Melanchthon on the Philosophical Relevance of Poetry

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ANNALS of the University of Bucharest Philosophy Series

Vol. LXV, no. 2, 2016
pp. 115 – 129.
Abstract

In my paper I will focus on Melanchthon's concept of poetry as a legitimate means of philosophizing. I will show that he regards poetry as philosophy “arranged in verses and narratives” and that this view is grounded on his notion of perennial philosophy. I will explain this notion and emphasize Melanchthon's specific understanding of it. In order to do so I will first (1) consider Melanchthon's conception of philosophy which he equates with the liberal arts and delineate the significance of ancient literature for the transmission of logical, ethical and natural-philosophical knowledge. Thereby I will focus on his definition of poetry and its position amidst the liberal arts. (2) Subsequently, I will isolate citations and phrases of ancient literature which are illustratively used to substantiate moral-philosophical or natural-philosophical arguments in Melanchthon's theoretical writings. (3) I will show thereafter that the sentences of the poets function as authoritative arguments because Melanchthon's view of poetry is underpinned by his own interpretation of the theory of perennial philosophy which, however, does not coincide with the Ficinian view on the philosophia perennis. (4) In my conclusions I will summarize Melanchthon's view on ancient poetry and its relevance for the acquisition of philosophical knowledge.

Keywords: poetry, philosophia perennis, natural philosophy, Melanchthon.

I. Philipp Melanchthon’s conception of philosophy and his understanding of poetry

In an important contribution to Philipp Melanchthon’s philosophical thought, Günter Frank dedicates an introductory note to the various concepts

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of philosophy to be found in Melanchthon’s oeuvre. Melanchthon’s earliest expressed view on philosophy, which I believe him to hold throughout his philosophical writings, is the one expressed in his inaugural oration, “De corrigendum adolescenti studiis” held in 1518, after the prince-elector of Saxony Frederick the Wise had appointed him professor of Greek at the university of Wittenberg. In this oration, he equates philosophy with the seven liberal arts and takes up their traditional classification he had presented in a previous speech “De artibus liberalibus”, written one year earlier in Tübingen. There, Melanchthon ascribes to every art its own muse, and after going through the trivium and quatrivium, he remarks:

> Two muses have remained: Cleo and Calliope whom we ascribe the same right among the arts and assign Cleo to history and Calliope to poetry. All kinds of writings employ history and poetry. And no other authors are being compiled for the fruit of their works, like the poets and historians. (CR 11, 12)

Also, he goes on, “the enumerated arts are like particular announcements of the godly begotten great wisdom and the minds of men, after they have been instructed in those arts, are able to receive the godly will which descends from heaven”. I will come back to this conception of philosophy as a propaedeutic for revelation, later when I will highlight the Malenchthonian conception of philosophia perennis. Both in the oration written in Tübingen and in the one held in the front of the students and professors in Wittenberg, Melanchthon undertakes an extension of the canonical arrangement of liberal arts and, moreover,

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3 I will refer directly to the works of Philipp Melanchthon which are included in the Corpus Reformatorum: Opera quae supersunt omnia vol I-XXVIII, ed. Carolus Gottlieb Bretschneider/Henricus Ernestus Bindseil (CR I-XXVIII), Halis/Brunsvigae 1834-1860. In the following I will abbreviate the citation with CR and the corresponding volume and exact pages. For Melanchthon’s speech on the reformation of liberal arts see CR 11, 15-25. All translations have been undertaken directly form the Latin texts and are mine.

4 CR 11, 5-14.
endows history and poetry with overarching roles. Poetry is seen as a condition *sine qua non* for erudition and for the promotion of eloquence, the poets are also to be consulted regarding questions of morality and their attentive reading contributes to the education of character and mind. He explicitly mentions Homer saying that he was the acknowledged source of erudition for the Greeks, while the Romans turned for the same purpose to poets like Vergil and Horace (CR 11, 22). This emphasis on ancient literature is part of his attempt to reform the university curricula and change the canonical texts which are being taught to the students. This is due to the fact that Philipp Melanchthon shares with other humanists of the early 16th century his distaste for scholastic logic and its effects on the teaching practice of the other liberal arts and on the arts of the higher faculties. He believes that the corrupted state of academic philosophy is caused by a faulty usage of language which makes all the subjects of the various sciences unclear and difficult to understand. He identifies the source of this decay in the commentary tradition which, according to Melanchthon, turned the useful dialectical method into metaphysics and thus, rendered all subjects difficult and obscure. The only way out of this vicious circle of ignorance, is, in his view, the reading of the original texts in the original languages with the aid of a clear and simple method.

