

# The Madness of Francesco Dolci

A story by William Page

In 1461, while Marsilio Ficino was translating a Greek copy of the *Hermetica* given to him by Cosimo de Medici, another manuscript of the lost works of Hermes Trismegistus appeared in Florence. The second manuscript, also in Greek, was about half the length of the first. Initially it was thought to be a later copy of the longer manuscript, but when excerpts from the two were set side by side and compared, it was found that the second contained passages not included in the first, as well as some substantial differences in the text. From the evidence of the two manuscripts scholars determined that a third must have existed, which was the parent of both. There was some disagreement as to the language of the mysterious lost manuscript some thought Arabic, others Coptic<sup>3/4</sup> but it was generally agreed that both Greek texts were translations. Marsilio Ficino was of the opinion that the shorter version was inferior and decided to use only the longer codex for his Latin translation. Naturally the majority of Florentine scholars sided with him, though a few thought the second text more esoteric and worthy of a closer examination. The most ardent of these dissenters was the young theologian Antonius. When the second *Hermetica* appeared in Florence, he had just completed a work that he had hoped would make him famous, *The Hierarchy of the Heavens*, (*Caelorum Hierarchia*). In this work he brings together ancient and contemporary sources in order to explore the journey of a soul through the cosmos. At the time the church recognized Ptolemy's earth-centered universe as the only true picture of the heavens, and so Antonius, who was an indifferent mathematician and astronomer, based his hierarchy on the Ptolemy model. He was careful not to overstep established church doctrine, still some of the conclusions in the book bordered on the heretical. He, for instance, refutes the popular Christian notion that a man can petition to God directly in prayer. Though his arguments have some foundation in Greek philosophy, Old Testament tradition, and first-century Christian works, the rebuttal of this widely held view was certainly radical in fifteenth-century Florence. He postulated that even if God wanted to answer a man's prayer, He couldn't:

*If God decided to answer one man's prayer, He would have to first destroy the whole fabric of the universe. God created the laws by which the universe is formed, and, through these laws, the universe creates itself. If God were to violate his laws every time a farmer petitioned for rain or a plain woman prayed for a handsome husband, the world as we know it could not exist. ~ The Hierarchy of the Heavens*

Antonius was born Francesco Dolci. His father was unknown to him. His mother was only fifteen when she gave birth to Francesco, and he was her first and only child. At the time of his birth there were unsubstantiated rumors that a certain penniless tutor had seduced his mother. In fact, a priest, who was not that young, had impregnated the girl. It was a secret Francesco's mother carried to her grave. She was a deeply religious woman, and, before God had imposed on her the care of a child, she had unsuccessfully petitioned her father for permission to enter a convent. The rogue priest, Francesco's father,

eventually asked to be relocated to Padua, escaping from the potential predicament of having his bastard son become a member of his congregation.

When the shame of illegitimacy is counterbalanced by the gift of wealth, as it was in Francesco's case, the stigma of bastardy can be compensated for. The boy was given his grandfather's surname and was raised outside of Florence, not as his mother's son but as her nephew, whose unnamed parents were rumored to have died in the plague of 1438. When the boy was ten, his grandfather brought him back to the city and, for a price, secured his legitimacy from the church so that he might begin training for a religious life. From that time a Dominican, Leonardo the Just, who was known throughout Florence as a fair-minded arbitrator, took on the task of Francesco's education.

People of all ranks sought out this singular friar to settle their disputes. In one documented case a man accused a winemaker of selling him forty bottles of colored water instead of wine. The winemaker argued that the man who ordered the wine had drunk it, and then filled the bottles with colored water to avoid paying his debt. Leonardo settled the dispute by secretly emptying one of the bottles of the colored water and filling it with a good quality wine. When he poured the wine and gave it to the two men to taste, the buyer was astonished and declared that God must have turned the water into wine and offered to pay his debt. The seller noted that the wine was better, but had no objection to the original agreement. The dispute was settled, but later, when the buyer discovered that the other bottles contained colored water, he sought out Leonardo and complained to him. "I switched the wine myself," the friar explained, "to see how you would react. Your first reaction was astonishment: you knew all the bottles were filled with colored water because you filled them yourself. Then you reacted with greed, thinking that you could have forty bottles of good wine for the price of a cheaper wine. If the seller had been motivated by greed, he would have offered to take the wine back because he knew the wine I substituted was worth more than the wine he sold you."

