

Marsilio Ficino. *Commentaries on Plato, Volume 1, Phaedrus and Ion*. Edited and translated by Michael J. B. Allen. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008. lix + 269 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-03119-7.

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Published on H-Italy (March, 2010)  
Commissioned by Monica Calabritto



## The Palinode

In my reviewing of this volume, I will mainly limit myself to the consideration of its structural organization, with fewer remarks about the content, and even less about its enormous importance for the study of the father of the Renaissance.

The book is volume 1 in the *i Tatti Renaissance Library* series that intends to make available to scholars all the writings of Marsilio Ficino on Plato. To this end, Michael J. B. Allen has written about the important presence and place of the *Phaedrus* within Plato's and Ficino's thought, method, and historiography and their textual encounter. In the introduction, Allen corrects the date given to Plato's writing of *Phaedrus* and places it between 1466 and 1468. He also underlines the importance of handling this dialogue with "extreme delicacy and circumspection" (p. xxi) given the opinions expressed on its subject matter: the frenzy of love, physical and celestial. The notions expressed by Socrates often are those of his predecessors, the Pythagoreans, rather than his own or Plato's. Socrates, says Allen, is speaking as the medium of an earlier wisdom. With Oscar P. Kristeller Allen claims that the eventual publication of Ficino's Platonic works in 1484 far surpassed all other translations of the time and constituted "an intellectual event of the first magnitude, since they established Plato as a newly discovered authority for the Renaissance who could now take precedence over Aristotle" (p. xxiii). Eugenio Garin said that Ficino relied at first on Latin translations of Plato; that he studied Greek beginning in 1458-

59 and that it was only in 1462 that Cosimo the Elder and Amerigo Benci gave Ficino the gift of a Platonic Codex that Ficino began to translate into Latin. As Allen says, the 1460s was "the most productive decade in an exceptionally productive life" (p. xxii).

The introduction, translation of the text, appendices, notes, bibliography, and index are due to the editor-translator. The rest is by the hand of Ficino, who translated from Greek the central part of the dialogue, which has traditionally been identified by the paragraphs and the sentences numbered 243E9-256A7, and named the "mythical hymn," as Socrates refers to it at a different spot in the dialogue, at 265C (in the Stephanus pagination, known as the standard subdivision of Plato's dialogues). As the serious student will read the full introduction, so must the general reader and the interested student because, from p. 1 on, this book at first glance may seem a muddle. Recognizing the problem, the editor has provided the map (p. xxviii). His personal evaluation of Ficino's translation of the *Phaedrus* (part 1: from pp. 2-3 to pp. 36-37), Ficino's commentary on *Phaedrus* (part 2: from pp. 38-39 to pp. 102-103), and Ficino's own summaries of the chapters of the whole dialogue (part 3: from pp. 104-105 to pp. 192-193) is found at pp. xxix-xxxvii.

Part 1, or the mythical hymn, is the central core of the dialogue and is composed of twenty-one (from chapter 13 to 33) of the fifty-three chapters into which the dialogue is subdivided in Ficino and which are all presented in a

kind of interpretative summa in part 3 (pp. xxxi-xxxii). It was natural for Ficino to concentrate his commentary (part 2) on the twenty-one chapters, or mythical hymn (part 1), since they were the ones that captured his inner soul and tormented him for many years thereafter with the anguish of finding the final interpretation and solution to the problems they raised, as one can see in part 2 (the palinode).

