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**Marsilio Ficino, On Dionysius the Areopagite,
edited and translated by Michael J. B. Allen**

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Marsilio Ficino,
ON DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE,
edited and translated by Michael J. B. Allen,
The I Tatti Renaissance Library, Cambridge, MA, and London:
Harvard University Press, 2015, Vol. I, 592 pages, Vol. II, 598 pages.*

“It pleases [us] to wander
a little further in through these matters,
however, again in the Platonic manner.”¹

What follows is a presentation of the scope and context of Marsilio Ficino’s late fifteenth-century translation of and commentary on Dionysius the Areopagite’s *Mystical Theology* and *The Divine Names*. At the end of his life, Ficino undertook this extensive project on two foundational texts of apophatic theology in an ultimate attempt to synthesize Platonic theory and Christian revelation. The result is a momentous testimony. Its translation from Latin into English this year for the first time by the leading Ficino scholar Michael J. B. Allen accounts in turn for the topicality of this review. Instead of an impossible valuation of Allen’s translation and scholarship, attested not in a single edition but in the totality of his life and work,

I wish to trace the contours of a genealogy indispensable to the understanding of Ficino’s work. I will consider first the historic and theological significance of the pseudonymous author who came to be known as Dionysius; then I will turn to Ficino’s encounter with the Areopagite.

Nine centuries after the inception of Platonic thought, the most profound and truly manifold intellectual endeavour of the pagan world was transformed in the texts of Pseudo-Dionysius into a constitutional body of theological principles. One thousand years later, Marsilio Ficino’s translation and commentary on the Areopagite appeared, which recast the latter’s thought and inaugurated an era of transformative reappraisals of Dionysius.

Already in this handful of summary lines a historic stratification becomes apparent, akin to the dramatic structure of some of the most elaborate Platonic dialogues, vesting a narrative within another, while, in this hall of mirrors, no deficit of immediacy veils the original. Yet what, except perhaps the very urgency of thought, is the *original*? Where does the text at hand begin? The reader shares this question with the author, or indeed the authors, whose inscriptions create a palimpsest, where each layer, rather than erasing, relocates the old, while instigating a new series of relocations. For centuries, the chronologies of inscriptions remained

* My gratitude to Professor Dilwyn Knox and Adam Greenwood. Without them my involvement with Ficino’s thought would not have taken root. Their insights and instruction are not in the least responsible for the shortcomings of this brief account.

¹ 24-25. I have opted for a minimal reference style, *vis-à-vis* the intricate chapter division of the I Tatti edition. The few references used indicate the pages of the respective Latin and English text of Ficino in Arabic numerals or the page(s) of Allen’s introduction in Latin numerals.

fluid enough to facilitate this co-presence and currency of themes vital to the interweaving histories of Platonism and Christianity.

It forms the filigree of a tradition, related often, at varying lengths, amongst those who still seek to discover something in the “Platonic manner”. In *medias res*, we choose as a most propitious beginning the figure of the Areopagite, who on first sight appears as the core of this work. He is an unknown writer; someone who, at the turn of the fifth to the sixth century AD, usurped the identity² of Dionysius, the first Athenian disciple of Paul, mentioned fleetingly in *Acts* (17:34), upon the occasion of the Pauline oration on Areios Pagos. From being a Byzantine subject of Justinian, the author who made pseudonymity into a destiny became a Roman citizen in the reign of Nero: a neophyte of Paul and a correspondent of John, a Father³ whose writings would inform Christian thought and doctrine in the way only the most radical and thus unforeseeable events do.

Looking closer, the event of this pseudonymity appears less as a rupture and more as a foundational refolding of space and time. The event is in truth the construction

of an event, by means of a false signature, which resurrected the tenebrous corpse of the true Dionysius in order to give life to the *Corpus Areopagiticum*. A figure further removed from the apostolic aura, a merely profound late theologian, would lack the authority to catalyze the doctrinal disputes of the Monothelite controversy in which the Dionysian *Corpus* was first implicated and utilized. Accordingly, this initial polemical involvement of the *Corpus* required and established at once its authenticity, under the auspices of no less an authority than that of Maximus the Confessor.

The Dionysian folding of time created thus, on the one hand, a trans-historic living contemporaneity of superimposed iterations of an essentially immutable truth and, on the other, the possibility of a rearrangement of Platonic filiations. In terms of *avant la lettre* literary criticism, it meant that the extensive loans of Dionysius from Proclus were read in reverse. For the Church, the belated wisdom of Proclus was seen at best as an elaboration on the angelic insight of Dionysius; at worst, as a profane aberration. Ultimately, however, it was the same Proclean texts, and primarily among them *De malorum subsistentia*,⁴ now surviving only in the thirteenth-century Latin translation of William of Moerbeke, that gave away the Dionysian ruse.

An account of the historic significance of Pseudo-Dionysius for both the Greek and the Latin Churches might appear today overstated, despite its traces being still at times discernible.⁵ Fears of revisionism are however

² With regard to the significance of this usurpation or forgery, see also my talk “The Invention of Hierarchy in Pseudo-Dionysius” (available online at: https://www.academia.edu/11897150/The_Invention_of_Hierarchy_in_Pseudo-Dionysius).

³ Clearly, the patristic status of Dionysius poses great difficulties, since there can be no more doubt for the Churches than there is for scholars that two people are under consideration. Accordingly, the sanctity of the disciple of Paul and the theological significance of the unknown author appear problematic in isolation. I am thus using the term Father in accordance with the historic understanding of the Church, for which St Dionysius the Areopagite was a Father of immense significance and influence.

