CHAPTER - VII

Neo-Platonism & Medieval Period

Very recently, Indo-Greek symposium was organized at Delphi to which several brilliant scholars and philosophers, archeologists and historians contributed their research papers. Bishop Paulus Gregorius-primate of the Syrian Orthodox Church argued that several debts remained still to be recognized, among them, interaction between Greece and India over One thousand years - from the Sixth Century B.C. to the Fifth Century A.D. - whose influence on the course of civilization remains yet to be recognized by the West. Our western scholars refuse to go beyond Greek thought and culture and treat the same as if it grew in complete isolation. This is quite unscientific and speaks a lot about parochial arrogance compounded by ignorance leading to false claims of racial parity and pretensions of purely independent development of Greek thought and culture. No civilization can grow in complete isolation, much less the Greek thought and culture - the matrix of Western thought. As a matter of fact, the Greek thought and culture drunk deep at the fountains of one of the purely Eastern origin viz., Indian thought and culture and the fertile crescent and borrowed freely from the civilizations of "Near East", i.e. Summerians, Akkadians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Medes, Chaldians, Hebrews, Phoenicians, Iranians and Egyptians. Each one of these cultures contributed many new ideas to enrich the then centre of the world.
Indian contribution in moulding the classical Christian thought, especially the most powerful ideas like Christian Monasticism and the central idea of our union with Christ and through him with God is not a semitic thought or Greek idea but can be traced purely to its Indian origin. The teachings of early Christian fathers, particularly of Fourth Century are still traced to Egypt but in fact, it is difficult for scholars to recognize this. The profound ideas of Christianity of the Fourth and Fifth Century can be traced back to their constant contact with Buddhist monks through Judaic monasticism of QUMRAN communities of the two countries before and after Christ.

Idea of "Unity of All":

Plotinus belongs to the era (205-207 A.D) which witnessed the domination of Buddhistic thought on the region where Appolo was worshipped as the principal deity. Plotinus was the product of the early Buddhist thought which formed bed-rock in its conflict with Pre-Shankarite Vedanta to which the teacher of Shankaracharya Gaudpad belonged. There is a profound truth in the saying that Shankara was a Greplo-Buddhist for whatever he received from his teacher was largely the contribution and product of Buddhist thought. The same Vedantic tradition to which Gaudpad belonged was kept alive by a lucky stroke of chance or insight in Plotinus who carried these ideas to the West.
Plotinus taught at Alexandria which was not only a seat of learning, but also a meeting place of many cultures and cradle of many new thought currents especially among them were the idea of intelligibility of the universe or human mind's capacity to know reality in its undifferentiated Oneness and the total union of beings with the Being or the One by overcoming duality. The first of these clearly belonged to Roman culture while the second belonged to Pre-Shankarite Vedanta. Plotinus' idea of the Unity of All or One and the "mystical union" with the One which the soul aspired belonged to Indian thought which transformed the Greek, Pythagorian and Stoic notions of knowing which was through the union of inner Logos of the cosmos and the unity of the self with the inner logos of the cosmos, which is brought about by the craving soul by sublimation through intense meditation or constant contemplation of the Being or the One. It is through Plotinus that first of all, Hellenic ideas penetrated into the West. It was also through Plotinus that first of all, Indian ideas had their first encounter with the West.

Plotinus first formulated the non-Hellenic idea of the Unity of Being or the One into Platonism who merely roamed into the dark world of archetypes because he lacked the idea of the Unity of All. Plotinus supplied the missing link by formulating the idea of All One and thus provided a permanent footing to Roman culture on which the Western culture is built.
Emanation from and Return to Divine One:

The philosophy of Plotinus is contained in sets of nine essays which after his death, his discipline Porphyry arranged and edited in an order of ascent from ethical and aesthetic matters upto the Absolute one. It is a philosophy of Being through emanation from and return to the Divine One. There is this world, an appearance, as for Plato and the reality which is yonder. The grades of a kind of trinity of Soul, intelligence and Oneness occur as microcosmic and macrocosmic counterparts: in the individual things of this world, in the whole world and in the yonder. A kind of stratified or hierarchial universe is projected from our introspective awareness or our own consciousness. Looking towards intelligence, the soul reflects the ideas of intelligence, the forms of the world. And intelligence, looking up toward the one, is transcended in the one, the very principle of form or Being, the first thing and hence the Good. The one is so pure and simple and primal that we ascent to a concept of it only by the way of abstraction or negation.

According to Plotinus "It is in virtue of Unity that beings are beings" and "Deprived of Unity, a thing ceases to be what it is called: no army unless as a unity, a chorus, a flock .... Even house and ship demand unity .... Unity gone neither remains .... the material form stands a unity, fallen from that into a little of fragments, the things have lost their being, what
was is no longer there, it is replaced by quite other things - as many others, precisely, as possess unity.\(^1\)

**Plotinus' conception of Beauty:**

According to him what has thus been compact to unit, Beauty entrones itself, giving itself to the parts as to the Sum .... As an illustration he says that there is the beauty conferred by craftmanship .... and the beauty which some natural quality may give to a single stone.\(^2\)

What about, then ugliness if all is One, the Good, the Beautiful possessed of Being? Some like Persians say that evil is independent, positive, active principle fighting the Good - Ahriman the God of darkness fighting Ormazd, the God of Light - Some say ultimate reality is beyond Good and Evil, while Christian Scholastics say that evil per se is really nothing, but that it manifests itself as an absence of something where something ought to be.

