PLATONISM AND THE ENGLISH IMAGINATION

EDITED BY

ANNA BALDWIN and SARAH HUTTON

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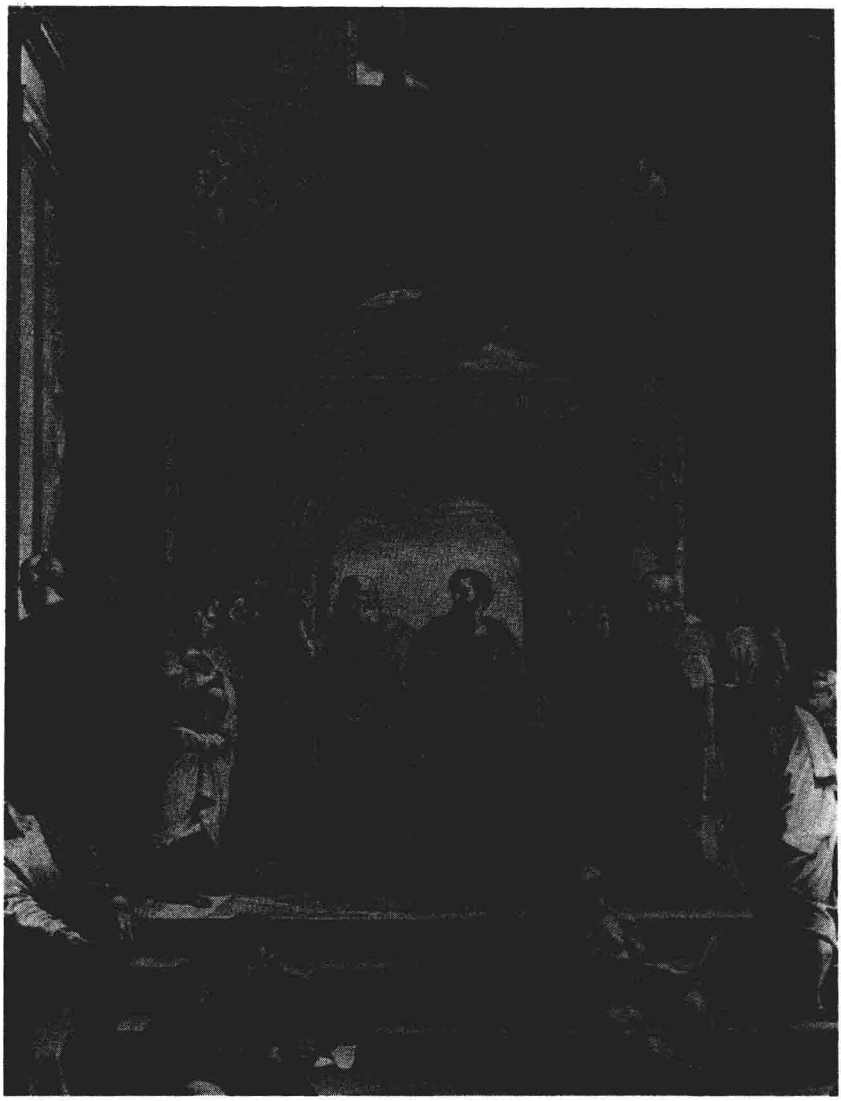
This is the first compendious study of the influence of Plato on the English literary tradition, showing how English writers used Platonic ideas and images within their own imaginative work. Source texts include Plato's Dialogues, and the writings of Neoplatonists and the early Christians who were largely responsible for assimilating Platonic ideas into a Christian culture; and there are essays on more than thirty English authors from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century, including Shakespeare, Milton, Blake, Wordsworth, T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden and Iris Murdoch. The book is divided chronologically, showing how every age has reconstructed Platonism to suit its own understanding of the world, and there is a bibliographical guide to further reading. Established experts and new writers over a range of disciplines have worked together to produce the first comprehensive overview of Platonism in English literature.



Detail showing Plato from Raphael's *School of Athens*, engraved by G. Volpato (1778), reproduced from a print at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. The original picture is in the Vatican Museum.

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Preface

This is a study of the way that Platonism and Neoplatonism run like a changing thread through the web of English literature. Not all of the authors here represented are English, and some did not even write in that language. But they have all contributed to a tradition which can be defined and which still continues. Our main aid to that definition has been to confine ourselves to writers who knew at least part of the corpus of Platonic texts at first hand. As can be seen from the bibliography, these texts include not only Plato's Dialogues but also the writings of the Neoplatonists, especially Plotinus, through whom Plato was read for so long. Our choice of writers has necessarily had to be selective but our chronological range from antiquity to the present offers, for the first time, a comprehensive overview of the influence of Platonism on English literature.

