INTRODUCTION

This book is not intended to present an outline sketch of the philosophy of Plotinus; there are readily available a number of works which do that very well. It is intended rather for those who are interested in a more detailed discussion of certain problems in Plotinus’ thought which have not always received the attention they deserve at the hands of either classicists or philosophers. In the last chapter I have ventured beyond Plotinus himself into the wider field of Neoplatonism generally, since the subject of faith, which is discussed there, affords an excellent opportunity for seeing Plotinus not only as a philosopher but as an influence on philosophers both Christian and pagan.

There has been a considerable and belated revival of interest in Plotinus’ thought in recent years, but, with a few exceptions, the scholars and thinkers engaged in this work have had little impact on the study of ancient philosophy in most parts of the English-speaking world. Within that world Plotinus has fallen into a curious limbo: he is regarded as too late to be studied as a classical author, and too early to fall within the scope of the medievalist, even where the medievalist is bold enough to step outside the narrow confines of the Latin West. It seems, therefore, that there is room for a book on problems in Plotinus’ thought. If a general picture of a great philosopher emerges from these pages, so much the better.
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The life of Plotinus has been recounted many times since it was first set down by Porphyry in the *Vita Plotini* with which in A.D. 301 he prefaced his edition of his master’s works. It is worth retelling not merely because it is the custom to open books on the history of philosophy with a brief biography of the particular hero, nor because it is possible to add significant factual details to what has been written already, but in order to show as far as possible the kind of man it was who composed the *Enneads*. For any light which may be shed on their frequent obscurities by a deeper understanding of the character of their author cannot but be of value.

When writing the life of any historical figure, the wise biographer will look as closely as he can at all the available evidence. In the case of Plotinus he will realize that virtually all the evidence we have comes from the work of Porphyry. In two matters at most is there evidence of any other tradition. We shall consider these matters, of course, but in general we must rely on what Porphyry says; and though Porphyry can often be most helpful, he can at times be infuriating. His aim is certainly not to tell us everything he knows about Plotinus, but to select those aspects of his character and career which are most easily fitted into a somewhat hagiographical framework. What is omitted is omitted either through a desire to suppress the unwelcome fact or a misunderstanding of Plotinus’ position in society. Needless to say the misunderstandings of Porphyry have led to more elaborate modern misunderstandings.

In almost the first words of the first chapter of the *Life* Porphyry remarks that Plotinus could not be induced to talk of his ancestry, his parents, or his place of birth. He gives us only one piece of information about Plotinus’ life up to the age
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of twenty-seven, namely that when he was eight years old and being taken to school by his nurse he used to enjoy baring her breasts and taking suck—until he was rebuked and shamed out of the habit.¹ Why Plotinus told this story we are not informed. Those who have suspected that he gave it as an example of an involuntary fault may be correct. Yet whatever the reason and whatever else Porphyry knew of Plotinus’ childhood and boyhood, he chooses to say nothing.

Porphyry thinks he knows when Plotinus was born, for he mentions his age at various times of life and at his death. Yet it is clear that he did not derive this information from Plotinus himself. Porphyry was not present at Plotinus’ death; the philosopher was attended then only by the doctor Eustochius, and Porphyry observes⁸ that it was Eustochius who told him that Plotinus was sixty-six years old when he died at the end of the second year of the reign of Claudius Gothicus (A.D. 270).⁸ A natural assumption from this would be that Plotinus broke silence about his birth to his doctor, but Oppermann⁴ has disturbingly pointed out that on Eustochius’ dating, as Porphyry gives it in the Life⁵ Plotinus would have been forty when he came to Rome. And forty, the famous ‘acme’ of a man’s career, is so often an age calculated by the merest guesswork.

