

The Influence of Florentine Neoplatonism on Early Modern Transylvanian Culture

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*“Plato tunc demum beatas
esse iudicabant, cum a
sapientibus regentur.
Felix igitur populis...”*

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FLORENTINE NEOPLATONISM was a cultural movement born in Italy at the end of the fifteenth century and which mainly sought to bring Platonic philosophy back to life. With the contribution of Marsilio Ficino, the leader of the Platonic Academy of Florence, this new intellectual trend would play a great role in the development of European culture in the centuries to come. Neoplatonism can only be understood in terms of its concern for the heritage of the Antiquity. If we consider the Renaissance as a return to the themes and values of Greek and Roman classical culture, then Neoplatonism is the rebirth of one of its most important components—the philosophy of Plato. Plato’s revival is considered by some historians to be the starting point of the Quattrocento Renaissance. Leonardo Bruni stated that the coming of Manuel Chrysoloras to Florence, in order to teach the inhabitants of Florence the Greek language, ended a period of seven hundred years of darkness.¹

Neoplatonism integrates the ideological framework of the Renaissance,

sharing many themes and ideas with the other intellectual movements of the age, but also keeping some elements that ensured its specificity. The Renaissance is characterized by the belief of its representatives that their work means a resurrection of arts and sciences, and that they are modern in a way their predecessors never were. This is an obvious feature of many intellectuals of those days. Petrarch was the first to express the pride of living in a period when the dark years of the recent past had been enlightened by the discovery of Antiquity.² Nevertheless, it is hard to tell to what degree Ficino considered himself to be a modern man. His reference to the medieval past is anything but critical. His frequent recourse to the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite and of Thomas Aquinas and his efforts to reconcile the heathen Plato and the Holy Church bring about the idea of an organic continuity between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

Another specific element of Neoplatonism is the understanding of the nature of education. For Ficino, the main goal of culture and education is a contemplative life that leads to an understanding of the eternal truth. By assuming this position, he breaks with the civic humanist tradition, represented by his fellow Florentines Coluccio Salutati, Carlo Marsupini and Leonardo Bruni, who consider politics and public life to be the purpose of education, following the model of illustrious men from ancient Greece and Rome. In light of these differences, Neoplatonism appears to be a reform of early humanism, with the intention of bringing together science and theological speculation.³ The Renaissance brings forth a new educational system, an alternative to the rigid scholastic teaching. Academies represent this institutional alternative, the one led by Marsilio Ficino offering the best example. The Platonic Academy found a good environment in the most splendid city of Italy, Florence, where art and science were regarded as public values. Undoubtedly, Florence was the home of some of the most representative figures of the Renaissance, but the number of exceptional personalities is nevertheless surpassed by the cultural atmosphere and the general interest for arts and science. It is highly remarkable that the Tuscan dialect was the first used as a literary language in Italy, and was surpassed only by French and Provençal in the rest of Europe.⁴

Marsilio Ficino, unlike most intellectuals of the Renaissance, had a less active life. His whole existence was marked by the writing of his books.⁵ One of his most original works is considered to be *De triplici vita*, published in 1489. *De triplici vita* consists of three distinct parts: *De vita sana*, also known as *De studiosorum sanitate tuenda*, which describes some intellectual afflictions like expectation, headaches, and especially melancholy; *De vita longa* or *De vita producenda*, which concerns the matter of remedies situated between occult and empirical medicine; *De vita coelitus comparanda*, a book that focuses on the means

of attracting positive influences from the stars, and on the means of protection against malefic influences.⁶ Without a doubt, the most important component of Ficino's oeuvre is the full translation of Plato's known writings, completed in 1484. The translation made by Ficino, together with his comments on Plato's works, ensured the continuity of the Platonic tradition and were the most often used Latin versions of Plato's texts throughout Europe for the next two centuries. Although his interpretation of Platonic philosophy is mostly erroneous, Ficino found in Plato an amplifying mirror, a splendid image identifiable with his own ideas and concepts.⁷ His perception of the distant past is not critical, at least not in the modern sense of the word. Plato's philosophical system is interpreted and adjusted in order to meet the needs of his contemporary society. That is what makes Ficino a Neoplatonist.

