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### *Aesthetics from Classical Greece to the Present*

## **PLOTINUS**

The philosophy of Plato continued to be taught by his followers, during the first centuries of the Christian era, at Alexandria and Rome, and in the Academy at Athens, until it was closed by the Emperor Justinian in 529, as a rival and threat to Christianity. But in the hands of creative thinkers, like Philo of Alexandria, at the beginning<sup>9</sup> of the first century A. D., and Numenius of Apamea, a century later, it evolved into a somewhat different system that became known as Neoplatonism. The most distinguished and original of the Neoplatonists was Plotinus (204/5-270 A.D.). Though his thinking ranged widely, and was especially important in philosophy of religion, he also has a significant place in the history of aesthetics.

Plotinus wrote fifty-four essays or "Tractates, which were arranged and published in six "Enneads," or groups of nine, by his pupil Porphyry in the first decade of the fourth century. The text, as we have it today, is in quite good condition, but Plotinus's terminology- is idiosyncratic and often mysterious, so that some parts of his elaborate and complex metaphysics are still subject to doubt or dispute. In main outline, we may say this: Behind the visible world, as its ultimate source and ground, is what Plotinus calls "The One" (*to hen*) or "The First," which is, in itself, beyond all conception and knowledge. Yet it can not untruthfully be described under certain aspects by certain terms, if they are taken deeply enough: it is the Good, for example, and the Infinite (Ennead II, Tractate ix, section 1). When we speak of the One, we are taking ultimate reality in its first "hypostasis" —a term for whose meaning one must rely on contextual specification, since no safe synonyms present themselves. The One has also a second and a third hypostasis, which are identical to the first, yet, constitute

different functions or, perhaps, roles. The Second Hypostasis is Intellect or Mind, the Divine Knower (*nous*), which is identical with what it knows (*noeta*): the Platonic Forms (or Ideas) that constitute the Intelligible World,

The ideal archetypes or patterns of the visible world The Third Hypostasis is the All-Soul (*psyche*) or principle of creativity and life. Together, the three Hypostases make up a single transcendent Being, from which all other Reality proceeds by "emanation" (*tolma*), and to which all other Reality aspires to return as its primal source (the *epistrophe*). Emanation is not a temporal process, but timeless; from Plotinus's metaphors of Being as overflowing like a spring (V, ii, 1), and of a central source of light that grows dimmer with the distance from it (V, iii, 12), we may think of the various parts of reality, including nature and the visible world, as participating in the light of Being, but in various degrees, from the most real things of spirit and intellect down to the lowest grades of matter The Platonic dualism of Being and Becoming is in one sense overcome by this conception of all things as ordered in a continuous degree of greater and lesser reality, but the contrast between the Visible World and the Intelligible World remains in the distinction between nature and the Forms of the Second Hypostasis.

A fully developed philosophy of beauty is central to this metaphysical system, and pervasive throughout the *Enneads*, though it is presented most systematically in three of the Tractates principally in I, vi ("On Beauty"), but also in parts of V, viii ("On the Intellectual Beauty") and VI, vii ("How the Multiplicity of the Ideal-Forms came into being; and on the Good"). Its major inspiration is Plato's aesthetic theory, especially the *Symposium*, though it also owes a great deal to the *Phaedrus* and the *Timaeus*. Nevertheless, it strikes out on its own in some highly original ways. Plotinus's exposition is frequently obscure and sometimes almost impenetrably so, but his attempt to preserve and deepen what he takes to be Plato's most important ideas, while giving the concept of beauty a new and most significant metaphysical status, is worth patient study. The tractate "On Beauty" was the first one written, according to Porphyry's biography of Plotinus, and it does not develop all of the aesthetic theories characteristic of his mature thought. But it contains some important ideas, and since its argument is difficult, we may well begin our

consideration of his aesthetics by tracing its thought with some care, supplementing it from time to time with material from other tractates.

Plotinus begins (1, vi, 1) by reviewing the variety of things that can possess beauty: most obviously things seen and heard, but also (for "minds that lift themselves above the realm of sense to a higher order") "beauty in the conduct of life, in actions, in character, in the pursuits of the intellect; and there is the beauty of the virtues" (trans. MacKenna and Page). The searching question is, "what, then, is it that gives comeliness" to all these things? "What...is this something that shows itself" in them?

The first answer Plotinus formulates and rejects is

That the symmetry of parts towards each other and towards a whole, with, besides, a certain charm of color, constitutes the beauty recognized by the eye, that in visible things, as indeed in all else, universally, the beautiful thing is essentially symmetrical, patterned.

