

SEMINAR WORKSHOP

ON PLOTINUS' ENNEADS

Translated by Greta Bianchi



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The *Enneads* contain all of Plotinus' writings—fifty-four treatises written between 254 and 269, arranged by his disciple Porphyry into six groups of nine treatises, hence the name *Enneads* (from the Greek *ennea*, meaning nine).

(...) When the Greeks asked themselves about the meaning of man in his highest significance and value, they unanimously answered that it consists in contemplation. (...) In Plotinus, "contemplation" rises to the level of the creative force behind all reality. (...) True and constructive action always structurally presupposes a contemplation that supports and motivates it. In practice, man empties himself; in contemplation, on the other hand, he fills himself with the Absolute. Moreover, modern man does not know the anxieties of "remaining in being" and of "returning": he seeks to reject authority and cultural traditions in various ways, nor does he accept metaphysical supports in which to find peace of mind. His emblematic paradigm is the speed of running, the fleeing from oneself, moving beyond, and the refusal to return or stop.

(from the back cover of Plotinus,
Enneads, Milan, Bompiani, 2014)

Seminar on Plotinus' Enneads

A small working group is proposed for those interested in sharing the reading of selected pages of Plotinus and in engaging with them materially to create a work of art. Interested individuals are invited to experience a research and working method based on slowness, patience, repetition, simplicity, and silence, emphasizing the importance and quality of the creative process and shared time, rather than the final result.

We will be assisted by scholars and experts who will introduce and accompany us in the text. Shared reading is already a form of practice.

This was the invitation issued in San Gimignano in the autumn of 2017, during the exhibition *Autobiografia del rosso*. The first shared working sessions took place on November 16–17 and December 1–2 in Sala Tamagni, with support from Galleria Continua and in collaboration with the Libera Università of San Gimignano. On the worktable: cutters, spare blades, cutting boards, scissors, rulers, set squares, small bowls for scraps, and some copies of the *Enneads*.

The task was to cut the Greek lines of the *Enneads* (from the Bompiani edition with facing text) and then the individual words of each line, folding them in half so that only the Greek typographic characters remained visible. Around the table were about ten people, including from the start Carolina Taddei, Emilia Lodigiani, and Pino Picone, faithful promoters and supporters of the project. Cutting, folding, reading aloud some passages of Plotinus' thought, conversing, reflecting, questioning... Tea breaks. Afternoon lectures to delve into the text and the spirit of the work. The first lectures were:

- Alessandro Linguiti, *An Introduction to the Work of Plotinus*
- Elena Volpato, *In the Text: Reading as Work*
- Selene Zorzi, *The Aesthetic Path as an Ecstatic Path in Plotinus*

From 2018 onward, meetings continued between Maccastorna and La Polveria, with the participation of

dozens of people, and further lectures:

- Pino Picone, *Edramon kai edramon, the Pursuit of Ancient Greek*
- Martino Menghi, *Plotinus and Augustine: Between Renunciation and Love of This World*
- Marco Cavalieri, *Plotinus and His Time*
- Father Brian Lowery, *A Dialogue Between St. Augustine and Plotinus*
- Gregorio Bottonelli and Lucilla Serchi, *The Forms of Being in the Language of the Greeks*
- Alessandro Anderle, *Hacia un saber sobre el alma: Maria Zambrano as Reader of the Fourth Book of the Enneads; Mystical Thought in the Enneads; Mystical Union and the Knowledge of the Soul. Truth between Plotinus and Zambrano*
- Elio Grazioli, *Collective Experiences in Art*
- Elisa Biagini, *Taking Residence*
- Eleonora Zeper, *Plotinus and the East*

Finally, on September 10, 2023, with Giovanna Morelli's lecture *The Art of Conspiratio*, we completed cutting the Greek words of the *Enneads* and concluded our meetings.

On the occasion of the exhibition *Gathering Words* at Galleria Continua in San Gimignano, the thousands of small folded Greek words were laid out on a square surface 110 cm on each side, covering the area of a circle. At the center of the circle, a 17x11 cm rectangle of white scraps, obtained from the edges and empty spaces of Plotinus' pages.

The work is accompanied by a projection of Paolo Carraro's black-and-white photographs of our many hands at work.

"Contemplation has no limit, nor does that which is contemplated."
(*Enneads*, III 8, 5, 30)

Interview with Sabrina Mezzaqui

The reading of *Seminar Workshop on Plotinus' Enneads* presents a working method that Sabrina Mezzaqui has

been developing for years, creating works based on collaborative labor.

