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Plotinus's Language of Seeing: Marsilio Ficino on *Enneads* V.3, V.8 and III.8

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Marsilio Ficino and the Plotinian Experience

The story of Plotinus's life and the main traits of his inspiring personality were preserved in the biography written by Porphyry, his most famous pupil, which remains the chief source for understanding the 'persona' of Plotinus. Through Porphyry's report, the various aspects of his master's life became inseparable from the principles of his philosophy and helped to create an idea of Plotinus as possessing an almost superhuman soul, which proved fascinating to later readers of the *Enneads*. Along with the pact of secrecy between Ammonius Saccas's disciples, the divine nature of his daemon and the story of his death – when a snake was said to have appeared and immediately disappeared into a hole in the wall – the unique difficulty of his prose has played a great part in the definition of Plotinus's philosophical personality. Plotinus's style is frequently hard to comprehend, the development of his thoughts is complex and unpredictable, and his words are pregnant with meaning which is easily lost in translation. He certainly regarded the verbalization of concepts as necessary for philosophical teaching, but was little concerned with words in themselves, which remained unable, because of their

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essential materiality, to express the profound insights of his metaphysics.[1] Hence his style constantly attempts to describe what cannot be described. As R. T. Wallis has rightly observed: 'In contrast to Plato, Plotinus's treatises exhaust the resources of language in endeavouring to attain successively closer approximations to what remains finally inexpressible.'[2]

Porphyry tells us that Plotinus was often fully immersed in his intellectual insights and always able to keep in mind his train of thought, writing it down, when he had to, as if copying from a book.[3] He had a tormented relationship with his own writing, let alone his struggles with spelling:

> When Plotinus had written anything he could never bear to go over it twice; even to read it through once was too much for him, as his eyesight did not serve him well for reading. In writing he did not form the letters with any regard to appearance or divide his syllables correctly, and he paid no attention to spelling.[4]

His speech was characterized by frequent slips of the tongue, such as *anamnemisketai* instead of *anamimnesketai*, which were also reflected in his writing.[5] The result of the combination of his metaphysical intuitions with poor language skills is a style which is 'concise and full of thought'.[6] Plotinus, Porphyry says:

> Puts things shortly and abounds more in ideas than in words; he generally expresses himself in a tone of rapt inspiration, and states what he himself really feels about the matter and not what has been handed down by tradition.[7]

Admittedly, in composing a philosophical narrative, Plotinus had to find a way to overcome the ontological discrepancy between words and concepts and adapt the essential unity of the latter to the fragmentary nature of the former. The result is a text which presents serious challenges to translators, especially the unavoidable necessity of making 'a desperate choice between being true to the letter or the spirit of the text'.[8]

[1] On Plotinus's prose, see D. Gutas, 'The Text of the Arabic Plotinus. Prolegomena to a Critical Edition', in *The Libraries of the Neoplatonists*, ed. C. D'Ancona, Leiden and Boston, 2007, pp. 371–84 (380–81); L. P. Gerson, 'Introduction' in *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, ed. L. P. Gerson, Cambridge, 1996, pp. 1–9 (8–9): R. T. Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, 2nd ed., London and Indianapolis, 1995, pp. 41–44; G. Stamatellos, *Plotinus and the Presocratics: A Philosophical Study of Presocratic Influences in Plotinus's Enneads*, New York, 2007, pp. 5–7. For a fascinating overview of the different forms of literary and philosophical narrative in Plotinus, see S. R. L. Clark, *Plotinus: Myth, Metaphor, and Philosophical Practice*, Chicago and London, 2016.

[2] Wallis, *Neoplatonism* (n. 1 above), p. 41.

[3] Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus,* VIII, in Plotinus, *Enneads*, transl. A. H. Armstrong, 7 vols, Cambridge MA, 1966–1988 (hereafter Plotinus, *Enneads*), I, p. 28.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, XII, in Plotinus, *Enneads*, I, p. 39. Mark Edwards believes that this passage documents 'the first case of dyslexia on record, with a slight touch of aphasia'; see Porphyry, *On the Life of Plotinus and the Arrangements of his Works*, in *Neoplatonic Saints: The Lives of Plotinus and Proclus by Their Students*, transl. M. Edwards, Liverpool, 2000, p. 23, n. 129.

[6] Ibid., pp. 39–41.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Gerson, 'Introduction' (n. 1 above), p. 8.

The Florentine philosopher and humanist Marsilio Ficino, who translated the *Enneads* into Latin between 1484 and 1486, was not spared this challenge when he had to convey the richness of Plotinus's terminology using Latin vocabulary. His translation was published in Florence, together with his commentary, in 1492. Even though he embarked on this project only at a later stage of his life and after finishing his Latin version of Plato, published in 1484, Plotinus had always played a central part in his scholarly enterprise to transmit Platonism to the modern world. We know, for instance, that he worked on Parisinus graecus 1816, the manuscript of the *Enneads* which had been copied for him in 1460 by the Greek scholar John Skutariotes, for more than twenty-five years.[9] Ficino greatly admired Plotinus and regarded him as a sublime interpreter of Plato, and even divinely inspired, for he alone – as reported by Porphyry and Proclus – had unveiled the message hidden in Plato's writings.[10] Plotinus, Ficino believed, had organized Plato's unsystematic thought and scattered metaphysical doctrines into a hierarchically ordered system, in which the essence and existence of the material world relied on the One, and the human soul – depending on how it chose to live – participated in either Matter or the Nous. Ficino's longstanding fascination with the *Enneads* is reflected in all of his writings, which are deeply imbued with the spirit of Plotinus's philosophy. Nevertheless, producing a Latin version of the *Enneads* was a long and strenuous work. Exhausted and captivated by Plotinus's sinewy – yet seductive – prose, Ficino found it hard to abandon the labours of translation: as he put it, Plotinus claimed all his time and attention as a translator.[11] 'I am now striving to enable Plotinus to belong to all', he writes to his friend Amerigo Corsini, 'and while I am devoting myself fully to one who will shortly belong to all, it seems to me that I am devoting myself to everyone.'[12] In a letter to the Hungarian humanist and poet Janus

[9] See C. Förstel, 'Marsilio Ficino e il Parigino greco 1816 di Plotino', in *Marsilio Ficino. Fonti, testi, fortuna*, *Atti del Convegno internazionale (Firenze, 1–3 ottobre 1999)*, ed. S. Gentile and S. Toussaint, Rome, 2006, pp. 65–88; E. Garin, 'Plotino nel Rinascimento', in *Plotino e il Neoplatonismo in Oriente e in Occidente*, Rome, 1974, pp. 537–53 (547); S. Gentile, 'Marsilio Ficino', in *Autografi dei letterati italiani: il Quattrocento*, ed. F. Bausi et al., Rome, 2013, pp. 138–68; P. Henry, *Études plotiniennes: Les manuscrits des Ennéads*, Paris, 1948, pp. 31–2; id., *Les manuscrits grecs de travail de Marsile Ficin, le traducteur des 'Ennéads' de Plotin*, in *Congrès de Tours et de Poitiers de la Association 'Guillaume Budé'*, Paris, 1954, pp. 323–8 (323); D. J. J. Robichaud, 'Working with Plotinus: A Study of Marsilio Ficino's Textual and Divinatory Philology', in *Teachers, Students and Schools of Greek in the Renaissance*, ed. F. Ciccolella and L. Silvano, Leiden and Boston, 2017, pp. 120–154.

