
Susan Byrne

Ficino in Spain

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Susan Byrne's *Ficino in Spain* is an essential contribution to the study of the intellectual and cultural history of Spain and early modern Europe. Meticulously researched, artfully argued, and lucidly presented, it introduces an important but neglected philosophical and literary current. In fact, it breaks new ground and, through Byrne's expansive scholarship and probing analysis, invites investigation and interrogation into a wide area of study that will substantially enhance appreciation and understanding of Ficino's place and role in Renaissance Europe.

In establishing the presence and influence of Ficino's Neoplatonist thought, Byrne confronts two problems that shape the argument of the study: (1) the acceptance of Ficino's ideas in Spain; (2) the integration of Ficinian themes into literary, philosophical, and political texts. Although the significance of Ficino's ideas in Italy, France, and England has been extensively recorded, examination of his thought in Renaissance Spain has been overlooked. In particular, Jacob Burckhardt (1818–1897), in his pioneering *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, dismisses Spain's role in promoting humanist study, noting its Sack of Rome and subsequent Inquisition as a rejection of the movement. Ficino becomes a victim of this exclusion. Later, Menéndez Pelayo (1856–1912) sees Ficino's writings as heterodox, and attributes Neoplatonist thought in Spain to León Hebreo. Scholars, such as Dámaso Alonso, Avalle-Arce, and Trueblood, have revised Burckhardt's and Menéndez Pelayo's claims. Nonetheless, Ficino's place in Spain requires empirical evidence.

The reformulation of Ficinian thought in vernacular literature is equally problematic. His Latin translations of Plato's dialogues in fifteenth-century Florence present the work of a philologist. But his commentaries on Plato's texts and his interest in Plotinus and the *Corpus Hermeticum* rework Platonic ideas that, through metaphysical and epistemological exploration, attempt to syncretize Christian theology with speculative philosophy. This Christian Neoplatonism or *pia philosophia*, though systematic in exposition, complicates the definition of an eclectic but original concept.

Archival resources enable Byrne to justify the circulation of Ficino's writings. In her opening chapter, she compiles an inventory of sixteenth-century copies of Ficino's *Opera omnia* in Spanish libraries and, then, examines prominent texts collected in the personal libraries of Hernando Colón and King Phillip II and holdings in Salamanca and Madrid. The numerous copies of Ficino's writings support strong belief in the availability of his translations and interpretations of Plato's dialogues. However, since Ficino's commentaries reflect a composite of Platonic and Neoplatonist thought, Byrne turns attention, in chapter three, to the reception and diffusion of Ficino's interpretations of the *Corpus Hermeticum* or *Pimander*. Earlier, Lactantius, Saint Augustine, and Alfonso X had validated these writings, but Ficino's designation of Hermes Trismegistus as one of the *prisci theologi* and his inclusion of this text in the *Opera omnia* reflect the development of his Christian Neoplatonism. According to Byrne, Ficino's texts also met the demands of Catholic teaching, escaping censorship and being integrated into the Jesuit school curriculum.

After demonstrating the accessibility of Ficino's editions, Byrne shifts focus to the integration of Neoplatonist images and themes in vernacular literature. Such an analysis can be excessively interpretative. However, instead of centering sole attention on themes, Byrne identifies concrete images presented in Ficino's works and adapted by contemporary writers. In chapter two, which elaborates upon Ficino's commentaries, Álvarez Miraval, for example, relates Ficino's remarks on the mandrake to the practicalities of astrology. Ficino's readings of Plato, moreover, extend to psychology, pharmacology, hygiene, and magic. The powerful properties of stones are detailed by Ficino and by Pedro Mexía and Mateo Alemán; both Ficino and Álvarez Miraval describe the therapeutic qualities of music. Similar parallels apply to melancholy, daemons, mathematics, and law. Likewise, in chapter four, Byrne surveys the presence of Hermetic ideas in Renaissance Spain. Images of the sun and fire in these Neoplatonist tracts figure prominently in the verse of Francisco de Aldana, Fray Luis de León, and San Juan de la Cruz, in the narrative of Cervantes's *Don Quijote*, and in the drama and poetry of Lope de Vega. The use of such imagery affords therefore the enlargement of Neoplatonist and Hermetic themes that, set forth by Ficino, structure many early modern Castilian texts.