We cannot be sure whom he is referring to when he says that this is what "almost everyone declares," but he is clearly including the Stoics; the theory is a plausible misinterpretation of *Plato's Philebus*, and something close to it can be read from Aristotle's *Poetics*. In any case, Plotinus argues, it is false. His *reductio ad absurdum* argument has several parts. (1) "But think what this means. Only a compound can be beautiful, never anything devoid of parts. In short, if symmetry is a necessary condition of beauty, then simple things cannot be beautiful. But (a) they must be beautiful, otherwise complexes, which are made up of simples, could not be beautiful either: "beauty in an aggregate demands beauty in details." And (b) some simple things clearly are beautiful: colors, single tones, the light of the sun, gold, night lightning, and so on. Moreover (c) spiritual qualities, such as "noble conduct, or excellent laws," can be beautiful, but what sense does it make to call them symmetrical? How, for example, could virtues be symmetrical? Finally (2) Plotinus inserts an argument that symmetry cannot be a sufficient condition of beauty, because an object that remains symmetrical can lose its beauty: "one face, constant in symmetry, appears sometimes fair and sometimes not"—and when the body becomes lifeless, it loses most of its beauty, though not its symmetry (VI, vii, 22).

Thus we come back to the original question: what is the "Principle - that bestows beauty on material things" (I, VI, 2)? The answer of Plotinus is stated most fully in the tractate "On the Intellectual Beauty":

Suppose two blocks of stone lying side by side: one is unpatterned, quite untouched by art; the other has been minutely wrought by the craftsman's hands into some statue of god or man, a Grace or a Muse, or if a human being, not a portrait but a creation in which the sculptor's art has concentrated all loveliness.

Now it must be seen that the stone thus brought under the artist's hand to the beauty of form is beautiful not as stone—for so the crude block would be as pleasant—but in virtue of the Form or Idea introduced by the art. This form is not in the material; it is in the designer before ever it enters the stone; and the artificer holds it not by his equipment of eyes and hands but by his participation in his art. The beauty, therefore, exists in a far higher state in the art. [V, viii, 1; P: 422].

It is, then, by virtue of matter's capacity to take and hold the Forms that "the Beauty of the divine Intellect and of the Intellectual Cosmos may be revealed to contemplation" (V, viii, 1; cf. VI, vii, 42). Nothing less than being itself, as a mirror of the One and the Divine, can so stir the soul in contemplation. Since the One, in its second Hypostasis, is both the knowin<sup>9</sup> Intellect and the knowable Forms, and it is form itself that makes the difference between a beautiful and an ugly object ("an ugly thing is something that has not been entirely mastered by pattern, that is by Reason, the Matter not yielding at all points and in all respects to Ideal-Form"), beauty is the mark, and the resultant, of this participation of the object in Ideal-Form.

But the experience of beauty, Plotinus also holds, is not the mere observation that matter is fit to receive Ideal-Form; this *fitness* is

Something which the Soul names as from an ancient knowledge and, recognizing, welcomes it, enters into unison with it...

Our interpretation is that the Soul—by the very truth of its nature, by its affiliation to the noblest Existents in the hierarchy of Being—when it sees anything of that kin, or any trace of that kinship, thrills with an immediate delight, takes its

own to itself, and thus stirs anew to the sense of its nature and of all its affinity [1, vi, 2; P-57].

In putting on beauty, then, matter acquires a deep "affinity" for the soul. And the soul takes joy in recognizing its own nature recognizing objectified, and in thus becoming conscious of its own participation in divinity. Here in Plotinus is the origin of the mystical and Romantic theories of art that we shall encounter later.

At first glance, it seems that Plotinus, having having rejected symmetry as a necessary condition of beauty, now brings it in under another name, "pattern," and states his own conditions of beauty in a way that runs counter to his previous argument. How can *the light of the sun* be beautiful, if simple, and therefore incapable of pattern? But he has a different emphasis in mind.

But where the Ideal-Form has entered, it has grouped and coordinated what from a diversity of parts was to become a unity: it has rallied confusion into cooperation: it has made the sum one harmonious coherence: for the Idea [i.e. the Form] is a unity and what it moulds must come to unity as far as multiplicity may.

And on what has thus been compacted to unity, Beauty enthrones itself, giving itself to the parts as to the sum: when it lights on some natural unity, a thing of like parts, then it gives itself to that whole. Thus, for an illustration, there is the beauty, conferred by craftsmanship, of all a house with all its parts, and the beauty which some natural quality may give to a single stone.

This, then, is how the material thing becomes beautiful—by communicating in the thought that flows from the Divine [I, vi, 2; P. 58].

It is unity, then, that is essential here. Speaking of a complex with heterogeneous parts, such as a house or painting, we can say that it becomes beautiful when and only when it is unified, and thus becomes a mirror of the One. But a single spread of color, or a sustained mellow tone, being homogeneous throughout, is unified by that very homogeneity, and so it too can be beautiful.

