

The Letters of
MARSILIO FICINO



Translated from the Latin by members of the Language
Department of the School of Economic Science, London

VOLUME I

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Publisher's Note:

The endpapers of this volume show two pages that are in Ficino's own hand from a manuscript in the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Florence (Cod. Naz. II, IX, 2) containing Book I of his *Letters*. The scribe for most of that manuscript was his cousin, Sebastiano Salvini. The beehive motif shown on the title page appears on a number of Ficino Manuscripts which were illuminated for Lorenzo de' Medici's library.

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Letter Titles

Prooemium in Epistolas
Preface to the Letters

In primum librum prooemium
Preface to the first book of letters

- 1 De foelicitatis desiderio
On the desire for happiness
- 2 Quae sit ad foelicitatem via
The way to happiness
- 3 Imitatio utilior est quam lectio
Imitation is more useful than reading
- 4 Dialogus inter Deum et animam theologicus
A theological dialogue between God and the soul
- 5 Medicina corpus, musica spiritum, theologia animum curat
Medicine heals the body, music the spirit, and theology the soul
- 6 Lex et iustitia
Law and justice
- 7 De divino furore
On divine frenzy
- 8 Excusatio prolixitatis
An excuse for prolixity
- 9 De divinatione et divinitate animae
On divination and the divinity of the soul

- 10 Modus laudis absque adulatione
How to praise without flattering
- 11 Solitariae vitae utilitas
The usefulness of the solitary life
- 12 De modestia componendi
On modesty in writing
- 13 De laude Platoniorum interpretum
In praise of those who expound Plato
- 14 Exhortatio ad scientiam
An exhortation to pursue knowledge
- 15 Consolatio in alicuius obitu
Consolation on someone's death
- 16 Laus brevitatis
Praise of brevity
- 17 Quantum utile sit alere doctos
How useful it is to support scholars
- 18 Laus opificis non a verbis, sed ab opere
Praise of an artist does not arise from his words, but his work
- 19 De virtutibus civilibus, purgatoriis, purgati animi exemplaribus
On the civil virtues, the purgatorial virtues, and the model virtues of the purified soul
- 20 De sapiente et foelice viro
On the wise and fortunate man
- 21 Bona scribere praestat quam multa
It is better to write good things than many things
- 22 Exhortatio ad scientiam
An exhortation to pursue knowledge
- 23 Invitatio ad scribendum
A request for a letter

- 24 Gratiarum actio
Giving thanks
- 25 Amatoria
Matters of love
- 26 Mirabilium auctor Deus est, non homo
God, not man, is the author of wonders
- 27 Laudes Laurentii Medicis mirae
The astonishing glories of Lorenzo de' Medici
- 28 Amatoria
Matters of love
- 29 Amatoria; quomodo amandus quisque sit et quomodo laudandus
Matters of love; how each man should be loved and how praised
- 30 Iocosa ad Ioannem invitatio ad reditum, per dissimulationem
A playful letter, using dissimulation in inviting Giovanni to return
- 31 Epistola genialis de heroibus
A letter about heroes written as the spirit moved me
- 32 Quod gratis fit, gratius est, quam quod ex debito
What is done freely is more pleasing than an act of obligation
- 33 Provocatio ad scribendum
A challenge to write
- 34 Quod necessariae epistolae inter amicos
Letters are necessary between friends
- 35 Gravis est iactura temporis
Loss of time is a serious matter
- 36 Quod iocundae amicorum literae
Friends' letters are a source of joy
- 37 Nemini detrahendum, quia Deus ulciscitur
No one should be disparaged, because God brings vengeance

- 38 Homo est animus. Amantis animus est in amato
Man is spirit. The spirit of the lover is in the beloved
- 39 Seria ad Ioannem. Anima post mortem intelligit, et multo clarius
quam in corpore
*Serious words to Giovanni. The soul understands after death, and much
more clearly than when in the body*
- 40 Contra Averroem, scilicet, quod non sit unicus hominum
intellectus
Against Averroes, on the grounds that there is not a single human intellect
- 41 Theologi vigilant, caeteri somniant
Theologians are awake; the rest dream
- 42 Veritas Dei splendor, pulchritudo, amor
The truth of God is splendour, beauty, and love
- 43 Ideae secundum Platonem in divina mente sunt
Ideas, according to Plato, exist in the divine mind
- 44 Causa peccandi, spes, remedium
The cause of sinning; hope; the remedy
- 45 Quos Deus coniunxit moribus, coniunget foelicitate
*Those whom God has joined together in a way of life, He will join in
happiness*
- 46 Praestantior est legum conditor, quam sophista
The lawgiver is superior to the sophist
- 47 Legitimus amoris terminus est consuetudo
The lawful end of love is its continual experience
- 48 Neque amor sine religione, neque religio sine amore laudatur
Love is not praised without religion, nor religion praised without love
- 49 De tolleranda iniuria
On bearing injury
- 50 De constantia adversus fortunam comparanda
On acquiring constancy in the face of fortune

- 51 Amicitia illa stabilis, quae a Deo conflatur
A friendship is lasting which is forged by God
- 52 Poeticus furor a Deo est
Poetic frenzy is from God
- 53 Cura patriae, familiae, amicorum
Care for country, family and friends
- 54 Quis sit verus vir appellandus
Who ought to be called a true man
- 55 De humanitate
On humanity
- 56 Gratia, amor, fides, amicitia
Grace, love, faith, friendship
- 57 Stultitia et miseria hominum
The folly and misery of men
- 58 Stultitia et miseria hominum
The folly and misery of men
- 59 Stultitia miseriaque hominum
The folly and misery of men
- 60 Exhortatio ad modestiam et studia literarum
An encouragement to modesty and the study of literature
- 61 Quod amicus est in amico
That a friend is within a friend
- 62 Salus amici ab amico
The health of a friend depends on his friend
- 63 Divinatio de amico
A prophecy concerning a friend
- 64 Quantum possit desiderium amicorum
How great the longing of friends can be