According to Plotinus Matter is multiplicity, the principle of falling apart and being nothing, the negative or nothingness which the One conquers into form and being.

**beauty of Appearance:**

Those who conceive the supersensory in corporeal terms and then, setting one body against another, reject the reality of
the world, are known as Gnostics. Plotinus is against Gnosticism. Their sensory vision of the Supersensory blinds them to the real world of the senses. A spiritual vision of the supersensory, on the other hand, opens our eyes to the reflected radiance of the sensuous world. Plotinus justifies nature, despite its low rank in the universal hierarchy and remoteness from Pure Being, in it, he perceives the beauty of appearance.

Plotinus assumes the identity of Being, Good and Beauty on one hand and of Negation, Evil and Ugliness on the other. He says "We may even say that Beauty is the authentic-existence and ugliness is the Principle contrary to Existence, and the Ugly is also the primal evil, therefore its contrary is at once good and beautiful, or is Good and Beauty, and hence the one method will discover to us the Beauty-Good and the Ugly-Evil ... the intellectual principle ... is pre-eminently the manifestation of Beauty, through the intellectual principle Soul is beautiful.

This is quite contrary to the Gnostic puritans who were carrying the distinction between matter and formal reality to the point of making apparent natural beauty an actual ugliness and evil.

Artist, far from being at a disadvantage as on the Platonic view of double removal from reality, actually enjoys a more than usual divine radiation of Nous, a more than full participation in the divine intelligence and realization of the beautiful reality of
the yonder. He says "the arts are not to be slighted on the ground that they create by imitation of natural objects, for to begin with, these natural objects themselves are imitations, then we must recognize that they (the arts) give no bare reproduction of the thing seen but go back to the Ideas from which nature derives and further, that much of their work is all their own, they are moulders of beauty and add where nature is lacking". Plotinus, according to modern historians, was the earliest systematic Philosopher of creative imagination.

Organic Unity source of Beauty:

Plotinus discarded symmetry and brightness of colour, order and definition advocated by Aristotle in metaphysics as criteria of beauty proper and emphasized organic unity of the universe as is advocated in the Purusa sukta of Rigveda. It is more than that of a species that of an individual and of the individual so intensely organized as to be microcosmic representation of the whole universe, in which, he says, "Each member shall remain what it is, distinctly apart; yet all is to form, as far as possible, a complete unity so that whatever comes into view shall show as it were the surface of the Orb over all, bringing immediately with it the vision, on the one plane, of the sun and of all the stars with earth and sea and all living things as if exhibited upon a transparent globe".

The system of Plotinus does not remain confined to the heterogeneity of this world but transcends towards the divine one
that is so simply one as to be conceivable by the method of negation and abstraction or intellectual, profound intuition wrought about by constant and sustained meditation upon the One.

Our sense organs especially, the sight and hearing, as Plato would maintain, partake into the nature of objects to which they are directed as Plotinus has maintained "Beauty addresses itself chiefly to sight" and "Never did the eye see the sun unless it had first become sunlike and never can the soul have vision of the First Beauty unless it shall be beautiful".

Influence of Plotinus on Medieval Philosophers:

The ideas of Plotinus exercised decisive influence on the basic thinking of subsequent medieval Philosophers. St. Augustine for instance had read Plotinus in Latin translation and as he shared with Plotinus the aim of combatting the several forms of dualism and Puritanism prevalent in the Third and Fourth Centuries, he gives us some rather close echoes of the neo-Platonic philosopher especially his idea of the Unity of all One as he says "without unity nothing could exist, to be is no other than to be one, the more unity a thing has, so much the more being does it possess .... no material object is really one because a body as such is indefinitely divisible, potentially, if not actually". With regard to the relation of beauty and unity he says "Any beautiful object whatsoever is more worthy of praise in its totality as a whole
than in any one of its parts. So great is the power of integrity and Unity that what pleases as a part pleases much more as a unified whole.  

Some nine hundred years later Thomas Aquinas turned the preoccupation of Christian metaphysics from the Platonic realm yonder of forms to an Aristottelian immediately experienced world of natural substances. It was a world, which pointed upwards to a transcending substantive and personel God. The Plotinian theory of emanation, a theory of continuity between creator and created, a shading of values is supplanted in the Christian Aristottelianism of Aquinas by an emphatic distinction between God and his works. In the aesthetic remarks of Aquinas, we have a discussion of "beauty" precisely as a "Divine Name". "Beauty" belongs to form and intelligence and hence pre-eminently to the contemplative life, says he. If we take Aquinas in the most secular and natural way, we can find codification of the principles with which we are familiar in the earlier centuries of Neo-Platonism. Beautiful things he says are those which are apprehended with pleasure and thus he parallels Augustine in giving his simplest definition of the beautiful a subjective accent. As with Augustine and Plotinus, we are once more in the presence of a basic assumption of radical harmony between man, the knower and the external universe which he knows - and in some parts of which he takes a special delight. The beauty of a beautiful object consists not merely in a self-enclosed character but in a corresponding external relation of fitness to
the knowing subject, a relation of knowability. All knowledge and especially knowledge of the beautiful, and pleasure in the beautiful, arise by a kind of union between subject and object.

