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The Philosophical Aspects of Jean Delville's *L'Ecole de Platon*

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Abstract:

Jean Delville's depiction of the philosopher Plato surrounded by his students reflects the understanding of the nature of beauty Delville set out in his book *The New Mission of Art*. It also expresses the view of Plato as one of the world's great spiritual teachers associated with the Theosophical movement founded by Madame Helena Blavatsky. These views in turn, have their origins in the works of Renaissance thinkers, such as Marsilio Ficino, and ultimately in the writings of the third-century philosopher Plotinus.

The Philosophical Aspects of Jean Delville's *L'Ecole de Platon* by J. H. Leshner

Jean Delville (1867–1953) was a central participant in the Symbolist movement in France and Belgium at the turn of the twentieth century. His monumental work, *The School of Plato* (fig. 1), begun during the artist's stay in Italy,^[1] made its first public appearance at the 1898 Salon d'Art Idéaliste in Brussels.^[2] Although two contemporary critics showered it with praise,^[3] *The School of Plato* has puzzled many viewers.^[4] Why, for example, does the central figure (one assumes Plato) bear a striking resemblance to Christ as he is traditionally depicted? Why are those gathered around Plato (one assumes his students) shown nude or semi-nude, and in this arrangement? And how do the unusual colors, flora, and fauna contribute to the message Delville was seeking to convey? Studies by Sébastien Clerbois^[5] and Brendan Cole^[6] have shed light on the significance of *The School of Plato* in its contemporary context. In what follows, I argue that insights into the work may also be gained by connecting it with a set of doctrines that go back to the Renaissance philosopher and translator Marsilio Ficino,^[7] and beyond, to the third-century philosopher Plotinus.

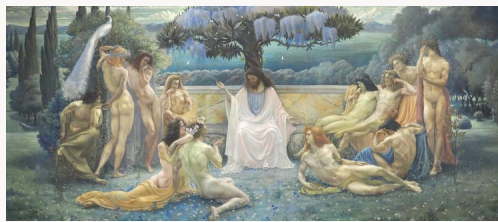


Fig. 1, Jean Delville, *L'Ecole de Platon* [*The School of Plato*], 1898. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. With the kind permission of Miriam Delville. [\[larger image\]](#)

The School of Plato

The School of Plato is divided into three triangular sections. Plato, who gestures with his right hand raised to the sky and his left hand lowered to the earth, occupies the inverted middle triangle and the central visual field. He is flanked by two more triangles, comprising the students on either side. A fourth, overlapping triangle can be seen extending from the top of Plato's head through his downturned gaze and the heads of the foreground students on the left and through his gesturing hand and the heads of the students on the right. This triangle overlays the first, inverted triangle, forming a shape perhaps suggestive of a hexagram, or the Star of David, which was an important symbol and emblem of the Theosophist Society, of which Delville was a member.^[8] As Cole points out, through Plato's torso cross two more diagonal lines, the first running from the heads of the background students on the left of the painting, through Plato's hands, and ending at the heads of the foreground students on the right. The second line extends in an almost mirror image from the heads of the background students on the right to the heads of those in the foreground on the left.^[9] The visual field is balanced, with six students on Plato's left and six more on his right. On either side, two students are standing, two are seated, and two lie on the ground; three are fair-haired, while three are dark-haired. The curve of the foremost two bodies on the left is reflected in the posture of the foremost two on the right. Another prominent symmetry in the painting

involves the students' dress: on each side of Plato, students wear two floral wreaths, three tan robes, and two blue robes. An olive tree and a path leading into the background frame the group on each side. Also apparent are other groups of three and other triangular patterns. These include three peacocks (one in the foreground and two in the background) and three sailboats. The mountains in the far distance provide additional triangular elements.