We cannot therefore be sure of Plotinus’ age at any time, or of his date of birth. The ages of the hero given by Porphyry at different stages of his life are useful markers of his activity, but not necessarily correct. Indeed one might hazard the guess that Plotinus was not as old as Porphyry supposed. Porphyry tells us in chapter three that he was twenty-seven when he became interested in philosophy. That seems rather late. We may wonder what he had been doing before, for the previous ten years or so. But this is merely speculation, part of the difficulty which Plotinus has caused his biographers by being unwilling to speak of himself, or, as Porphyry rather more melodramatically puts it, by his being ‘ashamed of being in a body’.⁶
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Of the date of birth of the philosopher, of his parents and family, Porphyry says nothing. He says nothing of his place of birth; yet there were strong traditions about that. In his note on the life of Plotinus Eunapius tells us that he came from Egypt;7 that much is obvious from Porphyry, doubtless Eunapius’ source. But Eunapius goes further and, commenting that Porphyry does not mention the fact, adds that his birthplace was Lyco. The version of the Suda is Lycopolis, identifiable with Assiut in Upper Egypt.8 But although Plotinus came from Egypt, he was almost certainly of Greek or at least entirely hellenized stock. His references to the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics indicate no understanding of their nature,9 despite the contemporary stirrings of native languages against the predominance of Greek. Scholars have sometimes suggested that the name Plotinus may be Roman,10 sometimes Hellenistic. In truth we do not know.

Let us then picture Plotinus as far as we can in the year 232 when he began to frequent the philosophers of Alexandria. He is of a fairly wealthy and leisureed class, for he went to school and could afford the hard-working but financially unrewarding life of a non-Cynic philosopher. His family is unknown, but probably had local significance at least, if not wider links throughout the Empire. He was, we may surmise, a child of the Hellenic or hellenized aristocracy of Egypt.

His activities among the philosophers of Alexandria are in no way unusual.11 He roamed about from one school to the next until he found what seemed satisfactory. It appears from Porphyry’s narrative that none of the better-known instructors came up to the mark, because Plotinus did not think of the man who eventually won his enthusiasm, Ammonius, but received this suggestion from a friend. At any rate Ammonius proved an inspiration and Plotinus remained with him for a period of eleven years.

The internal history of Plotinus during this period is almost as obscure as his childhood. We know virtually nothing of the philosophy of Ammonius, who wrote nothing.12 His teachings,
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or at any rate his major teachings, seem to have been confided only to a small group, to which Plotinus belonged in company with Erennius and a certain Origen. This Origen, author of treatises on daimones and on the causality of the first principle, is not to be confused with the Church Father who, however, may also at some time have been Ammonius’ pupil. Exactly what these pupils learned from Ammonius we do not know. The only possible clue Porphyry gives us is in an allusion to Ammonius’ methods of approach to philosophical topics: it seems that he was markedly less conservative and less of a commentator than the majority of his contemporaries.

Be that as it may, Plotinus’ externally uneventful life in Alexandria was completely transformed in 243. According to Porphyry Plotinus had so far advanced in philosophy that he wished to investigate the thought of the East—a perpetual longing of the Greeks—as represented by the Persians and Indians. Mindful perhaps of the train of savants who had followed Alexander the Great to India, Plotinus therefore managed to have himself attached to the expedition of the youthful Emperor Gordian III against the Persians. As scholars have observed, this mere fact tells us something about Plotinus’ life—as does its sequel. For Gordian was murdered by his soldiers and, Porphyry tells us, Plotinus only narrowly managed to escape to Antioch. His danger was clearly not from the Persians, but from the Roman enemies of the murdered Senatorial Emperor. In fact, as Harder has explained, Plotinus must have owed both his permission to join the expedition and his danger at Gordian’s death to connections within senatorial circles at Rome. The Roman Senate at this time was largely cosmopolitan in origin and could have contained friends, conceivably even members, of Plotinus’ own family. At any rate Plotinus’ background receives further illumination. The connections of his family extended to Rome.

And it was to Rome itself that Plotinus now journeyed. He appears not to have returned to Alexandria; whether because his patrons supposed his life would be in danger there, or be-
cause, Ammonius having died, he felt little incentive to return, we do not know. At first sight Rome might not seem a congenial place for the philosopher, but in some ways it was ideal. Apart from the presumed personal connections Rome had the advantage for Plotinus of not being the home of Ammonius. If Ammonius were still alive at this time, we can imagine that Plotinus would not wish to set up a school, which might be regarded as a rival, in the city of Alexandria. If Ammonius were dead, Plotinus might feel that his ties with Alexandria were gone, especially if one of the reasons for his unwillingness to speak of his parents was that they had perished in factional disturbances after the murder of Gordian III. And if Plotinus left Alexandria he would certainly not find Athens to his taste. Here the official Platonism of the Diadochi, or successors of Plato in the Academy, was taught, much of it of little interest to Plotinus with his unhistorical methods and dislike of traditional ways. Longinus taught Porphyry in Athens before Porphyry came to Rome; of Longinus’ works On Causes and Philarchaios Plotinus remarked that the author was a literary man, a philologist, not a philosopher.