⁴ Proclus, *On the Existence of Evils*, ed. and transl. J. Opsomer and C. Steel, London: Duckworth, 2003.

⁵ The city of Athens, for example, bears a triple inscription of the name: one of the main streets leading to the Acropolis, an Orthodox temple and

put quickly to rest as one leafs through the pages of Thomas Aquinas, where Dionysius is mentioned no less than 1700 times, more often, that is, than Aristotle. A little later, in a less than strictly scholastic space, Dionysius was given voice twice in Dante's *Paradise*.⁶ The gradual effacement of the pseudonymous author, which constitutes our heritage, is clearly interwoven with the world-historic demise of the Church. Yet for the Renaissance, despite the philological concerns of Lorenzo Valla, Dionysius remained a decisive apostolic figure. It is two of his five works, *Mystical Theology* and *The Divine Names*, that Ficino translated and commentated on as the Quattrocento expired.

Allen's introduction provides a faithful account of this trajectory and, more importantly perhaps, of the context in which Ficino's interception took place. Unlike Plato and Plotinus, whom Ficino partly or fully translated for the first time, Dionysius had been translated and commented upon in the West time and again since the ninth-century renditions of Hilduin and John Scotus Eriugena. Ambrogio Traversari's subsequent elegant Latin iteration from the 1430s seems to have informed Ficino's undertaking (xiii).⁷

Ficino was certainly not interested in offering another edition of Dionysius. At the end of Ficino's life, his extensive project was

animated by the conviction that this apostolic Church Father, as well as father of what was to assume the name of negative or apophatic theology, had at last to be understood *more Platónico*, that is, in the true Platonic light in which Dionysian thought ought to be seen. For Ficino, Platonism did not begin with Plato, but – based on another false chronology – with Hermes Trismegistus, if not Zoroaster; in turn, it unfolded through Orpheus, Pythagoras, Philolaos and Parmenides. Dionysius was the first legitimate heir of Plato, whose thought had been misconstrued by generations of sceptics at the Academy (xv).

At the same time, Dionysius was a Church Father, prefiguring the true destiny of Platonism in Christianity. Neoplatonism in the works of Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus and Proclus was thus for Ficino little more than an explication, albeit profound, of what had already found its most dense and inspired expression in Dionysius. Thus, in his letters Ficino acclaimed Dionysius as “the most eminent of the Platonists” and elsewhere wrote: “I love Plato in Iamblichus, I admire him in Plotinus, but I venerate him in Dionysius.” (xiv). In his *De Christiana religione* of 1474, Ficino was even more explicit on the Platonic heritage: “I myself have found that the principal mysteries in Mumenius, Philo, Plotinus, Iamblichus, and Proclus were in fact received from St. John, St. Paul, Hierotheus, and Dionysius the Areopagite. [...] For everything that the Platonists have to say about the divine mind, the angels and other theological matters that strike us as admirable, they clearly took from them.” (xvi-xvii).

Accordingly, Ficino at the end of his life wagered his allegiance not only to Plotinus and the Platonists, who are relegated to a derivative position, with regard to all that is truly essential,

the Catholic Cathedral of the city commemorate the historic figure and elusive author.

⁶ Bram Kempers, “The Fame of Fake, Dionysius the Areopagite: Fabrication, Falsification and the ‘Cloud of Unknowing’”, in W. Otten, A. Vanderjagt and H. de Vries (eds), *How the West was Won*, Leiden: Brill, 2010, p. 304.

⁷ Interestingly, the first Greek edition of the *Corpus* was not published until 1516, when in Florence Philippe Junta produced the complete works in the original.

but also imperilled his allegiance to the holy Augustine, for whom Plotinus understood Plato better than anyone else (xvii).⁸ Ficino was prepared to accept the stakes for the sake of a coherent, universal Pythagorean-Parmenidean monism informed by negative theology (xxii). Ficino understood and placed his work⁹ at the beginning of a reconstituted genealogy of Platonism, a new history which assumes the diffusion of divine wisdom across the ages and which had made possible the recovery of an inceptive thought, in which the name of Plato designates neither more nor less than a principal focality. In this *prisca philosophia* Dionysius the Areopagite constitutes at once the “culmination of the Platonic discipline” and a “column of Christian theology” (4-5).

The Platonism of Dionysius would soon turn from a claim of truth to the latter’s discredit in the eyes of the theologians of the Reformation for whom Dionysius had already lost his apostolic crest. Dionysius “Platonizes more than he Christianizes” would be the famous verdict of Luther. Although neither he, nor Calvin and even less Martin Bucer altogether dismissed Dionysius,¹⁰ the harmonious synthesis that invested Ficino’s project could not last. Sides had to be taken, and territories demarcated. The history of Christianity and that of Platonism were not to remain one. For a while, however, this harmony would find its most eloquent and committed expression in Ficino. Its swan song is the work at hand.

⁸ Augustine, *City of God*, 9.10.

⁹ When, for example, Ficino wrote: “My genius has destined me to interpret the Platonists.” (2-3), we witness the consciousness of an immense historic responsibility.

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¹⁰ K. Froehlich, “Pseudo-Dionysius and the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century”, introduction to Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, New York: Paulist Press, 1987, p. 45.