Thus all beauty is the "outcome of a unification" (I, vi,3).

So with the perceptive faculty: discerning in certain objects the Ideal-Form which has bound and controlled shapeless matter, opposed in nature to Idea [i.e., Form], seeing further stamped upon the common shapes some shape excellent above the common, it gathers into unity what still remains fragmentary, catches it up and carries it within, no longer a thing of parts, and presents it to the Ideal-Principle as something concordant and congenial . . . [I, vi, 3; p. 58].

This explains sensuous beauties. "But there are earlier [i.e., logically prior] and loftier beauties . . ." (I, VI, 4)—"the beauty of noble conduct and of learning," seen not with the physical eye but with the eye of the soul. These are capable of thrilling and exulting us, too, and even more deeply (I,vi, 5). But how? There is "No shape, no color, no grandeur of mass," only the "hueless splendor of the virtues

loftiness of spirit; righteousness of life; disciplined and purity"; and the like. To 'see what makes the

Virtuous soul beautiful, consider first, Plotinus suggests, the opposite, ugliness. The ugly soul is "dissolute, unrighteous: teeming with all the lusts; torn by internal discord; beset by the fears of its cowardice and the envies of its pettiness . . ." etc.—"What must we think but that all this shame is something that has gathered about the Soul, some foreign bane outraging it, soiling it..." In short, this "ugly condition is due to alien matter that has encrusted" the evil man, and if he is to win back his is win is grace it must be his business to scour and purify him and make himself what he was."

According to this theory of evil something "foisted" on the soul is impure and inwardly discordant (cf. III, VI, 2; I, VIII, 13; V, VIII, 13). Its moral discipline therefore consists "purification" of the alien, harmonization of the discord—in a word, unification (I, VI, 6; cf. I, II, 4; III, VI, 5; IV, VII, 10). So the spiritual beauty of the soul rests on exactly the same condition as the sensuous beauty of art or nature. "And it is just to say that in the Soul's becoming a good and beautiful thing is its becoming like to God" (I, VI, 6; cf. II, IX, 2) From this point of view, and considered in ideal terms, Beauty appears to be almost identical with Good. "We may even say that Beauty is the Authentic-Existents and Ugliness is the Principle contrary to Existence ... And hence the one method will discover to us the Beauty-Good and the Ugliness-Evil." "The Good and The Beautiful," says Plotinus in another place (V, V, 12), "participate in the common source"; the goodness and beauty of the Forms derive from their ideal properties (VI, VI, 18), but in the hierarchy of Being, nevertheless, The Good has priority (I, VIII, 2).

At this point (I, VI, 7), in the spirit of Plato's Symposium, Plotinus turns to a description of love—which is always, in every form, a love of beauty (cf. III, V, 1), and consequently a love of goodness and of being. Its hunger and its delight are directed, the soul knows it or not, toward the divine, which, in one aspect, is "the Beauty supreme, the absolute, and the primal (I, VI, 7; cf. VI, II, 18; V, VIII, 8—10). But by what path are we to rise to acquaintance with this absolute Beauty? Our ex-

perience of sensuous beauty gives us the foretaste, the intimation of what lies beyond, but to go beyond we must turn away from "material beauty" (I, vi, 8). "You must close the eyes and call

Instead upon another vision which is to be waked within you, a vision, the birth-right of all, which few turn to use." This means first fixing our attention, not on music and painting, but on "all noble pursuits, then the works of beauty produced not by the labor of the arts but by the virtue of men known for their goodness" (I, vi, 9). But even that is not enough: you must make yourself beautiful in spirit, morally excellent, to know perfect beauty.

When you know that you have become this perfect work, when you are self-gathered in the purity of your being, nothing now remaining that can shatter that inner unity, nothing from without clinging to the authentic man, when you find yourself wholly true to your essential nature, wholly that only veritable Light which is not measured by space, ... when you perceive that you have grown to this, you are now become very vision: now call up all your confidence, strike forward yet a step—you need a guide no longer—strain and see.

This is the only eye that sees the mighty Beauty [pp. 6344].

About this last progression, by which we ascend from the experience of sensuous beauty, through the contemplation of moral beauty, to truth itself, more can be added, from passages elsewhere in the Enneads, to make our account more accurate if, at the same time, less decisive. For the monism of Plotinus's system

does not wholly heal or conceal something of the same ambivalence toward the arts and toward beauty that we discovered in Plato's philosophy.