- 65 Laudare praestat benevolentiam, quam ingenium
It is better to praise benevolence than genius
- 66 Quos amor fallat, quos non fallat
Whom love deceives, whom it does not deceive
- 67 Commendatio ab egestate et dignitate
A commendation from need and merit
- 68 Cum bene omnia regantur a Deo, omnia in melius accipienda
Since all things are well governed by God, all things should be accepted for the best
- 69 De stultitia hominum, et quae sit vera scientia
On the stupidity of men, and what true knowledge is
- 70 Liberalitatis laus, eleemosinae laus
Praise of generosity, praise of almsgiving
- 71 Nulla virtus benignitate amabilior
No virtue is more lovable than kindness
- 72 Verus amicus non eget absentia, ut magis desideretur
A true friend does not need to be absent to be more desired
- 73 Quis dives iniustus sit, quis iustus
The rich man who is unjust, and the one who is just
- 74 Iurisconsulti bonitas et dignitas
The goodness and dignity of the lawyer
- 75 Dignitas sacerdotis
The dignity of the priest
- 76 Non cuilibet dandi sunt sacri ordines
Holy orders are not to be given to all and sundry
- 77 Nulla consonantia magis delectat, quam cordis et linguae
No harmony gives greater delight than that of heart and tongue
- 78 De officio civis
On the duty of a citizen

- 79 Quid est bene vivere
What it is to live well
- 80 Vota non sunt spernenda
Prayers are not to be despised
- 81 Nobilitas, utilitas et usus medicinae
The nobility, usefulness, and practice of medicine
- 82 Tempus parce expendendum
Time ought to be used sparingly
- 83 Homo sine religione bestiis est infœlicior
Man without religion is unhappier than beasts
- 84 Responsio ad epistolam de tempore parce expendendo
Reply to the letter about the sparing use of time
- 85 Nemini recte volenti omnino ad bonum interclusus est aditus
Access to the good is wholly barred to no one of right will
- 86 Imitatio potior est quam lectio
Imitation is more powerful than reading
- 87 Durate, et vosmet rebus servate secundis
Endure, and keep yourselves for favourable times
- 88 Divinitas animi ab inventione
The divinity of the soul through 'inventio'
- 89 Novum opus nimium placet opifici
A new work pleases the author too much
- 90 De perseverantia
On perseverance
- 91 Prudentis est nihil præter salutem animi bonamque corporis
valetudinem exoptare
*It is the nature of a prudent man to desire nothing beyond the welfare of his
soul and a healthy body*
- 92 De musica
On music

- 93 Verissima laus est, quae laude digna est
The truest praise is that which is worthy of praise
- 94 Foeliciter amatur qui a viro amatur amore dignissimo
He is fortunately loved who is loved by a man most worthy of love
- 95 De lege et iustitia
On law and justice
- 96 De anima
On the soul
- 97 Consolatio in amici obitu
Consolation on the death of a friend
- 98 Legitimi iurisconsulti partes
The role of the true man of law
- 99 Velociter comparatur quod ardentem desideratur
What is ardently desired is swiftly obtained
- 100 Fontes potius quam rivulos sectari debemus
We should pursue sources rather than streams
- 101 Peripateticus non ut philosophus est, pecuniam appetit, sed ut homo
A follower of Aristotle does not seek money as a philosopher, but as a human being
- 102 Commendatio a fortuna quondam foelici, innocentia, scientia
A commendation from former good fortune, innocence, and knowledge
- 103 Qua ratione sit quisque laudandus
Why a person should be praised
- 104 Nemo sine amore, de amore bene loquitur
Without love no one speaks well of love
- 105 Praecepta ad memoriam
Precepts for memory
- 106 Virtutum definitio, officium, finis
The definition, function, and end of the virtues

- 107 *Animae natura et officium, laus historiae*
The nature and duty of the soul; the praise of history
- 108 *Tres vitae duces, et una vitae optima ratio*
Three guides for life, and the one best principle for living
- 109 *Ratio docendi, laudandi, vituperandi*
The principle of teaching, praising and blaming
- 110 *Cognitio et reverentia sui ipsius omnium optima*
Knowledge and reverence of oneself are best of all
- 111 *De divinitate animi ac religione*
On the divinity of the soul and on religion
- 112 *Consolatio in alicuius obitu*
Consolation on someone's death
- 113 *Contra mendaces et impios detractores*
Against liars and impious slanderers
- 114 *Contra mendaces et impios detractores*
Against liars and impious slanderers
- 115 *Quid est foelicitas, quod habet gradus, quod est aeterna*
What happiness is; that it has degrees; that it is eternal
- 116 *Oratio ad Deum theologica*
A theological prayer to God
- 117 *Quod soli virtuti Deoque confidendum et serviendum*
That one should trust and serve only virtue and God
- 118 *Qualis debeat esse imitatio*
Of what nature imitation should be
- 119 *Saepe magna est laus quae brevis est*
Often great praise is brief
- 120 *Qui favet bonis sibi favet*
He who shows favour to good men shows favour to himself
- 121 *Quae sit petitio et commendatio iusta*
A fair request and commendation

- 122 *Institutio et admonitio brevis episcopi*
Brief instruction and advice to a bishop
- 123 *Laus Philosophiae oratoria, moralis, dialectica, theologica*
Oratorical, moral, dialectical and theological praise of Philosophy
- 124 *Gratia iubelei*
The grace of a Jubilee
- 125 *Gratiarum actio*
Giving thanks
- 126 *Ociosae vitae utilitas*
The usefulness of the leisured life
- 127 *De perseverantia*
On perseverance
- 128 *Solus divinus medicus curare morbos animi potest*
Only the divine physician is able to cure the ills of the soul
- 129 *Vicissitudo amoris unde nascatur*
Whence the reciprocity of love is born
- 130 *Vera poesis a Deo ad Deum*
True poetry is from God and for God
- 131 *Sua mittenda sunt ad suos*
What is a man's own should be sent to his own

Appendix A

*Homo non propter ingenium sed propter virtutem est
laudandus*
A man should be praised not for natural ability, but for virtue

Appendix B

Non est ad religionem quilibet admittendus
Men should not be admitted indiscriminately to holy orders

Preface to the Second Edition

THIS is a revised version of the first volume of the translation of Ficino's letters, published in 1975. The translation has been revised throughout, the Biographical Notes greatly expanded and the Notes on the Letters rewritten with far more detail. The 1975 Introduction has also been lightly revised.

