

Plotinus on the Dual Aphrodite-Venus

Translated by Stephen MacKenna and B.S. Page



Now we have to consider Love, the God. . . .

The existence of such a being is no demand of the ordinary man, merely; it is supported by Theologians and, over and over again, by Plato to whom Eros is child of Aphrodite, minister of beautiful children, inciter of human souls towards the super-nal beauty or quickener of an already existing impulse thither. All this requires philosophical examination. A cardinal passage is that in the *Symposium* where we are told Eros was not a child of Aphrodite but born on the day of Aphrodite's birth, *Penia*, Poverty, being the mother, and *Poros*, Possession, the father.

The matter seems to demand some discussion of Aphrodite, since in any case Eros is described as being either her son or in some association with her. Who then is Aphrodite, and in what sense is Love either her child or born with her or in some way both her child and her birth-fellow?

To us Aphrodite is twofold;

- 1 there is the heavenly Aphrodite, daughter of Ouranos or Heaven: and
- 2 there is the other the daughter of Zeus and Dione, this is the Aphrodite who presides over earthly unions;

The higher was not born of a mother and has no part in marriages for in Heaven there is no marrying.

The Heavenly Aphrodite, daughter of Kronos who is no other than the Intellectual Principle — must be the Soul at its divinest: unmingled as the immediate emanation of the unmingled; remaining ever Above, as neither desirous nor capable of descending to this sphere, never having developed the downward tendency, a divine Hypostasis essentially aloof, so unreservedly an Authentic Being as to have no part with Matter — and therefore mythically “the unmothered” justly called not Celestial Spirit but God, as knowing no admixture, gathered cleanly within itself.

Any Nature springing directly from the Intellectual Principle must be itself also a clean thing: it will derive a resistance of its own from its nearness to the Highest, for all its tendency, no less than its fixity, centres upon its author whose power is certainly sufficient to maintain it Above.

Soul then could never fall from its sphere; it is closer held to the divine Mind than the very sun could hold the light it gives forth to radiate about it, an outpouring from itself held firmly to it, still.

But following upon Kronos — or, if you will, upon Heaven, the father of Kronos — the Soul directs its Act towards him and holds closely to him and in that love brings forth the Eros through whom it continues to look towards him. This Act of the Soul has produced an Hypostasis, a Real-Being; and the mother and this Hypostasis — her offspring, noble Love gaze together upon Divine Mind. Love, thus, is ever intent upon that other loveliness, and exists to be the medium between desire and that object of desire. It is the eye of the desirer; by its power what loves is enabled to see the loved thing. But it is first; before it becomes the vehicle of vision, it is itself filled with the sight; it is first, therefore, and not even in the same order — for desire attains to vision only through the efficacy of Love, while Love, in its own Act, harvests the spectacle of beauty playing immediately above it.¹

Scholia by Thomas Taylor with reference to the Orphic Hymns

From sportive conceptions about the Gods, it is possible for those to energize en-theistically, or according to a divinely inspired energy, who apply themselves to things in a more intellectual manner. Thus, for instance, according to the material conceptions of the multitude, Venus derives her origin from foam; and foam corresponds to seed. Hence, according to them, the pleasure arising from this in coition is Venus. Who, however, is so stupid as not to survey primary and eternal natures, prior to such as are last and corruptible? I will therefore unfold the divine conception respecting Venus.

They say then that the first Venus was produced from twofold causes, the one as that *through which*,² co-operating with her progression, as calling forth the prolific power of the father, and imparting it to the intellectual orders; but Heaven as the maker and cause unfolding the goddess into light, from his own generative abundance. For whence could that which congregates different genera, according to one desire of beauty, receive its subsistence except from the *synochical* power of Heaven? From the foam, therefore, of his own prolific parts thrown into the sea, Heaven produced this Goddess, as Orpheus says. But the second Venus Jupiter produces from his own generative powers, in conjunction with Dione; and this goddess likewise proceeds from foam, after the same manner with the more ancient Venus, as Orpheus evinces. These goddesses therefore differ from each other, according to the causes of their production, their orders and their powers. For she that proceeds from the genitals of Heaven is supermundane, leads upwards to intelligible beauty, is the supplier of an unpolluted life, and separates from generation. But the Venus that proceeds from Dione governs all the coordinations in the celestial world and the earth, binds them to each other, and perfects their generative progressions, through a kindred conjunction. These divinities too are united with each other through a similitude of subsistence: for they both proceed from generative powers; one from that of the connectedly containing power of Heaven, and the other from Jupiter the demiurgus. But the sea signifies an expanded and circumscribed life; its profundity, the universally extended progression of such a life; and its foam, the greatest purity of nature, that

¹ Plotinus: *Ennead* III v, “On Love,” ¶ 2; tr. MacKenna & Page. Full text in our Hellenic and Hellenistic Series.