It was then to Rome that Plotinus came in A.D. 244. Here he was the centre of a circle which lasted with various fluctuations of membership and fortune until his death in 270. Some of its members came from the senatorial class: Marcellus Orontius, Sabinillus who shared the consulate with the Emperor Gallienus in 266, Rogatianus who attained the rank of praetor only to decline it for philosophic motives, and possibly the elusive Castricius Firmus who was a close friend both of Porphyry and of Plotinus’ other leading disciple Gentilianus Amelius, and to whom is dedicated Porphyry’s treatise on vegetarianism, De Abstinentia, a protreptic against lapsing into an ‘unphilosophical’ way of life.17 The background of Amelius was Etruria, though we do not know anything more of his circumstances there. Unlike most of Plotinus’ Roman adherents he had already received philosophical training—with the Stoic Lysimachus.18 As for the lady Gemina, in whose house
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Plotinus lodged, and her daughter of the same name, we know nothing.

Such then is the society, so far as we can see it, into which Plotinus moved when he came to Rome. It is a senatorial society with connections over a large part of the world. It is not, however, a society especially favoured by the Emperor Gallienus, who some have supposed encouraged the Plotinian school as the vanguard of a Hellenic revival. Gallienus’ wife may have been Greek; but despite all the admiration Gallienus later came to have for Plotinus personally, his public activities have little connection with the career of the philosopher. 19

If Plotinus’ circle was partially composed of prominent Roman personages, including senators, and if, as Porphyry tells us, Plotinus himself played a significant rôle in Roman society and was in considerable demand as an arbitrator and as the ward of young children—both of which tasks he performed in exemplary fashion 20—we must not forget that the larger section of his group was always of Oriental origin. First and foremost comes the Tyrian Malchos, or Porphyry as he is better known; from Alexandria come Plotinus’ doctor and close confidant Eustochios, a professional speaker named Serapion, who, according to Porphyry, never shook off the vices of avarice and usury, 21 and probably the Arabian Zethos who married a daughter of a friend of Ammonius. Of the others mentioned by Porphyry, Paulinus came from Scythopolis while the critic and poet Zoticus is of unknown origin—although Alexandria might again be a fair guess. The third of the women who, Porphyry tells us, were devoted to philosophy was Amphiclea, wife of Ariston, son of Iamblichus. It has been noticed that the name Iamblichus probably marks a Syrian origin. Furthermore it should be recalled that, when Amelius chose to retire, he moved to the birthplace of his adopted son Hostilianus Hesychius, to Apamea, a city of Syria with some philosophic pretensions whose sons had included Posidonius and Numenius.
We see Plotinus then in the years 244–53 living in Rome, moving in high circles, teaching among his friends, looking after the interests of those who trusted him in matters of importance, but writing nothing. He did not go to the baths, not out of the spirit of excessive asceticism but probably through dislike of the licence they encouraged. Instead he looked after his health by having massage at home. He was not of strong constitution, suffering from various intestinal complaints; he remained a strict vegetarian and would not use medicaments made of animal flesh.

His lectures were open to the public and took the form of the discussion of set texts. As Porphyry tells us, various Platonic or Peripatetic writings would be read, the works of men like Numenius or Alexander of Aphrodisias, and these would form the basis on which Plotinus would give his disquisition. Although at first he was unwilling to use the teachings of his master Ammonius, because of an agreement with his fellow-pupils, he eventually followed their example and based his seminars on them. During the proceedings he encouraged the audience to ask questions, a method which in the view of Amelius led to a good deal of purposeless discussion, and which often annoyed visitors. Porphyry records that on one occasion he himself questioned Plotinus for three days in succession on the relation of the soul with the body, and when a visitor named Thaumasius objected that he wished to hear from Plotinus a set treatise he only received the reply from the master himself that if he could not resolve Porphyry’s difficulties he would have no treatise to give.