Besides being an arbitrator and tutor, Leonardo the Just was also a scholar and a scribe. The Dominicans, under the protection of Cosimo de Medici, had moved from Fiesole to St. Mark's convent in Florence in 1436. The convent, which was to become famous for the frescos of Fra Angelico, housed not only a substantial collection of ancient books, but also many copies of rare, privately-owned manuscripts. Leonardo the Just read Greek and Latin, had remarkable handwriting, and oversaw the work of copying manuscripts for the library at St. Mark's.

By the time he was twelve the young Francesco's command of Latin was so good that the friar employed him as an apprentice scribe. He was trained in both calligraphy and illumination. In his years at the library at St. Mark's, he helped copy a number of important manuscripts. More importantly, the library became the primary source of his education. The Dominicans singled him out early as a future scholar because of his capacity for abstract thought. By the age of fourteen he could read Greek and Latin, sing—he was a soprano until the age of fifteen—and intelligently discuss the works of Plato and Aristotle. Though he excelled in philosophy and theology, his education also included mathematics, astrology, and musical composition. When his voice broke at fifteen, he gave up music altogether in favor of theology. In the next five years he studied all the early Christian texts that found their way to St. Mark's, wrote a very readable interpretation of the *Gospel According to John*, and became the darling of the intellectual

circles in Florence. But by the time the boy was seventeen Leonardo the Just began to wonder whether Francesco would be happy with the rough life of a Dominican. His interests in Christianity were clearly more intellectual than devotional, and his tastes in clothes and food were far more refined than the vows of a monk permitted.

The vocation of a Dominican was chosen for Francesco by his grandfather, who would be passing his fortune on to his sons and grandsons of legitimate birth, and by his mother because she had wanted a religious life for herself and, like many mothers, believed her son shared her aspirations. No one considered that he had any other choice in the matter, but then no one expected that he would be gifted. Perhaps it was his vanity that kept him from joining the Dominicans. At nineteen he dressed like a courtier, and despite his questionable parentage, was welcomed in the best homes of the city. He was handsome, and though he was never given to the vice of pursuing women, it was well known that he frequented the bed of a certain widow. His ambition was obvious, but in general it was accepted as part of his aggressive intelligence and language skills.

By the time he was twenty he was no longer content to demonstrate his understanding of the gospels and the ancient Greeks; he had become convinced that it was his fate to add his voice to the dialogue of the centuries. He already imagined the scholars of the future honoring his name with the same regard his contemporaries reserved for the ancients. His old tutor tried to temper ambition with humility, but Francesco found the way of life of the friars too timid. He wasn't afraid to let his mind soar beyond the safety of morality and common sense.

In the summer of his twenty-third year he finished *The Hierarchy of the Heavens*, a project that ate up eighteen months of his young life. He passed the book around among the scholars of Florence under the pen name of Antonius because he was convinced that his relative youth would keep many of the older men from taking his ideas seriously. But nobody was fooled. The scholars who read the book classified it as an ill-conceived work of an ambitious young man. He was told that it was a good effort, but that his mind needed the maturity that comes with age. The public, of course, knew nothing of the book, but the church did, and they were less than pleased. When one of the bishops of Florence criticized the work and suggested that he write a study of the *Acts of the Apostles*, Francesco expressed his frustration by burning one of four copies of the book. It was the only copy that was returned to him. The other three began to be passed from person to person, and then eventually from city to city.

Still suffering from his disappointment about the reception of *The Hierarchy of the Heavens*, Antonius, along with a number of other scholars, took up the investigation of the two manuscripts of the lost works of Hermes Trismegistus. There were those who thought he opposed Marsilio Ficino's opinion in order to create the stir that his book failed to create. Many men before him had mistaken opposition for originality, but in reality, in this case, Antonius was not swayed much by the opinions of others. He honestly didn't understand why Ficino thought the shorter manuscript was inferior. The quality of the Greek was as good, and many of the passages that the two shared were very close. And he wasn't entirely alone in his view. The foremost Florentine alchemist, Zanetto Baccetti, who believed in the possibility of changing lead into gold and performed chemical experiments in his house on the banks of the Arno, thought the translator of the shorter manuscript was instructed in the secrets of alchemy. Baccetti

