

# Man and Cosmos in the Renaissance: 'The Heavens Within Us' in a Letter by Marsilio Ficino

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In an extraordinary page of his *Homilies on Leviticus*, Origen develops in an unusual way the great theme of the correspondence between man and cosmos. There is no need to seek victims to offer to God from among visible animals: we can all find them in ourselves, in our souls.<sup>1</sup> The human is a little world in which the cosmos is reflected point by point: 'Do not be surprised to hear me say all that is within you; you should understand that you are another world in miniature (*in parvo*) and that in you there is a sun, there is a moon, there are stars.'<sup>2</sup> In this singular passage the human soul is seen as a mirror of the visible world, which in its turn is nothing other than a vast allegory of the divine. In an image that is not without astrological resonance, the nub of the correspondence between the great world and the small one is situated in the heavenly bodies.

This image of the correspondence between the universe and man, macrocosm and microcosm, is not a novel or even unusual one; on the contrary, André Festugière defines it as the most famous in antiquity.<sup>3</sup> In his important book on Pico della Mirandola, Henri de Lubac devoted a chapter to searching in ancient and medieval tradition for the most significant evidence for the idea of a relationship between macro and microcosm, with which Count della Mirandola concludes the *Heptaplus*: 'It is important to note that the world is called by Moses "a great man". Indeed if man is a little world, assuredly the world is a great man, etc. See with what harmony all those parts of the world and man match each other.'<sup>4</sup> As De Lubac clearly indicated, the themes of universal harmony and the relationship of macro to microcosm can be found in the most varied texts and authors: hermetic works and Bible commentaries by Clement of Alexandria, Philo, Chalcidius, Macrobius, St Augustine and Martianus Capella. So Isidore of Seville can present it as a well-established idea in ancient culture, 'if it is true that in Greek "world" is expressed as "cosmos", and man in turn as "microcosm", that is, "little world".'<sup>5</sup> Thus the Spanish bishop transmitted

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the theme to the Latin Middle Ages, where Hildegard of Bingen and Bernard Sylvestre, among many others, performed suggestive elaborations on it before it reached the heart of Renaissance culture in Nicholas of Cusa's *De coniecturis* and Pico della Mirandola's writings.

We have noted that the theme underwent various developments and implications depending on authors. In many Christian texts it was to converge with the idea that man, being the first and most excellent of the creatures, incorporates all aspects of the world; sometimes it was limited to the sense of a brotherly closeness between humanity and the rest of creation, both ideas expressing the same love of God that caused St Francis of Assisi, among others, to praise Brother Sun and Sister Moon.<sup>6</sup> In Stoic circles it had become associated with the theme of universal *sympatheia*, while in hermetic texts it had taken a detailed form through the ordered list of chains or relations linking a precise series of animals, plants and minerals individually to each of the heavenly bodies, and particularly moving stars. In the opening to the *Iatromathematica Hermetis Trismegisti ad Ammonem Aegyptianum* it is developed in the direction of a systematic link between each of the stars and the different parts of the human body (*melothesia*) – which is a basic reference for the long tradition of astrological medicine.

Scholars say, oh Ammon, that man is a cosmos, because in his constitution he is made in the likeness of the cosmos. In truth, in the generation of human seed, in all the parts that make up the human body, the rays of the seven planets mingled just as at the act of birth by virtue of the position of the twelve signs. They say Aries is the head, while the perceptive faculties in the head are attributed to the seven moving planets: the right eye to the Sun, the left to the Moon, the ears to Saturn, the brain to Jupiter, the tongue and uvula to Mercury, smell and taste to Venus and everything sanguine to Mars.<sup>7</sup>

Here the relationship between macro and microcosm involves the planets and signs of the Zodiac and is expressed in astrological form: the planets each govern parts of the body, and the study of the birth theme makes it possible to diagnose each individual's pathological predispositions. Thus the doctor can prepare appropriate remedies also taking account of the different life moments, studied on the basis of transits.<sup>8</sup>

