the

soul" than the Christian integral component of one's personality. The notion of man's dignity, strongly hermetic and re-established by Pico della Mirandola, fits perfectly with this picture and makes the idea of man's own initiative for ascension both logical and natural.

All this said, I do not intend to oppose the interpretations of a number of scholars – to mention Vittoria Perrone Compagni, Marc Van der Poel, and Christopher I. Lehrich – which suggest a certain deeper congruence and harmony between the different streams of Agrippa's thought. It is my perception that the contradictions I have pointed out do not necessarily exclude the coherence of Agrippa's spiritual program, being more imposed from the "outside" than, as the common interpretation goes, stemming from his own inner personal conflicts. In other words, concerning particularly the question of ascension, the integrity of Agrippa's philosophical intention could have faced a diversity of ways offered by different spiritual and philosophical traditions. What came forth as a binding force in this case was certainly the inherited rigidity of philosophical categories that did not readily leave room for new interpretations. That such a situation would have serious psychological implications in the form of constant doubts, wavering, and even the occasional pang of conscience, is highly probable and conceivable, but that question lies entirely outside the scope of this work.

To conclude with the enlightening words of Karl F. Morrison:

> Even the most refined philosophical formulations, and the most inspired spiritual utterances, were inadequate to explain the great issues of life… Perhaps the disharmonies in the *oeuvres* of great philosophers – so puzzling and embarrassing to their disciples – show that, when all is said and done, ambiguity in the very nature of things tends to intrude self-contradiction even into the most compelling systems of thought… It is exactly because incongruity is the norm in life that the impulse to find similarity in dissimilar things has been so

relentless and potent in magic, religion, philosophy, science, and the arts.[186]

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