The School of Plato and the Art-Historical Tradition

Several features link this work with earlier depictions of Plato. What may be the earliest of these is a Pompeian mosaic (*Plato's Academy*, National Archaeological Museum of Naples) dating from the Hellenistic period, which shows a group of seven individuals, some seated and others standing, gathered in a sylvan setting, with one figure (perhaps Eudoxus) pointing to what appears to be a model of the celestial sphere.^[10] Near the center of the scene sits a man with a markedly broad forehead, perhaps the philosopher Aristocles, who acquired the nickname Platôn (which means "broad") or Plato. The raised right hand of Delville's Plato is also reminiscent of the gesturing of Plato in Raphael's *School of Athens* (1510–11). In addition, the third youth from the left bears a striking resemblance to the naked Alcibiades in Pietro Testa's 1648 *The Symposium* (Museum of Prints and Drawings, National Museums of Berlin). The students in Antonio Zucchi's 1767 *A Greek Philosopher and His Disciples* (National Trust, Nostell Priory in Nostell, West Yorkshire) also gather around a central figure while studying texts and constructing geometrical demonstrations. And like most of Delville's youths, four students in an 1881 lithograph by Wilhelm Geissler,^[11] based on a painting by Otto Knille, are shown listening to their teacher, hands touching heads.

Delville's Aims in Creating The School of Plato

These references serve to confirm the historic continuity of Delville's subject, but to understand Delville's objectives in creating *The School of Plato* we must turn to his writings on aesthetic theory. Two principles asserted in his *The New Mission of Art* are particularly relevant. In one remarkable sentence^[12] Delville states:

Through the infinite veil, behind which the unseen work of the Great Unknown is carried on, Beauty sheds its light, quivering with the divine radiance, the wondrous effect of the mystic harmony of essence and substance, of which works of art are the objective suggestions, in proportion to the mental capacity of the artist inspired to receive them.^[13]

References to harmony and vibration appear frequently in the book: "The work of art in which there does not vibrate a harmonious combination of all the elements which constitute life and the ideal will only be an elementary work";^[14] "As matter is a unity, so Beauty is a unity, though manifested by a different kind of vibration";^[15] and "Rhythm, or harmony, exists as much in the world of forms as in that of sound."^[16] Elsewhere, Delville identifies "symmetry,"^[17] "proportion, measurement, and number,"^[18] "equilibrium,"^[19] and "unity in variety"^[20] as conditions essential to beauty.^[21] The basic principle appears to be that it is the mission of the artist to create works embodying numerical values and geometrical forms in as unified, balanced, and harmonious a manner as possible. The multiple symmetrical divisions and groupings on display in *The School of Plato* are readily understandable in the light of this view of the conditions of beauty.

A second, related principle Delville articulates in *New Mission* is that in fashioning visible harmonies and “vibrations” such as those just noted, the artist bridges the divide between the material and the spiritual, between the natural and the supernatural world:[22]

The object of art, then, is rather to cause man to perceive the essential reality of things. And the immateriality of things can be only perceived and understood by the immaterial principle of intelligence and spirit.[23]

In the same way as the musician of genius translates the harmonies of invisible space into natural sounds, the painter, the sculptor, can translate the harmony of typical forms which are in the invisible plastic light, living prisms of divine beauties, in which are refracted the splendours of the universal soul.[24]

Several aspects of *The School of Plato* reinforce the spiritual character of the message Delville was seeking to convey. The dominant blue tones in this and other works reflect the artist's view of blue as a celestial color associated with religious experience.[25] The peacock was an early Christian symbol of resurrection and immortality, inspired in part by the fact that the peacock renews its feathers every year and in part by the legend that the flesh of the peacock is impervious to decay.[26] Plato's twelve students call to mind the twelve disciples.[27] The wisteria vine and blossoms, featured in three other Delville depictions of a religious subject, [28] may link *The School of Plato* with Eastern traditions in which flowers possess a spiritual significance. The wisteria vine originated in the Shandong province of eastern China and appears often in Chinese and Japanese works of art.[29] Like his Theosophical associates, Delville affirmed the unity of the Eastern and Western religious traditions, declaring that “Buddha is the Christ of the East as Christ is the Buddha of the West.”[30] The peacock is also associated with the Bodhisattva, one of the Buddha's reincarnations.