With the opening of the reign of Gallicenus in 263 a change occurred. Plotinus began to write up some of his lectures and discussions. Why he did so we do not know; what we do know is that in the next ten years, before Porphyry joined the school, he put down twenty-one tracts. Under the urging of Porphyry and of Amelius the rate of composition increased so that during the years 263–8 twenty-four more treatises appeared. In 268 Porphyry thought of committing suicide, and
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being dissuaded by Plotinus was ordered to take a rest and enjoy the traditional cure prescribed in antiquity for such melancholia, a change of abode. He retired to Lilybaeum in Sicily and was there until after Plotinus’ death in 270.²⁹

According to Porphyry the treatises composed between 263 and 268 are Plotinus’ best,³⁰ but here Porphyry merely flatters himself. He seems to suppose that Plotinus’ best work was done while he himself was with him, but there is little evidence to support his notion that the earlier treatises show an as yet not fully developed talent. As for the nine tracts that Plotinus wrote between the time of Porphyry’s departure for Sicily and his own death, they are a special case, and while they show no diminution in Plotinus’ philosophical powers, they indicate a particular interest arising from the philosopher’s own situation which we shall discuss later.

Let us turn aside however to consider Plotinus at work on his writings. He certainly did not begin to write too young, and it is probably a fair surmise that he shared Plato’s suspicion of the written word and feeling that it was no substitute for oral discussion. At any rate, although his lectures were open to the public, his writings were made available only to a small circle of intimates.³¹ Porphyry makes it quite clear that although he was allowed to attend the lectures of Plotinus when he first came to Rome he did not gain immediate access to the writings. When Porphyry heard Plotinus’ lectures he was moved to write a reply to Plotinus’ teachings on the relation of Noûs and the Forms, and to propose instead the (genuinely Platonic) theories which he had learned from Longinus. Amelius was instructed by Plotinus to reply on his behalf; Porphyry replied to the reply and Amelius wrote again. At this point Porphyry gave in and wrote a palinode. At that stage only was he admitted into the inner circle and entrusted with Plotinus’ writings. Certainly the reason for this was that Plotinus felt that only with such men could written philosophy be safe. To the unskilled it would only breed confusions which it could not answer.
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To Plotinus’ probable mistrust of writing must be added his physical infirmities. His eyesight was bad and this precluded him, even had he wished, from revising anything he had written. Apparently he did not even re-read his sentences. His handwriting was bad; he joined words together wrongly; he made mistakes in spelling. He regularly spelled ἀναμνήσκοις as ἀναμνήσκοκε— in this case an error carried over from the spoken to the written word. Porphyry expresses amazement that these peculiarities continued down to the end of his master’s career.

There is a sentence in chapter eight of the Life which all editors of Plotinus should face with fear and trembling, but whose implications have often passed unnoticed. Plotinus only concerned himself with the sense (ἄλλα μόνον τοῦ νοῦ ἔχωμον), says Porphyry, and when he wrote he wrote continuously as though he were copying from a book. It would be an exaggeration to say that this implies that Plotinus disregarded the exigencies of grammar and syntax in his desire to put down what he meant, but it would not be unfair or uninformative to observe that there frequently appears in the Enneads what can only be described as a ‘stream of consciousness’ style. By this may be understood not so much a disregard of normal syntax, though that is not uncommon, as a neglect of the pedestrian connections of thought. Even the most learned of the ancients were baffled by this habit if they were not familiar with Plotinus’ manner of exposition. In chapters 19 and 20 of the Life Porphyry alludes to the fate of various manuscripts of Plotinus which he had sent to his former teacher Longinus, in particular those on the soul and on the Real. They are useless, complains Longinus; they are full of scribal errors. But Porphyry’s reply is that if ever there were correct copies of Plotinus’ tracts Longinus has them. They were copies, says Porphyry, from Plotinus’ own autograph. The reason Longinus is unable to follow them is that he is unfamiliar with the ‘customary method of exposition’ (τὴν συνήθη ἔρωπήσεων) which Plotinus employs. What a warning, though a