

MICHAEL J. B. ALLEN, *STUDIES IN THE PLATONISM OF MARSILIO FICINO AND GIOVANNI PICO*, ROUTLEDGE, LONDON–NEW YORK 2017 (VARIORUM COLLECTED STUDIES SERIES, 1063). XIII + 348 PP., ISBN: 9781472448385.

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The volume under review is Allen's second in the Variorum series of collected articles, eighteen in this case after the fifteen in the first (*Plato's Third Eye*, 1995). It also presents an opportunity to survey one of the most productive and consequential scholarly careers of the last half century. A PhD in English from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, in 1970, after a BA and MA in English from Wadham College, Oxford, in 1964 and 1966 would not seem to be ideal way to embark on a lifetime devoted to studying a Renaissance Italian philosopher who wrote almost exclusively in Latin and whose translations from the Greek became indispensable to Western intellectuals into the nineteenth century. But such is one of the glorious paradoxes of Allen's career and, I might add, a testament to the training in classical languages he received earlier in life.

Allen does not need to be introduced, of course, to students of Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499). But for those outside this specialty taking stock of Allen's prior publications will provide perspective. After the publication of his revised dissertation in 1975 on Ficino's *Philebus* commentary (reprinted twice thereafter), he went on to publish *Marsilio Ficino and the Phaedran Charioteer* (1981), then a larger study of Ficino's *Phaedrus* commentary (1984), followed by another on Ficino's *Sophist* commentary (1989) and finally one on Ficino's interpretation of the fatal number in Bk. 8 of the *Republic* (1994). All the while, he kept unceasingly producing critically important articles on Ficino, apart from what one found in his books. A large batch of these articles were collected together in the already mentioned 1995 volume with the arresting (a favorite Allenian adjective) title, *Plato's Third Eye*. Allen capped off this series of books with a brilliant deep dive into Ficino's understanding of Christian and Platonic history that carried the title *Synoptic Art* (1998). There is irony in this title because the book was published before Allen could prepare an index for it and therefore provide the volume the surest way to give readers a synoptic view of its extraordinary historical erudition.

As a professor in the English Department at the University of California, Los Angeles until his retirement in 2012, Allen regularly taught Shakespeare and other

Renaissance authors to great success in addition to authoring and co-editing a series of volumes on medieval and Renaissance literature. Indeed, one can well argue that it has been Allen's expertise in literature that has allowed him to capture and express the mythic, allegorical, and, one might say, poetic elements in the writings of Marsilio Ficino. But whatever have been Allen's contributions to the study of English Renaissance literature, Marsilio Ficino has always remained the heart of his scholarship. Just as Ficino's translation of Plato held the field for centuries, so too, I suggest, will Allen's translations of Ficino, if not for centuries, at least for generations to come. His translation in six volumes of Ficino's *magnum opus*, the *Platonic Theology*, in Harvard's I Tatti Renaissance Library series (2003–2006) is a landmark accomplishment. He followed up this achievement with a revised translation of Ficino's *Phaedrus* commentary (2008), and then in two volumes (2015) in the same I Tatti Library series a translation of Ficino's commentary on Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, an utterly pivotal author for Ficino, who so wanted to interwine (Neo-)Platonism and Christianity.

We thus arrive at Allen's latest volume, one in which he treats not only Ficino but also Ficino's younger contemporary and sometime opponent, the gifted Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. But before proceeding further, let us step back and consider for a moment the *modus operandi et dicendi* that runs through Allen's writings and makes his scholarship so unique. Simply put, Allen is not only a scholar, and a great one at that, but also a stylist and weaver of allusions, parallels, and suggestive possibilities in a way that gives the reader a deeper insight into significances that perhaps Ficino himself did not fully grasp as he elucidated his Plato. Allen does not write poetry, but there is a certain evocative, poetic quality in what he writes. A good instance of this characteristic is the fourteenth essay in the volume, «To gaze upon the face of God again: Philosophic Statutory, Pygmalion, and Marsilio Ficino», first published in *Rinascimento* in 2008, wherein, to explain «our final accession to God» Ficino, according to Allen, argues (Essay XIV, p. 134):

For at this juncture language itself becomes the stone that is chipped away as we attempt to carve out, neither man's statue, nor the world's, not even the sun's, but rather the statue at last of God Himself, the ultimate conceptual statue to which we long to give the gift of life so that we ourselves might live everlastingly as worshippers of His transcendent form. Mystically, however, even as we try to sculpt him conceptually, He recedes from the very language by which we attempt to conceive of the divine; and we find that in the very process of trying to sculpt Him, that he is mysteriously sculpting us. As sculptor we will become indeed, in the climatic Pygmalion moment, the sculpted, the living stone under the awful majesty of God's living hand.

Without denying the correctness of Allen's reading of Ficino, it must be said that one would be hard put to find such elevated prose in Ficino's *Platonic Theology* or Platonic commentaries that quite corresponds to this insight that Allen has extracted from Ficino's discussion in *Platonic Theology*, IX, 3, of the mind's attempt to contemplate God.