The Significance of the Nude Androgyne

The nudity of Plato's students also conveys an important if often misunderstood message. Some have regarded the depiction of these naked male bodies as a celebration of the pederastic relationships common among the individuals who appear in Plato's dialogues.[31] In his *Symposium*, for example, Plato depicts a group of notable Athenians who, in the presence of their lovers, offer speeches in praise of *erôs* or “passionate desire.” Whatever view of the institution of pederasty one might wish to attribute to Plato himself,[32] an undeniably homoerotic atmosphere pervades many of his dialogues. In *New Mission*, Delville has a good deal to say about the nude, and his comments make it clear that here it has nothing to do with homoeroticism:

It is by the nude alone that the artist can express the essential character of life, the impersonal ideas, universal beliefs, and the general sentiments of mankind. . . . In it we even observe the clearly defined tendency of harmony, style, and proportion to meet, through the constant study and aesthetic observation of nature, in an IDEAL TYPE.[33]

In short, the symmetries and harmonies observable in the naked human body, like those on display elsewhere in *The School of Plato*, were intended to spark an awareness of ideal forms, which is to say, afford the viewer access to a spiritual realm.

In assigning Plato's students both masculine and feminine qualities, Delville associated Plato's teachings with the androgyne, a common feature of Theosophical thought.^[34] Delville's associate Sâr Joséphin Péladan was so attracted to the concept of the androgyne or "man-woman" that he changed his name from Joseph to Joséphin in order to blur his gender identity. In his essay *De L'Androgyne* Péladan explained the "transporting" power of the concept:

The point of unity, synonymous with the point of truth, urges us to work towards synthesis and, plastically, no other synthesis exists other than that of the androgyne. . . . The androgyne transports us beyond time and place, beyond the passions, into the realm of the Archetypes, the highest reaches of our thought.^[35]

Plato and Jesus

In his depiction of a Christ-like Plato, Delville was also giving expression to the Theosophical view of Plato as one of a small number of religious sages or "initiates." Madame Helena Blavatsky, the co-founder of Theosophy, explained this view thus:

Although twenty-two and one half centuries have elapsed since the death of Plato, the great minds of the world are still occupied with his thoughts. He was, in the fullest sense of the word, "the world's interpreter" . . . and [through him] . . . the spirituality of the Vedic philosophers who lived thousands of years before him: Vyasa, Jaimini, Kapila, Patanjali, and many others transmitted their thoughts through Pythagoras to Plato and his school. . . . Thus is warranted the inference that Plato and the ancient Hindu sages held the same wisdom in common.^[36]

The idea of "initiates" or "masters of esoteric wisdom" had also been championed by Edouard Schuré (who wrote the introduction to Delville's *New Mission*). Schuré describes the moment when, seated in the Uffizi library, he discovered the essential unity of all the world's religions:

At that instant, as in a flash I saw the Light that flows from one mighty founder of religion to another, from the Himalayas to the plateau of Iran, from Sinai to Tabor, from the crypts of Egypt to the sanctuary of Eleusis. Those great prophets, those powerful figures whom we call Rama, Krishna, Hermes, Moses, Orpheus, Pythagoras, Plato, and Jesus, appeared before me in a homogeneous group. . . . Nevertheless, through them all moved the impulse of the eternal Word.^[37]

Schuré also held that in developing a view of a higher, ideal world, Plato had opened up the possibility for human communication with the divine:

Idealism is a bold affirmation of the divine truths by the soul, which in its solitude questions itself and judges celestial reality by its own intimate faculties and its inner voices. Initiation is the penetration of these same truths by the experience of the soul, by direct vision of the spirit, by inner awakening. At its highest stage it is the communication of the soul with the divine world.^[38]

The identification of Plato with Jesus and of Plato's students with Jesus's disciples; the evocation of ideal numerical and geometrical forms; the depiction of Plato's students as nude androgynes; the presence of symbolic colors, flora, and fauna—through each of these visual

features Delville was affirming the Theosophical view of Plato as one of those rare individuals whose teachings afforded mankind access to a spiritual realm.

