FRANS A. JANSSEN

Ad fontes. On the Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica

When the Dutch government decided in November 1994 to place the entire collection of the Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica (BPH) — the name of the private library of Mr J.R. Ritman of Amsterdam — on the list of protected collections coming under the Cultural Heritage Act, it characterized the library as follows: ‘A very special library with great significance for scholarship, both nationally and internationally, and an irreplaceable collection of culturally and historically valuable manuscripts and incunables. This library is unique from the point of view of scholarship because it has been built up on the basis of one single binding concept, the Christian-hermetic tradition within Western cultural history. The library is the only virtually complete centre where research in the field of the Christian-hermetic tradition can be carried out.’ The library is the second library to have been designated a protected collection; the first one is the medieval Librije belonging to the St Walburgis church in Zutphen.

The above characterization points to the double importance of the library, as a book collection and as a research institute in the field of hermetic Christianity. As a collection the BPH is dedicated to the ‘ad fontes’ principle in bringing together sources: that is to say that the texts within the library’s field are collected in their most authentic forms, in the way in which authors and editors, copyists and illuminators, printers and engravers have passed on these texts. The works held by the BPH include medieval and later manuscripts and first and later editions, together spanning a period of more than a thousand years. At present the collection contains almost 18,000 titles, including circa 600 manuscripts and nearly 5,000 books printed before 1800 (of which 435 incunabula). These sources are thematically related, and in this the BPH differs from most other libraries. As a research institute, the BPH catalogues and indexes and also studies these sources. This article will concentrate not so much on the many fine works from our library, but rather on the library’s theme, the collection areas and their backgrounds, and their mutual relationships.

In addition to its significance as a thematic collection bridging philosophy and religion, there is a second aspect which is illustrated by the following remark issuing from Dutch book historical circles: ‘That it is possible even in the present day to bring together an outstanding collection of old and rare books is


© Koninklijke Brill, Leiden, 1997
witnessed by the Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica, which is entirely focussed on the development through the ages of western mysticism and spirituality. The first, and beautifully produced, special catalogue of this private collection appeared in 1990."

This remark points to the significance of the BPH as an example of private book collecting, a tradition which is modestly represented in the Netherlands (e.g. Meerman, Westreenen – both collections now housed in the Museum of the Book in The Hague), and which was pursued on a wider scale in the United States (e.g. Pierpont Morgan, Huntington – now independent institutions). Private book collectors aim to bring together treasures from the world of manuscripts and printed books. As the library's collection of works on hermetic Christianity also incorporates works which belong in each collection (e.g. Plato, Books of Hours), the library's activities are part of this tradition.

I

To begin with the name of the Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica: what is understood by 'hermetica' or 'hermetic philosophy'? In a broader sense it is used to cover the entire field of esoteric thought, but in a more specific sense it refers to the philosophy contained in a number of short treatises, which were originally composed in Greek in Alexandria between the first and the third century C.E. and which are attributed to Hermes Trismegistus. There is no actual author behind this name; the figure of Hermes Trismegistus is an assimilation of the Greek god Hermes and the Egyptian god Toth. During the Middle Ages these Greek texts were known (amongst others to the church fathers Lactantius and Augustine) and influenced diverse Latin works, but in the Renaissance these texts also experienced a real revival, in particular when they were translated into Latin by Marsilio Ficino at the request of Cosimo de Medici, which made them much more accessible; the first edition of this translation appeared in 1471, and a great many editions and translations were to follow. They are collectively known to scholars as the Corpus Hermeticum.

What is contained in these texts to which the name of the BPH refers? The answer to this question is on the one hand simple, on the other hand complex. Simple, because there exists a good recent English translation of the Corpus Hermeticum with excellent commentaries; the BPH's own publishing house for that matter brought out a scholarly Dutch translation with commentary some years ago.² Complex, because hermetic philosophy cannot be explained in a few words.