[10] See Marsilio Ficino, 'Proemium in Plotinum', in D. J. O'Meara, 'Plotinus', in *Catalogus Translationum et Commentariorum: Mediaeval and Renaissance Latin Translations and Commentaries. Annotated Lists and Guides*, ed. V. Brown, P. O. Kristeller and F. E. Cranz, Washington DC, 1960–, VII, pp. 55–73 (69): 'Plotinus tandem his theologiam velaminibus enudavit, primusque et solus ut Porphyrius Proclusque testantur, arcana veterum divinitus penetravit.' See also M. J. B. Allen, 'Catastrophe, Plotinus and the Six Academies of the Moon', in his *Synoptic Art: Marsilio Ficino on the History of Platonic Interpretation*, Florence, 1998, pp. 51–92 (54); R. Chiaradonna, 'Marsilio Ficino traduttore delle "Enneadi": due esempi', *Bruniana & Campanelliana*, 12, 2006, pp. 547–52; H. D. Saffrey, 'Florence, 1492: The Reappearance of Plotinus', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 49, 1996, pp. 488–508.

[11] See 'Letter XXI', in *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, transl. Language Department of the School of Economic Science, London, 1975–, VII, p. 25=Marsilio Ficino, *Epistolae*, in *Opera omnia*, 2 vols, Basel 1576 (repr. Turin, 1962; Paris, 2000), I, pp. 607–964 (873).

[12] Ibid. See also 'Letter XVI', in *The Letters* (n. 11 above), VII, p. 19=Ficino, *Epistolae*, in *Opera omnia* (n. 11 above), I, p. 870.

Pannonius, parts of which were incorporated into the preface to his edition of the *Enneads*, Ficino describes his struggles in translating Plotinus, on account of the brevity of Plotinus's style, the abundance of his thought and the profundity of his meaning.[13] Admittedly, philology alone was not sufficient to unlock the mysteries of the *Enneads*, for the project of presenting Plotinus to the Latin-reading public required the simultaneous work of translation and philosophical interpretation. Plotinus himself, having read the treatise *On the First Principle*, observed that its author, Longinus, was indeed a philologist, but by no means a philosopher.[14] Longinus, on the other hand, acknowledged that he could not grasp the meaning of many of Plotinus's philosophical theories but that this did not prevent him from feeling 'the utmost admiration and affection for the general character of his writing, the closeness of his thinking, and the philosophical way in which he deals with enquiries'.[15] Luckily, Ficino was as great a philologist as he was a philosopher; and his Latin edition of the *Enneads* relied on both his extraordinary linguistic skills and his deep knowledge of Platonic metaphysics. He often managed to bridge the semantic gap between Greek and Latin by manipulating terms and transferring their meaning to different words, by playing with prefixes and suffixes, and by adjusting the Latin to the degree of philosophical profundity in the original Greek. A telling example of Ficino's exceptional abilities as a translator is the way he grapples with the different epistemological levels of vision, the principal faculty in Plotinus's philosophy. 'To see', through the eyes, but especially beyond the eyes, had a profound metaphysical meaning in Plotinus, and in his discourse of vision thoughts and speech related to one another in a dynamical and asymmetrical way. The translator's task was precisely to convey the dynamism and asymmetry of this relationship.

The 'Simplicity of Vision' in Ficino's Latin Translation

It is no accident that one of the pre-eminent and best-known accounts of Plotinus's philosophy, written by Pierre Hadot and published in 1963, is entitled *The Simplicity of Vision*.[16] The *Enneads* abound with metaphorical references to the faculty of sight, whether alluding to the perception of the external world by means of the eye or to the 'inner vision' which emerges from the soul's turning inward to look at its true self and becoming able to see it *sub specie aeternitatis*. During embodied existence 'vision' is essential, because it is by looking that we perceive images and

[13] Ficino, *Epistolae*, in *Opera omnia*, I, pp. 871–2: 'ob incredibilem tum verborum brevitatem, tum sententiarum copiam sensusque profunditatem'. See Allen, 'Catastrophe, Plotinus and the Six Academies of the Moon' (n. 10 above), p. 54.

[14] Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, XIV, in Plotinus, *Enneads*, I, p. 41. For Ficino's views on this passage, see D. J. J. Robichaud, 'Angelo Poliziano's *Lamia*: Neoplatonic Commentaries and the Plotinian Dichotomy between the Philologist and the Philosopher', in *Angelo Poliziano's Lamia: Text, Translation and Introductory Studies*, ed. C. Celenza, Leiden, 2010, pp. 131–89 (150–52).

[15] Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, XX, in Plotinus, *Enneads*, I, p. 55.

[16] P. Hadot, *La simplicité du regard*, Paris, 1963, transl. into English by M. Chase as *Plotinus or the Simplicity of Vision*, Chicago and London, 1993.

appearances, offered to the eyes by the phenomenal world – a world which Plotinus considers metaphysically weak and almost lacking being. By learning how to use the eye of the mind, however, the soul becomes able to pierce the veil of appearances and transform 'vision' from a physical act of the eyes to a disembodied experience pertaining to the intellect; by learning how to look inward we learn how to look up towards the One and to become reunited with it.[17] From the sense perception of the eyes to intellectual visualizations, vision represents the main activity of the soul, which ascends from lower to higher levels of reality – from the body to the mind, from the external to the internal world, from images to ideas – by seeing, looking, inspecting, observing and contemplating.

Plotinus uses three main verbs to refer to vision: βλέπειν, ὁρᾶν and θεωρεῖν, which express the different degrees of complexity of the visual act: while βλέπειν and ὁρᾶν refer to the act of the soul which 'sees' simply and directly, θεωρεῖν means, in the first instance, 'to look at something attentively', 'to be a spectator', or 'to speculate'. In ancient Greek philosophy, the act of θεωρεῖν, in its most speculative form as well as in its engagement with πρᾶξις, was regarded as the activity par excellence of the philosopher.[18]

Plotinus regards life and knowledge as organized according to degrees of ontological and epistemological perfection ascending from the material world, which is close to nothingness, to the One, the ultimate source of being. The soul, in his view, is able to operate on a range of cognitive levels which include the vital dispositions characterizing the life of the body, sense perception and the imagination, discursive reason and the intellect. While through sense perception the soul comes into contact with the external world and grasps the qualities of bodies, through the imagination it becomes able to de-materialize these qualities and to produce images of them; on a higher level, reason dissects the cognitive data, establishes similarities and differences between them, wanders from one object to another and makes judgements about them; the intellect, finally, sees its objects in their entirety and all at once. For example, when he discusses the nature and role of Dialectic – the discipline that reflects, on an epistemological level, the soul's metaphysical ascent to the realm of the Nous – Plotinus explains that the soul first enquires about individual objects and establishes what class of being each of them belongs to and in which way they are said to differ from one another. Then the soul

[17] For the sake of consistency, I use the word 'soul' to refer to the individual human self even when this ascends beyond the third hypostasis, i.e., the Soul. For Plotinus, however, when our self becomes one with the Nous and with the One, it is no longer a 'soul', since it has acquired a higher mode of existence; see E. K. Emilsson, *Plotinus*, London and New York, 2017, p. 337.