The link between the theory of the man–cosmos correlation and astrological techniques is still common in the Middle Ages and early modern times. Nevertheless we should not see in this a necessary relationship. In the majority of Christian texts, on the one hand, description of the man–world correlation does not involve re-using astrological terminology, but attempts rather to illustrate in a general way the harmony and symbolism of creation. On the other hand, astrological techniques imply a reference not to the complex relationship of macro to microcosm, but to the simpler link of synchronicity: in other words they are based on the implicit hypothesis that it is possible at any moment to assume heavenly positions to be significant for concomitant earthly events. It was in this context that they were used in Mesopotamia before, and independently of, the encounter with Greek philosophy, around which was forged, from Berosus onwards (later 3rd century BC), the link with the Stoic theme of universal sympathy central to texts such as Manilius' poem, the *Anthologiae* by Vettius Valens and the astrological writings inspired by hermeticism.<sup>9</sup> So there is

no reason to waste time on repeating that the theory of correspondence between macro and microcosm forms the basis for astrology in all its manifestations.<sup>10</sup> This assessment arose at a stage in research dominated by the conviction that, despite its distant Mesopotamian origins, the art of Urania, in its mature form, could not fail to be the fruit of the Hellenic genius. Assyriological research over the last few decades has nullified this thesis by finding in cuneiform texts not only the technique of prediction of great events in general, but also that of individual horoscopes, whose mathematical structure had convinced Auguste Bouché-Leclercq's generation that it derived from Greek astronomy.<sup>11</sup> Thus we can state that astrological techniques are not based on the Greek philosophical theory of correspondence between macro and microcosm, which actually represents one of their later interpretations and contexts.

In some of Origen's texts explicit use is made of the themes and language of astrology. According to *Philocalia* the holy book and the book of nature coincide, since God made a moving script of the Sun, Moon and planets; the *Commentary on Genesis*, also in the light of the theme of precession, deals with the relationship between the Zodiac's 12 sectors and the constellations.<sup>12</sup> In the *Homily on Leviticus* the reference remains implicit; but by making the reference to the sun, moon and planets the focus of the relationship between macro and microcosm,<sup>13</sup> Origen is re-using the most typical motif in the Mesopotamian tradition that is in fact centred on those seven heavenly bodies, and is applying it boldly to decipher inner life, a mirror of the life of the universe. On this same path, but explaining an astrological dimension, there is a letter by Marsilio Ficino that can be dated to around the end of 1477 or the early months of 1478.<sup>14</sup> In it the theme of the inner heavens is treated in terms so similar to Origen's that it might be thought to be a kind of indirect quotation: 'It is not outside ourselves that we should seek the heavenly bodies; in truth all the heavens are within us, who have in us a fiery vigour and heavenly origins.'<sup>15</sup> As we know, Marsilio Ficino found in Origen 'a very noble Platonist, a man whose doctrine and life are to be admired among all men' (*platonicus nobilissimus, vir doctrina vitaeque apprime mirabilis*),<sup>16</sup> one of the foundations for the revival of Platonism, to which he devoted such a large part of his writing. His quotations from Origen's themes, both explicit and implicit, are frequent and we would look in vain for allusions to the theological discussions and criticisms associated with the heterodox Greek Father's work.<sup>17</sup> And in this letter it is precisely on a theme from Origen that Ficino bases an example of rare effectiveness on the right way to understand and practise astrology.

In fact it is on the basis of the techniques of horoscopy that Marsilio deals with the qualities of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco dei Medici. The inner heaven, a term of the relationship between macrocosm and microcosm, takes the form of what astrologers call the birth theme: the series of astral positions at the moment of birth and related to its place. In his study Ficino follows the tried and tested processes of *genetliaca*, the analysis of the birth theme. First human dispositions are connected with the planets, in accordance with a classic schema that is only minimally varied:

First Luna – what else can she signify in us but that continuous motion of the soul and of the body? Mars stands for speed, Saturn for tardiness, Sol for God, Jupiter for the Law, Mercury for Reason, and Venus for Humanity (*Humanitas*).<sup>18</sup>

In fact, on the subject of the attributes of Venus, the planet which astrologers traditionally associate with kindness, Ficino draws on a humanist sensibility for which kindness may be re-read above all as liberality, culture and generosity: in short, humanity.

