The specific purpose of this paper is quite modest, simply to try to render reasonable, in the absence of sufficient direct textual support, a certain hypothesis, namely that Schelling's nature philosophy involves a transformation of the hermeticism of Marsilio Ficino, and thereby reveals the richness of certain pivotal concepts in Ficino's thought. Just as Paul Kristeller speculates that passages in Goethe's *Wanderjahre* were inspired by Ficino's *De Amore* (1) so I would like to explore the possibility that certain notions fundamental to Schelling's philosophical itinerary have their roots in that same work. Although he never quotes Ficino directly, it is without doubt that Schelling had read Ficino's Latin translations of Plato's dialogues during his studies at Tuebingen. Since the *De Amore* (2) was included in all editions of Ficino's translation of Plato, it is highly likely that he had also read the *De Amore*. He at least knew its argument indirectly through the hermetic works of Giordano Bruno who was a principle source of inspiration for Schelling, and to whose thought he devotes a major commentary. Also, his endorsement of the Neoplatonic theory of beauty, to which Ficino was a noteworthy contributor, is evident as early as his Jena lectures (1802-1803) on the philosophy of art (3). In what follows, I will try to shore-up my hypothesis by establishing some compelling correlations between these two thinkers, and I will do this by taking up several themes common to each of them, in particular that of the ontological function of color and the role of the unconscious in the creative process.

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Let me begin by focusing briefly on two competing theories of color expressed by Ficino in *De Amore*. These theories are best expressed by a question, namely: in works of art, is color merely decorative as the strict Platonist (in the modern sense of the term) in Ficino seems to want, or is it fundamentally expressive of the inner structure and depth of things as the hermeticist/panentheist in Ficino seems to want?

Ficino is filled with conflict: he is the most celebrated Platonist of Europe in his time, yet he often smuggles into his discourse a thought contrary to strict Platonism, in the form of hermeticism/panentheism, but he does so all in the name of Platonism. In 1463 he had completed a Latin translation of Hermes Trismegistos' *The Corpus Hermeticum*, which consisted of 17 theological writings, in the form of Platonic dialogues, that present a fusion of Eastern religious elements with Platonic, Stoic, and Neo-Pythagorean philosophies, and are characterized, in part, by an antinomy between the notion of God as immanent, present everywhere in Creation (panentheism) and the notion of God as transcendent, unknowable, to Whom only those who have been initiated into the

mysteries can aspire to reach, and only by means of a kind of gnosis or secret revelation. In the hermetic tradition, therefore, God is the paradox of immanence and transcendence. These dialogues were written from the middle of the first to the end of the third century AD by a circle of pagan theologians who flourished in Alexandria, and who falsely attributed their writings to the Egyptian God, Hermes Trismegistos. Ficino followed the Neo-Platonist, Proclus, by treating Hermes Trismegistos as a forerunner and source of Plato's philosophy. It is important to keep in mind, therefore, that Ficino's particular brand of Platonism is partially dependent upon an apocryphal Neo-Platonic work, on the basis of which he ascribes a doctrinal affinity between the ancient sage Hermes and the dialogues of Plato; this alleged affinity is developed in detail by Ficino in his 1458 Italian treatise, *Di Dio et anima*(4). With this stated up front, let us return to the problem of color to find there also the tension between immanence and transcendence.

For Ficino, color is what gives us the "third face of God" in the "mirror" which is the "Body of the World"(5), and it arouses the soul; in strict Platonic fashion, he further insists that Beauty is not to be found in the stream of colors, since color pertains to adornment(6). Yet, in various other passages in *De Amore*, he also asserts that Beauty is found chiefly and predominantly in the harmony of several elements, in the harmony of several colors and lines(7). Somehow it would seem then that color, for Ficino, is both the manifestation of Beauty and mere decoration.

According to the hermeticist/panentheist Ficino, color is the very principle of visibility, is aroused and strengthened by the presence and glow of one light, and reveals or is the glow of God (8). He writes "we would never know the goodness hidden away in the inner nature of things, nor desire it, unless we were led to it by its manifestations in exterior appearances"(9). Beauty is the blossom of goodness, and the beauty of the physical world is accessible, is visible, principally through color. Consequently, Ficino seems to be ascribing to color a spiritual depth. For what is this goodness hidden away in the inner nature of things if not God himself whom Ficino argues is "the prime actuality of all", the "activity and strength of everything," the Logos, the center and within of everything, and "infused in everything?"(10). These latter predicates are clearly not Platonic, although he is quick to also use strictly Platonic predicates when he says that God is "present to," "shines through" everything, 'illumines' Mind, Soul, Nature, Matter, bodies being "shadows", "traces and images"(11). For the hermetic Ficino, color is the very presence of God in the visible, in other words, it is the visible of this invisible, the corporeal of this incorporeal. It is an ample ontological power that brings to presence a fathomless depth.