The present volume covers the first book: correspondence between 1457 and 1476. Ficino probably started to collect his philosophic letters for publication towards the end of 1473. In a letter to Angelo Poliziano (Letter 21) he mentions a volume of 'philosophic letters' among his works. This consisted of the majority of the current first book of letters, which he collected, dedicated to Giuliano de' Medici, and circulated among his friends (a common practice amongst scholars at that time). He may have been prompted to start this collection by the fact that letters falsely purporting to be his were being circulated (see Letter 16).

The first book of letters was translated into Italian during Ficino's lifetime, probably by Ficino himself and Andrea Cambini, in manuscript only. All twelve books were translated into Italian by Felice Figliucci in the mid-16th century, though 91 individual letters were omitted.

When our first edition was prepared, a full collation of all the available manuscripts was not attempted, although several were referred to and the best manuscript (MS Biblioteca Riccardiana 797) was consulted throughout and was compared with the first printed edition of the *Letters* (Venice: Matteo Capcasa, 1495) and the first edition of Ficino's complete works, *Opera omnia* (Basel: Henricus Petri, 1561, reprinted 1576 and more recently by the 'Bottega d'Erasmus' in Turin in 1959 and 1962 (hereafter referred to as *Opera*) which was at that time the Latin version most widely available to scholars.

In 1990, Professor Sebastiano Gentile published his critical edition for Book I (Marsilio Ficino, *Lettere, Epistolarum familiarium liber I*, Florence: Leo S. Olschki), hereafter referred to simply as 'ed. Gentile',

followed by a similar edition for Book II in 2010. We acknowledge with gratitude our indebtedness to his work. We have been able to make numerous revisions and corrections to our earlier version, and have also been able to remove footnotes relating to textual differences, taking his edition as the definitive version.

We have not, however, altered the order in which the letters are presented, so as to minimise confusion. In our first edition, for the most part we followed the order of letters in the *Opera*; the exception to this is our Letter 5, which appears as Letter 4 in the *Opera* but as Letter 47 in both the Venice edition of 1495 and Gentile's edition. In MS Riccardiana it does not appear until *fol.* 88. The order of our first edition has been retained here apart from bringing to the front the Preface to the 1495 edition, which had appeared earlier as our Appendix II. The numerous manuscripts of Book I that have survived present the letters in various sequences, and the critical edition by Gentile should be consulted for a full account. Indications are given in our Notes to the Letters of any significant variations in numbering, but they are often adrift from Gentile's edition by one. The titles, however, which date at least from the first printed edition, serve as a reliable guide.

It is worth noting here that several words present particular challenges to a translator, especially those whose meaning has shifted over time, or those which change in how they are used from one occasion to another. Two in particular stand out in this volume, *animus* and *ingenium*, and have been often commented upon.

Ficino follows tradition in using *animus* to indicate 'soul' but sometimes uses it when he is clearly speaking of what we would call 'mind'. Because of this bivalency, it has even on occasion been appropriate to translate it with the English word 'heart' when referring to the inner workings of the human being, or even 'spirit' – despite the availability of the Latin word *spiritus*, which Ficino generally uses in a more technical sense to indicate that which allows soul and body to communicate with each other. The term *anima* also occurs frequently in this volume, again referring to 'soul', though it can additionally refer to the life-force or breath common to all animate beings. In Letter 4 *anima* is used for the personification of soul. In Letter 105, where *anima* is soul but *animus* also occurs, the latter seems rather to indicate 'mind'. In Letter 109, *filios animae* indicates 'spiritual sons'. Uses in other letters may be discussed in the notes to those letters (e.g. Letter 38).

Intellectus and *mens* are two other terms used to indicate the mind, the former generally indicating a higher faculty of the mind by which it recognises, comprehends, and understands. *Mens* can also indicate higher mind, the seat of intellectual activities, but in addition it may refer to the seat of self-awareness, of the emotions, of moral sense or of character.

Ingenium refers generally to qualities inherent in a person from their birth which later develop into their own particular character, attributes, mental qualities and even genius. In Letter 95, it seems to mean a person's ability or their own inner resources. Nowadays we might call it a person's nature, but in Letters 12 and 105 it seems to imply genius. The associated word *genius* in Ficino generally refers to a guardian spirit; the word *daemon* is likewise used for guardian spirits, angels or daemons, with none of the negative associations attached to the word 'demon' – although it is applied to the fallen angel Lucifer in Letter 113.

Other terms worthy of note are *idea* and the Graces. The Platonic term *idea* has sometimes been translated as 'idea' sometimes as 'model', sometimes as 'ideal'. Other possibilities would be 'ideal form' or even 'archetype'.

The name of the Graces, *Gratiae*, is clearly linked to gratitude and simple expressions of thanks, but never far away in Ficino's mind are the three Graces of the classical tradition, named in Letter 27 as three divine gifts or qualities: *splendor*, *laetitia*, *viriditas*, translated as 'splendour, joy and vigour,' but the Latin terms are richer, including in *splendor* dazzling brilliance, in *laetitia* complete happiness and in *viriditas* all the qualities of youth, growth and vitality that we associate with the fresh green growth of spring.