[18] The important place of θεωρεῖν in classical Greek thought has been explored by A. Wilson Nightingale in her *Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy: 'Theoria' in Its Cultural Context*, Cambridge, 2009. She argues that, despite the long-established belief that θεωρεῖν referred to a purely intellectual apprehension of truth, with no direct concern for the practical aspects of life, *theoria* presupposes an existential activity and a precise attitude towards moral and political life. In her view, the mutual relationship between θεωρία and πρᾶξις is represented, for example, by the θεωροί, i.e., the pilgrims who travelled from their cities to attend political or religious festivals and returned home with reports of the new 'spectacles' they witnessed, which would have had an impact on their community's social and political life; see esp. pp. 41–4. For another excellent discussion of the relationship between θεωρία, πρᾶξις and ποίησις in ancient Greek thought, see Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, 1958.

goes on to discuss what is good and what is not, what is eternal and what is perishable; eventually, once it has reached as high as intellectual knowledge, '[it] settles down in the world of intellect, and there it occupies itself, casting off falsehood and feeding the soul in what Plato calls "the plain of truth"'.[19] With respect to the soul's conversion to intellectual life it is important to point out that Plotinus, at times, uses the word νοῦς to refer both to reason and to the intellect. This is due in part, as H. J. Blumenthal has observed, to the laxity of his terminology and in part to his view that the soul's faculties represent different degrees of actualization of the cognitive self, rather than its different powers: the intellect, thus, can be seen as a fully developed form of reason, while reason is the intellect not yet actualized. In fact, Plotinus's wide-ranging use of νοῦς is a telling example of the subordination of words to concepts, on account of their essential metaphysical weakness. If, however, νοῦς describes different steps in the process of intellectual actualization, the final end of this process – the soul's reunion with the One – goes far beyond the νοῦς:

> Our awareness of that One is not by way of reasoned knowledge or of intellectual perception, as with other intelligible things, but by way of a presence superior to knowledge.[20]

The ultimate form of life, in which the soul has become one and the same as the One, transcends any form of knowledge, even intellectual contemplation. At this stage any form of duality is obliterated, and there is no longer a difference between thinker and thought, spectator and spectacle, lover and beloved. Theoretical contemplation has no place in this metaphysical unity, for the activity of θεωρεῖν is built on the duality between the subject and the object of vision: a duality which lurks within the verb θεωρεῖν itself (θὲα means a 'spectacle', that is, something which is opposite to and distinct from the spectator). Θεωρεῖν, therefore, for Plotinus, is a preparatory endeavour aimed at a non-speculative form of existence, which is better rendered by the verbs ὁρᾶν and βλέπειν. In general θεωρεῖν, like νοῦς, describes the complexity and diversity of knowledge, from sense perception to the highest flights of the Nous, through the wandering of reason.[21] After the soul has had its first perception of the One, θεωρεῖν ceases, the soul is made one with the divine and any trace of duality is left behind. Even below the One, however, it is through a direct glance that we become immediately identified with the Nous. Contemplation of intelligible reality relies on a simple act of self-knowledge, which seems closer to 'seeing' than to 'thinking'. Plotinus explains:

> A man has certainly become Intellect when he lets all the rest which belongs to him go and looks at this with this and himself with himself (τούτῳ καὶ

[19] Plotinus, *Enneads*, I.3.4, I, p. 159. See Plato, *Phaedrus*, 248B6. See also H. J. Blumenthal, *Plotinus's Psychology: His Doctrines of the Embodied Soul*, The Hague, 1971, p. 104, and id., 'On Soul and Intellect', in *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, ed. L. P. Gerson, Cambridge, 1996, pp. 82–104.

[20] Plotinus, *Enneads*, VI.9.4, VI, p. 315.

[21] See R. Arnou, *Praxis et Theoria. Étude de détail sur le vocabulaire et la pensée des Ennéades de Plotin*, Paris, 1921, p. 12.

τοῦτον βλέπει, ταὐτῷ δὲ ἑαυτόν): that is, it is as Intellect he sees himself (ὡς δὴ οὖν Νοῦς ἑαυτὸν ὁρᾷ)'.[22]

In this complex system, in which the metaphysics and the vocabulary of vision predominate, Ficino does not always follow Plotinus's linguistic choices. This is hardly surprising given that the Latin verb *contemplare*, which is normally used to translate the Greek θεωρεῖν, is by no means sufficient to convey the manifold meanings which the Greek verb has in Plotinus. Likewise, *videre*, which is used to translate both βλέπειν and ὁρᾶν, is inadequate to express the super-intellectual act of vision by which the soul becomes identified with the One. Consequently, Ficino translates the same verb in different ways: θεωρεῖν becomes: *videre*, *perspicere*, *intueri* and *contemplare*; βλέπειν becomes *videre*, *aspicere*, *respicere*, *inspicere* and, finally, *intueri*; and ὁρᾶν is translated as *perspicere* and *intueri*.

An example of how Ficino's linguistic choices can be, at times, more faithful to the spirit than to the letter of the text, as Lloyd P. Gerson would have it,[23] is found in his translation of a passage from *Enneads* V.3.5, which follows immediately after the one quoted above. Here Plotinus describes the inward process by which the man who has become Nous understands himself in terms of a progressive self-visualization. True knowledge, he says, happens only when the man becomes able to see himself as one and the same as the Nous and not as an external and separate object contained by it:

> Tum vero, quisnam est, qui dividit? Num forte, qui in eo se ordine ponit, in quo est videre (ἐν τῷ θεωρεῖν), an potius, qui in eo, quod est videri (ἐν τῷ θεωρεῖσθαι)? At vero quomodo videns (ὁ θεωρῶν) ille cognoscet se ipsum, dum secundum ipsum videre (θεωρεῖν), se in eius gradu constituit, quod videtur? Non enim in ipso viso inest videre (οὐ γαρ ἦν ἐν τῷ θεωρουμενῳ τὸ θεωρεῖν). An cognoscens ita se ipsum potius tanquam visum, quam tanquam videntem, considerabit? Ideoque neque omnem, neque totum se ipsum animadvertet. Quem enim novit, hunc quidem visum (θεωρούμενον), sed non videntem (θεωρῶν) novit, atque ita non se ipsum, sed alium potius intuebitur (ἑωρακώς). Sed numquid per se adiunget ipsum quoque videntem, ut se ipsum perfecte comprehendat? Verum si complectitur et videntem, simul quoque visa complectitur. Si igitur in ipsa perspectione (ἐν τῇ θεωρία) perspectae res (τὰ τεθεωρημένα) continentur, quaeritur, numquid rerum figurae, an res ipsae contineantur. Si figurae tantum, res ipsae non possidentur: sin autem hae possidentur, certe, qui eas perspicit, non ex eo, quod se ipsum diviserit, habet: sed erat etiam antequam se divideret, et contemplator (θεωρῶν) et possidens. Si res ita se habet, oportet contemplationem (θεωρία) idem esse cum ipso (ut ita

[22] Plotinus, *Enneads*, V.3.4, V, p. 85.

[23] See n. 8 above.

