Daniele Iozzia


This short, but interesting book contributes in different ways to the research on the influence of Late Antique philosophy, Plotinus especially, on Christian thought. Its focus is on the role of philosophical aesthetics in Late Antiquity and on their connection with contemporary artistic production on the one hand, and with later inquiries on the nature of Beauty on the other. This approach is particularly welcome, as it opens up a new research path, namely the role of aesthetics in the transmission and reception of classical thought throughout the Middle-Ages and the Renaissance.

The elusive nature of aesthetic reflection in Late Antiquity makes it difficult to identify its specific role within the philosophical thought of the time, characterized by a marked tendency to consider the spiritual world metaphysically superior to the material one, especially in a Platonic context. In a world which is culturally, religiously and philosophically oriented towards the divine, the inquiry on the nature of beauty and on artistic production is strongly influenced by the belief in an ultimate form of beauty which stands far beyond the material world. The aversion to portraiture, famously ascribed to Plotinus, but shared by many of his contemporaries, is a telling example of the hesitation to find beauty in the physical world. Iozzia outlines the challenge of identifying philosophical aesthetics in late antiquity: “The problem of how to detect elements which can be connected to aesthetics is even more complex in the case of late antiquity thinkers, because their perspective is often transcendent and the reflection on beauty is never confined to the natural world, but finds its archetypal source in the divine” (p. 12).

The first chapter explores Plotinus’s rhetorical expressions and his use of metaphors, especially his striking view that life is like a theatre ( _Enneads_ II.2.15-18) as a way to express the complex nature of both the soul and the universe and the constant interactions between different levels of reality, as well as the poietic role of the soul over the material world. In his treatise _On Beauty_ ( _Enneads_ I.6.7-24) Plotinus uses another powerful image when he says that just as the artist represents ideal beauty in a block of stone, the soul must seek to attain ontological perfection by making itself similar to the One. This metaphor is dealt with in the third chapter, where Iozzia convincingly argues for the intimate connection, in the _Enneads_, between beauty and self-perfection: “The overall meaning of the metaphor (with reference to the text of the _Phaedrus_) is that, like a sculptor who strives to further his work, each individual must not abandon the cathartic activity until the perfect beauty of
virtue resides in the soul’ (p. 41). This image, ‘significantly placed almost at the end of the treatise and rhetorically organized in a perhaps more diligent way than other texts by Plotinus’ (p. 43) proved to be a very inspiring one for Gregory of Nyssa and Iozzia claims that Gregory’s comment on Songs of the Songs 5:15 explicitly refers to the image of the sculptor in Enneads 1.6 (p. 43). Through the analysis of two texts, one from Basil of Cesarea’s In martyres Sebastenses and another one from Gregory of Nyssa’s De Sancto Theodoro, Iozzia is able to show the presence of a Plotinian influence in these Christian authors even when there is not direct and explicit reference to the text of the Enneads. Basil’s and Gregory’s praise of the silent narrative of painting, which is able to communicate with the soul and to exhort it to virtue and to an understanding that is ‘immediate and universal’ (p. 48) reechoes Plotinus’s idea that the quest for true beauty and for one’s true self is an inward and silent journey which leads the soul to the very source of life and being. The forth chapter explores the influence of Plotinus’s famous rejection of the view that symmetry is the only criteria to define beauty (Enneads 1.6.1) on both Basil and Gregory of Nyssa and provides good examples of the later reception of Plotinian aesthetics, a topic which still awaits explorations. The fifth and last chapter looks at Plotinus’s description of the soul’s emotional responses to beauty, understood as a manifestation of the higher reality of the One. Plotinus establishes an intrinsic relationship between beauty, love and the soul’s desire to being united with Beauty in itself and, ultimately, with the Divine. The important role of emotions in both aesthetic and ecstatic experiences is underlined also by Gregory’s of Nyssa. For him, not only love, but fear too, characterize the soul’s emotional state when the soul contemplates the immensity the One. Paradoxically, divine nature attracts the soul by producing fear, a position which, as Iozza rightly observes, seems to anticipate Kant’s description of the sense of astonishment in his treatment of the sublime (p. 87).

Although the style would have highly benefited by a revision by a native English speaker, the arguments in this book are cogently argued. Moreover, all historical and philosophical connections give a clear account of the complexed development of the inquiries on beauty and its relationship to the Arts throughout the centuries. What is more, by dealing with the later influence of Plotinus’s philosophical aesthetics, Iozzia gives also an important contribution to the field of Plotinian scholarship.

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