In revising the notes to these letters we are indebted to many sources that were not available at the time of our first edition. Pre-eminent among these is Sebastiano Gentile's critical edition of the letters already mentioned. Definitive editions of many of Ficino's works have appeared, including the *Three Books on Life*, translated and edited by Carol V. Kaske and John Clark; *Platonic Theology* translated and edited by Michael J.B. Allen and James Hankins; Ficino's commentaries on Plato's *Phaedrus* and *Ion*, (ed. Michael J.B. Allen); on *Parmenides* (translated and edited by Maude Vanhaelen); his commentaries on Plotinus (two volumes to date, translated and edited by Stephen Gersh) and others due to appear soon, including a new edition of *De amore*. Many of the more recent historical studies have

also been invaluable. For publication details of all these works, see the expanded Bibliography in this volume and later volumes in the series.

Valery Rees, Adrian Bertoluzzi, Arthur Farndell
Editors
July, 2018

Preface to the First Edition

THE work of Marsilio Ficino, the head of the Platonic Academy of Florence, was never quite forgotten, and it has aroused, ever since the beginnings of this [the twentieth] century, a continuing interest which seems to have increased and expanded in recent years. This interest is due to a variety of reasons. As a philosopher, Ficino forms an important link in a metaphysical tradition that extends at least from Plato to Hegel and that has not yet run its course or lost its appeal. Moreover, as a translator of Plato, Plotinus and other ancient thinkers, Ficino has attracted many readers who would otherwise not have been drawn to his independent writings. As a religious thinker who does not insist on points of dogma he has benefitted, not unlike Erasmus, from the present climate of religious tolerance and universalism. When many people seek the truth in Eastern beliefs, often ill-understood, at least some will be sympathetic to a genuine Western tradition to which Ficino and his Neoplatonic predecessors belong and which stresses the life of contemplation. His doctrine of Platonic love inspired many writers and poets, his allegories and metaphors many artists, and his theories of poetry, of music and of the visual arts were taken up and developed by many critics. Having lived in early Renaissance Florence and conversed and corresponded with many distinguished friends, at home and in the rest of Italy and of Europe, he rightly shares the fascination which that period and milieu has exercised on historians and laymen alike. He thus appeals to us, not only through the style and content of his writing and thought, but also through his associations, his sources and his influence.

Modern interest in Ficino has found expression in many monographs and articles published in several languages, and in a number of reprints and editions of his works. His commentary on Plato's *Symposium* and a few short pieces are available in English, and English translations of other Plato commentaries, of the *Platonic Theology* and of the *De vita* are now being prepared. A translation of his letters fills a definite desideratum, and it is to be hoped that the present volume

which contains the first book of the *Epistolae* will in due time be followed by others.

The Letters occupy in fact a very important place in Ficino's work. As historical documents, they give us a vivid picture of his personal relations with his friends and pupils, and of his own literary and scholarly activities. As pieces of literature, edited and collected by himself, the letters take their place among other correspondences of the time and are a monument of humanistic scholarship and literature. Finally, the letters are conscious vehicles of moral and philosophical teaching and often reach the dimensions of a short treatise. This intention is made explicit in the title attached to each letter which is due to the author himself and not to a later editor.

Ficino began to collect his letters in the 1470s, gradually arranged them in twelve books, had them circulated in numerous manuscript copies, and finally had them printed in 1495. The first book contains letters written between 1457 and 1476, and its manuscript tradition is especially rich and complicated. These letters derive great interest from the time of their composition, for they were written at the same time as some of the commentaries on Plato and the *Platonic Theology*, Ficino's chief philosophical work. The correspondents include many persons of great significance: Cosimo and Lorenzo de' Medici, and members of other prominent Florentine families, allied or hostile to the Medici at different times: Albizzi and Pazzi, Soderini and Rucellai, Salviati and Bandini, Del Nero, Benci and Canigiani, Niccolini, Martelli and Minerbetti. There are two cardinals, Francesco Piccolomini, the later Pius III, a famous patron and bibliophile, and Bessarion, the great defender of Platonism. There is Bernardo Bembo, Venetian patrician and ambassador, Giovanni Antonio Campano, bishop and humanist, Francesco Marescalchi in Ferrara, and Giovanni Aurelio Augurelli from Rimini. There are the friends of Ficino's youth, Michele Mercati and Antonio Morali called Serafico, and his favourite friend, Giovanni Cavalcanti. There are philosophers and physicians, and there are numerous scholars, of different generations, who occupy a more or less prominent place in the annals of literature and learning: Matteo Palmieri and Donato Acciaiuoli, Benedetto Accolti, Bartolomeo Scala and Niccolò Michelozzi, all connected with the chancery, Cristoforo Landino, Bartolomeo della Fonte and Angelo Poliziano, Francesco da Castiglione, perhaps Ficino's teacher of Greek, and Antonio degli Agli, bishop of Fiesole and Volterra, Jacopo Bracciolini the son of Poggio,

and Carlo Marsuppini, the son of the humanist chancellor of the same name, Benedetto Colucci and Lorenzo Lippi, Domenico Galletti and Francesco Tedaldi, Antonio Calderini and Andrea Cambini, Cherubino Quarquagli and Baccio Ugolini, known for their vernacular verse, and a number of Latin poets: Pellegrino Agli, Alessandro Braccesi, Amerigo Corsini, Naldo Naldi and Antonio Pellotti. The book also includes several pieces that are important compositions in their own right: the dialogue between God and the soul (4), on divine frenzy (7), on humanity (55), on the folly and misery of man (57-59), on the use of time (82), on law and justice (95), on happiness (115), the theological prayer to God (116), and the praise of philosophy (123).

The translators have pursued their task with enthusiasm, and if I may judge from the sections I examined, successfully. In the absence of a critical edition, they have not relied on the 1576 edition of Ficino's works which has been recently reprinted and offers a rather corrupt text, but on the first edition of 1495, and have collated one or two of the better manuscripts, at least for some of the difficult passages. I have encouraged them to follow accuracy as their chief goal, though not at the price of clumsy style.