> dixerim) contemplabili (θεωρητός), et intellectum intelligibili similiter idem: alioquin, si non sit idem, non erit contemplatio vera.[24]

By exploiting the linguistic resources of Latin, Ficino does justice to the relationship between words and their philosophical context, as well as to the wide semantic range of Plotinus's verbs. Θεωρεῖν, for example, is first translated as *videre*; and then, a few lines later, θεωρία becomes *perspectio*, which conveys in a very powerful way the idea of 'seeing through' or 'examining' the object of vision. A little further on, θεωρῶν is translated as *contemplator*, θεωρία as *contemplatio* and θεωρητός as *contemplabilis*. As I have indicated, for Plotinus θεωρεῖν is the discerning look of reason which investigates and examines the object of knowledge from top to bottom (*perspicit*), but it is also the highest reach of the intellect, when it is able to draw on the self-knowledge of the Nous. On the other hand, the verb ἑωρακώς (the perfect participle of ὁρᾶν) is translated as *intuebitur*, which describes the immediacy of the perception of the divine through intuition. To get across the idea of the divine contemplation of the Nous from within, Plotinus employs the verb βλέπειν, which refers to the physiological ability to see and expresses the simplicity of sight as an act of sense perception. Paradoxically, precisely because of its irrelevance to cognitive life, in *Enneads* V.8.10 βλέπειν is used to describe the simple act of perception through which the soul sees intelligible beauty. In Ficino's Latin *Enneads*, however, the different degrees of intensity of this vision are gradually revealed through four different translations of the verb βλέπειν:

> Qui tanquam externum aliquid aspicit (βλέπει), idcirco velut externum, quia tanquam visibile respicit (βλέπει), et quia sic videre constituit. Quicquid autem aliquis intuetur (βλέπει) ut spectandum, extra videt (βλέπει): verum operae

[24] Plotinus, *Enneades cum Marsilii Ficini interpretatione castigata*, ed. F. Creuzer and G. H. Moser, Paris, 1855 (hereafter Plotinus, *Enneades cum Ficini interpretatione castigata*), p. 313. See Plotinus, *Enneads*, V.3.5, V, p. 85: 'And who is the divider? The one who sets himself on the contemplating or on the contemplated side? Then, how will the contemplator know himself in the contemplated when he has set himself on the contemplating side? For the contemplating is not in the contemplated. Knowing himself in this way, he will know himself as contemplated but not as contemplating; so that he will not know himself completely or as a whole; for what he saw, he saw as contemplated but not as contemplating: and so he will have been seeing another, but not himself. Or perhaps he will add from himself the one who has contemplated, in order that he may have perfect knowledge of himself. But if he adds the one who has contemplated, he at the same time adds what he sees. If then the things contemplated are in the contemplation, if what are in it are impressions of them, then it does not have them themselves; but if it has them themselves it does not see them as a result of dividing itself, but it was contemplator and possessor before it divided itself. But if tis is so, the contemplation must be the same as the contemplated, and Intellect the same as the intelligible; for, if not the same, there will be no truth' ('καὶ ὁ μερίζων δὲ τίς; ὁ ἐν τῷ θεωρεῖν τάττων ἑαυτὸν ἢ ὁ ἐν τῷ θεωρεῖσθαι; εἶτα πῶς ἑαυτὸν γνώσεται ὁ θεωρῶν ἐν τῷ θεωρουμένῳ τάξας ἑαυτὸν κατὰ τὸ θεωρεῖν; οὐ γὰρ ἦν ἐν τῷ θεωρουμένῳ τὸ θεωρεῖν. ἢ γνοὺς ἑαυτὸν οὕτω θεωρούμενον ἀλλ' οὐ θεωροῦντα νοήσει· ὥστε οὐ πάντα οὐδὲ ὅλον γνώσεται ἑαυτόν· ὃν γὰρ εἶδε, θεωρούμενον ἀλλ' οὐ θεωροῦντα εἶδε· καὶ οὕτως ἔσται ἄλλον, ἀλλ' οὐχ ἑαυτὸν ἑωρακώς. ἢ προσθήσει παρ' αὐτοῦ καὶ τὸν τεθεωρηκότα, ἵνα τέλεον αὐτὸν ᾖ νενοηκώς. ἀλλ' εἰ καὶ τὸν τεθεωρηκότα, ὁμοῦ καὶ τὰ ἑωραμένα. εἰ οὖν ἐν τῇ θεωρίᾳ ὑπάρχει τὰ τεθεωρημένα, εἰ μὲν τύποι αὐτῶν, οὐκ αὐτὰ ἔχει· εἰ δ' αὐτὰ ἔχει, οὐκ ἰδὼν αὐτὰ ἐκ τοῦ μερίσαι αὐτὸν ἔχει, ἀλλ' ἦν πρὶν μερίσαι ἑαυτὸν καὶ θεωρῶν καὶ ἔχων. Εἰ τοῦτο, δεῖ τὴν θεωρίαν ταὐτὸν εἶναι τῷ θεωρητῷ, καὶ τὸν νοῦν ταὐτὸν εἶναι τῷ νοητῷ· καὶ γάρ, εἰ μὴ ταὐτόν, οὐκ ἀλήθεια ἔσται·).

> pretium est in se ipsum iam spectaculum transferre, divinum ac velut unum prorsus inspicere (βλέπειν), et tanquam se ipsum penitus intueri (βλέπειν).[25]

Ficino's concerns with unpacking the semantic variety of βλέπειν into differently nuanced verbs results in a beautifully structured account of the various paths by which the soul ascends from the knowledge of an external reality to self-knowledge and, finally, to a complete identity with the divine Nous. Through his lexical choices he brings out the subtlety of the original text, in which the shift towards greater interiority relied on the prepositions and other syntactic features which accompanied the occurrences of βλέπειν. Moreover, in Plotinus, the dynamic continuity in the process of ascent is suggested by the retention of a single verb, which, in Ficino's version, persists in the Latin root *spicere*.

When reading Ficino's translation, however, it is always important to bear in mind that, as a humanist, he was as keen on the clarity and elegance of his text as he was on the persuasiveness of the philosophical message. His linguistic choices were often influenced by his efforts to produce both a polished text – for example, by avoiding repetitions of words – and a faithful translation. After all, as Jill Kraye has rightly observed 'the humanists' fondness for elegant variation led them to be inconsistent in their translation of technical terms'.[26] Combining attention to producing elegant prose with philosophical awareness, Ficino remodelled the structure of Plotinus's speech by squeezing out the connotations of his words. In Plotinus's description of the soul's perception of divine beauty, for example, the single verb βλέπειν contained different levels of ontological and epistemological perfection; Ficino, in his translation, unveils these meanings through a careful selection of verbs, so that βλέπειν becomes *aspicere* and then *respicere*. In the next sentence, it is translated as *inspicere* and then as *intueri*. In the first sentence, *aspicere* refers to the critical examination of an external reality, which implies a strong distinction between the subject and the object of vision. This is a stage in which the soul lacks full awareness, for it 'looks at' beauty without knowing that it possesses beauty, mistaking beauty for something external. *Respicere*, in the following line, refers to a longer, more relaxed gaze of the soul, which lingers on beauty before becoming aware that it is not outside, but inside itself. *Respicere* means 'to look attentively', but also 'to look back' and 'to care for'. In this second stage, therefore, for Ficino, the soul's attention to beauty is more persistent; it looks back to it a second time and, so to speak, cares for it. After having seen beauty as an external reality (*aspicere*) and having looked back at it (*respicere*), the soul transfers that divine sight to itself and finally sees beauty in its complete unity. This inner look, which grasps the unitary and inward nature of the divine, is conveyed by the verb *inspicere*, that is, 'to look within'. Finally, this act of self-visualization reveals

[25] Plotinus, *Enneades cum Ficini interpretatione castigata*, p. 358. See Plotinus, *Enneads*, V.8.10, V, p. 273: '[the keen sighted] looks at it as if it were outside because he looks at it as if it was something seen, and because he wants to look at it. But one looks from outside at everything one looks at as a spectacle. But one must transport what one sees into oneself, and look at it as one and look at it as oneself' ('καὶ ὡς ἔξω ὂν βλέπει, ὅτι ὡς ὁρώμενον βλέπει καὶ ὅτι θέλει βλέπειν. Πᾶν δὲ ὅ τις ὡς θεατὸν βλέπει ἔξω βλέπει. Ἀλλὰ χρὴ εἷς αὐτὸν ἤδη μεταφέρειν καὶ βλέπειν ὡς ἓν καὶ βλέπειν ὡς αὐτόν').