The lack of precise historical evidence regarding the activity of the Florentine Academy determined some historians to consider it a cultural myth, alongside the Palatine School of Charles the Great, the School of Chartres, and the Astronomical Academy of Sagres founded by Henry the Navigator.⁸ The theory that enjoys the greatest success was propounded by Arnaldo della Torre, in his book *Storia della Accademia Platonica di Firenze*, which makes a compromise between the most radical positions regarding this matter. Although the book was published in 1902, even today it is considered to be one of the best writings on this subject. Della Torre considers the Academy a group of scholars gathered in Ficino's villa, at Careggi, under the patronage of Cosimo and Lorenzo de' Medici. This "institution" had no precise rules or conditions of admission, but did carry out some specific and regular activities like conferences, free discussions, and a commemorative banquet.⁹

Florentine Neoplatonism is simply a stage in the sustained development which Platonic philosophy underwent in the course of history. Marsilio Ficino remains essentially just another interpreter of Plato, finding his place in a tradition that he acknowledges. Ficino's Neoplatonism is a mixture of ideas and doctrines coming from the original system of Plato's philosophy and also from later interpreters like Plotinus, Albinus Platonicus, Proclus, Iamblichus, and other thinkers from the late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. These many different sources may give the impression of a lack of coherence in Ficino's philosophy, although the original Platonic philosophy gives the opportunity of diverging interpretation and appears to be itself lacking in coherence and unity.¹⁰

An important part of Neoplatonic thought consists of the hermetic tradition. A mixture of magical and scientific ideas of unknown origins, hermetic philosophy exerted considerable influence, during the seventeenth century, on the modern science which was developing at that time. Apart from hermetic philosophy, Florentine Neoplatonism emphasizes some of the main ideas and

themes of Plato's original philosophy: the theory of knowledge by *anamnesis*, melancholy seen as a state of inspiration or divine madness,¹¹ *eros* considered a cosmic factor generating life and also the will to obtain beauty and the harmony of Ideas,¹² astrology, universal hierarchy, and—last but not least—the immortality of soul. These are some of the ideas that Neoplatonic philosophy brought back to life and spread throughout early modern Europe.

The Context of Italian Cultural Influences in Transylvania

NEOPLATONISM HAD a certain influence on the intellectual elites from sixteenth and seventeenth century Transylvania, but some of its elements also spread throughout popular culture. In this part of Europe, the reception of Neoplatonic works and ideas had to face many obstacles, but, as we are about to see, it also had some unexpected successes. Transylvania was close to the main humanistic centers of Europe, thus receiving a greater amount of influence from the most important cultural trends of the moment. Until 1541 Transylvania was a part of the Hungarian Kingdom, experiencing in a way the same cultural evolution. The period of great cultural prosperity, marked by the rule of King Matthias Corvinus, had a positive impact on Transylvania. Through the numerous scholars gathered at the royal court in Buda and through the famous library that was organized there, a bridge was cast towards the intellectual elites of Transylvania. The king showed great interest in Italian culture and favored above all the scholars from Florence. He had direct contact with Marsilio Ficino and his group, and Ficino personally addressed a letter to the Hungarian king. Corvin intended to have John Arghiropoulos at his court in order to teach the Hungarian scholars the Greek language, but this project was never accomplished. Nevertheless he managed to gather a considerably large group of Italian writers and artists, among whom we can find three illustrious adepts of Ficino: Francesco Bandini, Filippo Valori and Filippo Buonaccorsi.¹³ The coming of this personalities to Hungary was preceded by a Hungarian embassy to Florence, obviously with a cultural mission, lead by the Hungarian poet Janus Pannonius. On this occasion he made contact with the members of the Neoplatonic Academy, and assured them of his patron's interest in their work.

The Library of Corvinus was famous throughout history, but there is no exact evidence regarding the number of volumes it held or the authors and books that were favored here, because the collection was scattered in 1541, when the Turks conquered Buda. In 1688 Luigi Marsigli made a first description of what was left of the initial library, reporting a large number of Greek volumes in com-

parison to other European libraries of that time. An important aspect in the history of the Corvinian Library concerns the origin of the books gathered within its walls. It is highly important to note that some of the manuscripts and early prints come from older Transylvanian collections. Many volumes were taken from the library of János Vitéz, the bishop of Oradea, when his entire fortune was confiscated by the king.¹⁴ Later, many volumes were brought from Italy. In 1477, Ficino sent his writing on the life of Plato to his friend Bandini, who was at the time the main librarian of King Matthias. While he was given the task of organizing the king's library, he tried to gather in Buda a circle of fellow scholars with a common interest in the philosophy of Plato, following the example of Ficino in Florence.¹⁵

