Non-Discursive Thought - An Enigma of Greek Philosophy in *Proc. of the Aristotelian Society* 1970, pp. 261-274.
15. See especially IV 8 (6) 6, 23-28 and V 8 (31) 7, 12-16.
16. III 4 (15) 3, 22: cp. IV 7 (2) 10, 34-36.
17. cp. VI 4 (22) 14, 16ff. VI 5 (23) 12.
18. Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus* ch. 12.
19. III 8 (30) 6, 37-40: my own translation from *Plotinus* III (Loeb Classical Library) p. 381.
20. *Life* chs. 3, 13.
21. VI 7 (38) 22.
22. V 5 (32) 12.
23. VI 7 (38) 34-36.
24. l.c. 35, 24-27 and 36, 17-18.
25. VI 9 (9) 11. 50-51.
26. Ἄφελε πάντα V 3 (49) 17, 38.

XIX

BEAUTY AND THE DISCOVERY OF DIVINITY IN THE THOUGHT OF PLOTINUS

Plotinus would probably have been much surprised to discover that he had an 'aesthetic' – or even that, for moderns, 'aesthetic' is a distinguishable and respectable part of philosophy. He thought much about the beauty of art and nature, and an intense feeling for beauty is apparent in his thought at every level. But for him the apprehension of beauties in the world of sense was a beginning of the journey to the interior during which the soul discovers its own divinity and the source from which it comes, and the perception of the deeper beauties which make the beauties of sense is part of that journey: you can no more separate aesthetic from religion in Plotinus than you can separate religion from philosophy. In this paper, therefore, I propose to explore his thought about beauty entirely in the context of the soul's discovery of divinity, in the hope that this may enable us to understand both better.

The first stage in the soul's journey to the interior is its discovery of its unity with all Soul, and, in the totality of Soul, with the great soul which made the world of sense. If we consider his thought about the beauties of this world of sense in the context of this discovery, we shall at once become aware of the intricacies of the relationship between the Second and the Third Hypostasis and the outer world of space and time which both make, and may arrive at some interesting discoveries about the relationship of the human artist to his work. It is always the belief of Plotinus that we too can "walk on high and direct the whole cosmos", as Plato says of Soul[1]. We can share the ideal relationship to body which belongs to the Soul of the All and the great divine souls of sun, moon, stars and earth. This is a relationship of free detached creativity, in which soul gives everything to body and takes nothing from body, and is present to the material world without experiencing the hindrance or disturbance which a self-isolating fuss about the needs of our particular bodies brings with it. In the great meditation by which we are to realise our unity with universal soul, which occupies the second chapter of the treatise *On The Three Primary Hypostases*[2] the beauty of the world of

sense is certainly present to Plotinus' mind. It is a real cosmos, an ordered beauty, which soul brings into being: and the beauty is shown in a very Plotinian way to be a beauty due to life and light. The life-giving function of soul is stressed throughout the chapter, and the symbolic 'entry' of soul into body is expressed in one of Plotinus' finest light images: "As the rays of the sun shedding light on a dark cloud, make it shine and give it a golden look, so soul entering the body of the universe gives life, gives immortality and wakes what lies inert."[3] But there is no indication in this passage or anywhere else in the *Enneads* that universal soul takes delight in the beauty which it creates, or is even aware of it. There is nothing in Plotinus which corresponds to "God saw that it was very good" in the *Book of Genesis*. Creation is always for him the spontaneous reflex of contemplation. The beauty of this world springs indeed from delight, but it is delight in that inner, intelligible beauty which the beauties here below only image imperfectly. This of course lies above Soul in the Second Hypostasis, Intellect, in which divine Soul lives and from which it derives its power. And what is true of divine creativity seems also to be true of the human creation of beauty. The artist can create beauty, even sometimes a greater beauty than that of nature, but only because he contemplates the intelligible realities from which the beauties of nature derive: and the beauty which he manages to put into his works of art, though it is truly a beauty of living form, is always less than the beauty which remains in his contemplative soul[4]. Plotinus seems to leave little more room for human than for divine joy in the act of creation, and none at all for what we should be inclined to take into account in considering great works of art, for the degree to which the artist might discover in the course of his work insights and capacities of which he had not been previously conscious and even be stimulated to surpass himself by the difficulties and newly discovered possibilities of the medium in which he was working. The artist in Plotinus can never discover anything, it would seem, in his work, which is not present in a higher degree in the "art within him", and the material medium in which he works can only hinder his expression of the beauty of living form and not stimulate him to genuinely new achievement[5]. The beauties of art, like the beauties of nature, can serve as effective reminders to others of the intelligible beauty which they image, but it does not appear that the artist who has truly attained to the contemplation from which all beauty proceeds can be helped by his work any more than he should enjoy it. But here there are some important qualifications to be made. First of all, however philosophic Plotinus may make the contemplative creation of the