We invited Sabrina to share some of her experiences, particularly this artistic method that allows insights into psychosynthesis applied in ways different from those traditionally practiced in centers and the Institute of Psychosynthesis—an applied and displaced psychosynthesis.

Sabrina, your work clearly shows a collective character: group dynamics, collaboration, the sense that “what is done together is worth more than the sum of individual contributions”.

Reading *Reflections on the Table of Plotinus – Seminar Workshop on Plotinus’ Enneads*, I wondered where the idea of group work came from. You wrote: “... The formation of a small working group is proposed...”, an invitation launched in San Gimignano in 2017. How do you involve people? Are these temporary groups that

gather around single artistic activities or something else?

SM – The collective method arises from the gestures that fuel my work: simple, repetitive, time-consuming. Already in the 1990s, to complete works for exhibitions on time, I would receive help: sometimes I called someone, sometimes they would come across my house and find me working and lend a hand. Over time—around 2010—a fairly stable group formed that attended my house in Marzabotto to help me. For example, about ten people participated in copying Simone Weil’s notebooks.

This experience led me to attend the Group Facilitation and Counseling School of Psychosynthesis in Florence. I was in a guiding role without proper tools, both organizational and relational. I launched the experience but also had to contain and lead it, hence the need for training.

In the photos (...) we see your historical group: all women.



SM: Now yes, but in the past there were men too. There is a stable core, though people may change around this now-established group.

What motivates participants? It seems quite singular as you describe it.

SM: That surprises me too. I think there is personal motivation, but also the sharing of simple manual activities enriches everyone.

The activities can be simple, but the content is not: Plotinus' *Enneads* address challenging topics.

SM: Yes, the content we work on is never simple.

Your method somehow recalls psychosynthesis seminars: a common purpose (the work) that is then developed collectively. Working on Plotinus invited the formation of a group to read some pages together and transform them materially. Could this method be applied in psychosynthesis: deconstructing written words, appropriating and transforming them to create something new? Do you think manual practice can serve as a pathway to deep levels of the unconscious or superconscious? Do participants gain particular self-understanding through these activities?

SM: More than understanding, I would speak of practices that resonate in mysterious parts of ourselves, which we can call the unconscious.



EN - The Table of Plotinus, 2017–2024.

A table containing thousands of paper cuttings: the Greek words from the *Enneads*, Bompiani edition.

Courtesy of Galleria Continua

Photo: Ela Bialkowska/Okno Studio and Paolo Carraro

But they work there naturally, like images that arrive directly without passing through the intellect. These manual practices touch levels we cannot access rationally.

We could say that through these activities access to the superconscious is facilitated, through more spontaneous transformative experiences, different from those induced in our psychosynthesis exercises.

SM: Perhaps that is exactly the point. Beyond my often vague intentions, the meaning lies in the experience itself, which is transformative by nature. Experiencing a practice of something. I think that is why people come. Your question helped me clarify: the experience carries its own significance.

This is very characteristic of contemporary art: it is difficult if you only try to understand it intellectually; if we are interested in contemporary art, somehow we hope to have contact with it, to experience it. The same applies to contemporary music and poetry: either something calls you and you have small experiences, or intellectually it does not hold up, although the conceptual aspect of contemporary art is strong.

I also wanted to ask about the experience of doing things together. During or at the end of your work, do you share the experiences lived? Are there traces, diaries?

SM: Usually no. Or rather, there is the completed material result, which is a work: that is already a lot. Sometimes we create a small publication to commemorate the collaboration: for the Table of Plotinus, for example, a limited edition booklet was created and given to participants.

Can your collective working method be replicated?

SM: Laura, know that I am not the only one in Italy working this way. There are other artists creating group artworks. I think, for example, of Chiara Camoni, who works with ceramics and makes beautiful works with others. Contemporary art is often shaped by shared

experiences: since the 1970s, many artists have formed temporary groups for joint projects. Elio Grazioli, in his lecture *Collective Experiences in Art*, mentioned many significant examples.

So not only artistic value, but also the collective value of the project. What you do in your works and that you probably could not do alone.

SM: Exactly. Alone, I would never have done it: it would be boring. Sharing these practices, however, is much greater: they acquire something very interesting.

From 22 October 2025, Plotinus' Table will be on display at the Elpis Foundation in Milan during opening hours (fondazioneelpis.org).

Thank you, Sabrina, for sharing your experience as an artist with us, very interesting.