

FRANCES YATES'S HERMETIC RENAISSANCE IN
THE DOCUMENTS HELD IN
THE WARBURG INSTITUTE ARCHIVE

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1. *Introduction*

In 1840, John Stuart Mill published in the *London and Westminster Review* a substantial article on Samuel Taylor Coleridge whose philosophical works had just appeared, edited by his nephew Henry Nelson Coleridge. Mill's essay, which may be called a critical appreciation, and even perhaps a critical celebration (if we may allow such a glaring oxymoron to stand) did ample justice to the occasion. For it is true that on the one hand Mill dissociated himself, with characteristic clarity and admirable intellectual honesty, from Coleridge's speculative position of a transcendental, post-Kantian mysticism (by which nothing is meant in common parlance, Mill observed ironically, but "un-intelligibleness"). But on the other hand, he recognized in Coleridge not so much the romantic poet and dreamer we remember above all to-day, but rather a finely tuned speculative mind: a thinker who had dedicated his brilliant, intellectual energies to operating a radical substitution of the empirical doctrines of the school of John Locke with a metaphysical theory of truth based on the necessary existence of innate ideas in the mind¹.

Mill himself never fully renounced his Utilitarian education, with its debt to the importance of outward facts which he imbibed in early youth through the influence of his father and Jeremy Bentham. He did, however, recognize the significance in any serious intellectual debate of an authoritative opposing point of view. Furthermore, he learnt from a reading of both Coleridge and Wordsworth, as he would later recognise in his *Autobiography*, important lessons which modified the intransigence of his early utilitarian position². For he had no difficulty in admitting, in his essay, that Coleridge looked much deeper into the human soul and feelings than Bentham was prepared to do. Because he had represented this more spiritual alternative with such passion and eloquence, Mill asserted, Coleridge's voice had become an important one for a

¹ Mill, *Collected Works* X.

² Mill, *Collected Works* I. See esp. 149-153 for the importance to Mill of his reading of the romantic poets.

younger generation whose religious and spiritual needs required deeper satisfactions than the scientific facts privileged by the Utilitarians could provide them with.

I have chosen for a number of reasons to start this documentary paper on *The Hermetic Renaissance of Frances Yates* with a reference to Mill's pages on Samuel Taylor Coleridge. First and foremost because they allow me to clarify my own more scientific and pragmatic point of view with respect to Yates's magical and hermetically defined interpretation of one of the most dramatic and debated periods of European intellectual history. Although it would be a mistake to push the comparison too far, it seems to me a telling one. For, in spite of the over a century and a half which separates ourselves from Mill's Victorian England, the fundamental issues debated by Mill in his essay are remarkably similar to those raised by the so-called "Yates thesis" to-day. Questioning the dominion of the so-called "scientific revolution" as a prelude to the modern world, Coleridge proposed a new metaphysics with clearly neo-Platonic connotations. Yates, for her part, yokes together the European renaissance with the spiritualism and magic of ancient Hermetic and neo-Platonic texts. And it is no coincidence, surely, that Coleridge was an avid reader of Giordano Bruno, later to be placed by Yates at the centre of her Hermetic interpretation of the renaissance³.

2. *Yates, Kristeller and Garin*

There is, however, a further reason which led me to open this paper with a reference to Mill's essay on Coleridge. For in his attempt to offer a fair and generous evaluation of Coleridge's philosophical thought, Mill finds himself obliged to discuss a specific aspect of his subject which is relevant also in a consideration of the Hermetic renaissance of Frances Yates. That is, that Coleridge as philosopher is remembered above all as the thinker who brought to England a new body of doctrines which had originated elsewhere: in his case in Germany, in the wake of Kant's "Copernican revolution" in the field of epistemology. Mill's characteristic intellectual honesty obliges him to face squarely up to the question of whether this means that Coleridge's romantic idealism is to be seen as "necessarily subordinate" to the German philosophies which inspired it. Mill answers this question with both a "yes" and a "no".

There can be no doubt, Mill admits, that Coleridge as philosopher can only be remembered correctly as the thinker who added the English fragment to an edifice already constructed elsewhere. And yet, Mill goes on to claim, this

³ See Gatti, 'Coleridge's Reading of Giordano Bruno'.

admission does not mean that we find in Coleridge the philosopher a lack of originality. For in every national context, cultural problems and relationships possess their own characteristics and complexities, their own particular emphases; and the work of diffusion assumes a specific coloring and significance. Mill underlines how bringing the new idealism to England made Coleridge into a particularly significant thinker precisely because English culture at the end of the 18th century was spreading throughout Europe values founded on the empiricism of Francis Bacon and John Locke, which had already achieved their practical exemplification in the mechanical science of Isaac Newton. Recently reinforced by Benthamite utilitarianism, Mill's Victorian England could thus be considered the very citadel and bulwark of a scientific, anti-metaphysical empiricism, which Coleridge questioned, using as his weapon the new German transcendentalism. Surely a similar situation arises when, in the second half of the twentieth century, Yates proposes her Hermetic renaissance, neither invented nor originally discovered by herself. Yet much of the significance of her work derives from its constant and at times almost obsessive questioning of the positivist, anti-metaphysical bases of so many of the cultural and linguistic assumptions of the twentieth century, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon world.

