

**PLATO AND
PLATONISM: A
SERIES OF LECTURES**

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Plato and Platonism: a series of lectures by Walter Pater

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WALTER PATER

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A SERIES OF LECTURES

BY

WALTER PATER

FELLOW OF BRASENORSE COLLEGE

Ὡς φιλοσοφίας μὲν οὐσης μεγίστης μουσικῆς

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THE Lectures of which this volume is composed were written for delivery to some young students of philosophy, and are now printed with the hope of interesting a larger number of them. By Platonism is meant not Neo-Platonism of any kind, but the leading principles of Plato's doctrine, which I have tried to see in close connexion with himself as he is presented in his own writings.

W. P.

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I.

PLATO AND THE DOCTRINE OF MOTION

WITH the world of intellectual production, as with that of organic generation, nature makes no sudden starts. *Natura nihil facit per saltum*; and in the history of philosophy there are no absolute beginnings. Fix where we may the origin of this or that doctrine or idea, the doctrine of "reminiscence," for instance, or of "the perpetual flux," the theory of "induction," or the philosophic view of things generally, the specialist will still be able to find us some earlier anticipation of that doctrine, that mental tendency. The most elementary act of mental analysis takes time to do; the most rudimentary sort of speculative knowledge, abstractions so simple that we can hardly conceive the human mind without them, must grow, and with difficulty. Philosophy itself, mental and moral, has its preparation, its forethoughts, in the poetry that preceded it. A powerful generalisation thrown into some salient phrase, such as that of Heraclitus—*Πάντα ῥεῖ*. All things fleet away—may startle a particular age by its novelty, but takes possession only because all along its root was somewhere among the natural though but half-developed instincts of the human mind itself.

Plato has seemed to many to have been scarcely less than the creator of philosophy; and it is an immense advance he makes, from the crude or turbid beginnings of scientific enquiry with the Ionians or the Eleatics, to that wide range of perfectly finished philosophical literature. His encyclopædic view of the whole domain of knowledge is more than a mere step in a progress. Nothing that went before it, for compass and power and charm, had been really comparable to it. Plato's achievement may well seem an absolutely fresh thing in the morning of the mind's history. Yet in truth the world Plato had entered into was already almost weary of philosophical debate, bewildered by the oppositions of sects, the claims of rival schools. Language and the processes of thought were already become sophisticated, the very air he breathed sickly with off-cast speculative atoms.

In the *Timæus*, dealing with the origin of the universe he figures less as the author of a new theory, than as already an eclectic critic of older ones, himself somewhat perplexed by theory and counter-theory. And as we find there a sort of storehouse of all physical theories, so in reading the *Parmenides* we might think that all metaphysical questions whatever had already passed through the mind of Plato. Some of the results of patient earlier thinkers, even then dead and gone, are of the structure of his philosophy. They are everywhere in it, not as the stray carved corner of some older edifice, to be found here or there amid the new, but rather like minute relics of earlier organic life in the very stone he builds with. The central and most intimate principles of his

teaching challenge us to go back beyond them, not merely to his own immediate, somewhat enigmatic master—to Socrates, who survives chiefly in his pages—but to various precedent schools of speculative thought, in Greece, in Ionia, in Italy; beyond these into that age of poetry, in which the first efforts of philosophic apprehension had hardly understood themselves; beyond that unconscious philosophy, again, to certain constitutional tendencies, persuasions, forecasts of the intellect itself, such as had given birth, it would seem, to thoughts akin to Plato's in the older civilisations of India and of Egypt, as they still exercise their authority over ourselves.

The thoughts of Plato, like the language he has to use (we find it so again, in turn, with those predecessors of his, when we pass from him to them) are covered with the traces of previous labour and have had their earlier proprietors. If at times we become aware in reading him of certain anticipations of modern knowledge, we are also quite obviously among the relics of an older, a poetic or half-visionary world. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that in Plato, in spite of his wonderful savour of literary freshness, there is nothing absolutely new: or rather, as in many other very original products of human genius, the seemingly new is old also, a palimpsest, a tapestry of which the actual threads have served before, or like the animal frame itself, every particle of which has already lived and died many times over. Nothing but the life-giving principle of cohesion is new; the new perspective, the resultant complexion, the expressiveness which familiar thoughts