Part 2, or the commentary, unfortunately is at its own turn divided by Ficino into eleven chapters, the first three of which were once a unity for “the assessment of the *Phaedrus* in the 1460s” (p. xxix). It is a confirmation of the fact that he did not renege on or revise it, when he put it into the present format. The next eight chapters constitute the commentary proper. Chapter 4 begins with 245A and “deals exclusively with the divine frenzies, primarily the poetic” (p. xxx). Chapters 5 and 6 address the rigorously syllogistic section from 245C to 246A, which concerns the soul’s immortality. Chapters 7, 8, and 9 treat of the soul nature and powers, that is, the ramifications of the charioteer, horses, wings, wheels, and the chariot myth. Chapters 10 and 11 present the Jovian cavalcade (how the gods may be multiplied in four ways) and its cosmological flight (the four worlds, the supercelestial place, the twelve gods). Allen is diligent in providing some precious lines that show in brief the continuity in these sections concerning the drama of the soul in its ascent: “with the individual soul’s ascent through the four divine inspirations [see *Ion*, or part 4], then with the ascent to immortality, ... and finally with the ascent of the Soul (Jupiter) and all the souls, as a cavalcade of gods and men, ... beyond the arch of the intellectual heaven to gaze upon the supracelestial place, the portal of the transcendent One” (p. xxxi).

In part 3, Ficino reviews every chapter: briefly for chapters 1-12 (227A-243E) and chapters 34-53 (257A-279C); extensively for chapters 13-33, the palinode or mythical hymn (243E9-256A7), about which he could never feel unambiguously sure of having fully understood the meaning, the imagery, and Plato’s handling of it. “The *Phaedrus* was about the most august mysteries of inspiration, theogony, incarnation, soteriology, eschatology, and purification, as Jamblichus had long ago insisted by defining its genre as theological, not as logical, physical, or ethical” (p. xi).

Hermias and Theon of Smyrna had also compiled a commentary on *Phaedrus*, but Ficino, because of its complexity and multiple perspectives, returned often to meditate on it, always unable to express with definitive words the infinitely indefinite. Several times, Ficino referred

to this dialogue, mainly to the palinode (the mythical hymn and its commentary), and in some other writings and letters, approached it as the archaeologist of thought he had been, the philologist of ancient Greek he became, the priest of the Platonic temple of light and love, he wanted to be. He felt himself incapable of reaching the ultimate meaning of the *Phaedran* palinode, aware of the presence in it of the same idea of the eternal revelation he found in the *Hermes Trismegistus*.

Though always unsatisfied, uneasy, in regard to the *Phaedrus*, the *Phaedrus* “had supplied [Ficino] with some of his most haunting concepts and images, as it had the ancient Neoplatonists before him.” His characterization of the *Phaedran* charioteer became “one of the Renaissance’s most potent and expressive self-images.” We may affirm, “he was unquestionably the best equipped scholar-philosopher in the Latin West to rise to the challenge of interpreting its riches” (p. xxxv).

In part 4, with his interpretation and introduction to *Ion*, Ficino returns to the consideration of the positions taken in regard to the frenzy of love and other frenzies in the *Phaedrus*. The dialogue *Ion* is short; it is contained between paragraphs 530-542 in the Stephanus pagination. In itself, *Ion* is another ramification from the *Phaedrus*, at least the way Ficino reads it. Ficino’s introduction to *Ion* consists of four chapters that he wrote for his commentary in *Convivium* (speech 7.13-7.14) and five more, in which Ficino’s interpretation “elevates the image of the rhapsode to the level of a universal condition: man as rhapsode is man in search of the divine gift” of inspiration (p. xxxvii). And it is the four kinds of inspiration from God that this introduction-commentary on *Ion* deals with: the poetic frenzy, or first step from the multiplicity of soul’s dispersions; the priestly frenzy, or expiation and ritualization of the worship from the gods to one god; the prophetic frenzy, or foresight of future events; finally, the frenzy of the love that converts into the One. The *Ion* returns to use the images of the charioteer and his horses, and this fact must have influenced Ficino to consider *Ion* the extension of *Phaedrus*.

Even those with little Latin would enjoy these splendid and uncommon texts of Ficino, thanks to the editor’s formatting and his captivating English narration. The profundity and expertise shown by Prof. Allen in the introduction should not remain unnoticed or disregarded. The only way to value and enjoy these sublime texts on the Platonism of the Renaissance is to read the pages of the introduction alternatively with the pages of the texts to which they refer.

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**Citation:** Giorgio A. Pinton. Review of Ficino, Marsilio, *Commentaries on Plato, Volume 1, Phaedrus and Ion*. H-Italy, H-Net Reviews. March, 2010.

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