Our greatest blessing comes to us through madness, when it is sent as a gift of the gods.

Plato, *Phaedrus*, 244a

In the final pages of his seminal 1951 study *The Greeks and the Irrational*, E. R. Dodds famously describes the struggle of humankind to get rid of what he calls the “irrational elements in human nature” and submit to the power of reason:

We too have experienced a great age of rationalism, marked by scientific advances beyond anything that earlier times had thought possible, and confronting mankind with the prospect of a society more open than any it has ever known. And in the last forty years we have also experienced something else – the unmistakable symptoms of a recoil from this prospect.¹

In reference to the *Phaedrus*’ winged chariot Dodds compares our reluctance to embrace rationalism fully with the horseman’s hesitation before making the final jump:

Is it the horse that refused, or the rider? That is the crucial question. Personally, I believe it was the horse – in other words, those irrational elements in human nature which govern without our knowledge so much of our behaviour and so much of what we think is our thinking….the men who created the first European rationalism were never – until the Hellenistic Age – ‘mere’ rationalists: that is to say, they were deeply aware of the power, the wonder, and the peril of the Irrational. But they could describe what went on below the threshold of consciousness only in mythological or symbolic language; they had no instrument for understanding it, still less for controlling it…²

The essential point of Dodds’s study is that Greek thought was not immune to irrational ways of thinking. It rests upon the notion that ‘irrational’ beliefs are those of ‘primitive’ people, that intellectual progress is intrinsically linked to reason, and that there is a strict separation between what constitutes philosophy (which is based upon reason and method) and what constitutes superstition (defined as anything that appeals to the irrational forces of the human mind). History is naturally progressing towards rationalism, only to be interrupted by periods of ‘regression’ in times of crisis, when it is inevitably drawn back to irrational practices such as healing magic and ‘foreign cults’. But Dodds fails to take into account another, perhaps more important point: not only did these irrational ways of thinking exist, but, far from being the symptoms of a regressive or ‘primitive’ form of thought, they were actually crucial for the development of philosophy, religion, and science.³

Talking about hermeticism, Wouter Hanegraaff argued that it is “due to ingrained ideological biases – ultimately grounded in the biblical and theological rejection of paganism as idolatry – rather than for scholarly reasons that this entire domain was severely neglected by academic research until far into the 20th century”.⁴ This is also true of our understanding of the Renaissance revival of Neoplatonic demonology, the science of the pagan ‘demons’, those intermediate spirits, good or evil, that constituted the link between men and gods and were objects of a religious cult called theurgy, a set of magical rituals used by Neoplatonic philosophers to purify the soul and achieve its deification. With a few exceptions, these doctrines have been seen by Renaissance specialists as

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². **Dodds** (as in n. 1), p. 254.


‘Neoplatonic delusions of the Roman decadence’, or, at best, as ‘strange’ and ‘weird’ practices. This view still shapes, at least in part, our view of Renaissance culture: the ‘occult’ works of Renaissance philosophers, from Ficino to Newton, are often seen as the remnants of a primitive attraction towards the dark forces of occultism. For instance, studies of Ficino remain too often based upon a separation between what is seen as Ficino’s mainstream philosophy, expounded in his *Platonic Theology* and his *Plato Commentaries*, and his ‘deviant’ magico-astrological writings, such as *De Vīta*, even though these two trends are drawing upon the same Platonic and Christian sources.

Historically, the notion that demonology could not be anything other than some pagan occult doctrine comparable to black magic stems from Augustine. In open opposition to paganism, Augustine devoted several books of the *City of God* to demonstrating that pagan religion, including Neoplatonic theurgy, was idolatrous and impious. He stated that all *daimones* – the Greek spirits that Neoplatonists invoked in their rites – were equivalent to the Bible’s fallen angels and thus evil spirits. Hence, the word demon (or daemon), which initially designated any spirit, acquired a negative connotation that is still in use today, while theurgy – a set of religious invocations to divinities – is still perceived as a dangerous magical practice. This also explains why Dodds felt compelled to establish a strict, and largely unfounded, distinction between the first Neoplatonist, Plotinus, and his successors. Plotinus was heralded as the great defender of “the Greek rationalist tradition”, who had never practiced theurgy.

Until fairly recently little had been made of Marsilio Ficino’s prolonged study of Neoplatonic demonology in the years 1486–89. At that time the Florentine humanist decided to interrupt his monumental commentary on Plotinus’ nine-book treatise, the *Enneads*, and devote three years to the translation of other Neoplatonic texts on demonology, theurgy, astrology, Platonism, and theurgy. Dodds felt compelled to establish a negative connotation that is still in use today, while theurgy – a set of religious invocations to divinities – is still perceived as a dangerous magical practice. This also explains why Dodds felt compelled to establish a strict, and largely unfounded, distinction between the first Neoplatonist, Plotinus, and his successors. Plotinus was heralded as the great defender of “the Greek rationalist tradition”, who had never practiced theurgy, while his successors were seen as decadent promoters of irrationalism who defended the use of theurgical rituals – notwithstanding the fact that Plotinus had devoted two treatises to demonology and was described by his pupil Porphyry as practicing theurgy.