This serves as an exhortation and a reminder that we cannot possess anything great on this earth without possessing the men themselves from whose favour all earthly things spring. Men, however, cannot be caught by any other bait but that of Humanity. Be careful, therefore, not to despise it, thinking perhaps that 'humanitas' is of earthly origin. For Humanity herself is a nymph of excellent comeliness, born of heaven and more than others beloved by God all highest. Her soul and mind are Love and Charity; her eyes Dignity and Magnanimity, the hands Liberality and Magnificence, the feet, Comeliness and Modesty. The whole, then, is Temperance and Honesty, Charm and Splendour. Oh, what exquisite beauty! How beautiful to behold. My dear Lorenzo, a nymph of such nobility has been wholly given into your hands. If you were to unite with her in wedlock and claim her as yours she would make your years sweet.<sup>19</sup>

Once the usual astrological connection is established between the planets and human gifts, Ficino can read the horoscope, interpreting the positive aspects of the Moon with the beneficial planets (Venus and Jupiter, but also, in Ficino's version, the Sun and Mercury), and the absence of lunar aspects with the baleful ones (Mars and Saturn), as signs of favourable dispositions:

The astrologers have it that he is the happiest man for whom Fate has so disposed the heavenly signs that Luna is in no bad aspect to Mars and Saturn, that furthermore she is in favourable aspect to Sol and Jupiter, Mercury and Venus.<sup>20</sup>

It is up to the will and initiative of the young boy – who was 14 or 15 at the time of the letter – to cultivate throughout his life the abilities his horoscope allocates to him; in this respect, Ficino assumes the mantle of the mentor who shows how the best use will be made of good natural dispositions.<sup>21</sup> His teachings do not allow any room for the fatalism, originally stoic, that had often gone together with ancient astrology and had been unanimously rejected by Christians. The birth theme is not the starting point for pre-established events whose inevitable occurrence would preclude any conscious intervention of the will. Rather it is a cryptography of pre-dispositions and talents whose realization is given over to subjective initiative and moral responsibility.

And just as the astrologers call happy the man for whom fate has thus arranged the heavenly bodies, so the theologians deem him happy who has disposed his own self in a similar way . . . Onward, then, great-minded youth, gird yourself, and, together with me, dispose your own heavens. Your Luna – the continuous motion of your soul and body – should avoid the excessive speed of Mars and the tardiness of Saturn, that is, it should not hasten unduly, nor tarry too long. Furthermore this Luna within you should continuously behold the Sun, that is God Himself, from whom she ever receives the life-giving rays, for you must honour Him above all things, to whom you are beholden and make yourself worthy of the honour. Your Luna should also behold Jupiter, the laws human and divine, which should never be transgressed – for a deviation from the laws by which all things are

governed is tantamount to perdition. She should also direct her gaze on Mercury, that is on good counsel, reason and knowledge, for nothing should be undertaken without consulting the wise, nor should anything be said or done for which no plausible reason can be adduced. A man not versed in science and letters is considered blind and deaf. Finally she should fix her eyes on Venus herself, that is, to say on Humanity.<sup>22</sup>

Rather than a constraint, destiny is a task whose achievement is down to subjective initiative and moral responsibility, which can find a valuable support in astrological diagnosis properly understood. Thus the heavens only ever provide signs, which are reflected in the inner heavens; the planets indicate, they do not cause. In this idea, which underlies the entire letter, we can clearly see the re-use of an idea from Plotinus, whose pages on astrology in *Enneads II* and *III* fed into Ficino's profound meditation in his *Disputatio contra iudicium astrologorum*, before he subjected it to analytical examination in his *Commentarium in Plotinum*. Having denied that the planets, understood here as physical bodies, can have influence on the incorporeal soul, Plotinus had acknowledged their value as signs of divine order: 'And the stars co-operate towards the whole, since they are no small part of the heaven; this is why they are so bright and well adapted for signs. So they signify everything that happens in the sense-world, but do other things, the things which they are seen to do'.<sup>23</sup>