What role, exactly, is played by the beauty of art, sensuous beauty, in the soul's passage to ultimate knowledge of, and immersion in, the full light of being that the Plotinian philosopher craves? It is a path, says Plotinus: for when we recognize the beauty of a picture we are after all recollecting, however dimly, the eternal Beauty that is our home, and so, since

the sight of Beauty excellently reproduced upon a face hurries the mind to that other Sphere, surely no one seeing the loveliness lavish in the world of sense—this vast orderliness, the Form which the stars even in their remoteness display—no one could be so dull-witted, so immovable, as not to be carried by all this to recollection, and gripped by reverent awe in the thought of all this, so great, sprung from that greatness [II, ix, 16; p. 149].

But on the other hand, sensuous beauty may take us in a different direction:

Beauty is all violence and stupefaction; its pleasure is spoiled with pain, and it even draws the thoughtless away from The Good as some attraction will lure the child from the father's side [V, v, 12; P. 413].

Again, Plotinus distinguishes three ways to truth, those of the musician, the lover, and the metaphysician (I, iii, 1, 2). Being "exceedingly quick to beauty," the musician tends to respond sharply to "measure and shapely pattern";

This natural tendency must be made the starting-point to such a man; . . . he must be led to the Beauty that manifests itself through these forms; he must be shown

that what ravished him was no other than the Harmony of the Intellectual world and the Beauty in that sphere, . . . and the truths of philosophy must be implanted in him to lead him to faith in that which, unknowing it, he possesses within himself [I, iii, 1-2; P. 37].

But on another occasion, Plotinus collapses the lover and the metaphysician into one hopeful and likely seeker after truth, which is "not held by material loveliness," and the path of the musician seems to disappear (V, ix, 2).

As the last quoted sentence suggests, the beauty of the visible world is its mirroring of the invisible, and Plotinus has much to say on behalf of natural beauty. "Even in the world of sense and part, there are things of loveliness comparable to that of the Celestials" (II, ix, 17). The objects around us are expressions of Nature, and "the Nature . . . which creates things so lovely must be itself of a far earlier beauty" (V, viii, 2).

Thus there is in the Nature-Principle itself an Ideal archetype of the Beauty that is found in material forms and, of that archetype again, the still more beautiful archetype in Soul, source of that in Nature [V, viii, 3; p. 424].

How easy would be the transition, then, from one to the other? Moreover, The arts are not to be slighted on the ground that they create by imitation of natural objects ; for, to begin with, these natural objects are themselves imitations; then, we must recognize that they give no bare reproduction of the thing seen but go back to the Reason-Principles from which Nature itself derives, and, furthermore, that much of their work is all their own; they are holders of beauty and add where nature is lacking [V, viii, 1; pp. 422-23].

Here is Plotinus's gentle answer to Plato's doubts about imitation: a tree and a picture, of a tree share alike in the Form that bestows on each whatever beauty it may possess, and such is the freedom of the painter that his picture may in fact capture and exhibit that Form even more fully than the tree. "Thus Pheidias wrought the Zeus upon no model among things of sense but by apprehending what form Zeus must take if he chose to become manifest to sight"—a famous, and in a way revolutionary, statement. But even more significantly, and originally,

Any skill which, beginning with the observation of the symmetry of living things, grows to the symmetry of all life, will be a portion of the Power There which observes and meditates the symmetry reigning among, all beings in the Intellectual Cosmos. Thus all music—since its

Thought is upon melody and rhythm—must be the earthly representation of the music there is in the rhythm, of the Ideal Realm [V, ix, ii; P- 441].

Art need not be representational to be revelatory. ( And for the full meaning of "the symmetry of all life" see III, 11, 16, 17; 111, 1.)

On the other hand, it must be remembered that Absolute Beauty itself is invisible: the "Authentic Beauty" is "Beyond- Beauty" (VI, vii, 33), since it surpasses shape and form, without which beauty cannot be experienced. Thus, paradoxically, to achieve absolute Beauty is not to see it; to know fully is to become the divine, no longer to be external to it. and he who is one with Beauty does not behold the beautiful (V, viii, 11). At this point, the argument has come full circle: or, in a perhaps now too familiar figure, the mystic, having climbed beyond the top of his ladder, kicks it away. Plotinus comes close to exalting Beauty at the expense of beauty, or Beauty at the expense of art; in the framework of his metaphysics, determined as he is to fix the transcendental Beauty as an essential aspect of ultimate reality, he sometimes carries the tension between sensuous and spiritual beauty to the snapping point—since the unseeable Beauty we are after will hardly satisfy the appetite aroused by the seeable beauty that sets us after, it. But, on the whole, Plotinus means to bring the two orders of beauty together more closely than Plato could, and despite passages in the other direction he has had some success. For if Reality consists of a continuous series of planes,

Each farther from the central Light of Being, each in a way and mutation of those that are nearer, all beauties, however dim, must be connected ultimately with the Absolute Beauty that they allude to. And at all levels, as we have seen, some consciousness its affinity with the divine is present in the soul.

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