The translation will not replace the original Latin text for scholarly purposes – no translation ever does and, in view of present attitudes, this simple truth cannot be repeated often enough. Yet the translation will be useful for all scholars working with the text, for it will clarify obscure passages and often correct the readings found in the most accessible editions. Above all, the translation will make available to students and lay readers an important document of Renaissance thought and literature that would otherwise not be accessible to them, and thus enrich their taste, their knowledge and their outlook.

Paul Oskar Kristeller
New York
Columbia University
January, 1975

Introduction

MARSILIO FICINO (1433-99), of Florence, was a man who wrought a deep and lasting change in European society. From him and his Academy the Renaissance drew its most potent intellectual and spiritual inspiration. To Ficino the writings of Plato and his followers contained the key to the most important knowledge for Man: knowledge of himself, that is, knowledge of the divine and immortal principle within him.¹ Not only does this knowledge appear from his letters to have been actual experience for Ficino, but he possessed the magic to make faith in this principle a living ideal for his age.

He was apparently one of the least active of men. It is probable that in his sixty-six years he never set foot outside the territory of Florence and the record of his life is little more than the chronicle of his books. And yet, associated with his Academy and under his immediate influence was the most conspicuously brilliant group of men ever to have assembled in modern Europe. These were the men who embodied the Renaissance – Lorenzo de' Medici, Leon Battista Alberti, Angelo Poliziano, Cristoforo Landino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. Directly inspired by Ficino were the great Renaissance artists, Botticelli, Michelangelo, Raphael, Titian, Dürer, and many others. Professor Kristeller has said that the whole intellectual life of Florence in his time was under his influence.²

It is hard to capture or define the elusive quality of spirit that not only bound so many great men in Florence to Ficino, but attracted to him, both in person and by correspondence, leading statesmen, scholars and churchmen from all over Europe. Indeed the site of Ficino's Academy at Careggi became a place of pilgrimage both during his life and after his death. The letters provide four main clues: first, the love which he extended to all who approached him; second, the wisdom which enabled him to see so clearly into the nature of his correspondents and to touch on those points which could lead them to make the best use of their talents;³ third, he seemed to understand clearly how the various activities of his correspondents related to the

divine principle in Man and also to their function in the State; fourth, the letters have a quality of timelessness, so that Ficino seems to be speaking to us as clearly today as he spoke to his contemporaries in 15th century Florence. Almost absent from them are accounts of the disappointments and satisfactions resulting from physical events, which render most letters out of date immediately they have been written. He was a true man of the spirit; largely independent of the 'blows of fortune' upon the body,⁴ he imparted tranquillity and strength, like his own, to those who listened to him. For instance, a class of students who had been set the task of composing exhortations for a crusade to defend Christendom against the Turks had become rather gloomy. At the time, the apparently invincible Turks were a serious threat to Europe. Ficino picked up his lyre and with his singing immediately gave back to the company its confidence and strength.⁵

Ficino seemed to understand the principles of every art and to embody in himself the Renaissance ideal of the complete man. He was first of all philosopher, but he was also scholar, doctor, musician and priest. As scholar, apart from his original works, he translated into Latin the whole of Plato and many of the classical writings in the same tradition. This he did at amazing speed and so well that his translations remained the standard editions until those published in national languages in the 19th century. As a doctor his skill was such that many called upon his services. In the tradition of Hippocrates he never took a fee.⁶ As a musician his main object was to arouse devotion, and in this his contemporaries recognised him as extraordinarily effective. Singing his Orphic Hymns to the lyre, Ficino enthralled Bishop Campano who was travelling through Florence. In a letter Campano says it was 'as if curly-headed Apollo took up the lyre of Marsilio and fell victim to his own song. Frenzy arises. His eyes catch fire ... and he discovers music which he never learnt.'⁷

To Ficino the visual arts were of especial importance. Their function was to remind the soul of its origin in the divine world by creating, through art, resemblances to that world. It was largely through Ficino's insistence on the importance of this art that the painter's position in Florentine society was raised nearer to that of the poet than that of the carpenter, where it had previously been. The image of painting is a frequent metaphor. He was himself on close terms with the Pollaiuolo brothers and may have influenced the painting of Botticelli's *Primavera*. In the *Platonic Theology* he describes the

first impulse in the creation of a painting. He writes: 'The whole field appeared in a single moment to Apelles and aroused in him the desire to paint.'⁸

Ficino became a priest in 1473 and later a Canon of Florence Cathedral. The priesthood was to him the highest function of all, 'standing in God's place, performing his work among men'.⁹ When he himself preached in the Cathedral, Corsi tells us that people flocked to hear him speak and were delighted by his sermons on the gospels.¹⁰ He was not afraid to write to the leaders of religious orders¹¹ and once to the Pope himself,¹² urging them to fulfil their responsibilities, at a time when corruption in the church was general. Ficino also wrote to lawyers, rhetoricians and others. He wrote so authoritatively because he related all the activities to the central aim of Man: to return to his divine source. It is not surprising that even in Florence, the centre of so many men of genius, Ficino became a mentor to Lorenzo de' Medici, who became the effective ruler of Florence in 1469 in succession to his father, Piero, and grandfather, Cosimo. Lorenzo was a man of great versatility, the outstanding statesman and Italian poet of his day. He was a life-long friend of Ficino, though perhaps never more so than during the period covered by these letters.

The meetings at the Academy must have been the main means by which Ficino taught philosophy to its illustrious members. Rich though they are, the 131 letters in this volume, many to bare acquaintances, can only give a faint reflection of the discussions that must have taken place within its walls, among men of such stature. They were a spiritual community bound together by a common bond of love to each other and to Ficino.¹³ He was their centre and they were the centre of the Renaissance.

