Deepa Majumdar, *Plotinus on the Appearance of Time and the World of Sense. A Pantomime*. Adlershot: Ashgate, 2007. 237 pp.

Deepa Majumdar's book on the appearance of time and the world of sense in Plotinus is structured in three parts: "The Hermeneutic Scene", "The Architectonic Scene", and "The Cosmological Scene". The first part (chapters 2-3) deals with Plotinus' method, originality, heritage and legacy; the second (chapters 4-7) with the concepts of soul, self, and the "logic of Plotinian *poiesis*" (p. 9); and the third (chapters 8-12) with the involvement of soul and self in the genesis of time and the world of sense, "with special attention paid to III.7(45).11-13" (p. 9). The aim of the book, as presented in the Introduction, is a "thorough exploration of two key aspects", namely "the engagement of soul and self in [the] genesis [of time and the world of sense]", and "*tolma* and the weakening of the edifice of soul" (pp. 8-9). These themes, it is added, are explored "in the hope of constructing the tacit architectonic pillars underlying Plotinus' cosmology in III.7(45).11-13" (p. 9), that is, the three last chapters of Plotinus' treatise *On Eternity and Time*.

Quite astonishingly, the venture appears to have been pronounced successful in the very first page of the book, where the innocent reader is confronted with several quotations of distinguished professors, presented in the form of excerpts from pre-publication reviews. While all are eulogistic, the one that comes first, from Michael F. Wagner, is overwhelmingly so: "Dr. Majumdar provides the most thorough, rigorous, precise, organized, and insightful account I have read of Plotinus' many remarks and discussions regarding soul and some related concepts". Dimitri Nikulin, too, finds the book "particularly impressive" in terms of "knowledge and command of the sources, both primary and secondary".

Such an introduction fills the reader with great expectations. Alas, disillusion follows, as it soon becomes evident that the book falls short of its so-called achievements.

Let us start with the most striking feature of the book, namely the use that Majumdar (henceforth M.) makes of the secondary literature. Throughout the book, as we shall have further occasion to note, M. prefers to refer to the views of *other* scholars rather than to Plotinus' own. We are made to read a great number of quotations from Armstrong, Rist, Strange, Deck, Smith, Schürmann, etc.—the names are picked at random, but they are among those most often referred to. It is, of course, honourable to bring into one's own analysis what other commentators think, either to build on what they have achieved or to engage in exegetical debate with them. But that is not what M. does. What she does is to provide a mere summary of their views. She rarely ventures to disagree with them and is for the most part content to integrate their interpretations in the body of her text

rather than in footnotes. As a consequence, very little space is left for a direct interpretation of Plotinus' text.

Is this, as Nikulin claims, a "particularly impressive" knowledge and command of the secondary sources? The question is all the more pertinent since M. refers only to secondary literature written in English. Furthermore, when she happens to refer, for instance, to Jean Trouillard and Pierre Hadot, both well known French scholars, she quotes only from their books or articles written in English first, or translated in that language afterwards. Likewise, she makes no reference to Denis O'Brien's numerous publications in French, a particularly regrettable omission which, as we shall see, is not without affecting the relevance of her own interpretation. No mention is made of Matteo Andolfo's book (*L'ipostasi della psiche in Plotino. Struttura e fondamenti*) or of Francesco Romano's article ("Natura e anima in Plotino"), both of which deal with M.'s topic. Werner Beierwaltes, who is mentioned as holding a view on the meaning of the 'we' (in III 7 [45] 11) opposite to M.'s own, is not referred to directly, but through the mediation of Smith's article "Eternity and time" (169, n. 9).

Let's now turn to M.'s approach to Plotinus' text. In the Preface, she says she is "grateful to the silent community of Plotinian scholars, who taught [her] to quieten the hermeneutic eye, *let the text be its own lens, and allow Plotinus to speak for himself*" (p. vii, my italics). Yet, Plotinus and the *Enneads* are in many respects the most notable absentees in M.'s book. Her numerous references to the *Enneads* are generally incomplete, confined to a bare mention of the number of the chapter, without line references. This is most irritating for the reader, who cannot check the precise passages that M. is referring to and, as a result, is plunged into a morass of ghostly ungraspable passages. This is all the more frustrating since M. hardly ever gives *verbatim* quotations of the texts that she is dealing with. In fact, it is not until chapter six (p. 92) that the reader first comes across a quotation from the *Enneads*. Another one comes shortly afterwards (p. 97), and then nothing again until chapter nine. Most of the few textual quotations from Plotinus are limited to III 7 [45] 11, and appear only in the last four chapters of her book (excepting chapter thirteen, which is in fact not a real chapter, only a rapid conclusion). Since M. does not give line numbers, this leads to the situation where several *different* passages are given with exactly the *same* reference, namely III 7 [45] 11 (see in particular in chapter twelve, pp. 202, 206, 209 and 214). Finally, when M. ventures to quote Plotinus, it is virtually never with any reference to the original Greek, not even to stress some key word in the passage she is dealing with. She does not bother to mention that the translation she uses is Armstrong's (in Loeb Classical Library), and she certainly never seeks to amend it.