The destiny of the Corvinian Library, after the death of its founder, remains uncertain until today. It seems that in 1526 the library was untouched, but in 1541 there was a rumor that the sultan had set the whole library on fire. Another hypothesis claims that Queen Isabella Zápolya brought most of the books to Transylvania in the same year. Some of them were deposited in Alba Iulia, others were taken to Braşov, but were eventually destroyed in a fire during the seventeenth century. If this theory is true, we may assume that the manuscripts and early printings of the Corvinian Library were accessible for quite a long time to Transylvanian intellectuals.¹⁶

From the beginning of the fifteenth century, the diocese of Oradea was a suitable environment for cultural imports from Italy. The Italian influence was encouraged by some remarkable personalities, like Bishop Andrea Scolari (1409–1426), the cousin of the famous Pippo Spano. During his period, an Italian intellectual colony was established in Oradea and played a great role in the spreading of Renaissance art and culture in Banat and Partium.¹⁷ The Premonstratensian order convent from Dealul Orăzii also held at the time one of the richest library in Transylvania.¹⁸ Here we find, in the middle of the fifteenth century, a very interesting character named János Várady, considered to be an early representative of Hungarian humanism. In 1455, he was sent to Florence, where he studied theology alongside Marsilio Ficino, who later became his close friend. After eight years of study, Várady retired to a small monastery near Buda, keeping a rich correspondence with his friend Ficino.¹⁹ János Várady was influenced by Ficino's Neoplatonic conception and brought these new ideas into the cultural milieu of Hungary and Transylvania. János Vitéz, whom we mentioned earlier, was also very receptive towards Italian influences and particularly to Platonic thought. He sent, on his own expense, people from his entourage to study in Italy and gather books and manuscripts for his library, which was later integrated in the Corvinian Library.²⁰ A Platonic text that was originally in his possession was identified

in the Vatican Library. It is the work of Georgius Trapezuntius (George of Trebizond), *Comparatio Platonis et Aristotelis*.²¹

Platonic and Neoplatonic texts were also found in the collection of Márton Haczaki, a Transylvanian bishop from the middle of the sixteenth century. He owned a copy of the complete translation of a Platonic text made by Ficino, printed in Venice in 1491.²² After his death, most of his books were taken into the princely library of John Sigismund, and later they were taken and used by the Jesuits from the College of Cluj. Today, this early printing of Ficino's translation can be found in the special collection of the Cluj Library of the Academy.

These are some of the first Neoplatonic presences in early modern Transylvanian culture. They established a material base for the spreading of ideas and conceptions that can be identified in the centuries to come.

Neoplatonic Elements in the Sixteenth Century

AMONG THE concerns of Transylvanian intellectuals from the sixteenth century we can also find philosophy. However, philosophy is not their main concern. First of all, we have to consider the fact that most of them were clergymen and their profession was obviously theology. Ancient philosophy was only used when it was appropriate for theological reasoning. The profound study of philosophy was made as a personal option by individuals who had the necessary inclination and the means to do it. Clerks and other literate laymen also had a considerable classical culture. Their knowledge of ancient thought is often expressed in rhymes, quotations, and side notes on texts containing collections of laws and official documents.²³ These ideas never materialized into large scale writings. In most cases, they can be found isolated as mere notations, sometimes accompanied by comments and personal reflections. Elements form the philosophy of Plato can also be found in private or official letters.

Another promoter of Italian cultural influences was the bishop of Alba Iulia, László Géreb (1475–1502). During his youth, he traveled to Italy and studied in Ferrara. In a letter sent to Alexander VI, on the occasion of his election as Pope, he quotes Plato on the matter of the importance of wisdom for a ruler: “Nam quid utilis, quid praestabilis, quid in rebus humanis iocundis quam sapientiam habere rectorem? Plato tunc demum beatas esse iudicabant, cum a sapientibus regentur. Felix igitur populis...”²⁴ Plato's ideas regarding the ideal ruler were very popular during his lifetime and afterwards, and originated in the letters addressed to Dionysus, the tyrant of Syracuse. We need to mention, though, that the ethical part of Plato's philosophy was never favored by the

Florentine Neoplatonists. It is interesting to note that, in this period, Plato was quoted by some intellectuals more often than Aristotle. Tamás Pelei, another clergyman from Alba Iulia, had a high interest in classical culture, as shown by his annotations on his copy of *Adagia* by Erasmus. Plato is quoted five times, while Aristotle is quoted only once.²⁵

The Early Reformation also made use of some philosophical ideas from Greek and Latin culture, as long as it was deemed fit for the purposes of the reformer. Examples from Plato's philosophy were used in order to strengthen the moral sense of the people. A good example is offered by a book written in the early sixteenth century by the Transylvanian reformer Valentine Wagner, containing aphorisms for the use of young students.²⁶ Scattered texts of Plato could also be found in a chrestomathy edited in Braşov around 1541.²⁷

