

Modern Platonism

ERASMUS in his age of religious revolution expressed an alarm, which in some shape has been since realized. He strangely, yet acutely, observes, that “*literature* began to make a great and happy progress; but,” he adds, “I fear two things, that the study of *Hebrew* will promote *Judaism*, and the study of *philology* will revive PAGANISM.” He speaks to the same purpose in the Adages, c. 189, as Jortin observes, p. 90. Blackwell in his curious Life of Homer, after showing that the ancient oracles were the fountains of knowledge, and that the *god* of Delphi actually was believed by the votaries, from the oracle’s perfect acquaintance with the country, parentage, and fortunes of the suppliant, and many predictions having been verified; that besides all this, the oracles that have reached us discover a wide knowledge of everything relating to Greece;—is at a loss to account for a knowledge that he thinks has something divine in it: it was a knowledge to be found nowhere in Greece but among the oracles. He would account for this phenomenon, by supposing there existed a succession of learned men devoted to this purpose. He says, “Either we must admit the knowledge of the priests, or turn *converts to the ancients*, and believe in the *omniscience of Apollo*, which in this age I know nobody in hazard of.” Yet to the astonish-

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ment of this writer, were he now living, he would have witnessed this incredible fact! Even Erasmus himself might have wondered.

We discover the origin of MODERN PLATONISM, as it may be distinguished, among the Italians. About the middle of the fifteenth century, some time before the Turks had become masters of Constantinople, a great number of philosophers flourished. *Gemisthus Pletho* was one distinguished by his genius, his erudition, and his fervent passion for *platonism*. Mr. Roscoe notices Pletho; “His discourses had so powerful an effect upon Cosmo de Medici, who was his constant auditor, that he established an academy at Florence, for the sole purpose of cultivating this new and more elevated species of philosophy.” The learned Marsilio Ficino translated Plotinus, that great archimage of *platonian mysticism*. Such were Pletho’s eminent abilities, that in his old age those whom his novel system had greatly irritated, either feared or respected him. He had scarcely breathed his last when they began to abuse Plato and our Pletho. The following account is written by George of Trebizond.

“Lately has arisen amongst us a second Mahomet: and this second, if we do not take care,

CURIOSITIES OF LITERATURE

will exceed in greatness the first, by the dreadful consequences of his wicked doctrine, as the first has exceeded Plato. A disciple and rival of this philosopher in philosophy, in eloquence, and in science, he had fixed his residence in the Peloponnese. His common name was *Gemisthus*, but he assumed that of *Pletho*. Perhaps Gemisthus, to make us believe more easily that he was descended from heaven, and to engage us to receive more readily his doctrine and his new law, wished to change his name, according to the manner of the ancient patriarchs; of whom it is said, that at the time the name was changed they were called to the greatest things. He has written with no vulgar art, and with no common elegance. He has given new rules for the conduct of life, and for the regulation of human affairs; and at the same time has vomited forth a great number of blasphemies against the Catholic religion. He was so zealous a platonist that he entertained no other sentiments than those of Plato, concerning the nature of the gods, souls, sacrifices, &c. I have heard him myself, when we were together at Florence, say, that in a few years all men on the face of the earth would embrace with one common consent, and with one mind, a single and simple religion, at the first instructions which

should be given by a single preaching. And when I asked him if it would be the religion of Jesus Christ, or that of Mahomet? he answered, 'Neither one nor the other; but a *third*, which will not greatly differ from *paganism*.' These words I heard with so much indignation, that since that time I have always hated him: I look upon him as a dangerous viper; and I cannot think of him without abhorrence."

The pious writer of this account is too violently agitated: he might, perhaps, have bestowed a smile of pity or contempt; but the bigots and fanatics are not less insane than the impious themselves.