Cosimo de' Medici was inspired to establish a Platonic Academy as early as 1439, by the arrival in Italy of Gemistos Pletho and Ficino writes that Cosimo marked him out as its future leader even though he was still only a boy.¹⁴ Pletho had come with the Greek Emperor and Patriarch to the Council of Ferrara/Florence to discuss a proposed union of the Greek and Roman Churches. Pletho was so steeped in the philosophy of Plato that he seemed to contemporaries like another embodiment of the great philosopher. However, it was not until 1463 that Cosimo gave Ficino a villa at Careggi, situated on the southern slopes of Montecvecchio overlooking the Medici villa not far away.

Ficino wrote to Lorenzo in 1474¹⁵ that he should take care of his health, as without Lorenzo neither his country nor the Academy

could prosper. In this he was prophetic, for shortly after Lorenzo's death (1492) and the expulsion of his son Piero, the activities of the Academy were greatly reduced,¹⁶ although it continued into the 16th century under Francesco Cattani da Diacceto.

Ficino was born at Figline in the Val d'Arno on October 19th 1433. His father, Diotifeci, was doctor to Cosimo de' Medici. Of his mother, Alessandra, we know little except that she was much respected by Ficino and appears to have had the gift of 'second sight'. She lived to an advanced age, cared for by Ficino in his home, dying only a year or so before Ficino.

Little is known about his education except the names of his early teachers and that he studied under the Aristotelian, Niccolò Tignosi, at Florence University. It is not certain when Ficino first became attracted to the writings of Plato. But since Cosimo de' Medici had had an enthusiastic interest in Plato, at least since 1439, and Ficino writes that he had discussed philosophy fruitfully with Cosimo (who died in 1464) for more than twelve years,¹⁷ it must have been at least since 1452. Late in learning Greek, he had at first to rely on Latin authors, and the few dialogues available in translation, for his knowledge of Plato. His first work (1456), the *Platonic Institutions* (now lost) was based on these sources; and after he read it, Cosimo told him not to publish anything until he could read Greek.¹⁸ However, the letter in this volume on 'Divine Frenzy',¹⁹ composed the following year, shows the authority and power with which he was already writing.

Antonino Pierozzi, later St Antoninus,²⁰ the Archbishop of Florence and Chancellor of the University, whom Ficino greatly respected, advised him at about this time to study less Plato and more St Thomas Aquinas. He may well have studied more of the latter, of whom he gained considerable knowledge, but his enthusiasm for the Platonic tradition in no way diminished.

By 1462 he was already producing his first Latin translations of Greek authors, which included the *Hymns* of Orpheus and the *Sayings* of Zoroaster, and the first dialogues of Plato. The following year he completed a translation of the Hermetic writings, which subsequently became his most frequently published work.²¹ He then resumed the translation of Plato's dialogues, which he finished by 1469, but he continued to revise them. He was afflicted with illness and 'deep melancholy' in 1468, and was then advised by his 'unique friend' Giovanni Cavalcanti to cure himself by writing a dialogue on love;²² this is his commentary on Plato's *Symposium*, *De Amore*. In this

work he explains how creation is brought into being, sustained and again gathered to its source through the flow of love. For him this movement is reflected in the classical Graces, so often illustrated in Renaissance art.

In the following year Ficino began *The Platonic Theology* or *The Immortality of Souls*. This was his major work. It extended to eighteen books and occupied him for the next five years. In proving the immortality of the soul he showed the single source and unity of two fundamental elements in the life of Western civilisation: Judaic-Christian religion and Greek philosophy.²³

Ficino became a priest in 1473, and in the same year began *The Christian Religion*. This work emphasises, in addition to the divinity of Man's soul, the personal relationship between Man and God, so beautifully expressed in letter 4. In this book he writes of Man:

Let him revere himself as an image of the Divine God. Let him hope to ascend again to God, as soon as the Divine Majesty deigns in some way to descend to him. Let him love God with all his heart, so as to transform himself into Him, who through singular love wonderfully transformed Himself into Man (*Opera*, pp.22-23).

Numerous short treatises followed *The Christian Religion*. From about 1484 to 1492 he was engaged in translating and commenting upon the philosopher Plotinus (204-270 AD), and his successors, Porphyry and Proclus. In 1489 he published the medical and astrological work *The Three Books on Life*. Ficino had his letters published in 1495. In 1496 his commentaries on Plato and his translations and commentaries of Dionysius were printed,²⁴ followed in 1497 by his translation of Iamblichus; his last extant work is an unfinished commentary on St Paul's Epistle to the Romans.

Giovanni Corsi, Ficino's early 16th-century biographer, describes his appearance and character:

He was short in stature, slim, and slightly hunched in both shoulders. He was a little hesitant in speech, and stammered in pronouncing the letter 'S'. On the other hand he was not without grace; his legs, arms and hands being well proportioned. The set of his countenance gave him a mild and gracious appearance. He was ruddy in complexion and his wavy golden hair curled high over his forehead.²⁵

According to Corsi, Ficino's health was generally poor, although it improved after his forty-fifth year. He says that although Ficino was

cheerful in company he was melancholy when alone. This melancholy 'he burned up by unremitting work at night'. In temperament,

he was mild, although when moved by bile, he sometimes broke out into swift anger, which like a lightning flash quickly disappeared. He readily forgot an injury. He was never forgetful of his own duties. He was not at all inclined to sensual passion, but he was rapt in love, just like Socrates, and used to converse and debate with the young about love in the Socratic manner. Throughout his life he was content to have few clothes and household possessions. He had fine but not extravagant taste, for all indulgence was fundamentally foreign to him. He attended carefully to the necessities of life; although sparing with food, he obtained the most excellent wines.²⁶

To Ficino, discipline was essential to the spiritual life. Following the example of Pythagoras, he favoured light food and encouraged his followers to rise with the sun, or an hour or two earlier.²⁷ He led a life of abstinence and chastity, the importance of which he explained in a long letter in Book VIII.²⁸ Yet although he believed in discipline, his mind soared beyond dogma. There could be many roads to the source even though the Christian one was the best. He writes in *The Christian Religion*:

Divine Providence does not permit any part of the world at any time to be completely without religion, although it does allow rites to differ. Perhaps variety of this kind is intended ... God prefers to be worshipped in any manner, however unfittingly ... than not to be worshipped at all through pride.²⁹

Not far below the surface, in many of his letters, is his sense of humour.³⁰ Take, for example, his letter to Lorenzo de' Medici, recommending him to support the Aristotelian philosopher, Oliviero Arduini.³¹ He grants that Lorenzo may query whether such a philosopher should ask for financial help but begs that he should give the money first and raise the query afterwards.