artist sound, he is not likely to have put the artist on the level of the true philosopher. Anyone who actually tries to produce a sensible image of intelligible beauty, instead of being content to contemplate it in interior silence, would seem to fall into the class of 'weak' contemplatives whom he discusses so interestingly in the treatise *On Contemplation*. "Men too, when their power of contemplation weakens, make action a shadow of contemplation and reasoning. Because contemplation is not enough for them, since their souls are weak and they are not able to grasp the vision sufficiently, and therefore are not filled with it, but still long to see it, they are carried into action, so as to see what they cannot see with their intellect. When they make something, then, it is because they want to see their object themselves, and also because they want others to be aware of it and contemplate it as well as possible"[6]. Those in this inferior class, whether artists themselves or those who enjoy their works, might certainly gain greater awareness of intelligible beauty through contemplation of the sense-images with which they were concerned: and they would, of course, be by far the greater part of the human race. For Plotinus, as for all ancient philosophers, those capable of philosophy were only a tiny minority of mankind. He might well have thought that the concern for the external obviously shown in this paper made it clear that its author was not one of that minority. And we may, perhaps, even go a little further. There is much in the *Enneads* to suggest (and nothing in the *Life* to contradict the suggestion) that Plotinus himself was helped rather than hindered in his contemplation by having to produce his ideas in teaching, discussion and writing, from the time when he took part in the seminars of Ammonius onwards. And we may surmise that the distinctively artistic or poetic part of his philosophical production, his unsurpassed choice and verbal expression of sensuous images to express the living power and beauty of the intelligible, may greatly have enhanced his awareness of intelligible beauty. At any rate, there is nothing in the *Enneads* to exclude the supposition that there were always times when he, like the rest of mankind, stood much in need of "images of beauty to remind them"[7].

There is another line of thought in the *Enneads* which may lead us to conclude that, even in the unlikely event of the artist being a perfect philosophic contemplative he might in the process of artistic production acquire a greater awareness *on the conscious level* of the intelligible reality which he contemplated. This is the remarkable doctrine about consciousness which is clearly stated in three places in the *Enneads*[8]. Consciousness for Plotinus must be sharply distinguished from the noetic

activity in which the higher part of our soul, which does not "come down" but always remains on the level of Intellect, is according to him continually engaged. We can only be conscious of this higher activity of thought when it penetrates to those lower regions of our soul which are intimately connected with the body, and its adequate reception and imaging there depends to a great extent on our bodily condition. In the great treatise *On Difficulties About the Soul* when he is discussing how we remember our acts of intellection, which we can only do if they in some way enter the image-making power[9] he suggests "Perhaps the reception into the image-making power would be of the verbal expression which accompanies the act of intelligence"[10]. This theory would enable Plotinus to explain how the artist, on the lower and less important level of ordinary consciousness, could gain greater awareness of the realities which his intellect contemplates in the process of artistic creation through the formation of images, verbal, musical or visual, which would be a necessary part of that process. (We can see from the well-known chapter of the treatise *On Intelligible Beauty* in praise of hieroglyphics[11] that Plotinus thought that non-verbal, non-discursive symbols were better adapted than verbal ones to express intelligible forms). But this discovery of the intelligible realities in their images on the conscious level would be for Plotinus a matter of small importance for the philosophic artist, and nothing like it would be possible in the case of divine creation. Divine creation must be the spontaneous, unplanned, reflex of inward contemplation which cannot increase the self-knowledge or the joy in intelligible beauty which is in that originative contemplation: and human creation should approximate to this as closely as possible.