Aquinas maintains that the object of aesthetic pleasure must have three qualities i.e. wholeness or perfection, due proportion or harmony and brilliance. Beauty is thought to be apprehended in a kind of reposeful contemplation and in that sense is different from the Good which is the object of appetite. The conception is much better known to modern aestheticians under its Kantian name of "disinterest". The pleasure afforded by a thing we call beautiful whether a natural object or a product of art would seem to differ from other pleasures in being more steady and cumulative and more surely held by the mind and more charged with symbolic intimations.

The Influence of Plotinus in Modern Times:

The thinking of Plotinus influenced Monadology and related essays and letters of Leibnitz and set in an idealist reaction which was closely affiliated to neo-Platonism and if we pursue the thought, through German aesthetics of the later 1815 Century extended to the flowering of German and English criticism which emphasized beauty through unity and order. The kind of "organic" unity that we will find especially in Coleridge and German aestheticians with its strongly pantheistic implications about the organic structure
of the universe and the union in knowledge and being of subject and object - all this and still much more can be traced back to Plotinus and neo-Platonism.

Origin of the Ideas of Plotinus:

Plotinus is considered as the first systematic thinker who influenced not only Greek thought but also through it the early German and English criticism in the field of aesthetics based upon philosophy especially metaphysical mysticism contained in his thought. Plotinus himself was from Egypt who was, at the age of twenty eight, drawn to Alexandria by his interest in philosophy. He was a student of Ammonios Saccas whom he was looking for. He stayed with his teacher for eleven years and has attributed all his thought to his teacher who has left no writing of his own.

He provided much needed unity to Platonic forms in the form of world of ideas lacking in substance. His affiliation to Plato is a projection by Western thinkers who refuse to go beyond Greek thought and treat Greek thought as if it grew in isolation. Plotinus at the age of thirtynine took part in the emperor Gordianu's Eastern campaign in order to familiarise himself with Indian wisdom. Though he could not visit India which he longed for, he collected as much information on Indian wisdom and Philosophy as possible from Persians and established a school in Rome on his return. The ancestry of Western mysticism, thus, is clearly in the Upanishads and in
Vedantic techniques of Hindu teachers who went to West. His ideas, he says "are not new, they were stated long ago, though not clearly and sharply". The present ideas are interpretations of those old ideas.

For Plotinus philosophizing was a Union with the divine, thereby the distance between man and God is annulled. Plato observed a dividing line between world and transcendence. Plotinus crossed it and lived in the one transcendence. Plato invents a world-architect., Plotinus makes everything issue from the One. Although Plotinus quotes Plato literally in support of his own central ideas, in fact, he is actually drawing on a very different source to establish an all-pervading metaphysical way of life.

His whole background was body of thought associated with Mysteries, Orphic ideas and oriental lore which formed the cult of Gnosticism. he opposed some of the defined ideas of Gnostics like fall of soul from its heavenly abode, evil of existence, illusion, impurity and ascent to heaven through guide. His purpose was purely philosophical, the self liberation of the individual soul. He acknowledges the splendour of this world and rejects both the Gnostic conception of a temporal history of Being and the fanciful multiplication of intermediate stages which later Neo-Platonists took over from the Gnostics.

The Greeks had been subject to Oriental influence since the earliest times. In assimilating it, they transformed it giving
speech to something which without them would have remained mute. This is also true of Plotinus who from early youth was passionately interested in the wisdom of India and the Orient.

**Stultification of Profane Poetry by Church:**

Plotinus evolved his mystic system and handed on to the Christians a metaphysical justification of "other worldliness". The doctrine of renunciation in its most relentless form dominated Christendom for more than a thousand years when irresistible organisation of Christian church drew into its service most of the intellect, culture and trained mind-power of Catholic Europe; its all-absorbing authority imposed its discipline upon its members and restricted their devotion to the world-renouncing ideas of the Church, where to acknowledge a taste for profane poetry was to admit intercourse with the devil. From fifth to fifteenth Century, the Christian church tended to stifle the free, conscious development of secular arts and impeded with progress of any continuous stream of literary activity. The literary art, as a pleasurable activity pursued for its own sake, as a part of intellectual culture dissociated from religion, came under its ban. The freedom by which literature thrives was denied to just those who were equipped to carry on its tradition. We have this period in West, extraordinarily sterile in creative literature and at the same time almost destitute of free literary criticism.
References

1. Plotinus: Ennead III viii 10 and VI ix 1.
5. Plotinus: Ennead V VIII, 1
6. Ibid V VIII 9
7. Ibid I VI 9
8. Literary Criticism A Short History: P. 123.