[26] J. Kraye, 'Philologists and Philosophers', in *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism*, ed. J. Kraye, Cambridge, 1996, pp. 142–60 (143).

the identity between the soul and the Nous, expressed with the verb *intueri*. This is a significant example of how Ficino, throughout his commentary, is able to give a compelling account of the increasing sophistication of knowledge which, in Plotinus, occurs through ascending levels of vision: from the inquiring look of reason, which examines the object in all its different parts and then subsumes these parts under a unitary representation, to the longer and more intense gaze of the intellect, which is already able to grasp images of divine life, and finally to the super-intellectual perception of the One, which takes place in the obscurity of the inner life, after the soul has blocked out the world of the senses and even that of the mind.

In *Enneads* V.3.10 Plotinus makes clear that seeing is an activity of the 'multiple' (πολύς) Nous, which 'sees' exactly because of its internal dual structure, comprising a seer and a seen.[27] Hence, to see is a manifestation of the *Nous*'s striving and yearning nature and it 'must necessarily be a seer, and a seer of that other, and its seeing is its substance'.[28] The One, by contrast, has no need to see (οὐδὲν δεῖται ὁράσεως),[29] for in it nothing is desired or wanted. As a consequence, the soul's vision of intellectual beauty and its perception of the One are two profoundly different experiences. The former implies the unification of the contemplator and the contemplated within the soul's inner space, which nevertheless still relies on the duality and separation which are integral to noetic life. Likewise, the soul's identification with the Nous through self-knowledge, described in *Enneads* V.3.5, attains a unity which is not yet free from the manifold nature of thinking. It is only when the soul 'suddenly takes light' that it sees the One, after it has let go of any shred of thought. In *Enneads* V.3.7 Plotinus uses the verb θεᾶσθαι, a derivative of θεωρεῖν, to describe this experience:

> This is the soul's true end, to touch that light and see (θεᾶσθαι) it by itself, not by another light, but by the light which is also its means of seeing.[30]

Θεᾶσθαι can be translated as 'to gaze' or 'to have a vision', and it has a semantic nuance which is slightly different from θεωρεῖν, for it describes a form of contemplation in which the object is simply 'seen' rather than critically inspected. Hence, θεᾶσθαι accurately expresses the suddenness of the soul's vision of the One, which, as A. H. Armstrong explains: 'is not something one can plan for or bring about when one wishes'.[31] Ficino does not seem to detect this subtle semantic difference and translates θεᾶσθαι as *perspicere*, in which, as I said above, lurks the idea of 'seeing through' or critically examining the object of vision. Ficino's

[27] See J. Bussanich, *The One and Its Relation to Intellect in Plotinus*, Leiden and New York, 1988, p. 222.

[28] Plotinus, *Enneads*, V.3.10, V, p. 105.

[29] Ibid. See Ficino's translation: 'Non enim [unum] indiget visionem', in Plotinus, *Enneades cum Ficini interpretatione castigata*, p. 320. See also Plotinus, *Enneads*, III.8.11, III, p. 399: 'For if it [i.e., Nous] was itself the Good, why would it have to see, or to be active at all?'; and see M. L. Gatti, *Plotino e la metafisica della contemplazione*, Milan, 1996, p. 43.

[30] Plotinus, *Enneads*, V.3.17, V, p. 135: 'Καὶ τοῦτο τὸ τέλος τἀληθινὸν ψυχῇ, ἐφάψασθαι φωτὸς ἐκείνου καὶ αὐτῷ αὐτὸ θεάσασθαι, οὐκ ἄλλου φωτί, ἀλλ' αὐτό, δι' οὗ καὶ ὁρᾷ.'

[31] Ibid., p. 135, n. 1.

translation of this passage is, however, quite curious, as he inserts two Latin verbs which are not in the original Greek text:

> Hic finis est animo verus, lumen scilicet illius accipere, et ipsum ipso perspicere, non alterius, inquam, lumine contueri, sed per ipsummet aspicere, per quod et suspicit.[32]

Whereas in Plotinus the action in the sentence is described by the single verb θεᾶσθαι, in Ficino's translation it is first expressed by *perspicere* and then reiterated through the use of *contueri* and *aspicere.* Despite the shade of difference between *contueri* and the other two verbs, it seems to me that here Ficino is more concerned with producing a clear and elegant translation of a particularly elliptical passage than trying to unpack the meaning of θεᾶσθαι. Likewise, his translation of ὁρᾷ as *suspicit* in the following line can be seen as an example of stylistic variation. One should not forget that, for Ficino, the lucidity and elegance of the Latin text was as great a concern as the rendering of philosophical concepts.[33]

To go back to the intrinsic difference between the soul's 'vision' of Nous and its 'vision' of the One, Ficino is keen to point out the disagreement of Plotinus's position with the Christian tradition, in which the 'first intellect' (*intellectum primum*) has an intrinsically unitary nature. 'The Christians', he says 'demonstrate that the first intellect does not have this plurality of forms, since by understanding everything through a single form of its own and in a single act (as long as it makes itself variably shareable in everything) it places the plurality [of forms] outside, not within itself.'[34]

Admittedly, in his Christianizing interpretation, Ficino tended to merge the soul's experience of the Nous and that of the One. Like Plotinus, however, he believed that the soul's union with the divine, the *visio Dei*, could only take place beyond the reach of human intelligence. The idea that sight was turned off during experiences of super-intellectual wakefulness or episodes of divine rapture was not unusual. In fact, mystical experiences of this kind were thought to imply the soul's sudden disentanglement from the visible species coming from the material world. Biblical characters who were said to have seen God had been blinded by the intense light and, as argued by Michael Allen, Ficino regarded Moses's encounter with God on Mount Sinai as the most sublime example of the soul's ascent to the divine. This encounter took place in a 'mystical obscurity', in which Moses knew nothing, in the sense that he had ascended above the level of human knowledge. The God of Ficino

[32] Plotinus, *Enneades cum Ficini interpretatione castigata*, p. 326.

[33] For a few other examples of Ficino's translation of θεᾶσθαι in *Enneads* III and V, see V.8.1 (*perspicere*), V.V.6 (*contemplari*), and III.8.11 (*contueri*), in Plotinus, *Enneades cum Ficini interpretatione castigata*, pp. 349, 335 and 189 respectively.