Like Ficino, Friedrich Schelling also tried to work out an ontology of the visible and the invisible. In

the Introduction to his I*deas Toward a Philosophy of Nature* (written some 300 years after the death of Ficino), Schelling writes: “nature must be visible spirit, and spirit invisible nature”(12). Like Ficino, he sees the divine as immanent within nature, as the wild Beauty, Unity, Truth, and Goodness which is present within each thing as its own germinal reason, its own formative force, its own vital principle. In his work, *On the Relation of Pictorial Art to Nature* (1807), Schelling argues that it is the artist who teaches the philosopher how to gain access to this principle. The artist, he writes, must raise himself up to the level of the creative power of nature in order to gain vision and expression of the therein-dwelling spirit of nature. The artist achieves this level through a deep and rich communion which he identifies with aesthetic intuition itself, and which is to be taken literally on the model of the sacrament. This communion is understood as a) ‘an operation of Grace’, as seizure, inspiration, and b) the real presence of God, consecrated and transfigured through color [in the case of painting]. Let us address briefly these two sacramental dimensions of access to the creative power of nature.

In making a pitch for the supremacy of art as what achieves the identity of consciousness and nature, Schelling appeals to “the declaration by all artists that they are involuntarily impelled to the creation of their works, that they must satisfy an irresistible impulse which…seizes upon the ultimate in them, the root of their entire existence”(13). This impulse comes from the unconscious, and is identified by Schelling with inspiration, the actual taking-in of the spirit that is unconsciously creative within nature. A work of art has two dimensions: “the part which is practiced with consciousness, deliberation and reflection, which can be taught and learned, received from others, and attained by one’s own practice, and, on the other hand, the unconscious which also enters into art, for that is art which cannot be learned, cannot be attained by practice, or in any other way, but can only be inborn by the free gift of nature, by an operation of Grace”(14). This same spirit that powers artistic production and the flowering of nature is wild Beauty. That this divine force should be called wild is to emphasize not only that it is unconscious, but that it carries within itself a remnant of its origin in a barbaric principle which is itself “amorphous”, unconscious, chaotic, and outside of all criteriological control. Schelling writes that “the barbaric principle,…the unruly, lies ever in the depths as though it might again break through, and order and form nowhere appear to have been original, but it seems as though what had initially been unruly had been brought to order. This is the incomprehensible basis of reality in things, the irreducible remainder which cannot be resolved into reason by the greatest exertion but always remains in the depth. Out of this which is unreasonable, reason in the true sense is born. Without this preceding gloom, creation should have no reality; darkness is its necessary heritage”(15).

This barbaric principle, what Schelling calls 'the primordial unconscious, the *Abgrund* (abyss), is "older than God himself." But it is not passive like 'prime matter' in Aristotle; rather it is characterized by a generative excess of desire, as a "longing which the eternal One feels to give birth to itself. This is not the One itself but is co-eternal with it. This longing seeks to give birth to God, i.e., the unfathomable unity…"and is strangely attracted toward order and form by a love which Schelling says is "higher than God, toward which even God is drawn in seeking his own perfection"(16). Although there are obviously major differences, this account of artistic and divine creation bears remarkable similarities to that of Ficino and could arguably be seen as a transformation of Ficino's account. What Ficino understands as the creative process of the human artist can be extrapolated from his discussion of the creation of the angelic mind by God. The human creative act, that of Michelangelo (to take an example congenial to Ficino), is analogous to the movement of the angelic mind from its originary state of chaos to the receiving/giving of form. Ficino's account of the process of creation involves five principles: the 'chaos' principle, the 'love' principle, the 'illumination' principle, the 'passion/approach' principle and the 'giving' principle(17). Whereas Schelling would argue that these are distillations of one process occurring within God, Ficino, in hermetic fashion, sees God as the paradox of immanence and transcendence, with an emphasis, however, on transcendence when describing the act of creation. For Ficino, chaos is "born from God",(18) while remaining distinct from Him. As for Schelling, chaos for Ficino is formlessness, darkness, disorder, the primary analogue to the unconscious night-side of the human artist's mind, teeming with tensions, eliciting a dark brooding and restlessness, seeking some kind of resolution or expression. As it was also for Schelling, this chaos is invested with an innate desire. In Ficino's case, however, it is a desire for its origin, and, as primordial love, involves a 'first turning toward' God by the angelic mind(19); analogously in the human artist, it is an innate desire for form, for bringing to consciousness what inhabits, haunts and disturbs him or her at the unconscious level. This desire or love is nourished in the 'first turning' by an infusion of divine light which seizes the angelic mind and arouses within it the most intensive passion to cleave to, or commune with, God and thereby acquire its own true ontological form as well as the forms of all things to be created by and through it; in the human artist it is the event of 'inspiration' characterized by a flood of vivid imagery and emotional release(20); it is the event of communion, a passionate surrendering of the intuitive life to what gives itself freely from the depths of things or the medium and which draws forth and informs the very gestures of the artist, and sustains, albeit unconsciously, his or her own conscious and purposeful elaboration of the inspired form.

For both Ficino and Schelling, this passionate communion involves transfiguration, and this is the second dimension of its character as sacrament. For both Ficino and Schelling the artist, whether

human or angelic, is transfigured by inspiration and desire, and the divine, whether it is called God or wild Beauty, is likewise transfigured by the work of the inspired artist. To disclose this two-directional movement, let us turn to the sacramental value of color as articulated by Schelling and Ficino.

