The Ritualization of Language in the *Hermetica*

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Abstract

Die Ritualisierung der Sprache in den Hermetischen Schriften

Die Hermetischen Schriften bestanden hauptsächlich aus Ideen, die in der Griechischen Philosophie ihre Herkunft hatten. Wenn man sie aber aus dieser Perspektive zu lesen versucht, scheinen sie nicht sehr kohärent, ja chaotisch zu sein. Man erkennt schnell, daß die Autoren von der Sprache der Philosophie auf eine sehr unphilosophische Weise Gebrauch machen. In meinem Aufsatz stütze ich mich auf anthropologische Untersuchungen zur Ritualsprache. Ich versuche zu zeigen, daß die philosophische Sprache in den *Hermetica* ihre Bedeutung verändert hat, daß sie, mit anderen Worten, zu einer Ritualsprache geworden ist. Man sollte also die hermetischen Argumente nicht nur mit Rücksicht auf ihren semantischen Sinn lesen, sondern muß vor allem die von ihnen beabsichtigte Wirkung (auf die Leser) in Betracht ziehen. Es ist nicht nur wichtig zu verstehen, was diese Texte *aussagen*, sondern auch was sie *bewirken*. Mein Artikel zeigt auf, daß der Hermetismus eine "liminale" Bewegung war. Seine Anhänger sind aufgrund der "hellenistischen Globalisierung" in einen "kulturlosen" Zustand geraten und sehnten sich danach, sich in einer unmittelbaren Weise auf Gott beziehen zu können, ohne sich auf traditionelle Religionsstrukturen stützen zu müssen. Die Sprache der Philosophie erwies sich als nützlich dank ihrer universalistischen Ambitionen. In gewisser Hinsicht war aber auch die philosophische Sprache zu beschränkt: Sie war zu stark von den Regeln der Logik abhängig. Diese erschienen den Hermetikern als verknöcherte Strukturen, die unsere Aufmerksamkeit von Gott ablenken konnten. Um die philosophischen Argumente ihrer wahren Bestimmung zuzuführen, mußte man sie erst von den Fesseln der Logik befreien (*Asclepius* 12-14). In den Händen der Hermetiker hat diese Sprache ihre intellektuelle Funktion verloren und wurde benutzt, um bestimmte Geisteszustände herbeizuführen, die in ihrer Gesamtheit die hermetische Frömmigkeit ausmachten.

In modern studies of the Greek *Hermetica*,[1] one can easily discern two competing approaches. The first one, initiated by Wilhem and Joseph Kroll and

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[1] By *Hermetica* I mean the "philosophical" treatises published by Nock and Festugière, leaving out the so-called "technical" Hermetism which is irrelevant to my subject.

brought to perfection by A.-J. Festugière, may be called "Hellenic".[2] It pays much attention to the fact that apart from a few exceptions (such as *C.H.* I, III or XIII), most of the *Corpus Hermeticum* consists of arguments and concepts borrowed from Greek philosophy. Accordingly, "Hellenic" scholars see the *Hermetica* as an eclectic by-product of Greek thought. Unfortunately, this philosophical perspective is rather hard to maintain because once we try to read the *Hermetica* as philosophical treatises, we immediately stumble upon a number of inconsistencies and logical gaps: the authors keep jumping incoherently from one point to another, their logical "proofs" often look rather like caricatures of their Platonic originals, and there are a number of contradictions even within a single treatise. Faced with this, Festugière was forced to conclude that our treatises were compiled by mediocre pseudo-intellectuals who tried to imitate Greek philosophy but failed to do so properly.[3]

For historians of religion such a conclusion is unacceptable. It is one of the basic premises of modern religious and anthropological studies that if some religious forms seem less coherent and "perfect" than others, it is due to their having different criteria of coherence. Hence if the Hermetists failed to follow the reasoning of the philosophers properly, we must assume that their interest lay elsewhere. To understand Hermetism, we must identify the criteria of intelligibility peculiar to it.

It is partly with this in mind that the Hellenic approach has, from the very beginning, been criticized by a second group of scholars who have denounced the philosophical reading of the *Hermetica* as naive and short-sighted. As Wilhelm Bousset put it in an oft-quoted maxim, 'die hermetischen Schriften gehören in die Geschichte der Frömmigkeit und nicht der Philosophie'.[4] To see what the Hermetists really mean, Bousset and Reitzenstein were convinced, we have to look at them from the perspective of Hellenistic oriental syncretism. While the original applications of this approach were not always convincing,[5] subsequent scholars have managed to show that in many respects Hermetism is indeed rooted in the world of Hellenistic Egypt and shows con-

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[2] W. Kroll, "Hermes Trismegistos"; J. Kroll, *Die Lehren des Hermes Trismegistos*; Festugière, *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste* I-IV.

[3] See e.g. Festugière, *Révélation* II, 33: 'la culture philosophique de l'hermétiste est médiocre et sa pensée sans originalité et sans vigueur'. Cf. *Révélation* II, x, or IV, 55.

[4] Bousset, a review of J. Kroll, *Die Lehren des Hermes Trismegistos*, 700.

[5] R. Reitzenstein in particular was all too imaginative in his various attempts to trace the Egyptian or Iranian roots of Hermetism. See the critical analysis of Colpe, *Die religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, 140-170.

siderable Jewish and Egyptian influences.[6] Over the last thirty years, this has been the dominant trend in academic study and the Hellenic perspective is nowadays largely considered as outdated.

This is certainly a good development, but nevertheless, in itself the new approach often seems no less one-sided than the Hellenic perspective. It is true that the Hermetists obviously did not belong to the philosophical tradition and that their texts can hardly be grasped properly from its viewpoint only. Yet this does not mean that in studying them we can leave philosophy behind altogether. When Reitzenstein and his followers attempted to trace a coherent "oriental" doctrine behind the superficial philosophical costume of the *Hermetica*, they were never able to do so for the whole *Corpus* and were always left with a number of treatises and passages that bore no resemblance to anything "oriental" and seemed philosophical through and through.[7] No matter how much attention we pay to Jewish, Gnostic or Egyptian parallels, it is indisputable that in terms of quantity the *Corpus Hermeticum* is predominantly composed of philosophical ideas. Its Hellenistic oriental background shows itself not so much in the particular motifs and images employed, as in a peculiar way of using the language of philosophy. Most of the texts do not seem to have a clear "oriental" doctrine behind them, but much rather philosophical concepts and arguments arranged in a non-philosophical way.

My argument in this article is that if we want to make sense of Hermetism, we need to pay attention precisely to its unusual way of using philosophical language. Building on contemporary anthropological approaches to the study of ritual language, I will argue that in the *Hermetica* philosophical language undergoes changes in terms of meaning and becomes "ritualized". In the second part of my paper I will devote some reflection to the reasons why this happened, and how this can help us understand the texts better.

1. Hermetic Hymns

What aspects of the language of the *Hermetica* might remind us of ritual? Clearly, the first thing that comes to mind are the hymns, of which there are several in the *Corpus*. Some of them are explicitly presented as such (*C.H.* I

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[6] The number of studies and articles is considerable. The most important ones are Dodd, *The Bible and the Greeks*; Mahé, *Hermès en haute-Egypte* I-II; Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*.
[7] See particularly the short but highly systematic study of Friedrich Bräuninger, *Untersuchungen zu den Schriften des Hermes Trismegistos*.