Frances Yates, of course, would not have thought of herself as a philosopher, but rather as an intellectual historian or a historian of ideas. The particular flavour of her work, however, derives, from the fact that she founded her Hermetic interpretation of the European renaissance to a large extent on the contributions of the two major historians of philosophy who redefined the culture of the period in the course of the twentieth century: Paul Oscar Kristeller and Eugenio Garin. The relationship with Kristeller is clearly admiring, but critical as well. Frances Yates appreciated the dramatic impact of Kristeller's celebrated paper of 1938, originally published in the *Annali* of the *Scuola Normale* in Pisa, which revealed for the first time the remarkable diffusion of Hermetic texts in both Italian and French renaissance culture⁴. On the other hand, she chided Kristeller sharply, in her review of his *Eight Philosophers of the Italian Renaissance* published in 1964, for not having understood the revolutionary consequences of his own discovery⁵. What had happened, she asked, to the Hermeticism which Kristeller himself had so dramatically announced to the world some three decades previously, but which he then appeared to dismiss, or even ignore, as a serious component of the philosophy of the period concerned? The answer, of course, as Yates herself had already

⁴ See Kristeller, 'Marsilio Ficino e Ludovico Lazzarelli'.

⁵ Yates, 'No Man's Land: P.O. Kristeller's *Eight Philosophers of the Italian Renaissance*'.

written in the introductory pages to her own book of 1964, the widely admired study of *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, was that it had already been assumed as the basis of a new interpretation of the period in the light of its Hermetical and magical doctrines by Eugenio Garin. And it is Garin's major works, such as *Medioevo e rinascimento* of 1954 and *La cultura filosofica del rinascimento italiano* of 1961 which Yates herself indicates as the fundamental inspiration of her own Hermetic interpretation of both Giordano Bruno and, more widely, of the period in which he lived⁶.

Those who are familiar with the work of Eugenio Garin and his Florentine school might find it difficult to discern any essential difference between his picture of the renaissance drawn in the light of its Hermetical and magical doctrines and the whole of the first half of Yates's book on Bruno. For Yates's pages tell what in 1964 had already become a familiar story, starting from Ficino's translation into Latin in 1463 of the major Hermetic texts, with the exception of the already Latinised *Asclepius*, passing through the kabbalistic accretions introduced by Pico della Mirandola, to arrive at the more openly demonic magic of Cornelius Agrippa: all subjects which had been for some years at the centre of attention of scholars in Florence such as Garin himself, Cesare Vasoli and Paola Zambelli⁷. Of course, Yates was also deeply influenced by the tradition of renaissance studies in the light of a *prisca theologia* already developed by a number of distinguished scholars linked to the Warburg Institute in London, where it had arrived with its remarkable library from Hamburg due to the hostility of the Nazi regime. Yates started an association with the Warburg Institute in 1936, and her diary shows that she considered essential to her own work on the renaissance studies such as Edgar Wind's *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, first published in 1958, and above all the refined intellectual study of her Warburg colleague D.P. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella*, published in London, also in 1958⁸. So that, if these pages of Yates remain in some way canonical for the English-speaking world, it is above all for the remarkable stylistic *tour de force* by which she succeeded in making available, in a language which avoids the dryness and tedium of so much academic prose, the spiritual ardour and the

⁶ See Yates, *Giordano Bruno*; and Garin, *Medioevo* and *La cultura filosofica*.

⁷ See Garin et al., *Testi umanistici sull'ermetismo*.

⁸ See Wind, *Pagan Mysteries* and Walker, *Demonic and Spiritual Magic*. It was Wind who put Yates in contact with the Warburg Institute in 1936. He was very involved in her work on the French Academies, and the Yates Archive contains many letters to her on the subject. Walker became known to her as Corporal Walker of the Intelligence Corps during the war, when she wrote to him for information about beliefs about music in the French Academies. Walker started his association with the Warburg Institute in 1953, and became a firm friend of Frances Yates.

intense aspiration towards the divine which underlay the renaissance doctrines of magic and the occult.

It is this stylistic *tour de force* which allows Yates to be compared in these pages to Garin himself, whose work has also reached a public much wider and more composite than the limited one of the scholarly community. In some revealing autobiographical pages, Garin has attributed his remarkable public success to his early years as a school-teacher, which required essential messages to be communicated in widely available linguistic forms⁹. Yates for her part, in the unfinished autobiography written shortly before her death, underlines her origins in a loving family whose interests lay outside the academic world¹⁰. In both Garin and Yates, we find scholars totally dedicated to the study of ancient and renaissance texts who developed the linguistic registers which allowed them to communicate their findings well beyond the confines of the scholarly world. Their Hermetic renaissance has become more than an academic subject for scholastic and university curricula. It has entered into the larger public domain.