In his *Oration on philosophy*, written in 1536, Melanchthon still employs the view that philosophy is constituted of the all the liberal arts. This time, he writes about a cycle of arts that binds them together, so that in order to grasp individual ones, many of the others have to be taken on. Philosophy represents thus, an acquired and vast knowledge of all the subjects knowable to man, however, not arbitrarily put together, but ordered and studied with the help of what Melanchthon calls true method. This methodical requirement implies that foolish and untrue opinions are prevented from entering the various fields of specialized knowledge because the latter, and so philosophy as a whole, are not allowed to assume anything without demonstration⁵. This seems like a very strong requirement for a philosophy made up of arts like

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⁵ See CR 11, 278-284.
history, poetry and even natural philosophy. There are, however, two aspects that legitimize such a claim: first of all, Melanchthon’s concept of demonstration is one that adapts itself to a concept of logic whose core doctrine is a topical one and thus, less rigorous than the Aristotelian theory of proof\textsuperscript{6}. Second, as a consequence of this relaxation of the logical formal requirements, poetry does not have to fall short of the possibility of knowledge-transmission. While Girolamo Savonarola kept a strict order of the parts of the Aristotelian Organon, with poetry being the far end of the spectrum, in direct opposition to the Analytics, lacking in demonstrative force and thus, capacity to transmit true knowledge\textsuperscript{7}, for the humanists, logic as dialectic is not only in no contrast to poetical language and narratives, but it even constitutes poetry as its underlying argumentative structure\textsuperscript{8}.

Seen against this background, Melanchthon’s assessment of the nature and functions of poetry in the introduction to his commentary to Ovid’s Metamorphoses is not surprising. Poetry is, he writes, nothing other than philosophy arranged in verse and narratives, containing the doctrine of all other arts and illustrating moral-philosophical precepts by means of examples of various kings\textsuperscript{9}. Long before the philosophers existed, the endeavor towards wisdom was carried out by the poets. Melanchthon does not doubt that poetry professes the same doctrine as philosophy does, thus, that the narratives of the poets abound with wisdom and erudition. By means of verses and witty fabrications, the poets lure students into learning by hiding the most useful things under the cover of invented narratives. Ovid’s versified images of the Metamorphoses not only disclose the life and the condition of man and its relationship to

\textsuperscript{6} On Melanchthon’s understanding of logic as a theory of argumentation see Volkard Wels, Melanchthon’s textbooks on dialectic and rhetoric as complementary parts of a theory of argumentation in Emidio Campi, Simone de Angelis, Anja-Silvia Goeing and Anthony Grafton (eds.), Scholarly Knowledge: Textbooks in Early Modern Europe (Genf: Droz, 2008), pp. 139-156.

\textsuperscript{7} Volkhard Wels, Der Begriff der Dichtung In der fruhen Neuzeit (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), 23.

\textsuperscript{8} See the introduction of Joachim Knape’s translation of Melanchthon’s Rhetoric (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1993), pp. 1-36.

\textsuperscript{9} See CR 19, 501.
God, but also teach eloquence by means of the employed rhetorical apparatus of words and tropes. Moreover, they lead the careful reader to the discovery of the underlying method of invention and distribution of a variety of things, and they support clear, rich and pleasant explanation.\footnote{See CR 19, 502}