Delville's Aesthetic Theory and the Esoteric Tradition

The aesthetic theory that informs *The School of Plato* gathers together a set of traditions often placed under the rubric of Esotericism. These include Hermeticism, Rosicrucianism, Theosophy, and a Neoplatonic tradition that extends through thinkers such as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Proclus, and Iamblichus back to the third-century thinker Plotinus.

One key figure in the formation of the Hermetic tradition was the Florentine translator, philosopher, priest, and physician Marsilio Ficino (1433–99). At the direction of his patron Cosimo d'Medici, Ficino ceased work on his translations of Plato's dialogues in order to focus his energies on a recently purchased manuscript entitled the *Corpus Hermeticum*. In the preface to his translation of a portion of this work, Ficino identified an Egyptian sage known as Hermes Trismegistus, meaning "Thrice-great Hermes" (who is also known as Mercurius ter Maximus, from the Latin, or even Mercurius Trismegistus), as the founder of a "single system of ancient theology":

At the time when Moses was born flourished Atlas the astrologer, brother of the natural philosopher Prometheus and maternal grandfather of the elder Mercurius, whose grandson was Mecurius Trismegistus. . . . They called him Trismegistus or thrice-greatest because he was the greatest philosopher and the greatest priest and the greatest king. . . . Just as he outdid all philosophers in learning and keenness of mind, so also he surpassed every priest . . . in sanctity of life and reverence for the divine. . . . Among philosophers he first turned from physical and mathematical topics to contemplation of things divine, and he was the first to discuss with great wisdom the majesty of God, the order of demons and the transformation of souls. Thus, he was called the first author of theology and Orpheus followed him, taking second place in the ancient theology. After Aglaophemus, Pythagoras came next in theological succession, having been initiated into the rites of Orpheus, and he was followed by Philolaus, teacher of our divine Plato. In this way, from a wondrous line of six theologians emerged a single system of ancient theology (*prisca theologia*), harmonious in every part, which traced its origins to Mercurius and reached absolute perfection with the divine Plato.[\[39\]](#)

One tenet in Ficino's reconstruction of the *prisca theologia* was his view of Pythagoras and Philolaus as major influences on Plato, a not entirely implausible view. A second, much less plausible tenet was his view of Hermes Trismegistus as a pre-Christian Egyptian sage who miraculously anticipated the main elements of Christian thought. When in 1614 the Swiss scholar Isaac Casaubon provided incontrovertible evidence that the Hermetic corpus dated from a later, Christian period, most of the case for the *prisca theologia* evaporated. But, as we have seen, the idea of an interlocking series of divinely inspired sages survived into the modern period in the Theosophical doctrine of "the initiates."[\[40\]](#)

The figure of the androgyne had also appeared in a number of earlier religious and philosophical texts. In his *Symposium*, Plato had the comic playwright Aristophanes explain how human beings as we know them today descended from an original race of double-men, double-women, and a third, mixed race, the *androgyne* or "man-woman." Unlike later writers,

Plato did not suggest that the *androgynos* was in any way a more spiritual being; it was simply one of the three original forms of the human being.^[41] The seventeenth-century German idealist thinker Jacob Boehme (often identified as an early if unofficial Theosophist) adopted a view of Adam as the original androgyne since both man and woman were created from him.^[42] Hermes Trismegistus had characterized God himself as the original androgyne insofar as the divine was beyond gender distinctions^[43] (a view which Péladan also adopted).^[44] And as Edgar Wind explains:

Philo and Origen inferred from this passage [*Genesis* 1:27]—and their authority ranked high with Renaissance Platonists—that the first and original man was androgynous; that the division into male and female belonged to a later and lower state of creation; and that when all created things return to their maker, the unfolded and divided state of man will be re-inked in the divine essence.^[45]

Ficino offered a distinctive account of the meaning of Aristophanes's speech. Perhaps because he was uncomfortable having the divine Plato speaking of a time when male-male and female-female relationships were commonplace, he chose to read Aristophanes's fairy tale as a metaphorical account, ascribing to human nature a pair of lights, one innate to deal with human affairs and another infused in order to deal with superior matters.^[46] But for many Renaissance thinkers, the image of the androgyne symbolized man's dual physical-spiritual nature, and the aspiration to ascend from the former to the latter (as reflected in the phrase *Philosophia Duce Regredimur*—"With philosophy leading the way, we retrace our steps").^[47]