expressed the opinion that the translator correctly rendered certain keywords that would only be understandable to someone initiated into an ancient esoteric society, to which Baccetti claimed membership. But Antonius was uncomfortable in aligning himself with Baccetti. He had nothing against the science of alchemy, but he believed that the pursuit of wealth was an improper occupation for a man dedicated to the life of the mind. He himself cared only for pure knowledge. In *The Hierarchy of the Heavens* his stated aim was to add to man's understanding of God's universe, and if his first attempt was a failure, which he supposed it was, he saw no reason to admit defeat. After all, he could think of no more difficult undertaking. That he missed the mark on his first try was not a huge humiliation, and besides he was convinced that his inquiry into the works of Hermes Trismegistus would provide him with the necessary keys and the inspiration for a second theological treatise.

Antonius spent nine months studying the two texts of the *Hermetica*. He purchased a leather book with a hundred and thirty blank pages and began filling it up with notes. He made his own translations into Latin, sometimes copying both versions of the same passage side by side. Book IV, called *The Basin*, particularly captivated him. In the discourse Hermes tells a parable about how God filled a great basin with mind and sent it down to the earth with a herald who proclaimed to all men:

*Dip yourself in the basin, if you can, recognizing for what purpose you have been made, and believing that you shall ascend to Him who sent you the basin. ~ Hermetica*

The men who dipped themselves in the bath of the mind received a share of divine knowledge and became complete men, but those who didn't remained blinded by bodily pleasures and desires. Hermes says that the initiated<sup>3/4</sup>those who dipped themselves in the basin<sup>3/4</sup>are, 'in comparison to the others, like immortal gods to mortal men.' But this is where the two translations begin to diverge. In the shorter version Hermes is said to say that those who dipped themselves in the basin are, 'in comparison to the others, like a man awake as opposed to one asleep. And it continues. In the version Ficino preferred, Hermes presents the concept of 'the good:' *and having seen the good, they deem their sojourn here on earth a thing to be deplored*. The other text reads: *and having awakened, they deem their journey here on earth a dream*.

He copied fifty-nine passages in which the authoritative text uses the concept of 'the good' and the shorter version changes the good to 'awakening' and thirty-seven passages where 'evil' is exchanged with the idea of 'being asleep.' He suspected that the translator of the longer manuscript was influenced by the Christian doctrine of good and evil, or by Plato, who also spoke of the good. The shorter text seemed to him less tainted. He formulated a number of key questions, which he saw as critical for his understanding of the text. Could the sleep the text refers to be compared to Plato's allegory of the cave? What does it mean that life can become a dream? What did the baptism of the mind signify? He guessed that water symbolized knowledge, but what knowledge? And what did the basin itself represent? An inverted earth? Aristotle's celestial realm? In particular the image of the basin haunted him.

He was not talented in mathematics or astrology, but he studied Ptolemy's cosmological model, which placed a stationary earth at the center of the universe

surrounded by eight spheres that were represented by the moon, each of the five planets, the sun, and the stars. The moon, Mercury, and Venus rotated in spheres between the earth and the sun, while the other three planets rotated outside the sphere of the sun. The stars moved collectively around the outmost sphere. Antonius had theorized in *The Hierarchy of the Heavens* that heaven was outside the sphere of the stars and that beyond that, in a final sphere, was God. Like others he placed hell at the center of the earth. In general it was believed that after death the soul either flew up toward heaven or fell down, because of the weight of its sins, to hell. He had heard rumors of discrepancies in the movement of the planets that implied that the Ptolemy model was not accurate, but the calculations involved in determining these inconsistencies were beyond his skills in mathematics, and so he was dependent on the theories of others. And these others, the scientists of the day, were careful not to proclaim publicly what they knew for fear of provoking the wrath of the Roman Inquisition. Still, Antonius understood that the planets didn't move in their prescribed rotations and that forced him to question the perfection of the universe, as prescribed by Aristotle and the Church.