Another source that shows the author's interest in the metaphysical side of Platonic philosophy is an annotation made by Petrus Lascovius, a notary from Braşov, on a personal religious writing entitled *Spectrum exilii et indigentiae nostrae*: "Scimus Platonem, Stoicos, Pythagoreicos et iis antiquorum Ionicos, dixise, Deum esse mentem et anima mundi."²⁸ Petrus Lascovius shows in this short fragment probably the most genuine Neoplatonic conception in sixteenth century Transylvania. The comment contains, however, an obvious mistake in the association of Plato's idealistic philosophy with the Ionian philosophers who were self-declared materialists. The notion of *mens et anima mundi*, associated with God, is certainly taken from Ficino's conception regarding the nature of Divinity. According to the Neoplatonic philosophical system, the Creation started with the emanation of the *mens angelica* and of the *anima mundi*, followed by the material creation of the whole universe.

Platonism and Neoplatonism in the Seventeenth Century

SEVENTEENTH CENTURY humanism bears the sign of decay, especially when it comes to editing texts of ancient authors. It is also notable that Renaissance culture presently spreads to a larger social segment. The process of large-scale dissemination also takes place in the case of Neoplatonism. The tradition of Platonic thought continues to be sustained in this century by the translations and comments of Ficino and his followers. No other writer or philosopher was able to surpass the work of Ficino at that moment. The philosophy of Plato emerged in the daily life of certain social groups. Especially the notion of "platonian love" enjoyed large popularity, although it was perverted in some aspects.²⁹ Neoplatonic ideas were so popular and common in this

century that, in order to have a general perspective on the subject, one did not have to be a highly educated person. This is one of the reasons why we can find Neoplatonic influence in the case of common people who were not necessarily professional intellectuals.

The popularity of Plato is maintained, or possibly increased, during the seventeenth century in Transylvania. This fact is visible in the memoirs written in this century, an important and popular genre in Transylvanian literature. A first example in this respect are the memoirs of John Kemény, prince of Transylvania in 1661–1662. Kemény wrote his memoirs in 1658, during his captivity in Bahçesaray, where he was taken together with other Transylvanian noblemen after the disaster that followed the defeat of Prince George Rákóczy II on his campaign in Poland. Kemény was a nobleman and his main concern and profession was war, but he was nevertheless an educated soldier. In the beginning of his biographical work he writes about education, admitting that it has a great impact on the development of one's personality, although his own education had not been systematic and often interrupted.³⁰ Kemény's text consists of descriptions of battles, military campaigns and soldierly life; he also gives importance to intrigues and diplomatic missions. Sometimes he inserts opinions on religion and traditional habits, but he never mentions the name of any ancient philosopher.

In one of his numerous military campaigns, while he was serving Prince Gabriel Bethlen, he was in charge of the organization of the camp and with the disposition of the night guards. After supper he had a revelation, inspired by an entity that he names a good *genius*. This *genius* gave him an unexpected solution that led to the saving of the entire Transylvanian army.³¹ The presence of this quite sophisticated Neoplatonic term, *genius*, in the vocabulary of Kemény, is striking. The *genius* and the *daemon*, in the celestial hierarchy of Ficino, are spiritual entities that populate the sphere that lies between the moon and the surface of the earth and interact with humans in different ways. This notion has a strong background in the philosophy of Plato, leading back to the Socratic tradition. Considering the fact that in the rest of the book he proves to be a man with a strong sense of Christian and Protestant values, we might ask why he did not use divine inspiration or angelical intervention instead of the Neoplatonic *genius*. The use of this term by Kemény gives us a strong indication of his contacts with a higher intellectual milieu with consistent Neoplatonic influences, a milieu that he most certainly had contact with at the court of Prince Gabriel Bethlen.

Another notion with Neoplatonic origins that can be found in the memoirs of Kemény is *melancholy*. When he writes about the death of Vladislaus IV Vassa, king of Poland, Kemény considers melancholy to be one of the cau-

ses of his death.³² The king was planning a large-scale campaign against the Ottoman Empire, but his project was ruined because of the opposition he encountered among his allies. Kemény notes that the despair following the king's disappointment eventually lead to his death. The ruined health of King Vladislaus was caused by a spiritual disease, the illness of Saturn, on which Ficino wrote so much in his work *De vita triplici*. Ficino states that melancholy is usually caused by the many obstacles that rise in the path of men with great goals. It is a pathological state determined by the increase of the black humor in blood and can lead to death. The sense of melancholy in Kemény's text has a precise Neoplatonic origin. Although it is isolated and somehow in discordance with the rest of the text, the presence of the terms *genius* and *melancholia* in the work of Kemény supports the theory of the spreading of humanistic knowledge among social groups who did not have a solid classical culture.