It is clear from what has been said that soul in creating beauty is always acting as a mediator between the two worlds of Intellect and sense. Soul never seems to be thought of as having a distinct world of its own, with a beauty distinct from and intermediate between that of the intelligible and that of the perceptible, though of course it contains *logoi* which are intermediate between the intelligible forms and those in nature and body[12]. Its world is either the world of Intellect in which at its highest it lives and contemplates, or the world of sense which it brings into being and fills with life and beauty but to which it should not, and in its higher forms does not, direct its contemplative attention. In our 'aesthetic' consideration of the soul's journey to the interior (or our 'spiritual' consideration of Plotinus' aesthetic) it is therefore to the beauty of the world of Intellect which we must now turn. It is by considering his descriptions of intellectual beauty[13] that we can best understand what beauty meant

to him both in the inner and the outer worlds. For the two beauties are not for him opposed or contrasted, though the first is immeasurably superior to the second. He is not inclined to make the sort of contrast which we so easily slip into when we distinguish intellectual and sensuous beauty, a contrast between a beauty of abstract pattern contemplated with a rather cool enjoyment and a warm, mobile, concrete beauty which excites our feelings. (It is a contrast, by the way, which cannot be applied to the masterpieces of what is at once the most abstract and intellectual and the most sensuous and passionate of arts, the music of J. S. Bach, for instance, or the last quartets of Beethoven. Modern European music at its greatest can illustrate Plotinus' accounts of intelligible beauty in a way of which he never dreamed). We can in fact best understand what kind of beauty moved and excited Plotinus in our world of the senses by studying the imaginative language in which he describes the beauty of the world of Intellect, which holds together all the beauties dispersed and separated here below in a more perfect unity and a greater glory of mutual translucence. This imaginative language has been carefully studied by Schwyzer and Ferwerda[14] and need not be discussed in detail here. But the general impression which it makes suggests that the kind of beauty which delighted Plotinus here below (perhaps at times rather more than he would have wished) was vigorous and vital, with the bloom and radiance of abounding life upon it, and full of the wild profusion of change and variety which goes with abundant life. As I have remarked elsewhere[15], nothing is more remarkable in Plotinus' accounts of intelligible beauty than the way in which he insists, at some risk to logical coherence, on introducing values which to our way of thinking are inextricably bound up with change and process into his eternal world. This of course brings the two worlds very close together. The world of Intellect is really an 'inner' rather than an 'other' world.

But we can only fully appreciate the importance of life in both the aesthetic and the religion of Plotinus when we understand that the life which glorifies his intelligible world (and in which that world has its origin) comes from beyond it. The awareness that life has a certain ontological priority to form and comes from a source beyond the reach of the supreme self-forming and self-structuring Intellect[16] is an important part of the general awareness that what we are really looking for, the ultimate object and origin of our love, lies "over the horizon" of thought, which impels us at the last to leave even intelligible beauty behind and seek union with the Good beyond intellect and being. This sense of the priority of life and the transcendence of its source affects the whole of the

thought of Plotinus about beauty, and seems to be responsible for some of its most interesting features. It may well be behind his rejection of the commonplace Stoic definition of beauty as "good proportion with pleasant colour" in the treatise *On Beauty*[17], and his preference for the simple statement that beauty is due to the presence of form. His arguments here are not altogether convincing, as Anton has pointed out[18]. His contention that beauty can be present in something absolutely simple, unrelated to anything else, is as it stands somewhat problematical. His insistence that the simple parts of a beautiful composite whole must themselves be beautiful is contradicted in the much later treatise *On Providence*[19], and Plotinus' second thoughts here seem to be more in accordance with the aesthetic facts. And it is difficult to see how form in a composite thing of beauty can manifest itself otherwise than in a harmony of proportions and colour: the 'proportion' definition and the 'form' definition of beauty seem on strictly Platonic principles to complement rather than to contradict each other. But if the implicit contrast is not simply between 'proportion' and 'form' but between proportion and colour considered abstractly as the conformity of a lifeless thing to certain aesthetic rules, and the living presence of a power in which the life coming from the Good structures itself into creative form, this first chapter of the treatise *On Beauty* makes a good deal more sense: and the 'dynamic' way in which form has just been described is in perfect accordance with the normal thought of Plotinus about the intelligible world and its contents.