[34] Plotinus, *Enneades cum Ficini interpretatione castigata*, p. 318: 'Christiani vero probant intellectum primum talem formarum multitudinem non habere, quoniam per unam sui formam unoque actu intelligens omnia, quatenus se varie participabilem ad omnia refert, multitudinem non in se ipso, sed extra disponat.'

cannot be intellectually comprehended, for he is beyond comprehension; he can only be loved and worshipped with prayers.[35]

For both Plotinus and Ficino, then, the soul's grasp of divine beauty is beyond knowledge as well as beyond sense experience, as it transcends the fragmentation of the embodied life. βλέπειν conveyed the wholeness and immediacy of the soul's union with higher realities, which transcends knowledge – and, to a still greater degree, language. This highest form of vision is described by Ficino with the verb 'intueri', as in the closing lines of *Enneads* V.8.10, which tells the story of how souls, once they are penetrated by divine beauty, no longer see this beauty as an external object, but as an inner presence:

> Ceu si quis occupatus a deo, seu Phoebo, sive Musa potissimum aliqua raptus, in se ipso dei ipsius intuitum iam efficiat, si quidem in se ipso deum valeat intueri.[36]

Whereas Plotinus here refers to the pagan god Phoebus and had devoted the first part of the chapter to Zeus and his ways of contemplating beauty, Ficino, even though he translates the passage impeccably, has the God of Christianity in mind. Both philosophers, nevertheless, believed that divinity makes itself visible not to the soul which uses its eyes, but only to that which has reached a state of contemplative wakefulness in which it sees in darkness. The forms of language, being so closely dependent on the shadowy nature of matter, were not enough to describe the soul's union with the Nous or Ficino's *visio Dei*. βλέπειν and 'intueri' did a fair job of conveying the sense of an immediate perception which happens both before and beyond discursive reasoning, but Plotinus's potent metaphysical images ultimately remained free from the constraints of linguistic expression, in Greek as well as in Latin.

[35] M. J. B. Allen, 'Dove le ombre non hanno ombre: Marsilio Ficino e l'ascesa al Sinai', *Rinascimento*, 49, 2009, pp. 15–26 (24). See also Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, X.6.5, transl. M. J. B. Allen and ed. J. Hankins with B. Bowen, 6 vols, Cambridge MA and London, 2001–2006 (hereafter Ficino, *Platonic Theology*), III, p. 168: 'Quid quod philosophica mens intuetur in universo et in seipsa cognitionem quandam angelicam et divinam a simulacris liberam?' Cf. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man: A New Translation and Commentary*, ed. F. Borghesi et al., Cambridge, 2012, p. 160: 'Tum ad ea et ipsi admissi, nunc superioris Dei regiae multicolorem, idest sydereum aulicum ornatum, nunc caeleste candelabrum septem luminibus distinctum, nunc pellicea elementa, in philosophiae sacerdotio contemplentur, ut postremo per theologicae sublimitatis merita in templi adita recepti, nullo imaginis intercedente velo, divinitatis gloria perfruantur.' See A. Corrias, 'When the Eyes Are Shut: The Strange Case of Girolamo Cardano's *Idolum* in *Somniorum Synesiorum Libri IIII* (1562)', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 79.2, 2018, pp. 179–97 (194).

[36] Plotinus, *Enneades cum Ficini interpretatione castigata*, p. 358. See Plotinus, *Enneads*, V.8.10, V, p. 273: 'As if someone possessed by a god, taken over by Phoebus or one of the Muses, could bring about the vision of the god in himself, if he had the power to look at the god in himself' ('ὥσπερ εἴ τις ὑπὸ θεοῦ κατασχεθεὶς φοιβόληπτος ἢ ὑπό τινος Μούσης ἐν αὑτῷ ἂν ποιοῖτο τοῦ θεοῦ τὴν θέαν, εἰ δύναμιν ἔχοι ἐν αὑτῷ θεὸν βλέπειν'). See also Ficino, *Platonic Theology,* IX.13.4, III, p. 20: 'Dei faciem rursus intueri desideras? Mundum conspice universum, solis lumine plenum.'

The Wide World of Plotinus's θεωρία

Going back to Plotinus's manifold and often equivocal use of words and to his interpretation of θεωρεῖν, it needs to be said that in the *Enneads* θεωρία does not belong exclusively to the domain of philosophical reflection or contemplative wakeness, but is performed at different levels, reaching all the way down to the production and maintenance of natural phenomena:

> Now let us talk about the earth itself, and trees, and plants in general, and ask what their contemplation (θεωρία) is, and how we can relate what the earth makes and produces to its activity of contemplation, and how nature, which people say has no power of forming mental images or reasoning, has contemplation in itself and makes what it makes by contemplation, which it does not have.[37]

Startling as it may be, Plotinus claims that θεωρία is not the sole prerogative of human beings and that even Nature occupies itself in a endless form of contemplation that 'is silent but somewhat blurred'.[38] As Hadot puts it: 'Life itself, at every level, is contemplation – a violent, yet highly Plotinian paradox.'[39] Given this fact, for Plotinus biological processes involving the emergence and development of natural organisms such as animals and plants are speculative activities in every respect. He goes so far as to imagine that if someone were to ask Nature in which respect she is said to contemplate, she would reply:

> What comes into being is what I see in my silence, an object of contemplation which comes to be naturally, and that I, originating from this sort of contemplation have a contemplative nature. And my act of contemplation makes what it contemplates, as the geometers draw their figures while they contemplate. But I do not draw, but as I contemplate, the lines which bound bodies come to be as if they feel from my contemplation.[40]

Θεωρία, ultimately, is nature – or the soul – being driven by the compelling desire to reach outside itself and generate new life; it is the need of being to transcend itself, its essential necessity of becoming 'production', on an intellectual as well as on a material level. As Christian Wildberg has shrewdly observed, in this context θεωρία can be understood as 'an anticipation of the discovery of the genetic code and the

[37] Plotinus, *Enneads*, III.8.1, III, p. 363.

[38] Ibid., III.8.4, III, p. 371. See D. Calouri, *Plotinus on the Soul*, Cambridge, 2015, pp. 61–8; C. Wildberg, 'A World of Thoughts: Plotinus on Nature and Contemplation', in *Physics and Philosophy of Nature in Greek Neoplatonism*, ed. R. Chiaradonna and F. Trabattoni, Leiden and Boston, 2009, pp. 121–43. On Plotinus's view of the contemplation of nature, see K. Corrigan, *Reading Plotinus: A Practical Introduction to Neoplatonism*, West Lafayette, 2005, pp. 120–122; J. N. Deck, *Nature, Contemplation and the One: A Study in the Philosophy of Plotinus*, Toronto, 1967, especially pp. 64–72; M. L. Gatti, 'Plotinus: The Platonic Tradition and the Foundation of Neoplatonism', in *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, ed. L. P. Gerson, Cambridge, 1996, pp. 10–37 (33–4).

[39] Hadot, *Plotinus or The Simplicity of Vision* (n. 16 above), p. 42.

[40] Plotinus, *Enneads*, III.8.4, III, p. 369.

mechanisms by which it is translated into features of the living cell'.[41] Just as the genetic makeup of an individual presupposes a 'reading' or a 'decoding' inherent in his or her biological structure, so the creation, maintenance and alteration of phenomena in the physical world involves Nature's understanding of the mechanisms underlying its own work. This understanding is not a form of conscious knowledge, but instead the ability to read, retain and process information in an effective way, aimed at the emergence of the sensible world. In this sense, Plotinus's view of contemplation can be seen as an exquisitely philosophical instance of the intimate relationship between θεωρία and πρᾶξις discussed by Andrea Wilson Nightingale in her *Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy: 'Theoria' in Its Cultural Context*.[42] In fact, despite his characteristic inclination towards lofty metaphysics, Plotinus seems to push the relationship between θεωρία and πρᾶξις described by Nightingale a step further when he establishes an active relationship of causality between θεωρία and ποίησις, which can be seen as the productive side of πρᾶξις. In short, for Plotinus θεωρία is at every level a poietic act, which involves 'the birthpain of creating many forms and many things to contemplate and filling all things with rational principles, and a kind of endless contemplation, for creating is bringing a form into being, and this is filling all things with contemplation'.[43]