As we have seen, the aesthetic theory that informed Delville's creation of *The School of Plato* took the mission of the artist to be the creation of unifying symmetrical or harmonious visible forms capable of sparking an awareness of their divine archetypes (underlining mine):

The artist, in short, who does not know that Beauty is the luminous conception of equilibrium in forms, will never have any influence over the soul, because his works will be without thought, that is without life.^[48]

As matter is unity, so Beauty is unity, though manifested by a different kind of vibration.^[49]

The beauty of perceptible forms results from that symmetry. It is the signature of the divine order in nature.^[50]

To put the point in more metaphysical terms, Delville held that Beauty emanated from a higher level of reality and descended into the visible and material realm:

Considered in its metaphysical sense Beauty is one of the manifestations of the Absolute Being, Emanating from the harmonious radiance of the divine plane, it traverses the intellectual plane in order to further irradiate the plane of nature, where it is quenched in the darkness of matter.^[51]

These [new artists] know that spirit descends into form, form into matter, and that without form, matter expresses nothingness.[\[52\]](#)

The hierarchy of art is based on the hierarchy of being.[\[53\]](#)

This understanding of the “metaphysics of Beauty” was not new. In an earlier period Ficino had also spoken of a hierarchy of being, in which Beauty is a ray that penetrates all the lower levels of being, and in doing so attracts the soul upward:

Beauty is a certain act or ray from it [the Good] penetrating through all things: first into the Angelic Mind, second into the Soul of the whole, and the other souls, third into Nature, fourth into the matter of bodies.[\[54\]](#)

This divine beauty has generated love, that is, a desire for itself in all things. Since if God attracts the World to Himself, and the world is attracted, there exists a certain continuous attraction (beginning with God, emanating to the World, and returning at last to God) which returns again, as if in a kind of circle, to the same place whence it is issued.[\[55\]](#)

Gombrich explained the link between the visible and the intelligible thus:

The objects in our sublunar world have different qualities, some, like heat and cold, dryness and moisture, are elemental and thus wedded to the world of matter. Others, like brightness, colours, and numbers—that is proportion—appertain both to our sublunar world and to the celestial sphere. These mathematical shapes and proportions, then, belong to the higher order of things. Shapes and proportions, therefore, have the most intimate connection with the Ideas in the World Soul or the Divine Intellect.[\[56\]](#)

Plotinus's Conception of Beauty

At some point in the third century of the Christian era, the philosopher Plotinus characterized beauty as an emanation from a higher level of reality, as the consequence of the imposition of unity on variety, and as an intelligible harmony:

This, then, is how the material thing becomes beautiful—by communicating in the Reason-Principle that flows from the Divine.[\[57\]](#)

So mounting the soul will come first to the Intellectual-Principle and survey all the beautiful ideas in the supreme and will avow that this is Beauty, that the ideas are Beauty. For by their efficacy comes all Beauty else, but the offspring of Being and of the Intellectual-Principle.”[\[58\]](#)

But where the ideal form has entered, it has grouped and coordinated what from a diversity of parts was to become a unity . . . and on what has thus been compacted to unity, Beauty enthrones itself.[59]

And harmonies unheard in sound create the harmonies we hear and wake the soul to the consciousness of beauty . . . for the measures of our sensible music are not arbitrary but determined by the Principle whose labor is to dominate matter and bring pattern into being.[60]

Some elements of Plotinus's understanding of the nature of beauty go back to Plato. In his *Republic*, Plato had spoken of a sun-like power, "the Good" (*to agathon*), that imparts order and value to the world,[61] and in the *Symposium* Plato had the priestess Diotima describe a process by which the soul, properly guided, can ascend to knowledge of the Form of "Beauty Itself" (*auto to kalon*).[62] So it would appear that Plato regarded all beautiful objects as approximations of and, under the proper circumstances, steps toward knowledge of the Form of Beauty. But the conception of the process in which Beauty as the product of divine love descends as well as returns through a four-level hierarchy of mind, soul, nature, and matter, was Plotinus's contribution.