There is no independent textbook on the art of poetry written by Melanchthon because he discusses the elements which constitute the poetical genre in his other textbooks on the trivial arts. Thus, he tackles prosody in his textbook on grammar, the figures of style his rhetoric and the things themselves he assigns to dialectic, which concerns the appropriate speech and the places of argumentation. In comparison to the philosophers, as Melanchthon states in his "Elements on Rhetoric," the poets wake awareness of special features and gestures in the reader by means of striking images. Thereby, a picture emerges before the mind’s eye and acts firmly on perception and thought. To Melanchthon, poets also use words as the signs for things, but they broaden the ordinary language use in order to appeal to the reader and accentuate particular aspects.\footnote{See CR 13, 459-460. See also Kees Meerhof, “The Significance of Philipp Melanchthon’s Rhetoric in the Renaissance”, in Peter Mack (ed.), Renaissance Rhetoric (St Martin’s Press, New York 1994), pp. 46-62.} Like rhetoric, poetry appeals to the affects and may move to action. Its main role consists in the pedagogical transmission of knowledge, especially natural-philosophical and ethical knowledge. In the response he writes to Pico della Mirandola in the name of Ermolao Barbaro, he praises wise thinkers as Homer, Demosthenes, Vergil, Cicero, Herodot and Livy, emphasizing their skillful and learned manner of presenting the nature of things and their advice regarding the most useful rules and examples of everyday life and mores.\footnote{See CR 9, 699.}

II. Melanchthon’s use of poetry in his theoretical texts

Melanchthon’s writings, especially those engaging with ethical, natural-philosophical and logical subjects, testify to his self-image as a
careful reader, interpret and transmitter of ancient wisdom. His textbook on physics is, I believe, one of the most striking examples of Melanchthon’s engagement with various philosophers, historians, poets, mathematicians and astronomers, as well as astrologers and physicians. Since it has become clear from his concept of philosophy that Melanchthon envisages a circular rather than a hierarchical order of the arts, it does not seem surprising that he regards the arguments of ancient thinkers and partly also contemporary humanists as equally valuable and worth mentioning. As he explicitly states in the chapter on the usefulness and the goal of the physical knowledge, Melanchthon aims to teach an accurate physics, i.e. only the true opinions which convey a composed and tamed mind so that it does not eagerly embrace absurd opinions. The kernel of Melanchthon’s doctrine of physics is his conviction that there is a godly ordained order of the physical world in which man is set in order to acknowledge it, and, by means of physical knowledge, achieve insight into God’s providence. His fundamental philosophical assumption is the congruence between the godly wisdom that underlies the order of the cosmos and the intellect of man. By means of notions put into man’s reason at his creation, man is able to gather certain knowledge in various disciplines which concerns the world order, its underlying laws and the distinction between good and evil. Thus, he is able to understand God’s providence and acknowledge him as the sole creator of the cosmos and keeper of the human society. The constitutive role of the godly providence for Melanchthon’s concept of nature and his assessment of the usefulness of natural philosophy has been thoroughly documented by Sachiko Kusukawa. However, man is prone to error and finds strong and convincing arguments in the doctrines of the wise men that have transmitted their own experience in philosophical or literary form. Melanchthon dedicates an extensive part of his Second Book on Physics to a discussion on causes, chance and fate.

13 CR 13, 189.
14 This has been argued for convincingly by Günter Frank: Die theologische Philosophie Philipp Melanchthons, Leipzig, 1995, especially pp. 211-233.
and discusses the involvement of God in the natural and societal order. The ancient poets contribute especially to the enforcement of the acknowledging and understanding of God’s providence and his involvement in human affairs. In his Commentary on the Metamorphoses, Melanchthon praises the great skill of Ovid in depicting the creation of the world, which, he says, is taken from the doctrine of the ancient fathers, taken up by ancient poets like Orpheus, Museaus or Linus and transmitted by the Greek theologian Clements Alexandrinus and Justin the Martyr. Ovid’s account endorses the existence of a wise, just, good and kind architect who created the world and endowed the humans with the natural light of reason and the capacity to discern right from wrong, providing for his well-being. That is why, Melanchthon believes that poets come closer to the wisdom transmitted by Moses than most of the philosophers, even though their narratives do not entirely coincide with the sacred writings. Against this background the constant mentioning of the poetical wisdom and the successive illustrative citations in his Initia Doctrina Physicae seem natural. What ancient mythology testifies to, in Melanchthon’s view, as clear as history or everyday experience, are the just actions of God and thus, his providence in the world. In a chapter of his Physics dedicated to the concept of faith (fatum) understood as providence Melanchthon says:

It is important to recognize when destiny can be understood as meaning godly providence and to see what the necessary and immutable godly decrees are and how they have been made. We only say of righteous and just events that they have been destined by God, like Vergil says about Aeneas: “he came to Italy and to the strand of Lavinium driven by destiny and as a fugitive”. (CR 13, 330)

The itinerary of Aeneas is exemplary for God’s providence and his righteous decrees concerning individuals. Insisting on the fate of Aeneas, Melanchthon thinks that the dictum of the Sybil should always be borne in mind. Talking about the golden twig she says: “Itself it yields if you the faiths invite, else with no force shall you its yielding feel”. This fate is representing what Melanchthon calls necessity by

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16 See CR 19, 504.
consequence (*necessitates consequentiae*), since it has been decreed by God and the events will necessarily follow his decisions. One has to restrain, however, from attributing to God the wrongdoings of men. Paris did not kidnap Helena because of faith, nor did Aegisthus mislead the wife of his living brother because of bad faith. It is crucial, in the view of Melanchthon to understand Homer’s description of such deeds as falling outside the influence of faith, because they are done by the free will of the characters.

Melanchthon distinguishes in the chapter on *fatum* two meanings of the word faith: as the accomplishment of God’s will, as we have seen above, and as physical faith. The latter he defines as a succession of natural causes, *i.e.* the relation between the influence of the stars and man’s temperaments and inclinations. Thereafter Melanchthon anticipates the traditional critique regarding the implications of a science, of the influence of stars for the debate on free will and cites the Latin poet Manilius. Manilius held in his poem *Astronomica* that “The faith governs man and everything is happening according to most certain laws”\(^\text{17}\). Melanchthon is anxious to invalidate Manilius thesis, by insisting that not all events can be traced back to the influence of the stars and much is left for man to decide. God can also righteously punish man, as he did with Oedipus for killing his father and marrying his mother. The wisdom of the poets is thus crucial to the understanding of God’s implication in the human world and the taming of one’s own will. Melanchthon’s *Physics* abounds in such examples which are employed as arguments which underpin his main thesis about the existence of God and his providence in the natural world. Melanchthon employs several examples from ancient literature to describe and differentiate between monsters (*res natas praeter naturae ordine*)\(^\text{18}\) that appear in nature. First, Melanchthon says one must acknowledge that some appearances are not physically caused. Like, how Plutarch narrates about the Triton that blew the horn for Cesar at the Rubicon, or the ghost that Dion had seen at his death or even the appearance that

\(^{17}\) On Melanchthon’s reaction to Manilius’s poem see Claudia Brosseder, *Im Bann der Sterne* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2004), pp. 169-173.

\(^{18}\) CR 13, 350-354.
warned Pausanias after he had killed a maiden in Byzantium. A statue is told to have sung verses: “you rush towards your sentence, because injustice leads to harm”\(^{19}\). Another kind of monsters are the higher appearances like comets, earthquakes or falling stars. They usually announce forthcoming events that interfere with societal order. Like Claudian is cited to say: “And one has never seen a comet that went unpunished” (\textit{Et coelo nuquam spectatum impune Comenten})\(^{20}\). Also, the third kind of monsters are the ones represented by mirages in the air or what we today call Fata Morgana. Vergil has appropriately described one such miracle when he said in his \textit{Georgics}: “the heaven resounded with the noise of weaponries” (\textit{Armorum sonitum toto Germaniae coelo, Audiit})\(^{21}\) and Virgil’s illustration fits, according to the humanist, with more recently observed appearances. These three kinds of appearances do not originate from natural causes but from the interference of good or bad angels and, as such, do not belong to the competence of the physicians. Melanchthon believes that it is crucial to acknowledge them and take the word of the most skilled thinkers that have written about them, in order not to confuse events that one can physically explain with the ones one cannot. This knowledge is useful to man, as it helps provide him with signs and admonishments and leads us to the only perfect refuge: to God.