Ficino's Academy awoke Europe to the deep significance of the Platonic tradition. His letters to eminent correspondents all over the continent contributed directly to this awakening. They included Colet (Dean of St Paul's Cathedral and founder of St Paul's School) in England. He wrote to de Ganay, Chancellor of the Parlement in France; to the humanist Reuchlin in Germany (about the meaning of the Orphic hymns). King Matthias of Hungary invited him to

his court to give personal instruction in Platonic philosophy; an appointment which he declined but a function which he filled through his follower, Francesco Bandini, who resided with the King for several years. Around 1488, he was able to write, even if partly humorously, that by his correspondence he 'held all Europe in amatorial servitude'.³²

Ficino was not the first to revive the study of Plato and his followers. This had developed with the rediscovery of antiquity, which had begun at the time of Dante, or earlier, and had increased in scope and depth with the growing knowledge of Greek and the accumulation of new classical manuscripts. He was not the first to show that Judaic religion and Greek philosophy had a single source, stretching back as he saw it to Moses, Zoroaster and Hermes Trismegistus, the sage of Ancient Egypt.³³ But more than anyone else he established the equal authority of these two strands of European tradition; he convinced his contemporaries that 'lawful philosophy is no different from true religion; and lawful religion no different from true philosophy'.³⁴ The most eloquent monument to his influence is the mosaic of Hermes Trismegistus in Siena Cathedral.

It was Ficino more than anyone who took from Plato, Plotinus and the Hermetic writings the concept that part of the individual soul was immortal and divine, a concept that was all-important to the Renaissance.³⁵ For, from this, it followed that the soul had power 'to become all things' and that Man could 'create the heavens and what is in them himself, if he could obtain the tools and the heavenly material'.³⁶

In a sense this became the philosophy of the age, for in the century or so following Ficino's birth, more progress was made in the arts and sciences than in the previous millennium, while the voyages of discovery to America, to Southern Africa and the East mirrored the inward achievements in art and literature. Already Europe was on the threshold of the scientific age of which the inventions of Leonardo and the discoveries of Galileo,³⁷ and later Kepler, were early fruits.

Ficino's 'discovery' of the immortality of the soul was particularly important in the revival of religion during the next century. In the Middle Ages it was a doctrine that had been rather neglected by Christian theologians. Through Ficino it again became central to Christian thought.³⁸ He carried the greater conviction because he gave every sign of having experienced in contemplation what he described in his writing. A study of contemporary documents will show what a

frequent subject for reflection the immortality of the soul became, and by decree of the Lateran Council in 1512 it was made for the first time part of the dogma of the Catholic Church. This emphasis on the individual soul led easily to the devotional step of a 'personal relationship' with God which became so characteristic of the reformers both within and outside the Catholic Church.

For Ficino the immortality and divinity of the soul was the basis of 'the dignity of Man', which the artists and writers of the Renaissance sought to express in countless ways. In time the expression of this ideal touched every aspect of life. Throughout Europe elegance became the object of riches. As the nobility moved out of their castles, they moved into houses that began to express the grace, proportion and light of the Renaissance.³⁹ The forbidding towers and narrow streets which dominated many mediaeval Italian towns gave way to spaciousness and order. Today the harmony of a Georgian farmhouse as well as the stately homes of Europe still recall to us the 'birth of beauty' in the 15th century.

The dignity of Man was not only reflected in architecture and art but had to be expressed in every field of human activity. A new ideal for Man was set, the first and best model for which was Ficino's pupil, Lorenzo de' Medici. Noble, magnanimous, courageous, completely trustworthy, he could turn from war and affairs of state to philosophy, scholarship, poetry, music or art, and excel in each. Equally at ease with his peers or his people, his authority sprang from his nature and not from his position.

The 'courtier' who was successful without effort and impressive without ostentation, both in the arts and the traditional pursuits of war and hunting, was a marked contrast to the more limited noble of an earlier age. The change in character required is well illustrated by the 16th century Castiglione in *The Courtier*. He describes a man whom a lady

had honoured by asking him to dance, and who not only refused, but would not listen to music or take part in the many other entertainments offered, protesting all the while that such frivolities were not his business. And when at length the lady asked what his business was, he answered with a scowl: 'Fighting.' 'Well then,' the lady retorted, 'I should think that since you aren't at war at the moment and you are not engaged in fighting, it would be a good thing if you were to have yourself well greased and stowed away in a cupboard with all your fighting equipment, so that you avoid getting rustier than you are already.'⁴⁰

The new 'courtier' became a model that was not confined to the noble class. This was the character that, for centuries, the English public schools endeavoured to build and it became almost the definition of a gentleman all over Europe. It required a more generous education than the somewhat restricted view of the seven liberal arts current in the Middle Ages. A knowledge of ancient literature and history became the unquestioned basis of education⁴¹ in the West and remained so until very recently.

The original impulse of the Renaissance, that the glory of Man should be reflected in all his activities, became in time a movement of general refinement, which lasted for centuries, affecting the taste and manners of the entire population of Europe. The improvement in manners meant more than learning to use a fork or how to make polite conversation. It was the adoption of a code of conduct by which consideration for others became a custom of society. In origin it was the reflection of 'Man's dignity' in his social behaviour.