3. *Giordano Bruno as Hermetic Magus*

Frances Yates's best known and most personal contribution to the already ongoing international discussion concerning a Hermetic renaissance is to be found in the second part of her book of 1964 in which she proposes Giordano Bruno as the culminating moment of renaissance Hermeticism. Here she strikes out into an area which Garin himself has always treated with more circumspection; for it is clearly debatable whether the complexity of Bruno's thought makes him into the appropriate choice for such a role. The price to pay was indeed high, involving as it did the relegation into the obscure field of renaissance emblem-making, with its clearly occult ramifications, of Bruno's life-long meditation on the corner-stones of a new science, such as the Copernican astronomy or the revival of ancient atomism. From the beginning, the thesis, as well as being widely admired, has been severely contested by scholars of prestige, such as Giovanni Aquilecchia, whose review of Yates's book in 1965 suggested that she had seriously overstated her case¹¹. Helene Vedrine in her book of 1967, *La conception de la nature chez Giordano Bruno*, argued for a Bruno who was no magus but rather a cultivated and complex philoso-

⁹ See Garin, *La filosofia come sapere storico*.

¹⁰ See the 'Autobiographical Fragments' in Yates, *Ideas and Ideals in the North European Renaissance*, 275-322.

¹¹ See Aquilecchia, 'Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*'.

pher of nature¹². Robert Westman, in 1977, in an exemplary paper on sixteenth century astronomical theses, found no common astronomy shared by the Hermetic thinkers of the period and no specifically Hermetic strands to Bruno's own astronomical arguments¹³. And these were only the beginnings of a long *querelle* which still continues to-day. Even scholars who recognize the importance of the Hermetical and magical components of Bruno's thought emphasized by Yates, such as Michele Ciliberto in Italy, tend to distinguish between periods, such as the London years, when these were of limited importance, and Bruno's final years when a meditation on the renaissance doctrines of magic became a central component of his work¹⁴. So that in many respects the Yatesian Bruno, seen as the prime example of a Hermetic Magus, has been judged as either exaggerated or wrong. And yet there are surely few who would deny that Yates's book on Bruno continues to represent a mile-stone both in Bruno criticism and, more widely, in the on-going discussion concerning a magical and Hermetic renaissance. For there can be no doubt that she succeeded in directing attention to areas of Bruno's thought, as well as of renaissance culture generally, which had previously been ignored or despised. The very suggestion that Bruno's works contain a doctrine of magic which requires serious attention, based on a universal animism of both neo-Platonic and Hermetic derivation, was a novelty, at least in the detailed and documented emphasis with which Yates proposed it.

Equally important are surely her studies of Bruno's relationship with the pictorial logic of Ramon Lull and with the art of memory: a subject to which she would dedicate a full-length study published in 1966 which is perhaps her greatest work¹⁵. Once again, there has been a notable shift in emphasis among recent scholars of the art of memory, who to-day consider it as more pertinent to rhetoric or to logic than to the magical arts which Yates always stressed so persistently¹⁶. But even if the series of images which recur again and again in the renaissance arts of memory are no longer thought of as necessarily imbued with magical and occult powers, a new awareness of the essential link between word and visual image in the culture of this period has remained as a central aspect of recent renaissance studies. It would be difficult to overestimate the contribution of Frances Yates in the development of this awareness.

¹² Vedrine later wrote an important paper on Bruno's doctrine of magic, compared with that of Della Porta: see Vedrine, 'Della Porta et Bruno'.

¹³ See Westman, 'Magical Reform and Astronomical Reform'.

¹⁴ See Ciliberto, *Giordano Bruno* and the introduction to Bruno's *Opere magiche*.

¹⁵ See Yates, *The Art of Memory*.

¹⁶ Particularly influential in this development has been the work of Rossi, *Clavis universalis*.

An example of Yates's work in this field can be considered her fine early essay on Queen Elisabeth I as "Astraea", where the political rhetoric which characterized this remarkable Queen's reign is discussed in terms of the poetical images which evoked her symbolic meaning as universal empress of a new era of justice and of peace, as well as through the wonderful portraits which depicted her in this role¹⁷. It was a subject which allowed Yates once again to refer to Giordano Bruno, whose cult of Queen Elisabeth I was such an important part of his philosophical dialogues written and published in London between 1584 and 1585. Following Bruno's dictum in the *Cantus Circaeus* that the philosopher, the artist and the poet are all involved in the same search for the truth, Yates demonstrated how politics, poetry and the pictorial arts interacted in renaissance culture in ways which are relevant to-day, when images have once again come to dominate the public arena. Words become images, and images invoke words: or, to quote Sir Philip Sidney (another of Bruno's English heroes), the poetry of words culminates in the creation of speaking pictures. The magic of poetry, which Sidney strongly underlines as Coleridge would do after him, came in the end to fascinate Yates more than the magical doctrines of the philosophers; and her last years were dedicated to subjects such as the final plays of Shakespeare or the occult in English literature¹⁸. It is a field in which her studies have had a limited if distinguished influence. Yet it may be that, in the long run, Yates's perception of the essential link in renaissance culture between image and word, which accompanied her work from the papers on Lull right up to the final pages on Shakespeare and his contemporaries, will remain as one of her most significant contributions to the study of the early modern world.