The final two chapters, more interpretative in approach, address significant themes shared by Ficino and early modern Spanish thinkers. In chapter five, Byrne traces the evolving presence of Plato, citing the significance

of his *Timaeus*, *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, and *Republic*, and Díaz de Toledo's comparison of Platonic philosophy and Christian theology. Ficino's efforts facilitated the reception of Plato's writings and supported the acceptance of his *pia philosophia*. Allusions in Fox Morcillo's commentaries detail parallel imagery in the poetry of San Juan de la Cruz and in Ficino's commentary on Plato's *Phaedrus*. Further, an examination of Juan de Pineda's allegoresis of Platonic tenets affirms Ficino's role in assimilating Platonic and Neoplatonist currents in Christian doctrine, and in determining a framework for such a syncretism in imaginative literature.

In chapter six, Byrne relates Ficino's interpretation of Plato's writings to political theory, justifying, for example, monarchy as the most practicable form of government, and seeing the ruler as one who contemplates the divine and effectively associates this vision with human concerns. Guevara, Arce de Otálora, and Fox Morcillo concur. However, differences in recognizing and attaining justice emerge. For both Ficino and Castillo de Bobadilla, the faculty of memory is required in the realization of justice. Ficino, though, sees memory as a means to apprehend a higher form of knowledge, whereas Bobadilla denotes precedence as necessary in the formulation of laws that, in turn, assume priority over ideals. Cervantes, too, attempts to define equity, and Jesuitical instruction reinforces Ficino's and Plato's views on rules of the Republic.

Encyclopedic in expanse and depth, authoritative in examination, coherently argued, and elegantly expressed, Byrne's research significantly advances our understanding of the intellectual and literary history of early modern Spain. In fact, it complements, in scope and style, Marcel Bataillon's monumental *Érasme et l'Espagne* (1937). Like all major monographs, moreover, it elicits questions that will encourage and facilitate other analyses, such as the inversion of these ideas in Spain and Europe, close reading of the thought of Ficino's Spanish inheritors theorized in the political philosophy in Machiavelli's *Il Principe*, More's *Utopia*, and Capanella's *La città del Sole*, and its possible Petrarchan and mystical expressions. Spain, then, was hardly the cultural backwater in Renaissance Europe that Burckhardt asserts nor the Ficinian desert that Menéndez Pelayo affirms. On the contrary, Byrne's archival investigations, assiduous attention to philological details, accurate readings of Platonic, Neoplatonist, and Ficinian texts that artistically reappear in Castilian literature, and an adroit untangling of ideas part and parcel of Ficino's *pia philosophia* compel a revision of thought. As a highly useful reference tool, and as a se-

rious critical analysis, this study, both seminal and foundational, deserves commendation and gratitude.

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Humà, més humà: una antropologia de la ferida infinita

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Un assaig filosòfic pot optar per moltes formes. En aquest cas trobem un equilibri encertat tant en el contingut com en la forma. No cal estar especialitzat en l'àmbit filosòfic per llegir-lo. Ho podrà fer tant una persona amb neguits culturals i filosòfics com algú especialitzat en l'àmbit del pensament. Però també fa aportacions filosòfiques, les referències creen ressonàncies o ens descobreixen textos i autors. Igualment ens fa veure el sentit en allò que semblava que ja enteníem. Sense ser un llibre d'autoajuda, pot acompanyar a qui senti la necessitat d'examinar activament la seva vida.

Encara que es pot llegir amb independència dels dos llibres anteriors de l'autor (*La resistència íntima: assaig d'una filosofia de la proximitat* i *La penúltima bondat: assaig sobre la vida humana*), té el seu lloc com a final d'una trilogia sobre l'ésser humà.

És en forma d'assaig que ens exposa la proposta pròpia que ha anat elaborant, que anomena «filosofia de la proximitat». El mètode adoptat connecta principalment amb la tradició fenomenològica, i en molts moments ho fa sobretot amb Emmanuel Lévinas. Es tracta d'un text que ens acompanya, on se'ns proposa el «retrobament» no tan sols com a concepte, també en la mateixa manera de dur-nos en la lectura per tot un seguit de conceptes (constel·lació conceptual).

Encara que la forma assagística pugui semblar que defuig la sistematitzat, no per això deixa de presentar un conjunt coherent de conceptes amb els quals es pot bastir una *antropologia filosòfica*. Entre els principals, a més del primer «algú» (pronomen de l'humà), hi ha «intempèrie», que indica la situació fonamental; «replec del sentir» i «ferida infinita», que expressen