Conclusion

While Delville's *The School of Plato* reflects a set of doctrines in vogue at the turn of the twentieth century, it also stands within an ancient philosophical tradition. The view of beauty as radiating from a divine source, as the manifestation of intelligible harmonies, as unity imposed on a manifold, and as a means to ascending to a higher realm were all ideas conceived by Plotinus long before they were revived by Marsilio Ficino and embraced by the Theosophists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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Notes

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- [1] "Delville's Autobiography," The Delville Estate, accessed June 20, 2013, <http://www.jeandelville.org/Docs/Autobiog.htm>; see also Lynda Harris, "Painting, Spirituality, and the Esoteric Focus on Jean Delville," *Insight* 42, no. 6 (November-December 2001).
- [2] Delville established the Salon at the Maison d'Art in Brussels as a successor to the Parisian Salons de la Rose-Croix organized by his associate Sâr Joséphin Péladan. Originally intended for the Sorbonne, *The School of Plato* was purchased from the artist by the Musée du Luxembourg and is today in the Musée d'Orsay. For the provenance, see Musée D'Orsay, accessed June 20, 2013, <http://www.musee-orsay.fr/fr/collections/catalogue-des-oeuvres/notice.html>.
- [3] An anonymous reviewer in *The Studio* 14 (June-September 1898) praised the work for its "grace and lofty style" (66-68); Vicomte de Colleville, writing in *La Plume* 10, no. 209-32 (January-December 1898), declared it an "oeuvre superbe de calme, de noblesse, de grandeur et de sereine beauté" (221).
- [4] The website of the Musée d'Orsay, for example, speaks of the work's "strange charm" and "ambiguity." "Jean Delville *Plato's School*," Musée D'Orsay, accessed June 20, 2013, [http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/works-in-focus/painting/commentaire_id/platos-school-3096.html?tx_commentaire_pil\[pilId\]=509&tx_commentaire_pil\[from\]=841&cHash=fbfc2ec8b3](http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/works-in-focus/painting/commentaire_id/platos-school-3096.html?tx_commentaire_pil[pilId]=509&tx_commentaire_pil[from]=841&cHash=fbfc2ec8b3).
- [5] Sébastien Clerbois, "In Search of the Forme-Pensée: The Influence of Theosophy on Belgian Artists, Between Symbolism and the Avant-Garde (1890-1910)," *Nineteenth Century Art Worldwide* 1, no. 2 (Autumn 2002), accessed June 16, 2013, <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/autumn02/in-search-of-the-forme-pensee-the-influence-of-theosophy-on-belgian-artists-between-symbolism-and-the-avant-garde-1890-1910>.
- [6] Brendan Cole, "L'Ecole de Platon de Jean Delville: Amour, beauté et androgynie dans la peinture de fin-de-siècle," *Revue du Louvre* 56, no. 4 (2006): 57-63; and Brendan Cole, "Jean Delville's *La Mission de l'Art*: Hegelian Echoes in fin-de-siècle Idealism," *Religion and the Arts* 11, no. 3 (2007): 330-72.
- [7] On the importance of Ficino's writings for Renaissance art, see M. J. B. Allen, *Plato's Third Eye: Studies in Marsilio Ficino's Metaphysics and Its Sources* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1995), 38-47; and Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanist Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (New York: Harper and Row, 1939), 129-48.
- [8] Clerbois, "Search."
- [9] Cole, "L'Ecole de Platon de Jean Delville," 60.
- [10] Found in the house of T. Simmias Stephanus in Pompeii, the work is generally regarded as a depiction of Plato and his associates. For an alternative interpretation, see G. W. Elderkin, "Two Mosaics Representing the Seven Wise Men," *American Journal of Archaeology* 39, no. 1 (January-March 1935): 92-111.
- [11] Wilhem Geissler, *A Classical Figural View*, 1881. Lithograph on paper. Privately owned.
- [12] Robert Pincus-Witten comments: "[*New Mission*] drowns in high-minded generalities . . . and swollen sentences hollow for all their flourish of names." *Occult Symbolism in France: Joséphin Péladan and the Salons de la Rose-Croix* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1976), 115.
- [13] Jean Delville, *The New Mission of Art, a Study of Idealism in Art*, trans. Francis Colmer (London: Francis Griffiths, 1910), 80.
- [14] *Ibid.*, 17.
- [15] *Ibid.*, 30.
- [16] *Ibid.*, 31.
- [17] *Ibid.*, 109.
- [18] *Ibid.*, 111.
- [19] *Ibid.*, 167.
- [20] *Ibid.*, 174.
- [21] This way of speaking about beauty was not peculiar to Delville: "With Péladan, the spectator hears the call of the beyond, even in front of an imperfect realization. The vibration of forms and colors on the retina resounds all the way to the soul and the spirit is illuminated by a rapid glimpse of absolute beauty that the wiseman [sic] Diotimus [sic] formerly revealed to the guests of the Symposium." M. Giral, "Au Salon de la Rose+Croix," *L'Artiste* 67, no. 13 (March 1897): 202, quoted in Pincus-Witten, *Occult Symbolism*, 196.
- [22] Cole writes: "Delville's book [*New Mission*] is a passionate statement of the view that art is a spiritual activity . . . the revelation of the mystery behind sensual reality. It is not the expression of the subjective whim of the individual artist, but rather the expression of the objective ideal, or