Referring to that idea, Ficino takes up a theme that did not come from Plotinus alone. On the same wavelength there is also the passage quoted above from Origen's *Philocalia*; but in its more general form the motive had already appeared in the field of more ancient Mesopotamian divination, in which the planets do not cause events but signify them. In cuneiform texts the stars are the heavens' writing, as if they were letters transmitting the divine message in quantifiable form. When they describe the basis for celestial divination the Mesopotamian scribes use the same metaphor of writing, treatise, drawing and measure that is found in Origen and, later still, Philo of Alexandria and the Bible itself. Furthermore, since heavenly phenomena may be read with reference to a code peculiar to them, with an earthly event matching each, it would not be possible to decode them without a writing: from that point of view it is not unreasonable that it should be the same Mesopotamian culture that was the first to develop the idea of celestial divination and the first to produce a system of writing.<sup>24</sup>

Clearly connected to the acceptance of a divine order in the universe, the theory of the planet-signs was thus older than the stoic-style theory of the planets seen as causes/signs that predominated among astrologers in late antiquity, older than the Aristotle-influenced theory of the planets as partial causes, expounded by Ptolemy and taken up by a number of Christian astrologers between the Middle Ages and early modern times.<sup>25</sup> However, by adopting it himself, Marsilio Ficino took an unusual step, if it is the case that historically it had especially gone alongside foretelling great natural and historical events, which was the province of a branch of astrology known as world astrology. Taking up Origen's theme of the inner heavens, he systematically applies the theory of planet-signs to deciphering underlying themes of individual personality. For Marsilio Ficino only the person who succeeded in deciphering his true inclinations – a task with which astrology could help con-

siderably – would get the best out of himself and avoid any external conditioning.<sup>26</sup> He would also free himself from the fearsome destiny described by the stoics, since there is a necessary element that comes from corporeal matter but does not act on the soul. And so Ficino can conclude his letter with a prediction that commits him: 'Finally, to express myself briefly: if you thus can conveniently regulate within yourself the heavenly signs and your gifts, you will escape all destiny's threats and you will not fail to live a happy life with divine favour.'<sup>27</sup>

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### Notes

1. 'Seek those victims in yourself, and you will find them within your soul', in Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus*, V.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 213.
3. A Festugière (1950), *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste. I: L'astrologie et les sciences*, Paris, J. Gabalda, p. 92.
4. H. De Lubac (1974), *Pic de la Mirandole*, Paris, Aubier Montaigne, pp. 160–9.
5. Isidore of Seville, *De natura rerum*, IX, 2.
6. On this subject see the recent study by P. Dronke (2004), 'Sole e Luna nell'immaginario poetico dal II al IX secolo', *Micrologus*, XII, *Il Sole e la Luna*, Florence, Sismel-Edizioni del Galluzzo, pp. 275–90.
7. 'La iatromatematica di Ermete Trismegisto ad Ammone egizio', in G. Bezza (1995), *Arcana Mundi. Antologia del pensiero astrologico antico*, vol. I, Milan, Rizzoli, p. 695.
8. For technical terms (*birth theme, transit, aspect*) see G. Vitali (1668), *Lexicon mathematicum astronomicum geometricum*. Anastatic reproduction, in G. Bezza (ed.) (2003), preface by O. P. Faracovi, Sarzana, Agorà Edizioni.
9. See the fine essay by A. J. Long (1982), 'Astrology: arguments pro et contra', in J. Barnes, J. Brunschwig, M. Burnyeat, M. Schofield (eds), *Science and Speculation. Studies in Hellenistic Theory and Practice*, Cambridge/Paris, Cambridge University Press/Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, where the author reminds us that direct references to astrology are not frequent in stoic philosophers. Which has not prevented a whole strand of astrological studies from finding in stoicism, via the theme of astral fatalism, a philosophical framework that has strongly influenced discussions on astrology, and not only in the ancient world.
10. For a classic formulation of this idea, see Festugière, *La Révélation, op. cit.*, pp. 89 et seq.
11. See A. Bouché-Leclercq (1899), *L'Astrologie grecque*, Paris, Leroux.
12. Origen, *Philocalia*, XXIII, 20; *Commentary on Genesis*, in Eusebius of Caesarea (1971), *La Préparation évangélique*, book VI, 11, Paris, Éditions des Places, 'Sources chrétiennes', Éditions du Cerf, no. 266, p. 268.
13. In Latin astronomical vocabulary the word *stella* is used as much for comets as for the fixed stars: '*Dicitur autem promiscua tam de erraticis quinque . . . quam de fixis in firmamento*' (G. Vitali, *Lexicon mathematicum, op. cit.*, p. 468). Its 'juxtaposition' to the Sun and Moon shows how Origen means to refer in this passage to the group of seven heavenly bodies that are at the centre of ancient astronomy.
14. That is the date suggested for the letters by P. O. Kristeller in Book V of Ficino's letters: see *Supplementum ficinianum*, Florence, 1937, vol. I, p. ci. For the text of this letter, Marsilio Ficino (1576), *Opera omnia*, Bâle, ex officina Sanctipetrina, vol. I, pp. 805–6; for a translation into a modern language,