Allen's *Studies*, however, are not without their more staid essays. Indeed, the books begins with a magisterial overview of Renaissance Platonism, followed soon after by an equally magisterial essay surveying Renaissance Neoplatonism. It is in this vein that Allen included in the volume his appreciation (Essay VII) of the one scholar who in his time dominated Ficino studies the way Allen has the last few decades, namely, Paul Oskar Kristeller (1905–1999). One can go further and say that with his *Supplementum Ficinianum* of 1937, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino* of 1943, and a series of seminal articles into the 1950s Kristeller laid the basis of Allen's Ficinian scholarship. Allen was as generous in his praise of the deceased Kristeller as Kristeller had been in encouraging the young Allen thirty years earlier.¹

In contrast to Kristeller's « essentially rationalist study » as Allen puts it (Essay VII, p. 18), Allen has become one of the foremost students of Ficino's "theosophical, demonological, prophetic, medical, and magical themes" (Essay VII, p. 17). Thus, we learn of the demonology arising from Pythagorean mathematics (Essay IV). Similarly, Ficino's *Timaeus* commentary introduces us to his understanding of the soul as arithmogony (Essay VI), and in exploring Ficino's « Christianized Neoplatonism » Allen explains that at its center there stood not the Nativity nor the Crucifixion, but the luminous Transfiguration on Mt. Tabor (Essay VIII, p. 239–240). Consequently, and not surprisingly, Allen argues that Ficino arrived at a « meditative ideal, a strange blend of Plotinian and Proclan metaphysics and Iamblichan daemonism [...] completely lost to Christianity » so that

one might well argue that Ficino's whole Platonic endeavour was heretical. Its goals after all were to become a sage not a saint, a magus not a worshipper, a choring angel not a sinner praying for forgiveness, and accordingly to achieve the ascent from human depth into daemonic and spiritual planarity, a corporeal levitation

¹ See Allen's expressions of gratitude in the *Acknowledgements* of his 1975 edition and translation of Ficino's *Phaedrus* commentary. We may note here that Allen has not commented on one possible point of contention. Kristeller had acknowledged in his *Marsilio Ficino and His Work after Five Hundred Years*, Leo S. Olschki, Florence 1987 (Istituto nazionale di studi sul Rinascimento. Quaderni di Rinascimento, 7), p. 13, fn. 29, that Allen was right to identify Proclus and not Plotinus, as Kristeller had argued in *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, as the chief inspiration for Ficino's system of five hypostases with the rational soul holding the central, third position. But Kristeller insisted that he was right to have asserted Ficino's originality in making quality the next hypostasis under rational soul, a contention Allen does not address either to agree or to demur.

even from the void of darkness into the purity, into the mystical 'glory' of light (Essay XII, p. 43).

In short, the true transgressive intellectual of the Italian Renaissance was not any theatrical public humanist whom Jacob Burckhardt might have nominated, but this mild-mannered Platonist philosopher working out the heretical implications of his assumptions alone in the confines of his study. Not that Ficino would have acknowledged the heretical radicalism of his philosophy. Hence, for instance, after accepting the Platonic doctrine of the « soul's ante-natal existence in an aethereal body » (Essay XI, p. 41), Ficino took « Plato's *Statesman*, or rather its great myth » as a work anticipating and conforming to Christian dogma and bearing witness to the belief both in a personal resurrection, at least for the purified philosopher, and in a final, or rather the final Resurrection of all men: (p. 43); but in doing so he was « implicitly rejecting (or subordinating) the traditional Christian notion of the final Resurrection of the ordinary elemental body in order to embrace the heterodox, if not completely unorthodox, notion of each liberated soul in its ascendant resurrection reacquiring after corporeal death its original spiritual envelope » (p. 44). As Allen notes in the last essay in the volume, Ficino believed he was advancing the cause of religion when in explicating Plato's *Epinomis*, he explains that « Iamblichus bears witness that this mystery of the Son's identity with the Father derives from Hermes, i.e., from such passages in the *Corpus Hermeticum* as 2, 14, 5, 9–11, and 14,4 » (Essay XVIII, p. 488). Interestingly enough, in comparing Ficino with his brilliant younger contemporary, the intellectually rambunctious Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Allen several times comments on Pico's 'medievalism' as he explicated in the *Commento* the mythology of Plato's *Symposium* in criticism of Ficino (Essay X). Taking to heart Crofton Black's characterization of Pico (*Pico's Heptaplus and biblical hermeneutics*, Leiden, 2006), Allen thus essentially reverses the usual portrayal of the relationship between the two Florentine thinkers.

The eighteen articles in the present volume do not encompass the full run of articles published by Allen on Ficino since his prior *Variorum* volume. He himself lists eight at the end of his preface that he omitted « for various reasons », one of which was certainly length since at more than 360 pages the present volume arrives at what is in effect the maximum size of a *Variorum* volume. Nonetheless, these *Studies* offer a comprehensive and representative view of Allen's meditations in the last two decades as he produced nine volumes of translations of Ficino's writings. In addition to Essays already mentioned, the volume includes studies on Ficino's understanding of language (Essays V and IX), on Ficino's approach to Plato's Second Letter (Essay XIII), Ficino's anti-Averroism (Essay XV), and Ficino's treatment of the myths of Eurydice and Prometheus (Essays XVI and XVII). Since Allen began his grand Ficinian enterprise with a massive 550 page book containing

an edition and English translation of Ficino's commentary on Plato's *Philebus*, the present volume is not only a necessary companion to his latest translations, but in a way also a fitting coda to a career-long engagement with the most influential philosopher of the Italian Renaissance. Editions are meant to provide the basis of critical analysis and interpretation. Allen's translations are *ipso facto* the necessary first step in interpretation, but only through the concomitant interpretative essays provided by these *Studies* do we get to see how Allen understood the texts he translated. In these essays Allen's philological labors blossom into historical analysis and intellectual insight.