Form, then, we may suggest, as the cause of true beauty in the sensible world, is always *living* form. But if we turn our attention to intelligible beauty, and consider it in relation to its source, we shall discover that Plotinus finds it possible, once at least, to consider the beauty of form in abstraction from the living light which plays upon it from the Good. This he does in a famous and much discussed chapter from the treatise *How the Multitude of Forms came into Being, and on the Good*[20]. Here we are told that intelligible beauty is 'inert' by itself[21] and cannot move or attract the soul until the light, warmth, colour, life, or grace (all these words are used in the chapter) which comes directly from the Good, descends upon it. Only then can it arouse the *erōs*, the passionate love, which is the proper response to beauty for any Platonist. There is an interesting inconsistency of language in this chapter. In the first part, where he is dealing directly with intelligible beauty, it is that beauty itself which he declares unattractive and uninteresting without what comes upon it from the Good. Something, that is, can be beautiful without moving or exciting us. The conception of unattractive or un-

interesting beauty with which Plotinus seems to be operating here has considerable practical aesthetic usefulness. It enables us to give a balanced account of works of classicist or academic art to which we cannot altogether deny beauty, in some sense of the word, but to which we must, if we are honest with ourselves, deny any interest or attractiveness. But in the analogy from the beauties of the sense-world which concludes the chapter, Plotinus goes back to a more Platonic way of speaking in which beauty *is* that transcendent radiance of life which is "the lovable"[22], and statues are more beautiful in so far as they are "more lifelike"[23], and an uglier living man more beautiful than a statue of a beautiful man. The cause of beauty and giver and goal of *erōs*, the Good, is still placed beyond beauty, but beauty is identified with *living* form[24], and the conception of a dead or inert beauty is no longer being used.

To appreciate fully the significance of what is said in this chapter we need to compare it with another famous passage which at first sight seems to contradict it. This is the description of the conflict which can arise in our souls between the attractions of the Good and of Beauty in the treatise *That the Intelligibles are not Outside the Intellect and on the Good*[25]. The beauty here in question is, unmistakably from the context, intellectual beauty, not the beauty of the sense-world. The perpetual presence of the Good, we are told here, and the unbroken attraction which it exercises on us, lies deep below the level of consciousness: the Good is always there, always drawing us to itself "even when we are asleep": when we do see it, we are not surprised, and do not have to make an act of recollection to know what it is. The awareness of beauty on the other hand is a conscious (and therefore on Plotinian principles more superficial) awareness, which provokes shock and astonishment and the pain of passionate love. And this disturbing awareness of beauty may lead to one of two undesirable consequences. Some people set themselves up as rivals to beauty, and compete with it for its proper place in the second rank of the universal hierarchy, "next to the King": and it is also possible for the ignorant to be distracted by beauty and drawn away by it from the Good "as a lover draws a child away from the father". In one passage, then, beauty derives all its power to excite and attract us from the Good, and it is only when we are aware of the "light from the Good" shining upon it that our passionate love is stirred. In the other, beauty seems to have an ambiguous, disputable, spiritually dangerous, erotic attraction of its own. There would be nothing surprising about this, of course, if it was said of the beauty of the sense-world[26], but its application to the beauty of Intellect is rather startling. The two passages can, I

think, be reconciled, once we realise clearly that Plotinus must, in both of them, be talking about varying attitudes of our selves to intelligible beauty rather than giving variant objective accounts of that beauty itself and its relation to the Good. Intellect in all the glory of its beauty must always stand next to the Good and be our way to the Good, and receive its glory eternally and unchangingly from the Good. But we, it seems, (though this is perhaps not altogether consistent with what is said elsewhere about our higher selves) can adopt various deviant and unsatisfactory attitudes to beauty, and it is these which seem to be described, with fine psychological insight, in the two chapters under discussion[27]. We can consider beauty abstractly, by itself, apart from its relationship to the Good: and if we do so we can either find it quite unexciting and uninteresting or much too exciting in the wrong way. We can be bored by it or carried away from the Good by it in a sort of erotic-aesthetic hallucination: further, since either boredom or intoxication can easily end in hostility, either of these deviant states may lead to a further deviation in which we quarrel with beauty and deny it its true place next after the Good: which means, perhaps, that we may adopt a thoroughly anti-aesthetic and anti-metaphysical religious attitude. This, at least, seems to be a Plotinian way of bringing the teachings of these two great chapters into harmony. If we escape these deviations, and always see beauty in the worlds of sense and intellect in its true nature and place, the sensible as the best possible image of the intelligible and the intelligible as the rich and complex radiance of the One; and always look beyond beauty when we contemplate it to the source of its radiance, travelling ever onwards till we reach the spring of living light; then the *erōs* which beauty properly excites in us will be the true *erōs* which comes from and will lead us back to the Good.