4. *The Hermetic Renaissance*

Yates herself, however, based her hopes of survival on a historiographical thesis which has become intimately linked with her name, and which is repeatedly defined in her work. It appears with particular clarity in the already mentioned review of Kristeller's *Eight Philosophers of the Italian Renaissance* published in the *New York Review of Books* in Yates's own most crucial year, 1964¹⁹. It says that the renaissance has to be divided into two quite distinct and even opposing periods: the early humanist period from Petrarch to Valla, which continued to find distinguished exponents such as Erasmus of Rotterdam and

¹⁷ See Yates, *Astraea*.

¹⁸ See Yates, *Shakespeare's Last Plays* and *The Occult Philosophy*.

¹⁹ See Yates, 'No Man's Land'.

Machiavelli well into the 16th century, and a second period starting with Ficino's translation of the Hermetic texts in 1463 and culminating in the death of Bruno the Hermetic Magus in 1600. The first period was to be placed under the sign of reason and classical Greek and Roman humanism; the second under the sign of ancient Egypt, or Hermetic mysticism and magic. The triumphant emergence of enlightened reason, and with it of the mechanical sciences, in the seventeenth century was regarded by Yates with mixed feelings. At times, as in the final pages of her study of Bruno, she would see it as the inevitable defeat of an earlier period of still barbaric superstition and magic. But then again, she would look, for example in her book of 1972 on the *Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, for signs of a Hermetic survival in underground movements and secret conclaves²⁰. The search for such signs of survival became somewhat obsessive in her later years; and, as she herself admitted in some of her last pages, the terms in which the claims of reason and the claims of imagination and faith were closely intertwined in many of the foremost enlightenment figures themselves, including Isaac Newton, remained obscure²¹. Yet the conviction that new insights could derive from a study of the seventeenth century in the light of a continuing influence of Hermetic and magical traditions was a profound and enduring one, to which Yates gave a particularly eloquent expression in the essay on 'The Hermetic Tradition in Renaissance Science' published by Charles Singleton in 1967 in the volume *Science and History in the Renaissance*. 'It is perhaps somehow in these transitions from Renaissance to seventeenth century that the secret might be surprised', she wrote, 'the secret of how science happened'²². And if we are still obliged today to admit that no previously secret knowledge has provided us with a final illumination on this vitally important subject, it is nevertheless true that in recent years this survival of Hermetic and kabbalistic themes well into the seventeenth century, and beyond, has proved to be one of Yates's most fertile intuitions. It lies behind the resurgence of interest in the Rosicrucian movement, as well as the lively discussion regarding the emergence of the Royal Society and the true character of Baconian and Newtonian science: both of them far more complex intellectual constructs than the previous history of science had been prepared to admit²³.

The Yates thesis of a Hermetic renaissance has also been subjected to much criticism in recent years, and is clearly untenable in the radical terms in which

²⁰ See Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*.

²¹ See Yates, 'Did Newton connect his Maths and Alchemy?'

²² See Yates, 'The Hermetic Tradition in Renaissance Science', 243.

²³ For a recent study of the rosicrucian movement, see Edighoffer, *Les Rose-Croix*. Most of the essential documents concerning the recent debate on Newton's theology with relation to his science have been collected by Margaret Osler in *Rethinking the Scientific Revolution*.

she proposed it. There is much in Ficino or Pico della Mirandola which links them still to the classical tradition of Florentine civic humanism; while more recent work on Bruno has shown how he was often influenced by Aristotle, as indeed by both Erasmus and Machiavelli²⁴. Scholars such as Charles Schmitt and Charles Lohr have demonstrated how the Aristotelian tradition generally was still a force to be reckoned with throughout the sixteenth century; while the most recent studies of renaissance magic by scholars such as Brian Copenhaver have emphasized its complex links with many of the developments which go under the name of the new science. Rather than the dichotomy proposed by Yates, sixteenth century studies seem to be developing in a search for the ways in which the major figures of the period brought together in their works the diverse and often contradictory cultural traditions which they inherited from the distant as well as the more recent past²⁵. Historiographical theses, however, have much in common with scientific theories. Even when the intellectual discussion has moved on to concern itself with different issues in different ways, they can maintain much of their interest and even a portion of their validity. They oblige us to ask ourselves how and why they emerged as and when they did, and what it was in them that allowed them to dominate the cultural scene, at least for a time. In the case of Frances Yates, a study of the emergence of her historiographical thesis of a Hermetic renaissance is of particular interest as it was closely linked in her mind with the tragically fragmented condition of Europe in the central decades of the twentieth century. 'I was determined that Hitler should not prevent me from writing that book', she wrote in her *Autobiographical Fragments* of the composition of *The French Academies of the Sixteenth Century*, which was finally published in 1947²⁶. And her later discovery of the Hermetic tradition in renaissance thought was clearly to a large extent inspired by the irenic elements which she detected in its cosmic mysticism. For Frances Yates was not a historian who considered the renaissance past as something distant or obsolete. Rather, as her Warburg colleague and friend, J.B. Trapp, remarked during his speech at her funeral in 1981, she 'was able to hold a consciousness of the past and a care for the future in every passing moment of the present'²⁷.