31-32; XIII 17-19; XIII 21; *Ascl.* 41), and may have even served a cultic purpose.[8] Yet as a whole explicit hymns are atypical and do not give us a useful clue for approaching the language of the majority of our treatises. It is more fruitful, as will be seen, to look at passages which do not stand out of the text as clearly as this and might be called "hymnic" rather than being hymns proper. One such text is the whole of *C.H.* III, fittingly described by Festugière as a 'hymne en prose sur la cosmogonie'.[9] Nothing in the treatise suggests that it would have been actually sung, but its hieratic tone, condensed language and numerous repetitive patterns make the text resemble some parts of the *Septuagint* rather than Greek philosophical essays.

C.H. III is still not quite typical of the *Corpus*, however. Even more important is another hymnic passage, *C.H.* V 10-11. Suffice it to quote the opening paragraph (§ 10):[10]

> Who may praise you, then, acting on your behalf or according to your purpose?
> And where shall I look to praise you—above, below, within, without?
> For there is no direction about you nor place nor any other being.
> All is within you; all comes from you.
> You give everything and give nothing.
> For you have it all, and there is nothing that you do not have.

The interesting thing about this hymn is how closely it is connected in tone, thought and formal structure with the rest of the treatise. Consider the passage immediately preceding it (§ 10):

> This is the god who is greater than any name;
> this is the god invisible and entirely visible.
> This god who is evident to the eyes may be seen in the mind.
> He is bodiless and many-bodied; or rather, he is all-bodied.
> There is nothing that he is not, for he also is all that is,
> and this is why he has all names, because they are of one father,
> and this is why he has no name, because he is father of them all.

Clearly, the only difference between this passage and the hymn that follows it is the grammatical person used: 3. sg. in the prose part, 2. sg. in the hymn.

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[8] This is suggested by the ritual instructions in *Asclepius* 41 and *C.H.* XIII 16. Cf. the evening prayer in *C.H.* I 29 and the praise of religious singing in *Ascl.* 9 and 26.

[9] Festugière, *Révélation* II, 9; cf. Reitzenstein, *Poimandres*, 345.

[10] Throughout the article I use the translation of Brian Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, for the *Corpus Hermeticum* and the *Asclepius*, unless indicated otherwise. The translations from *Stobaei Hermetica* are mine.

There is the same formal symmetry, the same play with logical paradox. If we changed the prose passage into 2. sg., it would become indistinguishable from the hymn.

Not all of the treatise is like this, of course. Some passages are more discursive than others, containing bits of dialogue and philosophical syllogisms. Yet, even these parts are interspersed with the same formal elements that make the hymn into what it is. There are paradoxes throughout: God is 'invisible and entirely visible' (as the title puts it), he is 'himself the things that are and those that are not' (§ 9), the cosmos is 'the motionless set in motion' (§ 5). The text abounds with symmetries: 'this is the order of the cosmos, and this is the cosmos of the order' (§ 5). There are long, repetitive series of rhetorical questions which have an intoxicating feel about them and make it impossible for the reader to dissent (§ 6):

> [C]onsider how the human being is crafted in the womb, examine the skill of the craftwork carefully, and learn who it is that crafts this beautiful, godlike image of mankind. Who traced the line round the eyes? Who pierced the holes for nostrils and ears? Who opened up the mouth? Who stretched out the sinews and tied them down? Who made channels for the veins? Who hardened the bones? Who drew skin over the flesh? Who parted the fingers? Who flattened the bottoms of the feet?

C.H. V is exceptional for the density of its hymnic elements, but is by no means unique. We find similar passages in *C.H.* IV 10-11; XI 5-8, 20-22; XII 20-21; XIII 6, 11; XIV 3-4 etc. Thus, while the small number of clear-cut hymns in the *Hermetica* are certainly interesting, I suggest it is even more rewarding to pay attention to the much more numerous hymn-like passages, which show that large parts of our texts are formally closer to songs than to prose essays.

2. Hermetic Sentences

Even more conspicuous than the hymn-like sequences is another literary element pervading most of the *Hermetica*: short gnomic maxims fittingly designated by Jean Pierre Mahé as "Hermetic sentences". Mahé considered them one of the main constituents that give our treatises their characteristic flavour,[11] and one cannot but agree. A good example is to be found in *C.H.* XI 2:

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[11] Mahé, *Hermès* II, 407-408.

> God makes eternity; eternity makes the cosmos; the cosmos makes time; time makes becoming.
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> The essence (so to speak) of god is wisdom; the essence of eternity is identity; of cosmos, order; of time, change; of becoming, life and death.
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> But the energy of god is mind and soul; the energy of eternity is permanence and immortality; of the cosmos, recurrence and counter-recurrence; of time, increase and decrease; of becoming, quality (and quantity).
>
> Eternity, therefore, is in god, the cosmos in eternity, time in the cosmos, and becoming in time.

The phenomenon of these "Hermetic sentences" provides us with a good illustration of how our authors use philosophical concepts. At first sight, these sentences are philosophical statements, and for most of them we can easily find parallels in Platonism. What is striking about them is not their content but their formalization and density. Although the sentences often make good Platonic sense, we may wonder to what extent the Hermetists would have been able to elucidate the philosophical nuances of all of them. Not only are many of them never explained, but even more remarkable is the way they are placed in the text. There are only a few cases where a sentence would logically connect with what precedes or follows. The sentences at the beginning of *C.H.* XI are exceptional in that there are two pages of them, forming a unified and vaguely thematic block. Yet, this is not the case later on in the same treatise, where we find the following sentence (§ 15):

> Eternity, therefore, is an image of god;
> the cosmos is an image of eternity;
> and the sun is an image of the cosmos.
> The human is an image of the sun.

The sentence bears no relation to the rest of the text. Neither sun nor man are mentioned anywhere nearby, eternity has not been discussed since § 7. It is obvious that the sentence is not introduced as an argument, but rather as an authoritative statement. Its content is typically Hermetic and this is obviously the whole point: it is meant to evoke some traditional motifs in order to put the argument in a different perspective, one that stands beyond the petty subtleties of logical reasoning and its "empty speeches" (*C.H.* XVI 2). The sentence sets a pattern that is familiar and that has become so formulaic as to become half empty of its literal meaning, being thus able to wind through various passages like a golden thread, stitching our treatises together.

A good case in point is a sentence found in *C.H.* V 11, following on the hymn quoted above:[12]

> The finest part of matter is air,
> the finest part of air is soul,
> the finest part of soul is mind,
> the finest part of mind is god.

Nock follows Scott in excising the sentence, for at the end of the hymn it is entirely out of place and seems to be an unfortunate borrowing from *C.H.* XII 14, where the same sentence occurs too. In my view, to do this is to misunderstand how Hermetic sentences function. If the sentence appears misplaced, so do a number of others. Indeed, thematically the sentence is no more in place in *C.H.* XII 14 and it is only acceptable there because it follows on another sentence that does have a connection with the previous paragraph.