spiritual order of reality, through the skill of the artist." Cole, "Jean Delville's *La Mission de l'Art*," 339.

[23] Delville, *New Mission*, 30.

[24] *Ibid.*, 65.

[25] See the discussion in MaryAnne Stevens and Robert Hoozee, eds., *Impressionism to Symbolism: The Belgian Avant-Garde 1880–1900*, exh. cat. (London: Royal Academy of Arts in association with the Ludion Press, 1994), 96.

[26] See Elizabeth Goldsmith, *Sacred Symbols in Art* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1911), 71; George Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), 22–23; and James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 238.

[27] As noted in Fernando Savater, *La Escuela de Platón* (Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama, 1991), 24; and Clerbois, "[Search](#)."

[28] Wisteria blossoms surround the central figures in Delville's *The Women of Eleusis* (1931), *The School of Silence* (1929), and *Dante Drinking at the Waters of Lethe* (1919).

[29] See Qi Wang and others, "Fruits and Leaflets of Wisteria (*Leguminosae*, *Papilionideae*) from the Miocene of Shandong Province, Eastern China," *International Journal of Plant Science* 167, no. 5 (2006): 1061–74; and Peter Valder, *Wisterias: A Comprehensive Guide* (Portland, OR: Timber Press, 1995). Valder states that visitors to Japanese wisteria gardens write poems to the benevolent spirits they encounter in these displays (76).

[30] Delville, *New Mission*, 92.

[31] In a review of a Musée d'Orsay exhibition, Robert Hughes described *The School of Plato* as "the most obsessively pederastic elocution in all art history" Robert Hughes, "Out of a Grand Ruin, a Great Museum," *Time*, December 8, 1986, 88. In his essay-novel, Fernando Savater similarly describes the scene depicted in *The School of Plato* as "doce efebos desnudos o levemente cubiertos, en posturas diversas que van desde el recogimiento hasta la lascivia" ("twelve naked or lightly covered young men in various postures that range from meditation to lust"). Savater, *La Escuela de Platón*, 24.

[32] For a defense of the view that the *Symposium* offers a critique of pederasty see the discussions in Peter Von Blanckenhagen, "Stage and Actors in Plato's *Symposium*," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 33, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 51–68; and Luc Brisson, "Agathon, Pausanias, and Diotima in Plato's *Symposium: Páiderastia and Philosophia*" in J. H. Leshner, Debra Nails, and Frisbee Sheffield, eds., *Plato's Symposium: Issues in Interpretation and Reception* (Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2006), 229–51.