²⁴ For Ficino, see the classic study by Kristeller, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, 13. For Bruno see Blum, *Aristoteles*, and Ciliberto, *Giordano Bruno*.

²⁵ See Schmitt, *Aristotle*, and the contribution by Lohr in the *Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*. See also Copenhaver, 'Natural Magic'.

²⁶ See Yates, 'Autobiographical Fragments', 316.

²⁷ The speeches pronounced at Yates's funeral were printed privately after the event. Copies of the texts are held in the Yates archive at the Warburg Institute in London.

5. *The Importance of the Archive*

How and when, then, did Frances Yates discover the importance of the Hermetic tradition in renaissance thought, and assume it as the key with which, from then on, to interpret the development of the early modern world? With this question in mind, I went to the *Autobiographical Fragments* in the hope of finding an answer. Rather to my surprise, however, I found that she had not explained either the exact time or the exact terms of what was clearly, in her mind, a world-shattering intuition. Her comments on her own books only make clear that it happened some time between 1959, when she published *The Valois Tapestries*, and 1964 when she published her next book, on Bruno. The *Fragments* also make clear the sense which she herself attributed to her new conviction that the whole of the final period of renaissance culture should be seen in the light of what she called its 'hermetic core'. For she herself clearly thought of her intellectual achievement as divided into two quite different phases. In the first phase, which she dates from the book on John Florio of 1934, which sparked off her interest in Bruno, up to and including *The Valois Tapestries* of 1959, she considered that she had done some work of distinction, but that it remained fragile because unsupported by an interpretative key to the character of the period as a whole. This was followed by her final period, dating from the Bruno book of 1964, which she herself valued more highly because it was securely founded on a single, clear and, in her mind, definitive idea of the late renaissance as dominated by Hermetic mysticism and magic. But exactly when and how she experienced this watershed in her intellectual life is not explained. The rest of this paper attempts to tell this so-far untold story using papers found in the Frances Yates Archive held at the Warburg Institute in London. I am grateful to Dame Frances Yates's literary executor, and to the then Director of the Warburg Institute, Professor Nicholas Mann, for their permission to examine these papers and to present my findings in this essay.

Frances Yates's diaries for 1959 and 1960 show that she was teaching a class on Ficino and Pico della Mirandola both years. The entry for Thursday, January 1st, 1959, reads: 'Man in Woburn Square said "Seek God"'. On Wednesday, May 18th, 1960, there was a lunch in London with Eugenio Garin. The diary entry says simply 'Garin – lunch', without further comment. Then there is a significant entry for Wednesday, December 28th, 1960: 'Pledge died to-day. Good deal of death over this Christmas. The seminar is about Immortality of the Soul'. The significance of this entry lies in the fact that H. T. Pledge, a mathematician, was the Librarian of the Science Library in South Kensington; and the early, unpublished study of Bruno's *Ash Wednesday Sup-*

per, for instance, shows that there was a time when Yates was not uninterested in questions relating to renaissance science. With hindsight, this entry would seem to indicate that the period of Yates's studies of early modern science were over. And so we get to the diary for 1961, the crucial year. The entries themselves are hurried, excited and obscure, although they clearly indicate a rush of reading of magic and kabbalistic texts. On Monday, April 17th, she is reading Scholem on the Jewish Kabbalah, and then on April 25th we find her in the British Museum reading *Picatrix*. And so on, throughout the year. After the final entry for December 31st, Yates decided to write a long note at the end of the diary telling the story of the whole year. The note reveals that the year had started with an effort to write the book on the art of memory, but had then dramatically changed course. But let us hear Yates tell her story in her own words:

I began to try to start on the memory book in February 1961. Began by looking at Camillo and tracing his sources. In doing this saw that Hermeticism is clue to Bruno. Saw whole view in history of renaissance magic in relation to Bruno. Worked on typed notes about this February, March. End of March we went to Droitwich. On return, about April 15th, I started to write the book. Wrote 19 chapters, up to end of Bruno, in April, May, June, July, August. End of August we went on Scottish holiday. Came back about September 25. Was not very well, sciatica in October. Spent most of October with sciatica preparing Lull lecture at Oxford, Oct. 27. November got back to book. Wrote last two chapters, November, December. Christmas holidays wrote Campanella chapter. Finished the last day of the year. This book thus written in one year and it is the most important thing I have ever done. There is still revision and some re-writing to chaps. 4 and 21 and 22 to do. Also the notes. But the book is there.