The sentences are a good example of the way philosophical language can be purified of its logical connotations and turned into religious sayings. In the *Hermetica* they seem to have played a part similar to that played by the Chaldean Oracles in the works of Proclus or Bible verses in the works of the Church Fathers. Clearly, their purpose is not explanatory but evocative. They referred to a shared background and functioned as "magical" formulae, associating common themes, setting a mood, focusing one's attention. It is not surprising, therefore, that Mahé regards them as the very basis of Hermetism. In his view, the oldest Hermetic texts were precisely collections of sentences, such as we find in *S.H.* XI or in the Armenian *Definitions*. The more typical treatises are supposed to have developed as commentaries on and mythical illustrations of these original gnomic sayings.[13] However, important though the "Hermetic sentences" are, I would consider this last assumption implausible, since it is difficult to imagine how a collection such as *S.H.* XI could have made sense all by itself. Let me quote the first six sayings from the treatise:

> (1) All things that are move, only that which is not is unmoveable. (2) Every body is subject to change, not every body is subject to decomposition; some bodies are subject to decomposition. (3) Not every living being is mortal, not every living being is immortal. (4) That which is subject to decomposition is perishable, that which remains

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[12] The translation is my own here, Copenhaver's being unsatisfactory.

[13] Mahé, *Hermès* II, 407-436.

changeless is eternal. (5) That which is always becoming is always perishing too, that which has only become once never perishes nor becomes anything else. (6) God is first, cosmos second, man third.

While (6) is general enough to stand by itself, (1)-(5) require further philosophical background and could hardly ever have existed without some more discursive discussions transmitted at the same time.

As an alternative, I would suggest the development went the other way around: the sentences are likely to have crystallized as formalized abbreviations of favourite philosophical arguments originally borrowed from the Greeks. In the process, they progressively lost a great deal of their philosophical meaning and were turned into revealed "logia", acquiring a new "liturgical" function and becoming traditional formalized expressions of the Hermetic tradition. Once this had happened, the sentences could no doubt give rise to further commentaries and there would have been a two-way interaction, with new sentences constantly arising while the old ones were being expanded upon.

Be that as it may, it is significant that the boundary between the sentences and the rest of the text is often far from sharp. It is not always easy to decide whether to classify a given proposition as a "sentence" or not. Just as we have seen many Hermetic passages to be hymn-like, even more of them can be classed as "sentence-like". Consider the following text (*C.H.* X 12-14):

> And cosmos is first, but after the cosmos the second living thing is the human, who is first of mortal beings and like other living things has ensoulment. Moreover, the human is not only good, but because he is mortal, he is evil as well. For the cosmos is not good because it moves, yet because it is immortal it is not evil. But the human, because he moves and is mortal, is evil. A human soul is carried in this way: the mind is in the reason; the reason is in the soul; the soul is in the spirit; the spirit, passing through veins and arteries and blood, moves the living thing and, in a manner of speaking, bears it up… All things depend from the beginning, but the beginning depends from the one and only, and the beginning moves so that it can again become a beginning; only the one, however, stands still and does not move. There are three, then: god the father and the good; the cosmos; and the human. And god holds the cosmos, but the cosmos holds the human. And the cosmos becomes the son of god, but the human becomes the son of the cosmos, a grandson, as it were.

What we have in this section is a whole spectrum of formalizations. Some parts are pure sentences, others resemble the normal language of arguing, yet others stand in-between. Thus we can see that the process of formalization is something that concerns not just isolated special sayings but to a lesser degree many other, less conspicuous parts of our texts as well. The sentences are no

exceptions but merely a well-visible apex of a wider formalization process going on throughout the *Hermetica*.

3. The Ritualization of Language

We have seen that the language of the *Hermetica* has indeed a number of features that make it resemble the language of ritual. The question is why this is so and what it tells us about the texts. To provide an answer, I shall consider some classic theories of ritual language. As a starting point I will take a ground-breaking analysis by the French anthropologist Maurice Bloch, first published in 1974, although I will modify its conclusions by resorting to theories of other anthropologists.[14]

As Bloch shows, the chief difference between ordinary language and the language of ritual lies precisely in the degree of formalization. In contrast to everyday speech, ritual speeches are severely restricted. They use limited vocabulary and prefer certain types of syntactic forms, usually the ones considered most polite and impersonal. They tend to repeat set formulas and arrange statements into fixed sequences. As a result, linguistic freedom is progressively diminished. While in everyday speech any speech act A may be followed by an almost infinite number of speech acts B, as formalization increases the number of possibilities becomes much smaller. To understand what Bloch means, we might compare various types of speech involved in a church service. The least formalized type is the sermon, which is unique every time despite its traditional form, granting the preacher enough freedom to comment on up-to-date events. With prayers and supplications, syntax and linguistic variability get more restricted. In liturgical formulae the content is firmly given and all one can alter is intonation. Formalization reaches its peak in choral singing where linguistic choice disappears altogether.

As a consequence, everyday speech and ritual language differ substantially. The former enables us to make unique statements concerning particular historical circumstances; it facilitates the exchange of opinions and provides room for arguments between different parties. Contrary to this, ritual speech is very much universalized, and unable to express anything specific. Often it draws its examples from a traditional canon of proverbs or holy texts, creating the impression that all events are but repetitions of the same set of archetypal patterns. This, of course, is precisely its point. Ritual language views things *sub*

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[14] Bloch, 'Symbols, Song, Dance'.

specie aeternitatis. It prevents disagreements between speakers, expressing fixed patterns and relations that are beyond dispute.

The two types of language have thus an entirely different function or "force". To describe the difference, Bloch uses the terminology of the philosopher John L. Austin, who in his classic book *How to Do Things with Words* tries to show that besides having a descriptive or "constative" function, language also has a "performative" force, i.e. there are sentences that 'do not "describe" or "report" or constate anything' but the uttering of which is 'the doing of an action'.[15] As an example, Austin gives the statements "I name this ship *Queen Elizabeth*" as uttered when smashing the bottle against the stem, or "I do" as uttered in the course of a marriage ceremony.[16] To utter these sentences, Austin explains, 'is not to *describe* my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it. None of the utterances cited is either true or false: I assert this as obvious and do not argue it'.[17] Though entirely different, constative and performative force are not mutually exclusive. For Austin one and the same statement can have both a *locutionary* force (i.e. its "constative" meaning—what the statement describes and what it refers to), and an *illocutionary* force: what we want to achieve (i.e. what act we perform) in saying it.[18]

As already noticed by Austin, performative statements are frequently of a ceremonial nature. It is not surprising, therefore, that his analysis was soon employed by anthropologists as a tool for understanding ritual. According to Bloch, 'with increasing formalization propositional [i.e. locutionary] force decreases and illocutionary force increases'.[19] In other words, language no longer describes but acquires greater emotional power instead, its role being 'not to report facts but to influence people'.[20] In everyday speech, both forces coexist. With most of our statements we are trying both to report something and to affect our audience. In some types of discourse, such as political orations,

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[15] Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 5.