It is no wonder, therefore, that M.'s exegesis turns out to be neither insightful nor convincing. In fact, one cannot but doubt of the relevance of the conclusions

that she reaches, not necessarily because those conclusions happen to be incorrect or debatable in themselves, but because they do not seem to be the result of personal and independent analysis. Admittedly, the book is uneven in that respect. The two first parts are very general and thus unhelpful for the interpretation of III 7 [45] 11, a text that M. is repeatedly pointing at, without yet giving an account of it. For that, the reader has to wait until the third and last part of the book. There, we find four chapters (nine to twelve) dedicated to the question of the appearance of time in III 7 [45] 11. In these chapters a more personal voice is sounded and an attempt made at a more precise approach to the texts. I shall limit myself to commenting on some of the points that M. tries to make in those chapters.

In chapter nine (“Conjoint Appearance of Time and the World of Sense (III.7(45).11)”), M. intends to explore the “involvement of soul and self with all stages of [the conjoint] geneses [of Time and the World of Sense]” (p. 141). From the start she speaks of the “fore-life” of time, i.e. the pre-existence of time before its actual appearance along with the sensible world (p. 141; that idea is already stated p. 4: “a tolmatic impetus stirs soul into a motion that dislodges time from its noetic rest”; and p. 6, n. 18). The question whether Plotinus did or did not endorse the view of a transcendent pre-existence of time is certainly a matter of controversy. But the position here adopted on that issue is careless in so far as M. is too quick to take literally Plotinus’ account in III 7 (45) 11. She is not interested in examining the very special way Plotinus frames his account, in particular his initial calling upon the Muses (which is a thinly disguised reference to *Republic* VIII 545d7-e3), and then upon time itself, to tell us about how time ‘was’ born (cf. III 7 (45) 11, 6-9 and 9-11). The same problem resurfaces in chapter ten, on “The Nature and Role of the Self (“we”) in III.7(45).11” (p. 165). Again, from the start, M. asserts that in the last three chapters of his *On Eternity and Time*, “Plotinus uses the pluralized self as metaphysical subject (“we”) and object (“us”)” (p. 165). Scholars agree that the use Plotinus makes of the first person plural in III 7 (45) 11 is tricky (see l. 5: γεννήσομεν δὲ χρόνον λόγῳ καὶ φύσει τοῦ ὑστέρου, and l. 19-20: μηκός τι τῆς πορείας ποιησάμενοι αἰώνως εἰκόνα τὸν χρόνον εἰργάσμεθα). In particular, it seems difficult to find out what subject it refers to, either a narrative “we” (including Plotinus, his audience, and readers), or a metaphysical “we” (the soul, be it individual or generic, responsible for the actual coming into being of time), or yet something else. Her literal reading of those passages drives M. to discard any option but the “metaphysical we”, without providing a real justification for her choice. This leads her to enter into the examination of the nature and role of that metaphysical “we”, and to provide an interpretation that is, to put it mildly, speculative.

Chapters eleven and twelve are mainly concerned with *tolma* (audacity), the *polupragmatic* nature of the soul, and the role those two elements play in the conjoint appearance of time and the world of sense. M. had been alluding to those notions throughout her book (see pp. 119, 120, 122, 129, 139, 142, 175, etc.), and it is only at the very end that we finally get an account of them. Though the word *τόλμα* does not occur in III 7 [45] 11-13, M. believes that the “soul’s *polupragmatic* nature is replete with *tolmatic* hues” (p. 183). Her analysis of *τόλμα* drives her to affirm that, in passages like III 8 [30] 8, “Intellect *chooses* otherness with respect to the One” (p. 189, M.’s italics). The ascription of choice-making to Intellect is a very bold assertion which I believe is not supported by the textual evidence. The fact of the matter is that, in III 8 [30] 8, we are told only that Intellect “wanted” or “desired” (cf. I. 34: θέλων, and I. 35: ἐθελῆσαι) to possess everything, and that this made it the second principle. There is there no mention of “choice”. On p. 204, we find M. making a similar ascription, this time to soul. But there, she has the authority of III 7 [45] 11, 15-17 to support her claim, a passage about the *polupragmatic* nature of soul, which “chose (ἐλομένης) to seek for more than its present state”. However, M. hangs too much weight on that single piece of evidence. She appears to be unaware that elsewhere (cf. IV 3 [27] 13, 17-18: οὐ γὰρ τὸ ἐκούσιον τοιοῦτον ὥς προελέσθαι) Plotinus dismisses the idea that the voluntary movement of the soul towards the body is the result of a choice. She seems not to be acquainted with O’Brien’s article, “Le volontaire et la nécessité: réflexions sur la descente de l’âme dans la philosophie de Plotin” (*Revue philosophique de la France et de l’étranger* 167, 1977, pp. 401-422), a very insightful and comprehensive study on those questions.

In conclusion, though Majumdar is surely right in stressing the importance of III 7 [45] 11 for a better assessment of Plotinus’ general conception of the generation of the world of sense, she does not succeed in providing a relevant account of it. The pain she takes in summarizing, or quoting from, other commentators often prevents her from engaging in a robustly exegetical and personal interpretation of Plotinus’ texts. M. is certainly a capable scholar, as is clear from the last chapters of her book. Far too often, however, she projects her own views on to Plotinus rather than testing them against the text of the *Enneads*.

Bernard Collette-Dučić

Post-Doctoral Researcher at the FRS-FNRS

(Fonds National de la Recherche Scientifique de Belgique)

bernard.collette@ulb.ac.be