Ficino is well aware of Plotinus's equivocal use of θεωρία, and when commenting on *Enneads* III.8, he seems to feel the urge to clarify its contextual meaning to his readers. He explains that the essential activity of Nature as well as Nature's own being – in which to know, to be and to generate are one and the same thing – is called *intuitus* (θεωρία) 'by a certain metaphorical usage (*translatione quadam*), this intuition not being acquired at some point but naturally fixed in Nature'.[44] He goes on to say that at this level:

> [Nature] does not seek something, but possesses it from the start. It does not notice something in itself but is senseless, so to speak, as those who are astonished are wont to be senseless. Perhaps it is a sense of this kind that some writers attribute to plants, for it is the 'plant' of the entire universe enjoying a life of its own and conceiving natural things by means of a certain quiescent and substantial sense that it has.[45]

The contemplative act of Nature is 'a noiseless sense (*sine strepitu sensum*)', completely absorbed in its own being and unconcerned with the outside world, just as described by Orpheus in his 'Hymns to Nature'.[46] In this silent and detached

[41] Wildberg, 'A World of Thoughts' (n. 38 above), p. 134. See Calouri, *Plotinus on the Soul*, (n. 38 above), p. 65.

[42] See n. 18 above.

[43] Plotinus, *Enneads*, III.8.7, III, p. 383.

[44] Ficino, *Commentary on Plotinus*, transl. and ed. S. Gersh, I Tatti Renaissance Library, Cambridge MA, 2017– (hereafter Ficino, *Commentary on Plotinus*), III.8.4.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid. See Orpheus, *The Mystical Hymns,* X, transl. Thomas Taylor, London 1896, 31: 'To all things common and to all things known, yet incommunicable and alone'.

gaze, completely turned inward and occupied in designing and producing the primordial acts of life, Nature's silent sense can be seen as a form of instinctive knowledge or a simple act of intuition: 'In nature to "intuit" (*intueri*) is nothing other than to be (*esse*) of such a kind and to do (*facere*) a certain thing of such a kind.'[47] We have seen that in his translation of *Enneads* V.8.10 Ficino used the verb *intueri* to translate βλέπειν, that is, the soul's contemplation of the divine Nous. Here, at the opposite end of the scale of being, he uses again *intueri* to translate θεωρεῖν which, this time, refers to the processes behind the primordial makeup of the visible universe. At this level of purely organic life, Nature produces material forms by an unconscious act in which, as Ficino points out, contemplation (θεωρεῖν) becomes an activity as effortless as existence itself.

Thus, Ficino uses *intueri* to describe a state which is beyond the highest as well as the lowest reaches of conscious experience. In *Enneads* V.8.10, the soul *intuetur* when it sees the Nous as an actual presence and not as an external object, which is the prelude to the intuition of the One in mystical obscurity; in *Enneads* III.8.2 Nature *intuetur* when it produces visible forms in the noiseless life of the earth, plants and minerals.[48] One must bear in mind that in Plotinus the soul which has rejoined the Nous 'sees' (βλέπει), whereas Nature, when it handcrafts the variety of organic and inorganic forms, 'contemplates' (θεωρεῖ). Plotinus uses two different verbs because, for him, the self-evidence and sufficiency of the Nous – which is 'all at once' and beyond inferential thought – can be better described by the verb βλέπειν, expressing the immediacy and simplicity of perception.[49] The contemplation of Nature, by contrast, involves a bustling, though effortless, activity aimed at the production of forms, even though Plotinus believes that Nature already possesses the forms it produces.[50] It is clear that in dealing with Plotinus's idea of unconscious intuition, Ficino proves his exceptional translation and exegetical skills: the verb *intueri*, which he chooses, does justice both to the soul's 'sight' of the Nous and Nature's 'contemplation'; for both are – though at diametrically opposite metaphysical levels – beyond discursive thinking.

For Plotinus, the contemplation of Nature is a reflection of divine contemplation, and the different levels of theoretical activity in the universe are metaphysically connected. In the *Enneads* the emergence and organization of the sensible world through Nature's formative principle reflect the orderly design of the divine *intuitus*, which reveals its greatness in the wonders produced by the 'living contemplation' (θεωρία ζῶσα, *contemplatio vivens* in Ficino's Latin) of Nature.[51] Divine contemplation shapes and crafts material forms as well as natural processes, leaving its mark on the striking beauty and rationality of what it makes:

[47] Ficino, *Commentary on Plotinus*, III.8.4.

[48] θεώρημα and θέαμα are other two derivatives of θεωρεῖν which occur several times in *Enneads* III.8. Surprisingly enough, Ficino is consistent in their translation as *contemplamen* and *spectamen* respectively.

[49] See E. K. Emilsson, *Plotinus on Intellect*, Oxford, 2007, pp. 181–3.

[50] See Plotinus, *Enneads*, III.8.3, III, p. 369: 'But nature possesses, and just because it possesses, it also makes.'

[51] See Plotinus *Enneads* III.8.8, III, p. 384. For Ficino's translation see Plotinus, *Enneades cum Ficini interpretatione castigata*, p. 184.

> And since it [i.e., Nature] makes as though with a certain intuition (*intuitus*) and sign (*spectamen*), that which is produced in matter can be described as a spectacle (*spectaculum*). In addition, what is produced can be called a sign of nature (*spectamen naturae*), in the way that we are accustomed to say of a child that the mark (*signum*) engendered in it is somehow the concupiscence and imagination of its mother.[52]

In commenting on *Enneads* III.8, Ficino stresses the fact that in this unremitting process of contemplation which characterizes the life of the universe, all levels of being are harmoniously connected:

> Plotinus envisions the following four terms: Intellect, intellectual soul, Nature and Matter, as four lenses placed in a row. The intelligences of the first intellect pass from there through soul, Nature and Matter in a certain continuity of conformity as do the rays from the sun: this in order that one can speak of the rays and of the intelligences in the subsequent and last terms as being the same as they were in the previous terms although declining gradually and sequentially from their prior dignity. Indeed, since the contemplation of the first intellect, being thereafter a certain contemplation in soul and nature, is the causal principle of natural things, then certainly contemplation is the end of all things.[53]

Ficino's main concern, though, was not the similarity of higher and lower forms of contemplation, but the divine design which this similarity revealed. This design, for him, corresponded to divine providence. He explains that the contemplation of non-rational living beings, including plants, was nothing but an imitation of the contemplation of divine providence, which 'steers all things towards the most exquisite beauty, when in the total disposition of things it has no less, but indeed more, concern for adornment than necessity'.[54] By contemplating, Nature reflects divine perfection in the material forms it produces; the soul, by looking inward, is able to ascend towards 'the discovery of the very art of the divine mind, and towards the contemplation of its beauty (*eiusdem pulchritudinem contemplandam*).'[55] In this sense, θεωρεῖν was an all-encompassing activity which bonded together God, the human soul and Nature in an endless act of production and reproduction of intellectual as well as of natural forms. In a famous passage from the third book of his *De vita,* Ficino claims that: 'Everywhere Nature is a sorceress', for she has the ability to give life to and shape matter with a miraculous perfection, reproducing the divine in the natural world.[56] The beauty and perfection of Nature, designed according to the forms of the divine θεωρία, enticed the soul to turn inward upon itself and, to use a highly Plotinian metaphor, to rejoin God with its eyes closed. This was, for Ficino, the ultimate goal of the *vita contemplativa* and of the 'flights of

[52] Ficino, *Commentary on Plotinus*, III.8.4. I have slightly modified Gersh's translation.