So the clue to the Bruno book is to be found in the pages of Giulio Camillo's *L'idea del teatro*, first published in 1550, which was initially being read in the context of Yates's studies in the art of memory, and would later lead her to Robert Fludd and Shakespeare's Globe Theatre for her study of *The Theatre of the World*²⁸. Camillo's eloquent and all-enveloping hermeticism includes an explicit defense of secret, symbolic writing on the basis that both Christ and Hermes Trismegistus encouraged the wise man to contemplate, as through a veil, the mysteries of God²⁹. Suddenly this seemed to Yates to yield the clue to Bruno, whose works, she admits in the *Autobiographical Fragments*, had previously appeared to her opaque and obscure. But now Bruno's infinite universe could itself be considered a divine symbol of a transcendent unity, to be

²⁸ See Yates, *Theatre of the World*, 11, where she notes that John Dee held a copy of Camillo's *L'idea del teatro* in his library.

²⁹ See the opening pages of Camillo, *L'idea del teatro*.

understood mystically, 'as through a cloud of unknowing' as she writes elsewhere in her private papers, and not scientifically or rationally as the previous critical tradition had claimed. So Bruno becomes for Yates the supreme example of the renaissance magus, taking his place in the context of the tradition of renaissance magic in which Yates was already well versed. Throughout 1962 and 1963, work continued on publication of the Bruno book by Routledge in London and Chicago University Press in the United States. The diary entry for Thursday, 23 January 1964 reads: 'Book published to-day without my knowing it'. Then on Friday, January 24th: 'Copies of the book came'. The diary tells us the name of the recipient of the first copy: Eugenio Garin.

The typed pages on Yates's reading of Camillo in February 1961, which she mentions in the note quoted above, can be found in the archive, in box no. 14 labelled 'Art of Memory: A. Notes and Early Versions'. On the cover of the file, Yates herself wrote later, on October 29th, 1979: 'History of my Work: Important Phase. Analysis of Hermetic influence in Camillo's Theatre. Notes made about 1961. Led to discovery of Hermetic quotations in Bruno'. The notes consist of a series of comments and quotations from Ficino's *Pimander* and the *Asclepius* and their influence on Ficino, Pico, Bruno and Campanella. Above all, however, they attempt to identify the numerous quotations from the *Hermetica* in Camillo's *Theatro*, together with ample comment on the contexts in which he quotes them. These notes are followed by a page entitled 'Thoughts'. The most significant of these thoughts seem to me the following:

The *Pimander* is the Egyptian Genesis, the *Asclepius* the account of the Egyptian religion.

Should perhaps be considered together, as Camillo does.

.....
If you believed with Lazzarelli and others that Trismegistus was earlier than Moses, you might still hold to some sort of Christian Magus idea through Trismegistus' recognition of the Son of God as creator.

But if you believed both that Trismegistus is earlier than Moses and that Moses and the Jews had corrupted the earlier and purer Egyptian religion, then you could adopt *Pimander* as the true Genesis, *Asclepius* as the true religion and become an all-out non-Christian magus like Bruno.

Bruno's philosophy practically all traceable to *Hermetica* which teach optimism gnosis.

His religion, the restoration of the Egyptian magical religion.

His heliocentricity the absorption of Copernicus into Hermetic sun mysticism and animation of the earth.

6. Was Bruno a Hermetic Magus?

I believe that the primary importance which the diary accords to Camillo's *L'idea del teatro* in inspiring Yates's hermetic interpretation of Bruno, and then more widely of the whole of the final period of renaissance culture, helps to define both the strengths and the limits of her thesis. For there can be no doubt of the primary importance for Camillo himself of the Hermetic texts in the elaboration of his theatre of memory. Also the historical logic which inspires the central part of this page of Yates's 'Thoughts' seems to me unimpeachable. In so far as Bruno made use of the Hermetic texts in defining his religion, or his definition of God, he seems to me to follow the path traced by Yates and to become an "all-out non-Christian magus". It was certainly possible to defend this thesis, as Yates did, with respect to works such as the *De umbris idearum* or the *Sigillus sigillorum*, for example. But the final jump which gives us a Bruno whose philosophy is *all* traceable to the Hermetica 'which teach optimistic gnosis' is surely arbitrary. Yates does not even find it necessary to measure her thesis against the chapter towards the end of Bruno's philosophical and cosmological masterpiece, the *De immenso* which concludes the Frankfurt trilogy of 1591, where Bruno takes his distance very explicitly from Palingenius and what he calls his gnostic nightmares. Indeed, whether any form of gnosis, optimistic or not, remains possible in the context of Bruno's not only infinite but also homogeneous universe, logically dependent on a divine principle which he considered as unknown and unknowable to the human mind, is surely one of the major themes of his works. But it is a theme proposed by Bruno in problematic terms which seem to place him at a considerable distance from Yates's sublime certainties³⁰.