What is the significance of Ficino's letters today? For a society which seems to have lost its direction and which is largely dominated by indolence, greed, violence and corruption, they have a contemporary ring. It was to the same problems that Ficino addressed himself in the 15th century. The letters remind us that these vices are the product of foolishness and ignorance and that the fulfilment of Man lies in return to his source.

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1975

NOTES TO THE INTRODUCTION

- 1 Plato, *Timaeus*, 41. *Phaedrus*, 245c-246a. Letters 110, 111 in this volume.
- 2 P. O. Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers of the Italian Renaissance*, Stanford, 1964, ch. 3.
- 3 See especially Letters 7 and 122.
- 4 Letter 50.
- 5 See R. Marcel, *Marsile Ficin*, Paris, 1958, p.396, quoted from B. Colucci, *Declamations*.
- 6 G. Corsi, *Life of Ficino*, Florence, 1506, XVIII-XIX. See now *Letters*, 3, pp.144-5.
- 7 A. della Torre, *Storia della Accademia Platonica di Firenze*, Florence, 1902, p.791, quoting from G. A. Campano, *Epistolario*, ed. Mencken, Leipzig, 1707.
- 8 *Platonic Theology*, III, I, *Opera*, p.118.
- 9 Letter 75.
- 10 G. Corsi, *Life*, XI; *Letters*, 3, p.141.
- 11 Appendix I.
- 12 *Letters*, 3, 1.
- 13 P. O. Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers of the Italian Renaissance*, ch. 3.
- 14 *Opera*, p.1537.
- 15 Letter 26.
- 16 A. della Torre, *Storia della Accademia Platonica*, p.831 *seq.*
- 17 Letter 86.
- 18 *Letters*, 10, 12.
- 19 Letter 7.
- 20 P. O. Kristeller, *Supplementum Ficinianum*, Florence, 1937, II, p.204.
- 21 The *Hymns* of Orpheus, the *Sayings* of Zoroaster and the Hermetic writings are considered by modern scholars to be works of late antiquity, although possibly based on earlier sources.
- 22 G. Corsi, *Life*, VIII; *Letters*, 3, pp.139-40.
- 23 See D. P. Walker, *The Ancient Theology*, Introduction.
- 24 For the importance of the writings ascribed to Dionysius, the Areopagite, see D. P. Walker, *The Ancient Theology*, Introduction.
- 25 G. Corsi, *Life*, XV-XVI; *Letters* 3, p.143.
- 26 G. Corsi, *Life*, XVI; *Letters* 3, p.144.
- 27 A. della Torre, *Storia*, p.633.
- 28 *Letters*, 7, 29.
- 29 *The Christian Religion*, ch. IV, *Opera omnia*, p.4.
- 30 See Letter 39 for Ficino's view of humour in Plato.
- 31 Letter 101.
- 32 *Letters*, 7, 72.
- 33 See the Argumentum to Ficino's translation of the *Pimander*, *Opera*, p.1836.
- 34 Letter 123.
- 35 See P. O. Kristeller, *Renaissance Concepts of Man*, New York, 1972, ch. 2.
- 36 Letter 123.
- 37 For a comparison between the thought of Ficino and Galileo, Pico and Kepler, see P. O. Kristeller, *Renaissance Concepts of Man*, p.20.
- 38 *Ibid.*, ch. 2, p.30 *seq.*
- 39 See letter 47.
- 40 B. Castiglione, *The Courtier*, tr. G. Bull, Penguin Classics, London 1967, p.58. This work was also the first of many in European literature to portray Ficino's notion of a purely spiritual love between friends (as described in Letter 51) as extending between members of the opposite sex.
- 41 For Ficino's views on the revival of education, see *Letters*, 10, 33.

Procemium in Epistolas

*Preface to the Letters*¹

Marsilio Ficino of Florence to all his letters at the same time: greetings.

MY letters, each time you greet my friends at my behest, offer immortal greetings to our dearest friend Girolamo Rossi. For I had fathered you mortal, soon to die by some misfortune or other. But Girolamo, a man well known for his loving care, has recently caused you to be born again, this time to immortal life I hope. For you lay hidden a long while, yearning for the light, nor until now was there anyone to pluck you from the shadows, perhaps because this was not yet the will of destiny or deity. But our Rossi – or rather now your Roscius² – with that devotion which he has always shown your father Marsilio, has now with the same inherited love happily pursued you too, working diligently so that your long-hidden faces may be wholly revealed. Therefore greet this learned and caring man who has restored you, you who hitherto were full of sorrow but are now of good cheer; and for the prodigious gift of immortality give immortal thanks.³

15th December, 1494.
Florence.

Marsilii Ficini Florentini in epistolas suas, scilicet in
primum librum ad Iulianum Medicem,
Virum Magnanimum Proœmium

*The preface of Marsilio Ficino of Florence to his
first book of letters addressed to the magnanimous
Giuliano de' Medici*¹

Marsilio Ficino to the magnanimous Giuliano de' Medici: greetings.

MAGNANIMOUS GIULIANO: the great Cosimo, your grandfather and my patron, often spoke these words of Plato: that in undertaking important affairs, nothing is more profitable than the good-will of prudent and learned men.² And there is no clearer evidence of justice and prudence in such affairs than if friends of this kind are present; nor of injustice and imprudence than if they are absent. This is the golden rule of Plato. Cosimo throughout the whole of his life proved it by what he did, much more than by what he said. He was certainly an exceptionally wealthy man; rich in money, far richer in men and most rich in prudence and justice. And what is most rare and wonderful, he left a son and grandchildren who inherit this treasure. So it is that in my Giuliano I recognise that old man, on whom alone, after God, my welfare totally depended.

There is therefore nobody whom I desire to be in better health than Giuliano; and indeed I pray and beseech God for this every day. And to declare to you more clearly my desire and intent, I have resolved that the first volume of my letters to my friends should be dedicated to you, who are the prince among them. I have done this in order that all my friends may be related to one principal friend; and so that when you are reading them, each time you read the greeting you will know that Marsilio greets Giuliano.