To try to imagine a creation in which one is a part is a maddening undertaking. Antonius, though steeled in the disciplines of pondering great spans of time and his ultimate mortality, reeled under the weight of creation theology. He had more questions than answers. If he were part of the universe, would he not always be limited to that universe? If his disembodied soul flew past the sphere of heavens, what would he find? Could he survive the void that surrounded God, or would his soul cease to exist as soon as it passed beyond the boundaries of the creation? Would he not always appear unreal to the God who created him? What if God tired of this universe and decided to abandon it? Would it cease to exist altogether or continue uncared for, like a garden gone to weed? And how is possible that God is unborn? How could a being, any being, come out of nothing?

These questions and the reasoning that surrounded them always filled him with fear. He had reached the limits of human thought. Still, at times he felt that he was close to finding something, something big, something that would change the way man saw himself in the universe, but it was in those moments that his fear opened up like a void to consume him. In order to quell his panic he sometimes took long walks around Florence; the physicality of the city, with its people, its horses, and its stenches affirmed his sense of being part of a world that was not in danger of collapsing.

His epiphany came while he was out walking. He was wandering about lost in his thoughts, when, in order to make way for a man with a cart, he stepped backward into the gutter and soaked his shoes. As a result of the mishap, he noticed that his shoes were torn and that his cloak was threadbare. He was shocked and ashamed; he had always taken pride in his appearance. Had he become so attached to his studies that he neglected the rest of his life? He walked immediately to his boot maker, ordered a pair of shoes, and then went off to see his tailor. On his way he noticed that a man walking toward him was asleep. His eyes were open, but the man was clearly asleep; his face had a puffy, pale look and he appeared to be totally blind to the scene around him. Antonius stopped and watched the man, amazed that he could go about the city without injuring himself. As he passed, it occurred to him to follow the man, but then he noticed that a woman standing on the other side of the street was also asleep. She was a plump, dirty woman holding a

basket of onions and greens in one hand and a basket of fish in the other. Antonius saw immediately that she was dreaming. In her dreams she sat at a table and ate like a pig, as if she were famished. He wasn't sure how he saw her dreams; it just happened that when he looked at her, the visions of her dreams appeared to him. She crossed the street and brushed his arm with her basket as she went by. Next a man walking beside a horse passed by him; he was also asleep.

To be sure he wasn't dreaming, Antonius stopped, pinched his arm, and then turned around and walked toward the city square. At the center of the square two men were arguing and a number of people had stopped to watch. The two men screamed at each other, but neither saw the other; instead they saw the images in their minds. One saw a half-dressed woman, while the other dreamt that he was stabbing his opponent with a knife. Antonius understood that they were both asleep, and the people who watched them were also asleep. The whole city was asleep. Antonius was apparently the only one who was awake. He didn't know what to think. Without knowing what he was doing, he sat on a stone step near the fountain and remembered a line from the *Hermetica*: 'And having awakened, they deem their journey here on earth a dream.' Then he began to try to think about that line and what it implied. He had difficulty remembering the questions that had haunted him for the last months. It occurred to him that if he could only recall the thoughts he had written out in his book that morning, everything would become clear. At times he thought he had found something, but as soon as he tried to translate it into words, it disappeared. Then it struck him all at once. It was a line that the *Hermetica* that he had ignored: 'man has been made by God in the image of God.'

He had ignored this fragment because he had heard it formulated before in the Old Testament, and he was looking for new knowledge. But that was the key. Man cannot study God directly. Instead he must study himself because he is created in the image of God. The attributes, possessed by God, must also be possessed by man in a smaller degree. If a man can create a beautiful palace or a fresco, it is because this creative activity is an attribute of God. The only difference is the scale. God works on his immense scale, and man does what he can, given his limitations. And if man sleeps and dreams then God must also dream. But because he is God, his dreams must create a universe peopled by impossible absurdities, like planets that suddenly refuse to follow their orbit, or one-eyed monsters, or red-skinned demons. To be dipped in the basin is to be dipped in God's dreams, and to be baptized is to be initiated in the knowledge that the imperfections of the universe are nothing more than God's sleep.

Antonius was so overcome by his thoughts that he hardly noticed that he had stopped seeing sleeping people. He hurried to his house. The world appeared normal to him again, but he didn't care. He had been dipped into the basin.