Nicholas Bethlen, another writer from the seventeenth century, shows a different perspective on the reception of Platonism and Neoplatonism than the one we have examined before. Bethlen had a solid culture based on his youth studies and on sustained and continuous reading. He had direct contact with Western civilization. He traveled a lot and frequented some of the best universities in Europe: Vienna, Heidelberg, Nuremberg, Utrecht, Leyden, Paris and London. He was a very religious man and often quoted from the Bible. The first chapters of his autobiography are about virtue and time.

Bethlen is concerned with the perception of posterity on his life and actions, as he took part in some troubled events that shaped the last decades in the life of the autonomous Principality of Transylvania. From the beginning he refers to Plato as a model of honesty and wisdom.³³ These two qualities that he took as an example from the ancient philosopher would be praised throughout the entire book, as he is also trying to give a moral lesson to his readers. The concern of Bethlen for virtue and its nature reminds us of the early *Dialogues* of Plato. In Bethlen's reasoning on the matter of virtue we can see some Neoplatonic arguments used by Ficino and his followers in the effort to conciliate Platonic thought and Christianity. First comes the distinction he makes between "worldly honesty" and "religious honesty."³⁴ This meditation allows him to criticize the foundation of mundane honor and honesty using an argument taken from the Socratic theory of self knowledge: in his madness, man claims to be able to judge his neighbor, before he is able to know himself; how one can judge another if he cannot make a good judgment on himself?³⁵

The most astonishing observation that Bethlen makes is about the misinterpretation that Aristotle made on the early philosophy of Socrates and Plato. In Bethlen's opinion, Aristotle distorted the teachings of Socrates and Plato, which originally advised people to follow the path of virtue, into cunning

speculation, useless and dangerous to the human mind. The philosophy of Aristotle altered theology and all other sciences.³⁶ This might be one of the strongest critiques in Transylvanian culture on Aristotelian scholastic thought. It can be explained, in the case of Bethlen, by his Protestant education, but the permanent recourse to Plato as an alternative to Aristotle has its origins in the disputes between Aristotelians and Neoplatonists that were very common in the universities of northern Italy in the late fifteenth century.

Bethlen's knowledge of Platonic philosophy is emphasized by his remarks on the immortality of the soul. This was one of the most important themes in Neoplatonic philosophy. Bethlen has an optimistic view on human nature, emphasizing its divine origins and initial perfection. The soul descends from God, and therefore it cannot perish.³⁷ He also claims that the soul is the residence of the intellect, and can exist and take action apart from the body. The soul is eternal and individual, an autonomous entity that goes beyond the transient body.³⁸ All these are arguments used by Ficino in his *Theologia Platonica*, in his attempt to demonstrate the immortality of the soul.

Unfortunately Nicholas Bethlen gives no direct evidence about the origins of his ideas, he never writes about any books of Plato or Ficino that he had read. Our hypothesis is based on the similarity between the ideas expressed by the Transylvanian nobleman and the concepts that were spread and made popular by the works of Ficino in this century.

NEOPLATONIC IDEAS were present in the culture of both highly educated and non-intellectual categories of Transylvanian society. These ideas brought a renewed perspective upon some of the fundamental problems of early modern European civilization, such as virtue, knowledge, and the immortality of the soul.

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Notes

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Abstract

The Influence of Florentine Neoplatonism on Early Modern Transylvanian Culture

Neoplatonism had a certain influence on the intellectual elites from sixteenth and seventeenth century Transylvania, but some of its elements also spread throughout popular culture. In this part of Europe, the reception of Neoplatonic works and ideas had to face many obstacles, but, as we are about to see, it also had some unexpected successes. The king showed great interest in Italian culture and favored above all the scholars from Florence. He had direct contact with Marsilio Ficino and his group, and Ficino personally addressed a letter to the Hungarian king. Neoplatonic ideas were present in the culture of both highly educated and non-intellectual categories of Transylvanian society. These ideas brought a renewed perspective upon some of the fundamental problems of early modern European civilization, such as virtue, knowledge, and the immortality of the soul.

Keywords

Marsilio Ficino, Matthias Corvinus, János (John) Kemény, Miklós (Nicholas) Bethlen, Neoplatonism