[33] Delville, *New Mission*, 57.

[34] For contemporary interest in the androgyne, see Clerbois, "[Search](#)"; and Cole, "Jean Delville's *La Mission de l'Art*," 57.

[35] From *De l'Androgyne: Théorie plastique*, quoted in Cole "Jean Delville's *La Mission de l'Art*," 357. For a discussion of Péladan's contributions to Idealist thought in nineteenth-century France, see Sandrine Schiano-Bennis, *La renaissance de l'idéalisme à la fin du XIXe siècle* (Paris: H. Champion, 1999), 455–501.

[36] Helena Blavatsky, "Old Philosophers and Modern Critics," *Lucifer* 10, nos. 59-60 (July-August 1892), 361-73, 449-59. The connection is noted in Stevens and Hoozee, *Impressionism to Symbolism*: "True to the principles of Mme Blavatsky's Theosophical programme, Delville represented Plato, the Greek philosopher with the attitudes of Christ." (96). Clerbois, "[Search](#)," provides an informative overview of the connections between the Theosophical and Symbolist movements. See also Edward Lucie-Smith, *Symbolist Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1972); Michel Draguet, *Splendeurs de l'Idéal: Rops, Khnopff, Delville et leur temps* (Gent: Snoeck-Ducaju and Zoon, 1996); and Harris, "Painting, Spirituality," 12.

[37] Edouard Schuré, *The Great Initiates: A Study of the Secret History of Religions* (West Nyack, New York: St. George Books, 1961), 17.

[38] *Ibid.*, 390-91.

[39] Preface to Ficino's *Pimander* in Brian Copenhaver, ed., *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation, with Notes and Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), xlvi. Copenhaver states that "Ficino's *Pimander* remained the most influential presentation of the Corpus Hermeticum until the nineteenth century." *Ibid.*

[40] See the discussion in Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (1964; repr., London and New York: Routledge, 1999), chap. 21; and Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 1–li.

- [41] It would be a mistake, therefore, to suppose that Delville and Péladan drew their understanding of the androgyne directly from their reading of Plato.
- [42] See Brian J. Gibbons, *Gender in Mystical and Occult Thought: Behmenism and its Development in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), chap. 4.
- [43] See the *Corpus Hermeticum* 1.2-3 and *Asclepius*, sec. 21, in Copenhaver, *Hermetica*.
- [44] Pincus-Witten states that: "Péladan recognized in the androgyne the symbolic manifestation of the *coincidentia oppositorum* as Nicholas of Cusa called it, a divine neutral stasis which is 'the least imperfect definition of god.'" Pincus-Witten, *Occult Symbolism*, 44.
- [45] Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (London: Faber, 1968).
- [46] Marsilio Ficino, *Commentary on the Symposium on Love*, trans. Sears Jayne (Woodstock, CT: Spring Publications, 1985).
- [47] The phrase encircles a medal coined to honor the Paduan philosopher Marco Antonio Passeri. See Wind, *Pagan Mysteries*, 173.
- [48] Delville, *New Mission*, 12.
- [49] *Ibid.*, 30.
- [50] *Ibid.*, 109.
- [51] *Ibid.*, 163-4.
- [52] *Ibid.*, 64.
- [53] *Ibid.*, 16.
- [54] Ficino, *Commentary*, 51.
- [55] *Ibid.*, 46.
- [56] E. H. Gombrich, *Symbolic Images: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance* (1972; repr., London: Phaidon Press, 1975).
- [57] Plotinus, *Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna and B. S. Page, 3rd ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), 1.6.
- [58] *Ibid.*
- [59] *Ibid.*
- [60] *Ibid.*
- [61] Plato, *Republic*, trans. Paul Shorey, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 6.508-9.
- [62] Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Michael Joyce, in Hamilton and Cairns, *Collected Dialogues of Plato*, 210-11.

Illustrations



Fig. 1, Jean Delville, *L'Ecole de Platon* [*The School of Plato*], 1898. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. With the kind permission of Miriam Delville. [\[return to text\]](#)