He entitled his new work *Creation Rethought (Creātio Reputāta)*. In this treatise he tried to demonstrate that Aristotle's vision of an elegant and perfect universe was correct, and that observable imperfections were the result of an overlapping universe created by the dreams of God. He used Ptolemy's idea of an 'eccentric' as a model. In Ptolemy's view an eccentric orbit had a center different from the earth, which accounted for the planet appearing brighter or duller in the sky as it moved closer or further away from the earth. Antonius argued that there was a second universe, a kind of ghost universe, created by God's dreams that overlapped the real universe like a shadow. It

existed off-centered, like an eccentric; its movements were imperfect and at times arbitrary. Aristotle divided the universe into regions, the terrestrial and the celestial. The terrestrial realm, called the sub-lunar, consisted of the earth and the moon and the space in between; it was changing and imperfect. The celestial was everything beyond, and it was perfect and unchanging. The planets revolved in orbits that were perfect circles, never slowing down or speeding up. The problem with this view was that it didn't always concur with the actual observation of the planets' movements. In ancient times people explained these discrepancies with the belief that the gods were rolling the planets around in the sky. Ptolemy tried to overcome the imperfections of Aristotle's model by propounding various mathematical solutions; for instance, he theorized that a planet might move on two orbits, one around the earth, and another smaller orbit, called an epicycle, around the first orbit. Antonius, instead of offering a physical or mathematical model of the universe, suggested a mystical view. He proposed that at intervals a ghost universe overlapped the physical universe in such a complete way that elements of God's dreams appeared real. He called these times 'ecliptic.' An ecliptic interval could last for a moment, an evening, or a generation. During these times a planet might seem to move backward, a monster might terrorize a village, or the dead may rise up from the grave.

*Creation Rethought* is not a long work. A man can read it in an afternoon. Antonius made four copies and had his servant hand-deliver them to four respected scholars. The scholars then in turn passed the work on to others, so that in a couple of weeks there was lively discussion in the city of Florence about God's dreams: if they existed and if it was possible that they could create a second universe. In a way the idea of a ghost universe is very appealing because, if you accept it, it can explain almost any unusual phenomena. But first you have to accept it, and the majority of Florentine scholars who read *Creation Rethought* objected to it. They said that only a diseased mind could propose a theory that God sleeps. God was all-powerful; He was everywhere and stood watch over his creation. The bishops of the city were not pleased either, and in the autumn of 1464 one of the copies *Creation Rethought* was carried to Rome and given to the papal inquisitor, who immediately dispatched a warrant to Florence demanding that the author of *Creation Rethought* appear in Rome to be tried before the Inquisition on charges of heresy. An announcement was also made in the city that the writings of Antonius were banned and that all copies of his work were to be turned over to the Church for burning.

Antonius traveled to Rome with Leonardo the Just. The young man's mother had begged the friar to defend her son, whose attachment to his studies had left him thin and in bad health. They were forced to travel in midsummer and were delayed outside the city because of rumors of another plague, so that by the time they appeared before the Inquisition, worry had separated the young man further from his health. While the friar lodged at the Florentine embassy and pleaded with anyone who he thought could sway the bishops of inquisition to lenience, Antonius sat in prison. The young man was summoned three times for questioning. He said all that the friar told him to say. Leonardo expected that he would be found guilty, and he was, but because he recanted, he was released into the care of the friar. If it weren't for the intervention of Leonardo the Just, Antonius might have been imprisoned for years. His old tutor convinced the inquisitors that the young author suffered only from an over-zealous imagination and that he meant

no disrespect to God or Aristotle. In the end they convicted him, gave him a strict penance of good works and prayer, and dismissed him. They hoped he would go away and that his ideas would be ignored.

For the next eighteen months Antonius lived with his mother on his grandfather's Tuscan estate. He didn't write; the servants were instructed not to give him ink or paper. At night he wandered the countryside observing the planets. He became convinced that the scholars of Europe rejected his work because he was unable to determine a pattern of ecliptic intervals, which would allow him to predict the times when God's dreams overlapped reality. In his delusional state he stole out at night and attempted to build mud and stick models of the night sky. But what he created at night his mother had her steward destroy the next day. In 1465 his sad existence was ended. It was a plague year, and one morning Antonius ran away and entered a quarantined village. He tried to convince the dying that they were part of God's nightmare, and that if they could wake themselves up, the horror would disappear. He died four days later and his body was burnt along with the other corpses.

