

Stephen GERSH (ed.), *Plotinus' Legacy: The Transformation of Platonism from the Renaissance to the Modern Era*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, pp. VIII+304, ISBN 978-1-108-41528-6, £78.99.

The present volume, edited by Stephen GERSH, is divided thematically into five parts and consists of eleven chapters, preceded by the editor's introduction. At the end of the book, the reader can also find an appendix, in which there is a chronological list of the editions and translations of Plotinus' *Enneads*, followed by an index. In his introduction, GERSH makes a claim which is further substantiated by the contributors to the volume, namely, that Plotinus exerted a major influence on the whole of Western philosophy, if not directly (since the Latin translation of the *Enneads* by Marius Victorinus, studied by Augustine towards the end of the 4th century, did not make it to the Middle Ages), then through Christian philosophers. GERSH points out that the two main figures who paved the way for Plotinus to become such a significant influence in the West are Augustine of Hippo and the anonymous 5th century monk, author of the *Corpus Dionysiacum*.

It is certainly through them that he became not only "the father of Western mysticism" (as he was called by the Quaker mystic and scholar Rufus JONES¹), but also the father of Western metaphysics, I might add, as Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (not only Aristotle) were extremely important authorities for Aquinas in creating his monumental synthesis in the 13th century. The volume edited by GERSH demonstrates and documents convincingly what Rufus JONES was already sensing in 1930, when Plotinus was not as fashionable as today and regarded rather as an irrational proponent of mystical trances and ecstasies, despised by the Enlightened academia of the first half of the 20th century, than as a serious philosopher (which, presumably, must exclude trances and ecstasies). As Eric Robertson DODDS observes in his autobiography:

the membership of the class was initially six, but as Stewart [J.A. Stewart] proved to be an unexciting teacher it quickly dropped to two. I was one of the two; the other was a young American lately arrived from the Graduate School at Harvard. Out of regard for Stewart's feelings, if for no other reason, we felt bound to continue our attendance, and as we came away from the class we naturally fell into conversation. The American was a quiet reserved man, my senior by some years, who was preparing a Harvard thesis on the philosophy of F.H. Bradley. Like me he was seriously interested in mystical experience².

It was 1915 and the quiet American interested in mysticism was Thomas Stearns Eliot. That, however, is the past. Plotinus-the-irrational-mystic has been replaced in the last decades by Plotinus-the-serious-philosopher³, almost as serious as Aristotle himself, the embodiment

¹ R.M. JONES, *Some Exponents of Mystical Religion*, London 1930, p. 44. JONES is rarely credited with coining this phrase. Cf. RIST's observation that Plotinus "is sometimes called 'the father of Western mysticism'" (J.M. RIST, *Plotinus: The Road to Reality*, Cambridge 1967, p. 213).

² E.R. DODDS, *Missing Persons: An Autobiography*, Oxford 1977, p. 40.

³ RIST pointed out in 2006 that this change of paradigm has somewhat been to the detriment of the quality of the Plotinian studies: "while the number of scholars thinking and writing about Plotinus (and Neoplatonism more generally) in Anglo-American philosophy departments has risen enormously, the standard of much of the work done has dramatically declined" (J.M. RIST, *On Plotinus' Psychology*, *Rivista di Storia della Filosofia* LXI 2006, pp. 721–727, on p. 721).

of serious philosophy (of course, Aristotle cleansed from the irrational *μῦθος* of the Neoplatonic interpretations)⁴. Stephen GERSH points out that, on the one hand, the textual criticism, beginning from the Renaissance, weakened the influence of *corpus Hermeticum* and *corpus Dionysiacum* on the Platonic tradition and, on the other, it has brought back a direct presence of Plotinus to the West, starting with Marsilio Ficino's edition, translation and commentary on the *Enneads*.

The "post-Ficinian" reception of Plotinus, as GERSH calls it, includes primarily the Cambridge Platonists, but also Leibniz and the German universities of the 17th and 18th centuries. Certainly, a new chapter is opened, when Friedrich Creuzer begins to translate and popularise Plotinus among the German Romantics and Idealists, like Friedrich Schelling. The Romantic Plotinus was a reaction against the materialistic mechanism of the 18th century, the century when the pejorative term "Neoplatonism" was coined and when the long living legend of Plotinus-the-ecstatic was created by the scholars ecstatic about scientism. At the same time, Plotinus appears in a less distorted manner in the French Catholic intellectual tradition of the turn of the 20th century.