[16] *Ibid.*

[17] *Ibid.*, 6.

[18] *Ibid.*, ch. 8. As a third type Austin introduced "perlocutionary" force, which is meant to designate the effect that the statement has on others. Thus the locutionary force of the statement "That bull is about to charge" corresponds to a description of the bull's behaviour, its illocutionary force amounts to our intent to warn the audience, and its perlocutionary force to the subsequent flight of those who have heard.

[19] Bloch, 'Symbols, Song, Dance', 32.

[20] Austin, 'Performative Utterances', 234.

illocutionary force becomes more important, but it is typically in the language of ritual that it predominates entirely.

In Bloch's view, one of the most interesting features of formalization is that it places statements beyond logic. At first sight, the language of logic might seem no less formal, but its formality is of a different kind. Logic strives to give a formalized description of possible relations between statements, but in itself it prescribes no firm sequence of speech acts, leaving it up to the speakers to arrange their propositions. It does pronounce some of these sequences as incorrect, of course, but does so only after having considered them as an alternative:

> Logic implies that one postulated connection between units is more right than another because of the innate relation of the parts of the logical argument; one can therefore say that an argument to be logical must be formally contradictable in order to show its logical nature. Normally any statement is open to contradiction and replacement and since this is so in ordinary situations argument and reason are possible. By contrast, formalized language rules out the two prerequisites for logic, the potential of one statement to be followed by a large number of others and the possibility of contradiction. Formalized language is therefore non-logical.[21]

In the formalized language of ritual, the connection between units of speech is not governed by rules of logic but solely by traditional formal rules which define what sequences and expressions are proper. These are neither true nor false, admitting neither proof nor disproof.

Bloch's analysis of ritual language is convincing, even though it is biased in many respects. Bloch was influenced by Marxism and he is highly critical of ritual. In his view, ritual sets up hierarchies between speakers, making some of them subordinate to others, but it does so in a way which is strangely "automatic" and does not quite lend itself to conscious control; the formalization of language helps to "mystify" these power relations and make them unassailable. Obviously such statements reveal a Marxist subtext. Yet we need not accept the narrow interpretation favoured by Bloch himself. Instead, we can view ritual speech as having a positive function of its own. As Stanley Tambiah has shown, ritual formalization plays a role in establishing regular patterns that help us organize our experience and focus it better.[22] Being non-logical, ritual makes it possible to bridge over various areas of life that are otherwise difficult

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21) Bloch, 'Symbols, Song, Dance', 32.
22) Tambiah, 'A Performative Approach to Ritual', 139, 146.

to connect. In their meaninglessness magical spells are efficacious due to their ability to 'invoke images from a number of diverse areas of experience' and to organize them 'in terms of a small set of culturally significant and contextually desirable themes'.[23]

Reinterpreted in this way, Bloch's concept of formalization can help us understand the features of Hermetic language analysed above. Hermetic hymns and sentences are nice examples of a formalized discourse that has lost a great deal of its locutionary force, acquiring illocutionary force instead. In such cases, the language of the *Hermetica* stands beyond logic and seems incoherent. This is not to say, though, that it become meaningless—only that locutionary meaning is replaced by a performative one. Once we make this crucial Austinian distinction, we no longer need to blame our treatises for incoherence, nor do we have to prove their meaningfulness by looking for "deeper" messages hidden behind the text. Or rather, we can allow such "deep" readings as a legitimate strategy of interpretation while being aware that whatever meanings we find have not been hidden in the text but have emerged between the text and the interpreter. A pure performative statement has no locutionary meaning in itself but possesses a crucial evocative ability instead, thus acquiring the ability to incite a number of intellectual and emotional associations in the reader.[24] That the *Hermetica* are well endowed with such an ability has been borne out by their fruitful reception during the Renaissance.

4. Hermetic Arguments

I do not wish to claim, of course, that the *Hermetica* are of a purely liturgical nature.[25] As we have seen, Bloch does not see formalized and everyday speech as mutually exclusive terms, but rather as the two extremes of a continuous spectrum. Clearly, the *Hermetica* stretch across the whole of this spectrum. In a number of passages they use genuine philosophical arguments and argue logically. Yet in most cases the arguments quickly tend to get formalized and pass easily into a much more performative discourse that at its peak resembles

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[23] *Ibid.*, 143, quoting Rosaldo, 'It's All Uphill', 178.
[24] Using Austin's terminology we can say that the hidden meanings represent the "perlocutionary" force of our texts, i.e. the effect they have on the reader.
[25] I do not mean to deny that some parts of the *Hermetica* (such as, notably, *C.H.* XIII and *N.H.C.* VI.6) might have been used in an explicitly liturgical way, but important though they are in other respects, for my present argument these texts are marginal. My focus in on the *implicit* ritualization process that is going on even in treatises that do not appear to be liturgical at all.

the language of ritual more than that of philosophy. At this point, logical argumentation recedes and the texts make sense mainly in performative terms. What is fascinating is that the *Hermetica* chose precisely the logical language of Greek philosophy. If Bloch sees logical discourse as the very opposite of ritual speech, in the *Hermetica* both are combined and pass fluently one into another. The explanation of this phenomenon lies partly in the fact that in actual speech illocutionary force is the complement of locutionary force rather than its negation. We find both combined even in the language of pure philosophers, for these too want to influence their readers as well as to explain something, and rhetoric is no less important for them than logic. It is only the proportion of these forces that makes the *Hermetica* peculiar, performative force becoming very much prominent.

It is typical of Hermetic arguments that while based in Greek philosophy, they often disregard its logical strictness and emphasize the rhetorical and dramatic aspect instead. The Hermetists hardly ever have the patience to argue step by step and let us see all the parts and premises of their syllogisms. They tend to skip important parts of the argument and mix different kinds of reasoning that to a philosopher would hardly seem compatible. On the other hand, they are fond of rhetorical questions and indulge in repetitions and impressive verbal contrasts. A good example is to be found in *C.H.* XIV 4-6, which basically contains two ideas: 1) All that is can be divided into two aspects, into the things that become and into God that makes them; between the two there is no mediating term; 2) these two aspects are in need of each other—creation cannot happen without a creator, while a creator cannot exist without creation. These two points are made in the following verbose way:

> Therefore, after we have done with our loquacity and idle chatter, we must understand these two things: what comes to be and who makes it. Between them there is nothing, no third thing. [5] From all that you understand and all that you hear, remember these two and acknowledge that they are everything, reckoning no difficulty about things because they are above or below or divine or changeable or deep down. For the two are all there is, what comes to be and what makes it, and it is impossible to separate one from the other. No maker can exist without something that comes to be. Each of the two is just what it is; therefore, one is not to be parted from the other <nor> from itself. [6] If the maker is nothing other than the making—solitary, simple, uncomposed— then necessarily the making happens of its own because the making that the maker does is generation, and it is impossible for all coming-to-be to come to be of its own; coming-to-be necessarily comes to be of another. Without the maker, the begotten neither comes to be nor is, for the one without the other completely loses its own nature from deprivation of the other. Thus, if one agrees that there exist two entities, what comes to be and what makes it, they are one in their unification, an antecedent

> and a consequent. The antecedent is the god who makes; the consequent is what
> comes to be, whatever it may be.