- M. Ficino, ed. O. P. Faracovi (2001), *Scritti sull'astrologia*, Milan, Rizzoli, pp. 229–31. On this letter see the English translation and commentary by E. H. Gombrich (1945), 'Botticelli's Mythologies. A Study in the Neoplatonic Symbolism of His Circle', *Journal of the Warburg & Courtauld Institutes*, VIII, pp. 7–60.
15. 'Igneus est nobis vigor et caelestis origo', Virgil, *Aeneid*, VI, 730.
  16. *Liber de voluptate*, in Ficino, *Opera omnia*, *op. cit.*, p. 994; *De christiana religione*, XXXV, *ibid.*, p. 72. But see too *Epistolarum*, VIII, in *Opera omnia*, p. 866.
  17. On the dissemination of Origen's themes throughout Florentine culture in the second part of the 15th century see the classic study by E. Wind (1954), 'The Revival of Origen', in D. Miner (ed.), *Studies in Art and Literature for Belle da Costa Greene*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, pp. 412–24. (Reprinted in E. Wind [1983], *The Eloquence of Symbols. Studies in Humanist Art*, ed. J. Anderson, Oxford, Clarendon Press, pp. 42–55).
  18. *Scritti sull'astrologia*, p. 230. English trans. E. H. Gombrich, in 'Botticelli's Mythologies', *op. cit.*, p. 16.
  19. *Ibid.*, p. 231; 'Botticelli's Mythologies', *op. cit.*, pp. 16–17.
  20. *Ibid.*, p. 230; 'Botticelli's Mythologies', *op. cit.*, p. 17.
  21. The theme is taken up again in the letter to the young man's tutors, Antonio Vespucci and Naldo Naldi, *ibid.*, p. 232.
  22. *Ibid.*, pp. 230–1; 'Botticelli's Mythologies', *op. cit.*, p. 16.
  23. Plotinus (1966), *Enneads*, II, 3, 8, with an English translation by A. H. Armstrong, Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, pp. 72–73.
  24. On these matters see G. Bezza (2004), '“Liber vivus”'. Antecedenti astrologici della metafora galileiana del libro dell'universo', *Bruniana & Campanelliana*, X, 2, pp. 481–7.
  25. For a study of the different images of astrology, may I refer the reader to my 1996 essay, *Scritto negli astri. L'astrologia nella cultura dell'Occidente*, Venice, Marsilio.
  26. Marsilio Ficino elaborates on the same topic in his *De vita*, III, xxiii.
  27. *Scritti astrologici*, *op. cit.*, p. 231. For a study of the relations between the soul and destiny in Ficino's astrology, see O. P. Faracovi (2004), 'Destino e fato in alcune pagine astrologiche di Marsilio Ficino', in O. P. Faracovi (ed.), *Nella luce degli astri. L'astrologia nella cultura del Rinascimento*, Sarzana, Agorà Edizioni, pp. 1–29.