The sacrament teaches those who believe and partake in it that consecrated bread and wine are flesh, the body and blood of Christ, the real presence of God. The painter teaches us that color is flesh: by this he or she means that it has its depth, its imaginaire, its latency, its unconscious dimension, that it too is haunted, inhabited, possessed, that through it something undergoes transubstantiation. For both Schelling and Ficino, color is an ontological power of metamorphosis. Through the painter, according to Schelling, color unmasks and transfigures a force both primitive and violent, the barbaric, maternal, wild-flowering Beauty, at once promiscuous and polymorphous, silently urging within the heart of each thing its own transformation. In a certain respect, the continuing ontogenesis of God is being accomplished through painting as well as the other arts. In this regard, Schelling writes about "the inexhaustible depth which the true artist, though he works with the greatest presence of mind, puts into his work involuntarily and which neither he nor anyone else is able to penetrate completely"(21). This echoes the hermetic in Ficino who writes that what is proper to color is to be the surface of an inexhaustible depth, the making present by the sacramental path of transfiguration an irreducible otherness, the primordial God who is the center, the actuality, and the strength of everything. In so far as it is the presence of Beauty as the blossom of divine Goodness, color, for Ficino, reveals the "innate and latent fecundity of everything", being a kind of key that 'opens' and "draws out from the heart of each thing the powers of that thing"(22).

In the act of painting, the painter too undergoes transfiguration. To practice the rites of the sensible as does the painter, to create within himself or herself the hollow which liberates the voices of things, to bring to color the wild and dark desire for fusion with the Other, to avail oneself to inspiration, to possession, and thus to the most profound metamorphoses, this, for Schelling, is sacramental life. In *De Amore*, Ficino describes Orpheus in this manner, as being seized and transformed by the four divine madnesses (23), and through whose music the god is itself transfigured.

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Let me try to consolidate the results of my findings here. I wanted to render reasonable a certain hypothesis, namely that Schelling's ontology of wild Being and wild Beauty involves a transformation

of certain aspects of Ficino's hermeticism. Schelling proposes an ontology which will take its point of departure from within Being, in the experience of artistic creativity, and argues, as does Ficino, for the importance of the role of the primordial unconscious in artistic creation. Since both gain access, albeit indirect, to this unconscious by examining the phenomenon of 'inspiration' as a 'free gift' of nature or God, I have assembled some parallel texts, principally in an effort to explore more fully Schelling's understanding of the wild hidden logos of nature and its relation to expressions of human consciousness, especially painting. In this regard, I have examined Schelling's claim, echoing that of Ficino, that color is an ontological power, by taking up extensively the metaphor of the sacrament. Here we discover that Schelling's analyses repeat those of the hermeticist Ficino, namely that color is not mere decoration but a privileged opening upon the indwelling force creatively at work within nature as revealed and transfigured through the act of painting. As interesting as any of these correlations may be, they fall short of constituting a proof that Schelling is directly indebted to Ficino. But they do point in a way to an untimely thought in Ficino, a thought perhaps too powerful for the epoch in which it arose, and which needed Schelling's transformations in order to be seen in its full richness.

Notes

1.Paul Kristeller, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, trans. Virginia Conant (Gloucester, Mass: Peter Smith, 1964), pp. 112-113.
2.Marsilio Ficino, *De Amore* (Commentary on Plato: Symposium, trans. Sears reynolds Jayne, in Philosophies of Art and Beauty, eds. Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns (New York: Random House, 1964), pp. 204-238.
3.F.W.J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, trans. Albert Hofstadter in Philosophies of Art and Beauty, eds. Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns (New York: Random House, 1964), p.368.
4.Marsilio Ficino Fiorentino di *Di Dio et anima ad Franciesco Capponi*, (Firenze: Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, 1458), IT:Flo100_27.09_0002.
5.Marsilio Ficino, *De Amore*, 222-224.
6.Marsilio Ficino, Ibid., 220-222.
7.Marsilio Ficino, Ibid., 207.
8.Marsilio Ficino, Ibid., 209.
9.Marsilio Ficino, Ibid., 212.
10. Marsilio Ficino, Ibid., 209-211
11. Marsilio Ficino, Ibid., 230.

12. F.W.J. Schelling, *Saemtliche Werke* (Stuttgart: J.G. Cotta, 1856-61), I/4, 56.
13. F.W.J. Schelling, Ibid., I/3, 613-14.
14. F.W.J. Schelling, Ibid., I/3, 617-18.
15. F.W.J. Schelling, Ibid., I/7, 360
16. F.W.J. Schelling, Ibid., I/7, 87-89, 408.
17. Marsilio Ficino, De Amore, 207.
18. Marsilio Ficino, Ibid., 207.
19. Marsilio Ficino, Ibid., 207.
20. Marsilio Ficino, Ibid, 207.
21. F.W.J Schelling, *Saemtliche Werke*, I/3, 618-19.
22. Marsilio Ficino, *De Amore*, 215.
23. Marsilio Ficino, Ibid., 238.

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