Several things must be noticed about the argument. First, it is much longer
than it needs to be, for both ideas are being constantly repeated with only
small variations. As a result, the text reads like a mantra rather than a philo-
sophical statement. Second, the author wants to surprise and impress the
reader as much as possible, and hence formulates both ideas in the most
extreme way possible, emphasizing a radical dichotomy between God and his
creation and allowing for no mediating term. This certainly does not mean
that he is incapable of a more complex description (in § 10 four additional
principles are postulated!). Rather, this seems to be his way of astounding the
audience by the simplicity of the model, and of making them perceive God as
intimately close to the world. It is chiefly for this reason that so much empha-
sis is put on the reciprocity of God and the creation, and we are almost made
to believe that their relation is one of equal partnership. It is unlikely, in fact,
that the author would have stuck to this view at all times. His world view was
probably similar to that of most Hermetic treatises, which introduce a number
of mediating entities (such as soul and mind) between God and the cosmos
and describe their relation in much more complicated terms. Presumably it is
only for rhetorical effect, then, that these are left out at the moment. Finally,
in its diction the argument tries to give the impression of being a logical proof,
though in fact, if strict logical analysis were applied, it would soon crumble
down. The passage is full of grand philosophical formulations that are meant
to dazzle the audience but whose exact meaning is sometimes far from clear
(cf. the first sentence of § 6). In themselves these are all standard rhetorical
strategies in no way peculiar to the *Hermetica*,[26] but their intensity is certainly
distinctive and striking.

   Since the *Hermetica* use philosophical arguments as their starting point,
they are occasionally difficult to read, for they often make the impression of
"arguing" even in cases where this is no longer the case, the arguments having
been turned into performative assertions. Apparently, their ancient readers
hardly found this disturbing at all. Being men of religion rather than philoso-
phy, they took it for granted that the power of statements is sometimes more

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[26] The platonizing orations of Maximus of Tyre are similar in many respects. In them, however,
illocutionary force always acts in harmony with the locutionary one, while in the *Hermetica* the
latter is occasionally almost completely replaced by the former and the texts become illogical.

important than their coherence.[27] Their attitude is impressively spelled out by *C.H.* XVI 2, which contrasts the shallow reasoning of the Greeks with the 'powerful phrasing of (Hermetic) discourse' (*tên energêtikên tôn onomatôn phrasin*):

> For the Greeks have empty speeches… that are energetic (*energêtikous*) only in what they demonstrate,[28] and this is the philosophy of the Greeks, an inane foolosophy of speeches (*logôn psophos*). We, by contrast, use not speeches but sounds that are full of action (*phônais mestais tôn ergôn*).[29]

The performativeness of Hermetic speech is much more difficult to appreciate for us modern scholars who, due to the rules of our academic profession, are all too used to focusing on the locutionary aspect of ancient texts, searching for propositional meanings and coherent logical structures. Since the *Hermetica* often use logical arguments as their starting points, we are inclined to read them as such, only to be frustrated in our effort. Instead of following the arguments to their conclusion, the Hermetists tend to repeat the same argument all over again or combine it with other arguments which to our mind have little in common with the original one. Often they seem to lose their thread, skip from one topic to another, and mix contrary positions.

Our impression changes once we abandon the vain search for logic and focus on the performative aspects of the texts, trying to figure out what they *do* rather than what they *say*. Their repetitiveness, for instance, becomes meaningful in view of the following comment by Maurice Bloch:

> It is in this light that another often noted feature of ritual—repetition—becomes understandable. If one thinks of what is going on as an argument, as is implied by formal or logical analysis, repetition is mere redundancy. If, however, we are not dealing with an argument but with a total bonded experience, repetition is the only possibility for emphasis. A frozen statement cannot be expanded, it can only be made again and again and again. Repetition reminds us that we are not dealing with an

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[27] It is significant that almost none of our ancient testimonies on Hermetism come from professional philosophers, the only major exception being the Neoplatonist Iamblichus who was himself more than appreciative of the theurgic power of words.

[28] I.e. in their logical proofs and demonstrations (*apodeixeis*).

[29] The author actually wants us to believe that "Hermetic" really means "Egyptian", this being the "original" language of the treatise. In historical terms this is incorrect, of course, but it makes excellent sense precisely as a way of distinguishing between the two types of linguistic "force" that are being opposed here. The hieroglyphs are certainly a perfect image of the performative power that the Hermetists saw as the chief point of their discourse.

argument, since an argument is a basis for another argument, not the basis for the same argument again.[30]

In Bloch's eyes this speaks against ritual, but once again we need not follow him that far and can rather read repetition, with Tambiah, 'in terms of *pattern recognition* and *configurational awareness*'.[31] The redundancy of ritual also 'has something to do with the production of a sense of heightened and intensified and fused communication',[32] an objective surely of great importance for the Hermetists.

In a similar vein, the incoherent skips between subjects and intellectual positions can now be understood as creating forceful contrasts and a sense of transcendence, the true meaning of things being presented as something beyond the variety of logical stances. The Hermetists obviously delighted in paradoxes, making the reader feel dizzy by speaking of God who is invisible and most visible, transcendent and immanent, to be reached by looking down on this world as well as by embracing it fully. Philosophical arguments in the *Hermetica* should not be read as successive sequences of a rational exegesis but rather as an analogue of those traditional examples and precedents that ritual discourse is so fond of referring to. The point of such "arguments" is close to that of Hermetic "sentences": not to explain but to evoke. Though philosophical in origin, they have been rid of their logical structure and turned into impressive images, resembling the New-Testament parables more than rational expositions.

5. Hermetism as a Liminal Phenomenon

While the tendency of our authors to ritualize philosophical language seems obvious, we may well ask ourselves why they chose to do so. As we know virtually nothing about the Hermetists, we can hardly provide a historically reliable answer to this question. Yet, since we have their texts, we can at least speculate about a possible socio-cultural perspective from which they might have seemed meaningful. In my speculations, I have drawn inspiration from two classic articles by Jonathan Z. Smith which discuss a different but in some respects

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[30] Bloch, 'Symbols, Song, Dance', 42.
[31] Tambiah, 'A Performative Approach to Ritual', 139 (Tambiah's italics).
[32] *Ibid.*, 145.

similar phenomenon.[33] Smith calls our attention to the fact that while for two thousand years Near Eastern cosmologies were characterized by a strong sense of cosmic order guarded by the gods and mediated through institutional priests, in the Hellenistic period the perspective was radically inverted in some circles. If fate up to that point had been synonymous with divine order, it was now experienced as a force of coercion. If the heavenly bodies had traditionally been regarded as the guardians of order, they were now turned into dark oppressors. To account for this change, Smith uses Victor Turner's concept of liminality. Originally referring to the middle stage of transition rituals, Turner used the term in a more general way to describe an antistructural dimension necessarily present within every type of society.[34] Normally, liminality is institutionalised, being evoked regularly in ritual or represented permanently by a special class of liminal persons, such as monks. Occasionally, however, in times of dramatic social changes liminality breaks loose and gives rise to uncontrollable movements that rebel against traditional order and strive to achieve a new, "liberated" form of social interaction and world classification:

> Mostly, such movements occur during phases of history that are in many respects "homologous" to the liminal periods of important rituals in stable and repetitive societies, when major groups or social categories in those societies are passing from one cultural state to another. They are essentially phenomena of transition. This is perhaps why in so many of these movements much of their mythology and symbolism is borrowed from those of traditional *rites de passage*, either in the cultures in which they originate or in the cultures with which they are in dramatic contact.[35]

A typical feature of *rites de passage* is inversion and this, in Smith's view, explains why an inversion of cosmology occurred in the Hellenistic period,[36] fittingly described by Martin Nilsson as 'eine Übergangszeit'.[37] Smith took Gnosticism[38] as one of his illustrations. Originating in the milieu of Hellenistic

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[33] Smith, 'The Influence of Symbols on Social Change' and 'The Birth Upside Down or Right Side Up', both in *Map is not Territory*.