[53] Ibid., III.8.6.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Marsilio Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, transl. and ed. C. V. Kaske and J. R. Clark, Binghamton, 1989, p. 385.

the alone to the alone', as Michael Allen, quoting Plotinus, defines Ficino's view of mystical alienations.[57] In the *Platonic Theology*, the final destination of the soul's divine flight is presented as an experience which was described by saints and Platonists alike:

> The mind of the complete theologian he [i.e., John the Evangelist] describes as 'gold refined by fire'. For just as gold is clad with the form of fire, and through it grows hot and becomes more refined and lustrous, so the mind clad in the ideas of the divine mind, through them waxes bright with the light of truth and blazes up with the fuel of goodness. Paul the Apostle too tells us that the mind that contemplates things divine is renewed every day, and is changed into the same likeness with God, and becomes one spirit with Him. Trismegistus similarly says that from pure mind and divinity there coalesces in a way one spirit. And all Platonists support the view that, in the contemplation of rational principles, the divine reason is 'touched' by a substantial, not just by an imaginary, touching of the mind; and that the unity proper to the mind is joined to God, the unity of all things, in a manner beyond our conception.[58]

In this passage the emphasis is on God's action and 'touch' rather than on the soul's inner potentiality to become divine and on its own ability to ascend to higher states of being. It is God, Ficino makes clear, who ultimately makes the soul pure, as fire does with gold. Indeed, just as, for him, the orderly correspondence of different levels of contemplative life in the universe depended on the design of divine providence, so the *visio Dei* relied on divine grace. He believed that the human intellect alone 'never entirely understands the immense fullness of the divine light brimming over in God's absolute nature, since that nature far exceeds its own capacity'.[59] In the *Enneads*, of course, there is nothing like an operation of divine influence in the soul, directly inspiring it to rise up the metaphysical ladder. In fact, for Plotinus the soul's participation in divine nature was the well-deserved reward for the soul which had managed, all on its own, to become detached and purified from the body. For Ficino, by contrast, this participation was a gift which could only be granted from above. The soul could, no doubt, become godlike, but it would always remain a *creatura*.[60]

Conceptual and doctrinal differences with Plotinus, however, did not undermine Ficino's Latin translation of the *Enneads*, which achieves an extraordinarily high

[57] See M. J. B. Allen, *The Platonism of Marsilio Ficino:A Study in His Phaedrus Commentary, Its Sources and Genesis*, Berkeley etc., 1984, p. 59; see also p. 60, where Allen explains: 'For the Pauline and Plotinian flights, and possibly subsequent mystical ecstasies in the medieval tradition (though Ficino never explicitly adverts to these), were at the heart of what he deemed the Platonic, and ultimately perhaps the Mosaic, vision, either of the Ideas or of the One and the Good ineffably beyond them'. See Plotinus, *Enneads*, VI.9.11. On the *vita contemplativa* in Ficino and on divine contemplation, see P. O. Kristeller, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, New York, 1943, pp. 218–30, and id., *Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters*, 4 vols, Rome, 1969, IV, p. 209.

[58] Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, XII.2.3, IV, p. 29. See Book of Revelation 3:18; and Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, IV, p. 345, n. 32.

[59] Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, XVIII.8.5, VI, p. 127.

[60] See Jörg Lauster, 'Marsilio Ficino as a Christian Thinker', in *Marsilio Ficino: His Philosophy, His Theology, His Legacy*, ed. M. J. B. Allen and V. Rees, with M. Davies, Leiden, 2002, pp. 45–69 (67).

level of accuracy and fluency without modifying Plotinus's ideas or simplifying his dense style. By combining his mastery of Greek with a strong philosophical acumen, Ficino achieved deep insights into the questions posed by Plotinus's text, on a philosophical as well as on a linguistic level.

As Henri Dominique Saffrey has observed, with the publication in 1492 of his translation and commentary on the *Enneads*, Plotinus made his reappearance in the Western world.[61] During the Middle Ages, European thinkers had no direct knowledge of the *Enneads*, although indirect access to Plotinus's ideas could be gained through the writings of Boethius, pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Ambrose, Augustine and Macrobius. By translating the *Enneads*, however, Ficino made the work available to his contemporaries in a Latin version which, as we have seen in the passages examined here, is very faithful to Plotinus's Greek. It was almost four centuries before a new translation was made; and scholars today still consult Ficino's version on account of its accuracy and transparency. An example of the high regard in which Ficino's textual and philosophical exegesis has been held by later scholars can be found in a note on *Enneads* III.8 in Friedrich Creuzer's and Georg Heinrich Moser's edition of the *Enneads*, published in 1835, which refers precisely to Ficino's interpretation of Plotinus's controversial concept of Nature's θεωρία:

> Now, if you ask how Plotinus understands this word [i.e., θεωρία] in his book, since he acknowledges that it applies also to the earth, plants and trees, I would be doing something already done if, after Marsilio Ficino's commentary, I wanted to go over the matter again.[62]

The role of Ficino as a translator still awaits detailed scholarly analysis. Nevertheless, it is clear that the different ways in which he translates the verbs βλέπειν, θεωρεῖν and ὁρᾶν are good examples of his remarkable exegetical skills. The 1492 Plotinus edition was a prodigious scholarly achievement, even though Ficino's approach as a translator differs profoundly from his approach as an interpreter, since his imposing commentary is far less faithful to Plotinus than his translation. Rather than being merely an expository work on the *Enneads*, the commentary is, in effect, a companion to late ancient Platonism, for it is deeply imbued with a variety of post-Plotinian elements such as speculative digressions on the nexus between human imagination and external demons and references to theurgy.[63] It brings together the philosophy of Plotinus and that of his late ancient successors. This was possible because, from Ficino's perspective – and from those of his Renaissance and early modern readers – Plotinus and the later Platonists were exponents of the same tradition. From a linguistic point of view, however, Ficino's

[61] Saffrey, 'Florence, 1492' (n. 10 above), p. 488.

[62] Plotinus, *Opera omnia*, ed. F. Creuzer and G. H. Moser, 3 vols, Oxford, 1835, III, p. 195: 'Iam, si quaeris, quomodo hoc ipso libro Plotinus accipiat hanc vocem, cum etiam θεωρίαν γῆς, φυτῶν, δένδρων agnoscat: actum agerem, si post Marsilii Ficini Commentarium hanc rem recolere vellem.'

[63] See C. Celenza, 'Late Antiquity and Florentine Platonism: The "Post-Plotinian" Ficino', in *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy*, ed. M. J. B. Allen and V. Rees, with M. Davies, Leiden, 2002, pp. 71–97.

lexical choices and prose impress the reader for their great fidelity to Plotinus's unique style of philosophical narrative.

During the almost thirty years which he spent on the laborious reading of Plotinus, Ficino must have eagerly explored the most secluded recesses of his text. When he finally started to translate the *Enneads* systematically in the 1480s, his knowledge of both Plotinus's metaphysics and his style of writing were solid enough to enable him to produce a painstakingly faithful and clear – yet philosophically sophisticated – Latin version, which preserved the density of meaning and expressive force of the Greek language. All those who have translated – or have attempted to translate – Plotinus will agree that almost every word in his text is a treasure trove of philosophical intuitions waiting to be unpacked. Ficino was the first, in the Renaissance, to gain access to these treasures, disclose their precious gems and distribute them to his readers with a masterly exercise of philosophical translation which, for centuries, remained the main point of reference for any inquiry into the depths and heights of Plotinus's metaphysics and of his writing style.

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