His books fared a little better. A number of copies of his two important works, *The Hierarchy of the Heavens* and *Creation Rethought*, survived the Florentine burnings. Outside Italy there was a healthy black market for works banned by the Vatican. The influence of the manuscripts first appeared in Spain, where in 1486 outside Aragon a sect calling itself The Brotherhood of the Dream proclaimed that the upright post of the cross signified the universe, that the transverse plank represented the dreams of God, and that the meeting point of the two symbolized an ecliptic interval. When their leader announced that God could no longer hear the prayers of men because He was asleep, that the earth was in the middle of a generational ecliptic period, and that the grand inquisitor of Spain was nothing more than a dream figure, Tomás de Torquemada, the Grand Inquisitor himself, rode to Aragon to rid Spain of the heretic cult. A few of the members of the brotherhood fled, but the majority went to their deaths convinced that their torturer was part of an elaborate dream from which they would awaken.

Fifty years later an aristocratic Latin scholar and bibliophile had a copy of *The Hierarchy of the Heavens* and of *Creation Rethought* bound together in a single volume in Seville. He had it marked with his crest and the year he acquired it (1535). For the next three and a half centuries the volume sat unread in various private libraries in Spain and France until, in 1859, a Parisian book dealer bought the manuscript at a library sale in Lyon. A year later he sold it to the English spiritualist William Compton. Compton was a marginal figure in the literary and spiritual circles of Victorian England. His specialty was the fourth dimension. He wrote a number of undistinguished essays on the subject, but he was best known for organizing séances in Oxford, where he lived. Dickens attended one of his occult evenings, as did Tennyson and Swinburne. In the spring of 1862 he published an essay on Antonius. Compton was a decent mathematician, and so he disregarded the cosmology of *Creation Rethought*<sup>3/4</sup>Galileo and Newton had changed forever our landscape of the night sky<sup>3/4</sup>but he was intrigued by the idea of ecliptic moments, which he compared to a number of literary descriptions of cosmic consciousness. In addition he made some rather elaborate parallels between the vision of a dream universe and contemporary models of the fourth dimension. The article piqued the interest of a number of occultists, and in 1864 a small London publishing firm, called



Hermes House, offered an English translation of *Creation Rethought* in booklet form. Unfortunately, the translation, by a woman who called herself Ariel Knight, was so convoluted and riddled with errors that the English version created little sensation. But Compton didn't abandon Antonius. At the end of his life in his unpublished memoirs (1892) he wrote about his discovery of the Antonius manuscript as if it were the literary find of the century. He also claimed that his essay on *Creation Rethought* was vital in the conjuring up of Lewis Carroll's seminal work, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). If this is true, it seems strange that Carroll never mentioned Antonius or Compton in his letters. This is what Compton says about the subject in his memoirs:

*When my essay came out in May of 1862, I sent a copy to Dodgson (Carroll) as I knew he was interested in all things mystical and mathematical, and he sent me a message the next day asking me if I would be willing to lend him the Antonius manuscript. Though I didn't pay an exorbitant price for it, the book, besides being the only known copy, had a certain calligraphic and historical value, so I invited Dodgson to call on me. He came on two successive afternoons in the last days of June to examine the Latin text. He seemed more interested in *Creation Rethought* than the other work. Each day he spent the heart of the afternoon reading alone in my library. On the second day we passed a pleasant hour discussing the implications of a 'ghost' world impinging on the physical universe. It was on July fourth, about a week after we spoke, that Dodgson and his friend Robinson Duckworth rowed the three Liddell children up the Thames from Oxford to Godstow for a picnic on the bank of the river. We can easily imagine that his thoughts were turning around the ideas implicit in a dream universe that afternoon, and that his musings influenced the enigmatic story he told the children that day.*

On Compton's death, his daughter auctioned off the bound copy of *The Hierarchy of the Heavens* and *Creation Rethought*, along with a number of rare manuscripts. The Antonius manuscript, originally bought by a private collector in London, eventually ended up at Oxford library, and then, during the war, in 1942, was sold to a dealer in New York. The book currently resides in the rare book room at the Princeton University library.