[34] Turner, *The Ritual Process*, chapters 3-5.

[35] *Ibid.*, 112.

[36] Smith, *Map is not Territory*, 169-70.

[37] Nilsson, *Geschichte der griechischen Religion II*, 292.

[38] Despite the attack launched on the category of "Gnosticism" by Michael Williams in his *Rethinking "Gnosticism"*, I still find the term useful, though as an ideal type only that might not fully correspond to all of the movements traditionally regarded as "Gnostic". To my mind, Gnosticism is defined by two characteristics: (1) it ascribes the creation and management of this world to the Demiurge, who is inferior to the highest God and has a conflicting relationship with Him;

Judaism, it turned its categories upside down, transforming Yahveh into the stupid Demiurge whose rule is a hindrance to true knowledge of God. Yahve's rule is to be refused: the Gnostic is subject to spiritual rules that transcend this world.

With Hermetism, matters are more complicated. Here too the emphasis is on finding a way of truly relating to God that transcends all particular traditions. There is an emphasis on immediate, mystical knowledge that goes beyond rational categories—a typical feature of liminal movements. Yet there are crucial differences. Most importantly, the inversion motif is missing. Though Reitzenstein and others wanted to see it as the true "oriental" core of the *Hermetica*,[39] a clear-cut Gnostic scheme never really emerges in our treatises. The *Poimandres* comes close to it with its concept of planetary Governors, but even these are ambivalent rather than outright negative.[40] The Nous-Demiurge of the *Poimandres* is in no way opposed to God, being closer to the second Nous of Numenius than to the typical Demiurge of the Gnostics.[41] The difference between Hermetism and Gnosticism is even more obvious in the rest of the *Hermetica*. Though the more "pessimistic" stream of our treatises is often designated as "gnostic", it has little in common with Gnosticism *sensu stricto*, being thoroughly Platonic. It is only rhetorically that the world is occasionally denigrated as full of evil; the actual dependence of the

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(2) it relies on an exegesis of the Bible, often tending to reverse some of its traditional values. Without an ideal category of this kind, the comparative study of Hellenistic religions would become extremely difficult and we would be forced to dwell on particularities only.

[39] This is the central argument of Reitzenstein, *Die Hellenistichen Mysterienreligionen*. Cf. Bräuninger, *Untersuchungen zu den Schriften des Hermes Trismegistos, passim*.

[40] It is only in § 25 that they are presented as dark powers, in § 9-16 they are morally neutral, being a natural part of the cosmos.

[41] This is emphasized by Holzhausen, *"Mythos vom Menschen" im hellenistischen Ägypten*, 43-6, who sees this as a proof that *C.H.* I is not influenced by Gnosticism. I cannot agree with this conclusion: the second half of the treatise seems quite close to Gnosticism and is hard to derive from Greek philosophy only (cf. particularly the concept of *gnôsis* as a radical illumination experienced all of a sudden under the influence of a preacher's revelation; *C.H.* I 27-32). I am more in sympathy with Haenchen, 'Aufbau und Theologie des *Poimandres*', who envisages the development the other way round: the author of *C.H.* I knew some Gnostic systems but wanted to present an alternative to them, combining Gnostic elements with Greek philosophy. Rather than a precursor of Gnosticism, *C.H.* I seems to represent a parallel movement with a different emphasis. I should repeat, though, that I see "Gnosticism" as an ideal type only. The actual Hellenistic religious scene was a continuum, and some of the movements classified as "Gnostic" on my definition of the term (see above, note 38) might in fact be fairly close to *C.H.* I (cf. e.g. the complex cosmology of Justin the Gnostic).

cosmos on God is never denied.[42] Moreover, the "gnostic" stream can never be clearly separated from the "cosmic" one that praises God's presence in the world and is generally agreed to be derived from Greek philosophy. Most treatises persistently combine both approaches, and it is evident that the Hermetists saw them as quite compatible.[43]

Despite this, I still find Smith's "liminal" interpretation useful, for as Turner has pointed out,[44] there are actually two different ways to achieve liminality: either by inverting standard structures or by abolishing them altogether, achieving a temporary spontaneous *communitas*[45] governed by no rules. The former way is adopted by liminal movements that arise within a clearly defined religious tradition, reacting against it. This was clearly the case of Gnosticism, which appears to have originated in Hellenistic Judaism, rebelling against its structures. Contrariwise, the Hermetists do not seem to have felt a need to rebel against anyone. Rather, they stood outside all traditions, representing the second type of liminality that levels out all distinctions in favour of our shared humanity. In some respects they, too, were influenced by Judaism, as we can see from *C.H.* I, III and VII,[46] but there are no signs of a reaction against it. Besides, the treatises just mentioned are exceptional and seem to represent

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[42] This is particularly obvious in *C.H.* VI, possibly the most pessimistic of our treatises. Its doctrine is pure Platonism, praising the transcendent Good as the only thing worth striving for, everything else being but its pale reflection and not worthy of being designated as "good" at all. Accordingly, 'the cosmos is a plenitude of vice, as god is a plenitude of the good' (§ 4). Radical as this is, the author in fact knows well that the two extremes are mediated by participation of all things in the Good and in this sense even the cosmos is good after all, in that it shares in god's activity (§ 2). However, he has chosen to suppress this aspect so as to make his message more impressive. Despite this, the doctrine is the same as that of the "cosmic" passages, the only difference being one of emphasis. Cf. van Moorsel, *The Mysteries of Hermes Trismegistus*, 16-17.

[43] This comes out particularly nicely in *S.H.* IIB 1-4 where the "cosmic" and the "gnostic" attitude are presented as two complementary aspects of true piety. Modern scholars, due to their logical bias, usually find this difficult to accept and try to draw a clear dividing line between the two attitudes, considering them as either incompatible or as two different stages in Hermetic education (thus Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*, 95-104). Yet the *Hermetica* mix both approaches persistently and it is obvious that they were seen as two sides of the same coin.

[44] Turner, *The Ritual Process*, ch. 5.