Illustrations from the ancient literature are also used in Melanchthon’s textbook on the soul. In the chapter on the accidents of mind and will he distinguishes the various kinds of knowledge man may acquire. When he talks about probable knowledge, based on opinions, Melanchthon says people are prone to alter opinion, because, as the poet Propertius said: “Everything changes, and so the love certainty changes too”\(^{22}\). Here Melanchthon argues for the changeable nature of man and prefers to argue by means of a poetic sentence. In his textbook on \textit{Dialectics}, Vergil is quoted for the display of one of the fallacious arguments which Melanchthon is discussing. Taking a false

\(^{19}\) See CR 13, 350.

\(^{20}\) CR 13, 351.

\(^{21}\) See CR 13, 351.

\(^{22}\) In his \textit{Liber de Anima}, CR 13, 166.
cause for the real cause, Melanchthon emphasize, may lead to serious errors. Just like it had happened to the Trojans that have been misled by the fallacies employed by Sinon\textsuperscript{23}. It is clear that Melanchthon’s textbooks are a reflecting his own set standards of how one should teach and preach some of the canonical disciplines. Using poets as sources of illustrations, it only comes natural to an author who is convinced that “the inquiry and explanation of subjects of disciplines like Physics, Ethics and Theology cannot be accomplished without eloquence and without precisely those arts that eloquence comprises. Some arts like medicine can be taught without eloquence, but they are much easier to teach and grasp when eloquence is employed.” (CR 9, 699)\textsuperscript{24} To sum up, poets are being read, cited and imitated in the humanist school tradition because they promote both an astute mind that can distinguish the arguments and things in question, and eloquence, which is being instilled into the minds of the young students by means of exempla. The works of poets and orators clearly show, in Melanchthon’s view that language and thought are inextricably bound together.

But we have also seen that ancient poets are pagan bearers of wisdom and are to be read for the promotion of morality and also piety, when it comes to their narratives about the human faith and godly providence. Convinced that the ancient poets are the bearers of an ancient wisdom transmitted by the first fathers and handed down to the philosophers, ultimately rediscovered by the humanists, Melanchthon seems to adhere to the concept of an eternal philosophy that has been given to Adam by God and traversed history up to the Renaissance. In the remainder of the paper I will shortly show that Melanchthon does employ this view, but does not share the Ficinian concept of the *philosophia perennis* due to the restrains of the protestant salvation-historical distinction between law and gospel. However, because of the optimistic anthropology that he posits at the core of his metaphysics,

\textsuperscript{23} CR 13, 42.

\textsuperscript{24} For Melanchthon’s view on the importance of rhetoric, of which, I had said above that it comprises poetics, see his letter to Pico della Mirandola on behalf of Ermolao Barbaro in Nelson Peter Ross (ed.) *Christianity and Humanism*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Michigan, 1968, pp. 11-38.
ancient wisdom is treated as we have seen above, as a useful propaedeutic to revelation.

III. Melanchthon and the theory of perennial philosophy

Marsilio Ficino is one of the most important philosophers of the Renaissance who believed in a long religious-philosophical tradition: the *prisca philosophia*, dating back to Moses and which, he thought, was consummated in Plato, who “was imbued with the divine mysteries of Hermes Trismegistos” (Schmitt 1966, 509), a wise ancient theologian. To him, the philosophy of the ancients was nothing other than learned religion. As Charles Schmitt has shown, the notion of the constancy of philosophical tradition from the ancient theologians to Plato and the Neoplatonists had already been maintained by late ancient thinkers, and even by some of the Church Fathers. The implication of this continuity was, in fact, that, as Augustino Steuco – one of Ficino’s followers and a staunch defender of the tradition of *philosophia perennis* put it – true theology was nothing other than revealed truth which has been known to mankind from the earliest times. And this also meant that God was somewhat accessible to man by reason alone, since theological and philosophical truth coincided in many respects. In his study about Melanchthon’s philosophical definition of God and its relevance for the natural knowledge man can attain of God, Dino Bellucci refers to Melanchthon’s Platonic definition of God, which as he emphasizes, man acquires by the light of his reason: God is the eternal mind (*mens*) and the cause of Good in nature. This definition, Belucci argues, referring to the above cited fragments from the commentary on the *Metamorphoses*, was first known by Adam and his sons, consigned to future generations of ancient theologians and eloquently transmitted by the ancient poets to the philosophers.

According to Belucci, the *Metamorphoses* were seen by Melanchthon as a summary of the poetical theology of Orpheus, Museus and Hermes.