It was when Pletho died full of years and honours, that the malice of his enemies collected all its venom. A circumstance that seems to prove that his abilities must have been great indeed to have kept such crowds silent: and it is not improbable that this scheme of impiety was less impious than was imagined. Not a few Catholic writers lament that his book was burnt, and greatly regret the loss of Pletho's work; which, they say, was not meant to subvert the Christian religion, but only to unfold the system of Plato, and to collect what he and other philosophers had written on religion and politics.

Of his religious scheme, the reader may judge by this summary account. The general title of the volume ran thus: "This book treats of the laws of the best form of government, and what all men must observe in their public and private stations, to live together in the most perfect, the most innocent, and the most happy manner." The whole was divided into three books. The titles of the chapters where paganism was openly inculcated are reported by Gennadius, who condemned it to the flames, but who has not thought proper to enter into the manner of his arguments, &c. The impiety and the extravagance of this new legislator appeared, above all, in the articles which concerned religion. He acknowledges a plurality of gods: some superior, whom he placed above the heavens; and the others inferior, on this side the heavens. The first existing from the remotest antiquity; the others younger, and of different ages. He gave a king to all these gods; and he called him ΖΕΥΣ, or *Jupiter*, as the pagans named this power formerly. According to him, the stars have a soul; the demons were not malignant spirits; and the world was eternal. He established polygamy, and was even inclined to a community of women. All his work was filled with such reveries, and with not a few impieties, which my pious author will not venture to give.

What the intentions of Pletho were, it would be rash to determine. If the work was only an arrangement of paganism, or the platonic philosophy, it might have been an innocent, if not a curious volume. He was learned and humane, and had not passed his life entirely in the solitary recesses of his study.

To strain human curiosity to the utmost limits of human credibility, a *modern Pletho* has arisen in Mr. *Thomas Taylor*, who, consonant to the platonic philosophy, in the present day religiously professes *polytheism!* At the close of the eighteenth century, be it recorded, were published many volumes, in which the author affects to avow himself a zealous Platonist, and asserts he can prove that the Christian religion is "a bastardized and barbarized Platonism!" The divinities of Plato are the divinities to be adored, and we are to be taught to call God, Jupiter; the Virgin, Venus; and Christ, Cupid! And the *Iliad* of Homer allegorized, is converted into a Greek bible of the arcana of nature! Extraordinary as this literary lunacy may appear, we must observe, that it stands not singular in the annals of the history of the human mind. The Florentine academy, which Cosmo founded, had, no doubt, some classical enthusiasts; but who, perhaps, according to the political character of their country, were prudent and reserved. The

platonick furor, however, appears to have reached other countries. The following remarkable anecdote has been given by St. Foix, in his "Essais historiques sur Paris." In the reign of Louis XII. a scholar named Hemon de la Fosse, a native of Abbeville, by continually reading and admiring the Greek and Latin writers, became mad enough to persuade himself that it was impossible that the religion of such great geniuses as Homer, Cicero, and Virgil was a false one. On the 25th of August, 1503, being at church, he suddenly snatched the host from the hands of the priest, at the moment it was raised, exclaiming; "What! always this folly!" He was immediately seized and put in prison. In the hope that he would abjure his extravagant errors, they delayed his punishment; but no exhortation, nor intreaties availed. He persisted in maintaining that Jupiter was the sovereign God of the universe, and that there was no other paradise than the Elysian fields. He was burnt alive, after having first had his tongue pierced, and his hand cut off. Thus perished an ardent and learned youth, who ought only to have been condemned as a Bedlamite.

Dr. More, the most rational of our modern Platonists, abounds, however, with the most extravagant reveries, and was inflated with egotism and enthusiasm, as much as any of his mystic predecessors. He conceived

that he held an intercourse with the divinity itself! that he had been shot as a fiery dart into the world, and he hoped he had hit the mark. He carried his self-conceit to such extravagance, that he thought his urine smelt like violets, and his body in the spring season had a sweet odour; a perfection peculiar to himself. These visionaries indulge the most fanciful vanity.