[45] In Turner's terminology, *communitas* refers to the specific social and existential state of those in a liminal condition. It is characterized by spontaneity and immediacy, being 'a relationship between concrete, historical, idiosyncratic individuals' who are 'not segmentalized into roles and statuses but confront one another rather in the manner of Martin Buber's "I and Thou"' (Turner, *ibid.*, 131-132).

[46] The Jewish background of these treatises was analysed by Dodd, *The Bible and the Greeks*. Cf. Pearson, 'Jewish Elements in *Corpus Hermeticum* I'; Philonenko, 'Le *Poimandrès* et la liturgie juive'; Philonenko, 'Une utilisation du Shema dans le Poimandrès'.

either a less important stream or an earlier stage of Hermetism.[47] In the rest of the *Hermetica*, Jewish elements are either indirect[48] or absent, and it is most likely that their authors were no longer in touch with Judaism.

The only tradition consistently referred to by our authors is that of Egypt. Nevertheless we can hardly consider the teachings of Hermetism as genuinely Egyptian, though there are certainly many Egyptian elements and influences. The Hermetists no doubt lived in Egypt, identified with it in a way, and absorbed some of its cultural patterns. But the Egypt that we find in their treatises seems more like an ideal projection by someone who is no longer capable of relating to the gods in the old Egyptian way. The Hermetists' situation is likely to have resembled that of some of today's Africans who live in huge cosmopolitan cities out of touch with the customs of their ancestral villages, combining globalized Western cultural forms with whatever abstract African identity has been left to them. In terms of of religion, this often results in bizarre kinds of Christianity that mingle Christian symbols with modified African religious forms, such as spirit possession and divination.[49] We are entitled, I believe, to postulate an analogous socio-cultural situation for Hermetism. It probably originated in those circles of Alexandrian society that, due to the long-term effects of Hellenistic globalization, found themselves in a cultural no man's land outside all traditions, retaining but vague outlines of an Egyptian identity but having nothing particular to fill them with. It is a striking aspect of the *Hermetica* that, except for their occasional Egyptian references, their piety is entirely universalized.[50] The God they praise is transcendent

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[47] In the case of *C.H.* III this is generally agreed (cf. Nock's introduction to his edition of the treatise, p. 43). *C.H.* I was considered a Hermetic classic in antiquity already, but its missionary zeal is unlike the usual Hermetic emphasis on esoteric secrecy, and its language and cosmology are very much different from what we find in the other treatises (cf. e.g. the distinction between *Nous Theos* and *Nous Dêmiourgos*, or the concept of planetary Governors). *C.H.* VII is closely allied in style and themes to *C.H.* I 27-30, and is likely to have been written by the same author (cf. Dodd, *The Bible and the Greeks*, 181). Significantly, none of these treatises mention Hermes. The speaker of *C.H.* I was regarded as Hermes by ancient Hermetists (cf. *C.H.* XIII 15; Zosimus, *Final Accounting* 8), a view shared by many modern interpreters. However, the identification may well have been retrospective. As Scott rightly remarks (*Hermetica* II, 12), if the author had intended to put the narrative into the mouth of Hermes, he would no doubt have named him (cf. Dodd, p. 202).

[48] Besides some terminological borrowings (e.g. God often being termed *kurios*) the most conspicuous Jewish element is the constant anthropocentrism of the *Hermetica*, foreign to Geek philosophy (though here an Egyptian influence is possible too, cf. Mahé, *Hermès* II, 292-5).

[49] Cf. the chapter on 'African Christianity' in Ray, *African Religions*, 168-197.

[50] Universalism is typical of liminal movements. Cf. Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 112: 'It is noteworthy that many of these movements cut right across tribal and national divisions during their

and belongs to everyone, the gods of polytheistic traditions having been reduced either to Euhemeristic ancestors[51] or to the heavenly bodies.

Hermetism thus seems no less liminal than Gnosticism, having been born out of the same wave of Hellenistic globalization. The Hermetists plainly managed to explore the positive aspects of this situation more strongly than the Gnostics. There are signs of uprootedness and dissatisfaction with the state of worldly affairs in our treatises (cf. particularly the Egyptian "prophecy" of *Ascl.* 24-26), but on the whole, the Hermetists do not appear to have felt dreadfully alienated in their social position. On the contrary, they seem to have been fairly successful in combining their liminal piety with everyday life. They appreciated the divine beauty of the cosmos and encouraged procreation—an unmistakable sign that in some way they felt at home in the world.[52] Even the intensely pessimistic account of *C.H.* VI comes to the realistic conclusion that imperfect as things are around here, we can neither escape them nor hate them, for we cannot live without them (§ 6). Thus, to venture another modern analogy, if many of the Gnostics might be compared to various millennial sects active today in the Western world, the Hermetists would rather resemble certain manifestations of the New Age movement. While disillusioned with official traditions, they nevertheless believed that God can be seen directly even in this imperfect world of ours.

It is no doubt for these reasons that they adopted Hermes, the most liminal of Greek divinities, as their patron. As the god of boundaries, Hermes helps to define all worlds but belongs to none of them, passing endlessly from one to another in his function of a divine messenger and herald. His own home land is in the neutral zone betwixt and between.[53] It is understandable that a god of this kind must have appealed greatly to those who were culturally uprooted themselves, living in a period of cultural transition. With his help they tried to make the best of their liminal situation, using him as a guardian on their specific spiritual path. For besides living in a no man's land, Hermes plays the crucial part of a mediator, able to connect life and death, the human and the divine. His mode is one of immediacy. Being friendly and accessible, he offered

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initial momentum. Communitas, or the "open society", differs in this from structure, or the "closed society", in that it is potentially or ideally extensible to the limits of humanity'.

[51] *Ascl.* 37; Athenagoras *Libellus pro Christ.* 28; Lactantius *Div. inst.* 1.16.1.

[52] *C.H.* II 17; *Ascl.* 21. The refusal to procreate is typical of millennial movements; cf. Bloch, *Prey into Hunter*, 85-98.

[53] This is probably why in Classical Greece he counted as the patron of herdsmen, who 'lead a marginal existence in mountainous border areas' (Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 158).

a type of piety that could do without traditional forms of mediation.[54] With Hermes on their side, the Hermetists had a chance of approaching the divine by themselves, without the help of prophets, priests or ritual experts.

My interpretation makes it possible to understand why the Hermetists used philosophical arguments while ignoring their logical aspect. Their aim was to relate to God in an immediate and authentic way. In normal cultural situations, man's relation to the divine is mediated by traditional structures of one kind or another. The Hermetists no longer trusted any of these structures and tried to do without them, aiming for a true Turnerian *Communitas* of equal human beings meeting God face to face.[55] The language of Greek philosophy came in useful due to its having a similar universalist ambition. In adopting it, however, the Hermetists did not accept philosophy as such. They sensed rightly that while Greek philosophy was capable of transcending local distinctions, it was nevertheless a tradition in its own right, being bound by the fixed rules of logic. To the Hermetists these rules must have seemed like another instance of fossilized structures that diverted man's attention and made him forget about the true aim of the whole enterprise, the encounter with God.[56] To turn philosophical arguments to their proper use, they had to be "liberated" from the bonds of logic.[57]

This is why our authors mixed arguments freely and could not be bothered about following them to their conclusions. Their chief instruments were provocation and paradox. They delighted in pushing their views to the limits. In "pessimistic" passages the world is purposely devalued and the distance between us and God made seem abysmal. In "optimistic" sections this same distance is abolished and God is presented as present 'everywhere, where and when you least expect it, as you lie awake, as you fall asleep, sailing or walk-

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[54] Significantly, Hermes patronized unofficial types of power capable of bypassing standard structures, such as the power of magic (he is called 'the chief leader of all magicians' in *PGM* IV 2289).