That very comprehensiveness is, of course, a source of danger, and our account must of necessity be both partial and personal. But this is also true of the readings of Plato and his followers by the writers who are discussed here. Plato himself was a rich and diverse writer, and every age has rediscovered Plato in a different way, and reinterpreted Platonism to suit its different understandings of the world. This is not the story of a nexus of mummified ideas carried forward by authors with a nostalgia for antiquity, but of particular people who read within a related group of philosophical texts and responded to them individually in very different contexts from the pagan culture in which Plato and Plotinus lived. The process of transmission was inevitably one of transformation: strands of Platonic and Neoplatonic thought were often used to question or redefine the beliefs of many of the authors discussed here. In some cases writers applied Platonic principles to the political circumstances of their own times. Others assimilated tenets of ancient philosophy to their Christian outlook. So this is often a story of non-conformity and debate, and

often of the liberation of the imagination to explore meaning outside the confines of dogma.

It is always the imaginative use of Plato which we discuss: this is a collection of literary studies not a history of philosophy. We have, however, tried to give it some historical shape. Accordingly, we have divided it chronologically into periods so as to give a broad sense of how the perception of Platonism changes. There are both surprising correspondences between authors of very different dates, and diversity within each period. An account of each period is given at the beginning of each section, to set the chosen authors into a context, and to indicate some of the gaps which our telling of the story must leave. These introductions could all be read in sequence as a very general account of continuities and discontinuities of the Platonic tradition.

Each study has been specially commissioned to give an individual critical perspective on the writer or writers with which it is concerned. We begin with a summary of some of the principal strands of thought of the Platonic corpus (Anne Sheppard) and we include accounts of how they were to some extent incorporated into the Christian faith by Augustine and his predecessors (Janet Coleman), and how these and other Platonic authorities were used in Old and Middle English prose and poetry (Janet Bately, Andrew Louth and Yasunari Takada). We continue into the Renaissance by way of the Italian revival of Platonic studies (Sarah Hutton), exploring the role of Platonism in humanism (Dominic Baker-Smith and Thomas Bulger) and the philosophy of love (Jill Kraye), as well as the adaptions of Platonism in the love poetry of the Elizabethan era (John Roe and Stephen Medcalf). Religious issues dominate again in the seventeenth century in the eclectic Christian Platonism of the Cambridge Platonists (Dominic Scott) and the poetry of Milton (Anna Baldwin) and the metaphysical poets (Sarah Hutton). The eighteenth century marks a waning of interest in Platonism in general (Pat Rogers) although Blake continued to engage with it (Edward Larrissy). The renewal of interest in Plato in the nineteenth century (Richard Jenkyns) was at once more secular and more scholarly. And we find among the Romantic Poets and their Victorian successors a detailed focus on Recollection (Keith Cunliffe, A.W. Price), on society (Jennifer Wallace, M.W. Rowe) and on art (Anne Varty). The use of Plato to appraise society is even more characteristic of the twentieth century (Angela Elliott, Daphne Turner, Peter Conradi). Some writers reject

or parody Platonic idealisation (Brenda Lyons), although others continue to exploit the transcendent symbolism of both Plato and the Neoplatonists (Brian Arkins, A.D. Moody). Plato is now generally treated very much as a philosopher whose dialectical method is itself a focus of interest (Dennis Brown), and who must be analysed by scholars rather than reinterpreted to buttress faith.

The bibliography provided at the end is not intended to be exhaustive but rather to enable readers to take their study of Platonism further and in directions not covered by this collection. This volume is thus presented as a point of departure rather than a definitive statement of the subject. For this reason it is entirely appropriate to conclude as we do with a study of someone whose philosophy and fiction testifies to the continuing vitality of the Platonic tradition in the twentieth century, Iris Murdoch.

ANNA BALDWIN
SARAH HUTTON

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PART I

Antiquity

CHAPTER I

Plato and the Neoplatonists

Anne Sheppard

This chapter will be concerned both with Plato's own thought and with the Greek philosophers known as Neoplatonists who flourished from the third to the sixth century AD. Their understanding of Plato had a profound effect on later writers and thinkers and a proper appreciation of Plato's influence requires some knowledge of Neoplatonic thought. It is worth remembering however that Plotinus (AD204/5–270), the first Neoplatonist, lived nearly 600 years after Plato himself. The Neoplatonists treated Plato's thought as a unity and sought to interpret his works as a coherent whole. This sometimes led them to blur contradictions between different dialogues; in particular, they did not envisage any chronological development in Plato's views. Since the nineteenth century, Platonic scholarship has taken such development for granted. Plato is now usually seen as progressing from early dialogues such as the *Laches*, the *Ion* and the *Charmides* through the grand theory-building of the *Phaedo*, the *Symposium* and the *Republic* to a final phase of questioning and self-criticism represented by dialogues such as the *Parmenides*, the *Sophist*, the *Theaetetus* and the *Philebus*.

In most of Plato's dialogues his teacher, Socrates, is the main speaker. The early dialogues show Socrates searching for definitions of moral terms such as courage and temperance. He does this not by propounding definitions of his own but by testing definitions put forward by his interlocutors. These are regularly found wanting and the interlocutors' pretensions to knowledge are exposed as false and empty. Socrates' activity in these dialogues fits the picture given in Plato's *Apology of Socrates*. This purports to be Socrates' defence against the charges of impiety and corrupting the young, on which he was tried and put to death by his fellow-Athenians in 399BC. Although the *Apology* was probably written soon after 399 we do not