The first part of the book explores the Italian Renaissance and the pair of great friends, Ficino and Pico della Mirandola (chapter 1: "Marsilio Ficino as Commentator on Plotinus: Some Case Studies" by S. GERSH and chapter 2: "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola on Virtue, Happiness, and Magic" by Brian COPENHAVER). This is where the story of the renewed reception of Plotinus in the West begins and, because of the story told in Ficino's 1492 letter to Lorenzo de Medici, we can vividly imagine Pico della Mirandola standing in his door and seeing his joy over having completed his translation of Plato. We can then hear Pico responding with equal joy that now is the time to translate Plotinus. Which Ficino, of course, immediately started to do.

The second part of the volume is devoted to the 16th century France. This part, consisting of two chapters (chapter 3: "Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples and Charles de Bovelles on Platonism, Theurgy, and Intellectual Difficulty" by Richard J. OOSTERHOFF and chapter 4: "Symphorien Champier on Medicine, Theology, and Politics" by Guido GIGLIONI), is interesting in itself, as it discusses the Renaissance reception of Platonism in France, which is less known in the Anglo-Saxon literature, but this part is more loosely connected to the rest of the book, because there seems not to have been any direct "post-Ficinian" interest in Plotinus within the Eldest Daughter of the Church.

The next part, however, shows with clarity how important Plotinus was for the 17th century philosophy in England. The three chapters on the Cambridge Platonists (chapter 5: "Henry More and Descartes" by David LEECH, chapter 6: "Ralph Cudworth as Interpreter of Plotinus" by Douglas HEDLEY, and chapter 7: "John Smith on the Immortality of the Soul" by Derek A. MICHAUD) are a part of the grand research endeavour, coordinated by HEDLEY, to restore the Cambridge Platonists as a link in the modern Platonic traditions, bridging the Renaissance Platonism with Romanticism. And Plotinus is the single most important figure in this fascinating story.

The fourth part, concerning German Romanticism (chapter 8: "Schelling and Plotinus" by Thomas LEINKAUF and chapter 9: "Hegel's Programmatic Recourse to the Ancient Philosophy of Intellect" by Jens HALFWASSEN) builds up on the pioneering research work done by the great German scholar Werner BEIERWALTES half a century ago⁵. Georg Friedrich Creuzer, a great German philologist who edited the *Enneads* in 1835 is mentioned by LEINKAUF as the one who introduced Schelling to Plotinus, but one would dream of a separate chapter on Creuzer that would enrich this part of the volume.

The last part extends throughout the 20th century to the current state of the Plotinian studies. Chapter 10 ("Henri-Louis Bergson and Plotinus") was written by Wayne J. HANKEY (who sadly passed away on the 6th of February 2022) and it is a highly instructive, interesting essay. HANKEY shows the importance of Plotinus for Bergson who gave a whole course on the *Enneads* in Collège de France in the academic year 1897/1898. He also demonstrates how Plotinus became, through

⁴ Cf. L.P. GERSON, *Aristotle and Other Platonists*, Ithaca 2015.

⁵ W. BEIERWALTES, *Platonismus und Idealismus*, Frankfurt a. M. 1972.

Bergson, an important influence on the French Thomists or French Catholic intellectuals of the 20th century in general. The figures interested in Plotinus that HANKEY invokes are such eminent philosophers and scholars as Étienne Gilson, Jacques Maritain, Pierre Hadot or Jean Trouillard, all of whom were to some extent interested not only in Plotinus' metaphysics, but in his metaphysical mysticism as well. Kevin CORRIGAN, in the paper which closes the volume (chapter 11: "Plotinus and Modern Scholarship: From Ficino to the Twenty-First Century"), points also to the future of the Plotinian studies. Especially, he emphasises "three continuing problems in Plotinus' thought" (pp. 275–276), that is, the problem of spontaneous emanation vs. free will and the loving agency of the Good, the development and the chronological order of the *Enneads*, and the character of Plotinus' writing.

The volume edited by GERSH is an excellent summary of what we know about the history of Plotinus' influence in the Western philosophy, but it is much more than that. It shows the continuity of the Platonic tradition precisely as linked to the figure of Plotinus and opens up the new avenues for study as we are witnessing the renewal of the Platonic philosophy across the Western intellectual and spiritual world.

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