[55] For an immediate encounter with God cf. e.g. *C.H.* V *passim*; XI 20-21; XII 19-22; XIII *passim.*

[56] Cf. the criticism of technical school philosophy in *Ascl.* 12-14.

[57] The procedure is somewhat similar to that of Clement of Alexandria, who saw philosophy as containing the seeds of divine Truth to be liberated by the Christian Gnostic from their perverted Greek and Barbarian contexts, so that they might be put together in their pure form (*Strom.* I 57.1-58.2). This gave rise to Clement's "eclectic" method of picking out only what is authentic and beautiful in philosophical doctrines (*Strom.* I 37). The Hermetists are eclectic in a similar sense, except for having no clear doctrine of their own to organize their selection. Where Clement is guided by the Christian revelation, Hermetism only has the vague criterion of relating to God in an immediate way.

ing, by night or by day, as you speak or keep silent, for there is nothing that it is not' (*C.H.* XI 21). Both perspectives are shocking, and to make matters worse, the treatises switch between them all the time. The pupils must get no chance to pin their hopes on one of them only, mistaking its outer form for true piety.

It might come as a surprise that under these circumstances the Hermetists should have taken the path of ritualizing philosophical language, as I have tried to demonstrate above. Is the formalization of ritual not the very opposite of the kind of immediacy that our authors wished to achieve? Is ritual not a means of affirming traditional structures? To some extent it certainly is, and Bloch is right in seeing ritual as a crucial instrument of traditional authority. Yet this is but one part of the picture. As Turner has shown, ritual does not necessarily imply conservatism. While many rituals serve to confirm existing social and cultural structures, they often do so in a curiously roundabout way by confronting them with antistructure. In Turner's view, the liminal aspect is not just a part of *rites de passage* but tends to figure in all kinds of ritual.[58] Ritual makes it possible to step out of structure for a moment and to reflect upon it. By dissolving or subverting structure, it opens up a space for transcendence. In my view, this is precisely the effect the Hermetists managed to achieve by depriving philosophical arguments of their logical aspect, letting their words act and perform rather than explain.

The ritualization of language was probably also important in view of the low level of organization of the Hermetists. Though historically we know nothing about them, the lack of references in ancient sources as well as in the *Hermetica* themselves suggests that Hermetism was not an organized movement but rather an informal enterprise of small and informal circles of enthusiasts.[59] The huge diversity of our treatises in terms of both style and content implies some kind of organizational plurality, and rather than one tradition we can easily imagine dislocated groups of Hermetists who might not always have been in personal touch with one another.[60] This too would make the ritualization

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[58] Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 79-85.

[59] For a reasonably plausible "reconstruction" of the social reality of Hermetism cf. Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*, 159-160.

[60] The fact that we know only of texts but never encounter their authors or readers reminds one of Classical Orphism which seems to have been an equally pluralistic and non-organized movement. A modern parallel would be the spiritual religion that throughout the last one hundred years has progressively been competing with traditional church religion. According to Ernst Troeltsch (*The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, 743-749), one of its chief characteristics is precisely a low level of organization, its aherents meeting in informal, transient groups only,

of language more than appropriate. It is a crucial property of ritual speech that besides being indubitable, it is highly polyvalent.[61] Once its words have lost their locutionary meaning, they start to resemble *things* rather than lexical units.[62] In this way statements gain in ambiguity. Instead of standing for something specific, they are turned into empty, meta-semantic patterns capable of being related to various levels of experience. Thanks to this they can mediate between various areas of human life and keep together worlds that otherwise would fall apart. As Roy Rappaport, one of the most profound theoreticians of ritual puts it, while ordinary language tends to 'search out all differences and to turn them into distinctions which then provide bases for boundaries and barriers', it is in the nature of liturgical language 'to unite, or re-unite, the psychic, social, natural, and cosmic orders which language and the exigencies of life pull apart'.[63] In the decentralized Hermetic milieu, this property of ritualized speech must have been more than needed.

6. Conclusion

The idea of the *Hermetica* as ritual texts is not new to modern scholarship. It was already suggested by Richard Reitzenstein, who saw *C.H.* XIII as a "Lese-Mysterium", i.e. as a text whose reading was supposed to effect in its readers an experience similar to that of going through a mystery rite.[64] For Reitzenstein this ritual quality was peculiar to *C.H.* XIII, which actually describes Tat's transformation into a new man. As the Nag Hammadi discovery of "The Discourse on the Ogdoad and the Ennead" has revealed, there were more such Hermetic texts in circulation. Still, most of our treatises show no outward concern for ritual action and make the impression of pursuing philosophical interests only. The aim of this article has been to show that this impression is deceptive and Reitzenstein's insight can equally well be applied to the rest of

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being bound together by an "invisible church". Cf. Colin Campbell's concept of the "cultic milieu", as delineated in his classic article 'The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization'.

[61] For a classic analysis of the polyvalence of ritual symbols cf. Turner, 'Symbols in Ndembu Ritual', 19-47.

[62] Bloch, 'Symbols, Song, Dance', 41.

[63] Rappaport, *Ecology, Meaning, and Religion*, 206. In Rappaport's view (*ibid.*, 233), the locutionary meaninglessness of symbols is crucial, transcending differences between believers and being independent of particular circumstances: 'It is important, if a proposition is to be taken to be unquestionably true, that no one understand it, and it is not surprising that ultimate sacred postulates are often "mysteries"'.

[64] Reitzenstein, *Die Hellenistichen Mysterienreligionen*, 51-52.

the *Hermetica*, including the "philosophical" treatises. Not even their goal was intellectual. Rather, they strove to evoke various states of mind that together constituted Hermetic piety. For ancient Hermetists, their texts functioned as literary rites that partly replaced traditional forms of worship. No doubt the Hermetists still prayed and performed some basic ritual actions,[65] but the emphasis had very much shifted to the mental level of the individual. Just as traditional offerings had been replaced by 'pure speech offerings from a heart and soul' that reaches up to God (*C.H.* I 31), the ritualization of language made it possible to internalize other aspects of conventional liturgies.[66] In this way the Hermetists tried to establish a special kind of spiritualized religion, 'the religion of mind' (*religio mentis*—*Ascl.* 25), meeting the needs of those who had lost touch with traditional structures and craved a personal way of relating to the divine.

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[65] Cf. *C.H.* I 29; XIII 16; *Ascl.* 41.
[66] The process of spiritualization of traditional ritual forms in the *Hermetica* was analysed by G. van Moorsel, *The Mysteries of Hermes Trismegistus*, though the book needs to be used with caution due to its strong Calvinist bias.

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