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Trismegistos. Melanchthon seems, at \textit{prima facie}, to be a follower of the tradition that Ficino, Reuchlin and Pico della Mirandola have shaped within their humanistic endeavors. There is no doubt that Melanchthon has been influenced by this tradition. However, he undertakes a fundamental correction of this concept and strictly differentiates, as we have seen above, the theological from the philosophical truth. While the poets come close to the sacred writings, they are not able to achieve the perfect knowledge of God, the philosophical definition is only an incomplete one in comparison to the perfect and necessary one transmitted by the Church. This claim is grounded by the primary distinction undertaken by Luther between law and gospel. While man is banned after his fall to live in a world governed by law – all arts and sciences pertaining to this realm – faith in Christ and the reading of the Bible alone might lead man to the reception of godly grace. This grace cannot be understood through the light of reason and it is God alone that chooses to redeem sinful human beings. Recent scholarship concerned with Melanchthon’s philosophy has shown that although he keeps this methodical principle at the basis of his entire work, his constant emphasis of the capacities of human reason marks what Gunter Frank has called a theo-rationalistic philosophy announcing the modern philosophies of the 17th century (Frank 2008, 573). Against this background it is safe to maintain that Melanchthon allots to the ancient poets and writers more than a pedagogical function amidst the teaching practice of the liberal arts. This is why I disagree with Volkard Wels who sees a complete contrast between the Ficinian concept of poetry and the Melanchthonian view\textsuperscript{26}. While Melanchthon does not think that God revealed himself to the poets in an episode of \textit{furor poeticus}\textsuperscript{27}, he does

\textsuperscript{26} Volkhard Wels, “Der Begriff der Dichtung vor und nach der Reformation”, in Günter Frank und Sebastian Lalla (eds.), \textit{Fragmenta Melanchthoniana Bd. 3} (Heidelberg: Regionalkultur, 2007), pp. 81-105.

\textsuperscript{27} For Ficino’s rendering of Plato’s view that “poetry springs from divine frenzy, frenzy from the Muses and the Muses from Jove” see \textit{The Letters of Marsilio Ficino}, with a \textit{Preface} by Paul Oskar Kristeller, translated from the Latin by members of the Language Department of the Language School of Economic Science, London, 1975, pp. 45-48.
ascribe to them an important function of transmitting the knowledge of godly providence and a definition of God which agrees with the one achieved by the natural light of reason. This view resonates with Melanchthon’s providential interpretation of history which he expounds in his Physics. Since both Luther and Melanchthon thought the end of the realm of the law was near and the realm of the returning of Christ would begin after 2000 years of an unjust government through a corrupted Church\textsuperscript{28}, there was no doubt to him that the poets belonged to the generation of wise men that were very close to a less flawed natural knowledge of God. The fact that Melanchthon dedicated his entire work to promoting the liberal arts and emphasizing their fundamental role for the teachings of the Church testifies to the propaedeutic role of the arts, and of poetry concerning for the receiving of godly grace.

IV. Conclusions

Melanchthon is a staunch promoter of the reformation of the curricula in favor of the grounding of the liberal arts on ancient literature. This humanistic endeavor permits him to integrate poetry and history among the liberal arts although he does not see the need to write a separate textbook on poetry, since the poets have borrowed the instruments of the trivial arts while writing their works. This is due to the fact that, Melanchthon believes, poetry does not tell lies, nor does it lack the capacity of containing true doctrines, but only transmits the same wisdom as the philosophers by means of narratives put into verses. The moral-pedagogical virtues of poetry are emphasized when Melanchthon accentuates both the luring images by which students are more inclined to give in to reading and inquiring into arguments, and the moral lessons they can pick out of the illustrated lives of various characters. One of the most important pieces of knowledge which the poets transmit is, however the knowledge of God’s providence and his

\textsuperscript{28} See Brosseder 2004, 81-109.
nature, as the first fathers had kept and transmitted it. Albeit this is only a natural knowledge acquired with the rational capacities of man it is fundamental for the endorsement of piety and the enforcement of the belief in God, which eventually prepares man for the reception of revelation and for the realm of heaven, or, as Melanchthon calls it, the second Academy.

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