² This cause is Saturn [Kronos], who according to the fable cut off the genital parts of Heaven. See the *Theogony* of Hesiod.

which is full of prolific light and power, and that which swims upon all life, and is as it were its highest flower.¹

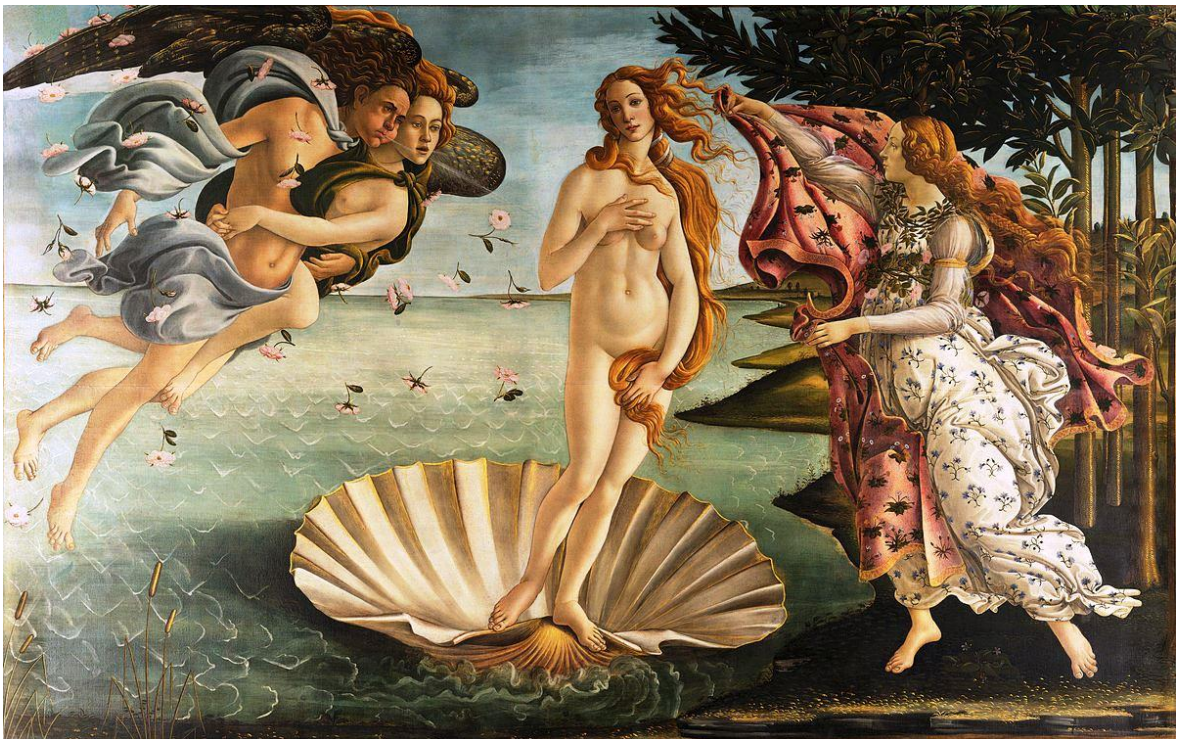
The series of our sovereign mistress Juno, beginning from on high, pervades to the last of *things*; and her allotment in the sublunary region is the air. For air is a symbol of soul, according to which also soul is called a *spirit* (πνευμα); just as *fire* is an image of *intellect*, but *water* of *nature*, by which the world is nourished (της κοσμοτροφου φυσεως), through which all nutriment and increase are produced. But *earth* is the image of *body*, through its gross and material nature. Hence Homer, obscurely signifying this, represents Juno suspended with two anvils under her feet: for the air is allotted two heavy elements beneath itself. For,

ηλιον δ' ακαμαντα βοωπις ποτνια ηρη
πεμψεν ετ' ωκεανοιο ροας.

i.e.,

Fair-eyed venerable Juno
Sent the sun to the streams of the ocean,

— is from the same conception.²



The Birth of Venus (1482–1486) Sandro Botticelli, Florence

¹ Taylor T. (Tr. & Annot.). *Hymns and Initiations*. (Vol. V of “The Thomas Taylor Series”) Frome: The Prometheus Trust, 2003 (2nd ed.). Taylor’s Additional Notes to the Orphic Hymns, pp. 182-83

² *ibid.*, p. 186