The view that demons were the fallen angels described in the Bible remained largely unchallenged in the Middle Ages, despite the growing interest in Latin Neoplatonic sources such as Apuleius and Macrobius, who had dealt extensively with pagan demons. In contrast, the revival of Greek demonology that occurred in fifteenth-century Florence had profound implications for the way in which Augustine’s apologetic description of ancient paganism was received. To begin with, the religious context had manifestly changed from a nascent Christianity surrounded by pagans who had the monopoly of culture to a Church that dominated everyday life to such an extent that there was no strict line of demarcation between science and religion. Secondly, there was a growing realization that these demonological texts had been misrepresented by Augustine, and could actually provide specific answers to questions that had tormented all philosophers since Plato: the mechanisms that determined the process of divine inspiration and demonic possession and, more importantly, the way in which one could describe the relation between body, soul, and God.


and magic. Ficino’s motivation in translating these texts was that of a scholar who obeys the needs of exegesis rather than cedes to the dark forces of occultism. As he states in a letter addressed to Braccio Martelli, Ficino turns his attention to these texts with the intention of clarifying some imprecise and obscure aspects of Plotinus’ doctrine regarding the nature of demons. Ficino was thus confronted with the very paradox that had led Dodds to establish an opposition between Plotinus the ‘rationalist’ and the other ‘irrational’ Neoplatonists: Plotinus had made but few allusions to the role of demons in the *Enneads*, but had been described by his pupil Porphyry as a practicing theurgist, capable of attracting or countering the influence of demonic spirits. Ficino’s response differs markedly, however, from that of Dodds: he considers that Plotinus had deliberately dissimulated his views on demons and theurgy behind obscure allusions, and that it was the task of the right interpreter to unveil these views, by turning towards Plotinus’ successors (Iamblichus, Porphyry, Synesius, and Proclus), who had treated the question extensively.

One must not neglect, however, the fundamentally spiritual context in which Ficino operated. For Ficino no longer considered these pagan demons as the evil spirits described in the Bible, but as good angels which could be invoked through music and incantations. In one passage of the *Platonic Theology* he goes as far as equating demonic inspiration with Christian grace; in another, he equates Neoplatonic theurgy with Christian rituals of fasting and prayer. He explains that the soul of the philosopher itself, when appropriately purified, could be called a demon and acquires supernatural powers, such as that of knowing the future.

12. Ficino (as in n. 11), p. 875.  
13. See e.g. Ficino’s argumentum to Plato’s Apology of Socrates (published in 1484), referring to Socrates’ demon as a “good angel”: FICINO (as in n. 11), p. 1388.  

From testimonies of the ancients’ impiety these Neoplatonic texts on demonology thus become sources of spiritual guidance for any question related to angelology, divine inspiration, and the power of prophecy; they also play a crucial role in Ficino’s main mission: the renovation of Christianity. When Ficino equates Neoplatonic theurgy with Christ’s use of fasting and prayer to expel evil spirits, he invites us to return to the early, uncorrupted phase of Christianity, when rituals, far from being the marks of religious ostentation, played a role of purification in the same way as Neoplatonic theurgy.

While the later reception of Ficino’s demonology still remains to be studied, its immediate influence can easily be traced, from Francesco Buonaccorsi to Girolamo Savonarola. Examination of Ficino’s correspondence indicates that the revival of ancient demonology had an intrinsic value in the realm of natural science and religion. Demonology, like science, concerned the study of Nature, in which the actions of demons were seen as natural causes of phenomena such as prophetic vision and demonic possession. This is perfectly illustrated by letters Ficino and a fellow humanist, Francesco Buonaccorsi, exchanged a few years before Ficino undertook his translation of demonological texts. At some point, Buonaccorsi asks Ficino to explain through natural rather than theological arguments (“non theologice sed naturaliter”) the possibility that demons could interact with human souls. It seems that the translations Ficino undertook a few years later, and particularly that of Priscianus, sought to respond to this query by using Neoplatonic doctrines of light to explain the meeting of demonic beings with human souls. Other texts provided more detailed explanations regarding the doctrine of the “vehicle of the soul”, which sought to describe the way in which human souls could receive and store demonic inspiration.

Other letters and manuscript annotations by Ficino and his colleagues reveal that many fifteenth-century intellectual figures shared this fascination for demonology, especially in the context of prophecy. These included Lorenzo de’ Medici’s physician Pierleone da Spoleto; Giles of Viterbo, who was to play a crucial role during the Fifth Lateran Council;

and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, often heralded (incorrectly) as the champion of the anti-astrological polemic against Ficino. But the importance of Ficino’s revival can perhaps best be measured by the strong opposition it generated on the part of the prophet and religious leader Girolamo Savonarola. We know that the Ferrarese friar had carefully read a few chosen passages of Ficino’s doctrine on the soul’s prophetic powers, and used these to develop a virulent criticism against recourse to the powers of ‘pagan spirits’ to predict the future. That Savonarola would feel the need to formulate repeated attacks against Ficino so as to establish himself as the only legitimate messenger of God’s will clearly indicates the impact Neoplatonic demonology had on Florentine religious culture.

In sum, the Renaissance revival of Neoplatonic demonology opened up avenues that the apologetic reading of paganism had closed off for nearly a millennium. The importance it had in the field of religion, as a way to return to an age of intense and uncorrupted spirituality, and in the field of science, as a way to respond to the growing skepticism towards the very existence of demons, undermines the modern tendency to regard the ‘occult’ as merely a set of ‘weird’ doctrines. Perhaps more importantly for the development of scholarship, the study of Renaissance demonology illumines, and partly explains, contemporary prejudices towards important philosophical trends that existed both in antiquity and in the Renaissance; it invites us to reconsider the pertinence of seeing ‘irrationality’ as a mark of cultural regress.

