Marsilio Ficino: On Dionysius the Areopagite; Volume 1: "Mystical Theology" and "The Divine Names," Part I. Michael J. B. Allen, ed.
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Marsilio Ficino: On Dionysius the Areopagite; Volume 2: "The Divine Names," Part II. Michael J. B. Allen, ed.
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These two volumes of the I Tatti Library, admirably edited by Professor Allen—by now the most authoritative expert of Marsilio Ficino—present Ficino's commentary of 1492 to the major philosophical works of the *Corpus Dionysiacum*: the *Mystical*

Theology and the *Divine Names.* As known, the *Corpus* was written by an anonymous sixth-century Christian writer under the influence of the fifth-century Neoplatonic philosopher Proclus. The anonymous writer introduces himself as Dionysius, a member of Athen's Areopagus converted by Saint Paul according to Acts 17:22–23. Under this name and with its almost apostolic authority, the *Corpus* was recognized by the Church in the Lateran Council of 649 under the urging of Maximus the Confessor. One aspect has to be emphasized: since then the twin treatises on the *Celestial Hierarchy* and the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* were mainly highlighted and the tradition placed them at the beginning of the *Corpus.* The Pseudo-Dionysius became one of the fundamental authorities of the Church, insofar as he contributed to strengthening the idea of the Church's mystical body and of her hierarchies as an earthly reflection of the celestial ones. As such, the *Corpus* was received in the Latin tradition and its prestige was renewed during any age of ecclesiastical reform. It occurred in the so-named Carolingian renaissance through the Latin translation by John Scotus Eriugena (ca. 862), and later in times of flowering of Aristotelian Scholasticism, thanks to the new translation by Robert Grosseteste (1240). Eventually Ambrogio Traversari produced in 1431 a humanist translation that was welcomed by Pope Nicholas V in his typical ambition to restore the institutional and cultural prestige of the Holy See. The Pseudo-Dionysius's name was mostly linked with the concept of "hierarchy": Dante depicts him as the wise man who inspected most deeply "the celestial beings and the ministry [of the Church]" ("l'angelica natura e'l ministero" [*Pd.* 10.117]). Conversely, the same characterization contributed to Lorenzo Valla's criticism, this time not in the usually quoted *Annotationes in Novum Testamentum*, but in the previous *Collatio Novi Testamenti*, where he denies the uncontrived "antiquity" of the "opus *de celesti hierarchia*" and of its author ("qui nec antiquitatem sapit et philosophum [i.e., not a judge of the Areopagus] se esse demonstrate," cf. *Collatio Novi Testamenti*, ed. Alessandro Perosa, [1970], 167).

Accordingly, though in the opposite sense, the approach of Ficino was no less revolutionary as he broke the unitary character of the *Corpus*, focusing on the Neoplatonic treatises and leaving aside the two *Hierarchies.* Furthermore, and in accordance with humanist criticism, he harshly censured previous translators (not excepting Traversari), who "had not possessed a full understanding of their metaphysical structures and sublimities" (1:xiv). Ficino is mostly concerned with the ontological and theological character of Plato's dialectics, particularly in the crucial dialogue *Parmenides*. Over the course of the debate, Plato proposes, without giving a response, four positive "hypotheses" and four negative concerning the question "whether the one is." It was mainly Proclus who strictly analyzed the *Parmenides*, and who recognized in Plato's concept of the "one" the transcendent principle whence all descends. Taking a cue from him, the Pseudo-Dionysius points to Plato's dilemma as the confluence of the two opposed theologies, the negative and positive (respectively "apophatic" and "cataphatic"), as converging ways to conceive the infinity of God. In turn, Ficino avails

himself of the Christian Dionysius in order to sanctify Plato's dialectic, ranking him within a mythical tradition consisting of, among others, Empedocles, Orpheus, and the Chaldaean Oracles.

As Professor Allen writes in his introduction, Ficino recognized in Dionysius's treatise *Divine Names* "the supreme validation of the Neoplatonic metaphysical hierarchy, with its emphasis on the experience of union beyond being, with a God who is no longer the Creator God, or the God of being, but the invisible, transintellegible God of our unknowing" (1:xxiv). We are thus far away from if not the *Celestial Hierarchy*, then surely the *Ecclesiastical* one. Ficino's commentary late in life to the Pseudo-Areopagite raises the whole of issues that his figure proposes to scholars. Someone could easily raise some doubt about his sincerity as well. In my opinion the statement would be unfitting. Ficino's thought is based not on institutional texts but developed alongside a mythical history and through an appeal to a rhetoric not seldom ambivalent in character. This is an issue worth pursuing: that is, the role that the philosophy of Proclus eventually performed in Ficino's attitudes. Like Proclus, Ficino assumes an uninterrupted continuity of the Platonic Academy, rescued from the "heresy" of Arcesilas's and Carneades's (and Cicero's) skepticism; like Proclus he titles his major work *Theologia Platonica*; like Proclus, last but not least, Ficino celebrated Plato's birthday every year.

Professor Allen's careful research ultimately suggest that we investigate once again the inspiring themes around such a difficult and historically influential figure as Ficino.

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