There is nothing more truly Hellenic in the philosophy of Plotinus than the way in which aesthetic and religious values, in spite of all his awareness of possibilities of conflict between them in our spiritual lives, are held firmly together in his thought about beauty. We may well be able to learn something from him here in our own age, in which an unnecessary and monstrous civil war between the defenders of different values has gravely weakened our civilisation and reduced its capacity to resist the destructive domination of those whose only values are money and power. If we can re-Hellenize rather then de-Hellenize our thought in this respect, so that the love of beauty and the love of metaphysical truth are seen as parts of the love of God, the prospects for both religion and civilisation will be better.

NOTES

1 *Phaedrus* 246C 1-2. *Enn.* IV 8 [6], 2, 20-21; IV,3 [27], 7, 17; V, 8 [31], 7, 34.
2 V, 1 [10], 2.
3 l.c. lines 20-23.
4 V, 8 [31], 1.
5 l.c. lines 18-26. My account of this passage owes much to a former pupil of mine at Dalhousie University, Mrs. N. Hare.
6 III, 8 [30], 4, 31-39 my own translation from *Plotinus* III (Loeb Classical Library): cp. ch. 7, 18-22, on 'creativity' in general, and see my note in the Loeb edition on ch. 6, pp. 372-373.
7 I, 8 [51], 15, 28.
8 IV, 8 [6], 8: IV, 3 [27], 30: I, 4 [46], 9-10. See my article *Aspects of the Thought of Plotinus at Variance with Classical Intellectualism* in Journal of Hellenic Studies XCIII (1973), 13-22.
9 φανταστικόν.
10 τοῦ λόγου τοῦ τῷ νοήματι παρακολουθοῦντος IV, 3, [27], 30, 7.
11 V, 8 [31], 6.
12 IV, 3 [27], 10-11.
13 Especially the two great "visionary" passages V, 8 [31], 3-4 and VI, 7 [38], 12-13.
14 H. R. Schwyzer, *Plotinos, RE* 21, 1. (1951), 526-7; R. Ferwerda, *La signification des métaphores dans la pensée de Plotin*, Groningen 1965.
15 *Eternity, Life and Movement in Plotinus' accounts of* Νοῦς, in: *Le Néoplatonisme*, Paris 1971, 67-76.
16 III, 8 [30], 9, 29-30.
17 I, 6 [1], 1: cp. Cicero, *Tusc.* IV, 31.
18 John P. Anton, *Plotinus' Refutation of Beauty as Symmetry*, Journ. Aesth. and Art. Crit. XXIII, 1964, 233-237.
19 III, 2 [47], 17, 64-74.
20 VI, 7 [38], 22.
21 ἀργόν τε γὰρ τὸ κάλλος αὐτοῦ line 11.
22 τὸ ἐράσμιον line 26.
23 ζωτικώτερα line 30.
24 cp. chapter 32.
25 V, 5 [32], 12.
26 cp. I, 6 [1], 8 and the remarkable description of the "enchantments" of this world in IV, 4 [28], 43.
27 In V 5, 12,20-4 we are told (i) that everyone does not recognize beauty (ii) that people think it belongs to itself, not to them (iii) that they find it sufficient to seem to be beautiful, even if they are not really. And in the some chapter, line 35, there is a phrase (συμμιγῆ τῷ ἀλγύνοντι τὴν ἡδονήν) which suggests the "mixed" pleasures of *Philebus* 46A ff. All this suggests that these deviant attitudes may only be possible at that stage of inadequate awareness of intelligible beauty in which we still see it as external and other than ourselves (cp. VI, 7 [38] 15, 30-32). For it is only that which is external to ourselves which, when present at the conscious level, can remain unrecognised, or appear to have nothing to do with us, or be acquired in seeming only, or satisfy a painful need.