The question of atomism is another aspect of late renaissance culture in which a similar problem emerges. Camillo has a single sentence on atoms which, he claims, are the foundation of discrete quantity in all things. He repeats this, with only minor variations, later on in his work³¹. It is by no means a banal understanding of the foundation of quantity in the context of the still largely Aristotelian culture of 1550, and it even suggests the possibility of developing a full-scale atomistic theory of matter. But Camillo himself gives no signs of wishing to do such a thing. Yates for her part, in her discussion of Bruno, gives atoms exactly the same amount of attention as Camillo did, claiming in a footnote of her Bruno book of 1964, probably inspired by Paul-

³⁰ For the problematic nature of Bruno's epistemology, see Spruit, *Il problema della conoscenza*.

³¹ Camillo, *L'idea del teatro*, 92: 'Gli atomi ci significheranno tutta la quantità discreta nelle cose'. See also o.c. 91, 150 and 162.

Henri Michel's seminal study of Bruno's atomism of 1957, that he introduced the idea of power or soul into the far more material atoms of Lucretius³². This is also an important point to make. However, it gives the reader no idea of the fact that Bruno, differently from Camillo, *did* attempt to formulate a full-scale atomistic theory of matter. He even dedicated a whole work to the subject: the *De triplici minimo*, which is the first part of his Frankfurt trilogy of 1591. Recent work on the history of corpuscular theories has been stressing the importance of Bruno as the first philosopher of the modern era to make such an attempt, as well as being the first to try to visualise in illustrations to his pages on atomism the nature of atomistic formations, or what to-day we would call the beginnings of a molecular theory³³.

If we now leave Bruno aside, and look at Yates's larger thesis of a primarily Hermetic renaissance, within which the works belonging to a classical-rationalist tradition assume only minor importance, the same kind of problem can be detected. Philip Sidney suddenly becomes a Hermeticist, in spite of the fact that his *Defense of Poetry* is argued on largely Aristotelian lines, on the basis of the fact that he took lessons in mathematics occasionally from John Dee³⁴. Francis Bacon is also enrolled on the basis of the Hermetic and Rosicrucian imagery of his late utopian work, *The New Atlantis*, which had been notably absent from his earlier *Advancement of Learning* or *Novum Organon*³⁵. And so we get to Newton, whose massive Biblical studies and enduring faith in alchemy suddenly assume centre stage, to the detriment of his works in physics which he himself chose to publish, and which ensured his primacy in the history of modern science at least until the Einsteinian revolution³⁶. Again the problem is one of emphasis. Can Newton really be seen as *primarily* a religious thinker, whose science can be reduced to a form of *curiositas* which places him on much the same level as the Hermetically-minded Jesuit Athanasias Kircher, as one recent commentator who makes explicit reference to the Yates thesis claims?³⁷

Frances Yates herself had no doubts about the answer to that question. Her later works particularly led unhesitatingly in a predominantly Hermetic and increasingly mystical direction. So much so that she would with time be gently chided even by Garin himself for her refusal to make the necessary historical

³² Yates, *Giordano Bruno*, 452 nt 1.

³³ On this subject, see Gatti, 'Giordano Bruno's Soul-powered Atoms' and Lüthy, 'Bruno's Area democriti'.

³⁴ See Sidney, *An apology*.

³⁵ See Yates, *Giordano Bruno*, 450.

³⁶ For a much discussed, radical expression of this thesis, see Dobbs, B.J.T., 'Newton as Final Cause and First Mover'.

³⁷ See Findlen, 'The Janus Face of Science'.

and interpretative distinctions. Garin would even consider that the time had come in 1975 to remind his readers of the important work on Bruno done earlier in the century by the distinguished historian of science Alexandre Koyré, while in 1991 we find him re-proposing the work of an idealist but far more rational and scientifically-minded philosopher and historian of the renaissance: Giovanni Gentile³⁸. The study of Bruno on the part of Gentile dates from 1907, the period of his collaboration with Benedetto Croce, and culminated in his edition of the Italian dialogues for the publisher Laterza of 1907-1908. By the time of Garin's re-edition of Gentile's Bruno studies, Yates was already dead; but she could hardly have agreed. Her archive contains some undated notes on her reading of Gentile's essay on *Bruno and Renaissance Thought* which provide interesting evidence of the evolution of her own thought on Bruno and on the period in which he lived.

The notes appear to belong to two quite different moments of Yates's life. They are composed of a synthesis of Gentile's essay in pen, containing no interpretative comment, above which, presumably at a later date, she added copious critical comments in pencil. This is one of the largest group of notes to be found in the archive, and it is only possible here to give some examples to illustrate the sense of Yates's comments on Gentile's thought on Bruno. It probably interested her in particular because Gentile was presenting Bruno specifically as a model of the thought of the late renaissance; and it is no coincidence that his essay on Bruno was followed, in the volume on renaissance thought which Gentile published in 1915, by a major essay on the philosophical thought of Galileo. Yates's comments are very aggressively critical, and may reflect her distaste for Gentile's later choice of allegiance to the Italian fascist regime, although I found no mention of this in the comments themselves.

A first example appears to represent a still uncertain attitude of criticism and is couched in the form of a question. It relates to the page where Gentile describes Bruno's thought as a rational and philosophical process, ending in ecstatic union. This, of course, is why it interests Garin. But Yates counters by asking: 'Not quite accurate?' When Gentile goes on to claim that Bruno maintains at Venice that religious and scientific truth are incommensurable, Yates comments: 'Wrong — he uses science as a religious symbol'. When Gentile claims that Bruno discards the transcendence on which the middle-ages had founded its philosophy, Yates comments: 'Wrong. Bruno does not discard transcendence. Nature is to him a symbol of the transcendent'. The word 'symbol' is underlined. Where Gentile writes that the medieval philosopher said:

³⁸ See Garin, *Rinascite e rivoluzioni* and Gentile, *Giordano Bruno*.

credo ut intelligam, but Bruno says: *non credo ut intelligam*, Yates comments: 'Bruno might say this, but he would mean it mystically not scientifically or rationally'. The word 'mystically' is underlined. And so it goes on, until we reach Yates's final comment which reads: 'Gentile has failed to perceive that Bruno's philosophy of the infinity of nature is a mystical symbol'.

One of the most striking aspects of these comments by Yates on Gentile's essay, commonly considered one of the milestones of modern Bruno criticism, is her frequent use of an outright *wrong*. Although she wrote these comments in pencil, they represent a conviction which has clearly become indelible and unshakable, to the extent of verging on the dogmatic. But perhaps it can be argued that no historiographical thesis is ever completely right or wrong, and that there are no definitive keys or clues to the bafflingly complex ways of history. In this case, what we can fairly ask of a historian of ideas is to have moved the waters of a discussion which was tending to become stagnant and stale; to have indicated new directions which needed to be pursued, and above all to have attempted to follow what at that time was a little frequented path with coherence and intellectual rigour, sustained by a vision of a more spiritually profound and more harmonious world. It would be difficult in this case to deny Frances Yates a role of distinction in the intellectual discussion of the second half of the twentieth century, which seems likely to continue to exercise an important influence for some years to come.

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Il Rinascimento ermetico di Frances Yates

L'intervento si apre con un riferimento al saggio commemorativo di John Stuart Mill del 1840 su Samuel Taylor Coleridge, visto come modello della celebrazione di un pensatore di inclinazione metafisica da parte di un oppositore dall'assetto mentale più utilitaristico, o quanto meno di tipo più logico o pragmatico. Il saggio di Mill si offre al paragone con la presente situazione anche in quanto Coleridge vi figura come propugnatore in Inghilterra di una filosofia trascendentale che aveva avuto origine altrove: allo stesso modo, la visione yatesiana di un rinascimento ermetico era sorta nella scia di un fondamentale saggio di Paul Oscar Kristeller del 1938, che era già stato assunto come base di una reinterpretazione della cultura rinascimentale da parte di Eugenio Garin e di un gruppo di studiosi fiorentini a lui connessi.

Il contributo più originale, da parte della studiosa inglese, al dibattito intorno al rinascimento ermetico sviluppatosi nella seconda metà del ventesimo secolo viene individuato nella sua interpretazione di Giordano Bruno come il principale 'magus' ermetico del periodo. Da ciò si passa a discutere i seri problemi posti da tale interpretazione non solo nell'ambito degli studi bruniani, ma in relazione all'intera questione della natura della nuova scienza sviluppatasi nei secoli sedicesimo e diciassettesimo.

Il problema principale su cui verte il presente intervento è quello di individuare quale sia stato l'impulso iniziale che ha condotto la Yates a collocare Bruno con tanta enfasi al centro del suo quadro di un rinascimento ermetico. Vengono qui addotte per la prima volta alcune delle carte private della studiosa, conservate nell'archivio Yates del Warburg Institute di Londra. Da tali carte si evince con chiarezza come l'interpretazione yatesiana secondo la quale tutti gli aspetti del pensiero di Bruno risalirebbero ad un'ispirazione di tipo ermetico derivi direttamente dalla lettura della *Idea del teatro* di Giulio Camillo. Oltre alla pagina del *Diario* del 1961 in cui viene descritta l'emozione provata dalla studiosa di fronte a tale scoperta, si presentano qui alcuni estratti da un gruppo di note che esprimono gli elementi essenziali della connessione Camillo-Bruno come individuati dalla Yates. Infine, viene esaminato un terzo gruppo di note consistenti in una sintesi del saggio di Giovanni Gentile su *Giordano Bruno e il pensiero del rinascimento*, alla quale la Yates aggiunse in un secondo momento dei commenti in cui critica aspramente la visione gentiliana di Bruno come precursore di Galileo.

La Yates considerava la propria interpretazione ermetica del pensiero di Giordano Bruno come una "chiave" per la comprensione non solo di una delle principali figure del rinascimento europeo, ma di tutto il periodo agli albori dell'età moderna. Il presente intervento si conclude con la messa in questione della validità della nozione yatesiana di una "chiave" interpretativa ad interi periodi storici, pur riconoscendo, allo stesso tempo, l'azione innovatrice esercitata dalla studiosa inglese sul tema dei motivi di derivazione ermetica nell'ambito del pensiero cinquecentesco ed oltre.

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