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## Metaphysical Horizons: on Being Blessed in One's Choice of Reading

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Not long before my seventeenth birthday, as I was about to commence my first year as an undergraduate at Queen's, in Belfast, some eager impulse drove me to seek out and enter the University Bookshop, which was situated quite close to the campus. I had an obscure notion of some of the books I wanted to get hold of: one author on my mental list was Plato. In the previous academic year, my final year at school, I had been fortunate enough to be introduced to Shelley's magnificent elegy for Keats, 'Adonais', and I had been bowled over by the Platonism in the poem, which had inspired some of the most unforgettable imagery I had encountered up to that time:

The One remains, the many change and pass;  
Heaven's light forever shines, earth's shadows fly:  
Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,  
Stains the white radiance of eternity,  
Until death tramples it to fragments ...

(ll. 460-64)

I had an old-fashioned edition, which was generously annotated, and I devoured the notes with that appetite for knowledge which exists in the young. In one of the notes on this specific passage I could read that 'according to the Platonic philosophy everything on earth was but a shadow of which the archetype existed in the heavens'. But the opposition between the One (or the archetype) and the Many (the manifold phenomena which we take to be 'real') is poetically reconfigured by the poet's rich and unexpected extrapolation of that basic opposition into the antithetical images of the 'many-coloured' dome and the 'white radiance' of eternity.

Such, in any case, was the background to my purchase in the bookshop of Plato's *Symposium* (in English translation, of course:

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I never had the privilege of learning Greek). One of its appeals was quite simply that it was quite short; rather shorter than, for example, *The Republic*. I read it closely and avidly, and as I read became, I would say, a devout Platonist. I was later to notice how frequently the word ‘transcendence’ featured in my vocabulary. What I should stress above all is this: that it was unquestionably through my reading of *The Symposium*, however amateur and under-informed that may have been, that I was convincingly introduced to the great possibility that, independently of any Catholic teaching, there was or might be a genuine metaphysical dimension to human experience.

In due course I was led back to the type of literature that seemed to accord most readily with a broadly Platonic view of life: that is, the literature, especially the poetry, of the English Romantics. Shelley is probably the most overtly Platonic of those poets: and I knew pretty well what he was getting at when I came across a quotation from a letter of early November 1818 to his friend Thomas Love Peacock: ‘I always seek in what I see the manifestation of something beyond the present & tangible object’.<sup>1</sup> Wordsworth may at first sight appear to be more committed to ‘the present and tangible object’; for one of the best-known anecdotes relating to his childhood, as recounted by himself to Isabella Fenwick late in life (in 1843), is this: ‘Many times while going to school have I grasped at a wall or tree to recall myself from [an] abyss of idealism to the reality’.<sup>2</sup> But this anecdote yields two large and rather different implications: yes, Wordsworth was conservative and empirical in his urge to hold on to the real; but he was also gifted with an intense Imagination which threatened to dissolve that reality. His near-contemporary, the more radically visionary William Blake, was quite misguided in suggesting that Wordsworth was dominated by Nature at the expense of Imagination or vision. Rather, he sought to reconcile the two in what he termed a ‘spousal union’ (for the more philosophically idealist Blake, an impossible compromise with material reality). And Wordsworth’s ambition to ‘see into the life of things’ (‘Tintern Abbey’, l. 49) is his equivalent to Shelley’s habit of seeking a dimension ‘beyond the present and tangible object’.

As for Wordsworth’s many encounters with the mysterious ‘presence’ he encountered in nature, one of his more explicit statements is found in these famous lines in ‘Tintern Abbey’:

1 *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley: Volume II: Shelley in Italy*, ed. Frederick Jones (Oxford, 1964), p. 47.

2 In most annotated editions of Wordsworth, the Fenwick anecdote is often given, at greater length, as either an introduction or as an annotation to the ‘Ode: Intimations of Immortality’. One reliable source is *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. E. de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire (5 vols., Oxford 1940-49), IV, 463.

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And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts ; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;  
A motion and a spirit, that ...  
... rolls through all things.

(ll. 93-102)

It was once fashionable to point to this as an example of Wordsworth's pantheism, but it is now, perhaps more accurately, seen as 'panvitalism': the acknowledgement that 'One Life' (not necessarily identical with the natural creation) pervades all things. That said, the kind of experience evoked in the passage, while seemingly an experience of the numinous, need not necessarily be seen as transcendent. In any case, Wordsworth repeatedly takes the view that we do have experiences of what is literally the ineffable, in the sense that no words or utterance can describe them. He is close to the tradition of mysticism when at one point in *The Prelude* he speaks of how the 'soul' remembers 'how she felt, but what she felt/Remembers not ...'

There is no doubt that Romanticism arose in large part as a reaction against both the rationalism of the Enlightenment; and the prestige of Newtonian science, which in any case was enlisted in the Enlightenment project. Along with rationalism came a spirit of free enquiry which offered possibilities of self-liberation; but it also encouraged scepticism. Deism replaced Christian belief, which led to a sense of an absentee deity, not one who might be manifest as a vital presence. In a rationally ordered world, there was no need for a God (assuming one wished to retain belief in such a figure) acting supernaturally within the universe. And of course it is against such a background that we should assess the passage quoted earlier from 'Tintern Abbey'.

The activity of science and scientific research was greatly facilitated by seventeenth-century Descartes' dualism whereby the *cogito* (the thinking self) was seen as an entity separate from what Descartes called the *res extensa*, that is, circumambient reality or the cosmos. The establishment of an objective cosmos stimulated the researches undertaken by science and scientific enquiry, the cosmos in its entirety lying available open to human analysis and exploitation. The tragic consequences of such a change were memorably summarised by a Belgian commentator on Romanticism in a work published in 1939: Albert Béguin. He

speaks of how henceforth man was ‘shut up in his own isolation in the face of an objective nature’; thus, we lost contact with ‘the dynamic power which is the vital bond of the cosmos’, and along with that were cut off from ‘both the formative influence on our physical beings and the source of our loftiest inspirations’.<sup>3</sup>

Wordsworth is even more forthright in his rejection of this ‘objective nature’ which entirely leaves out of account that ‘dynamic power’ which he had encountered in his own formative experiences of nature. Again and again in his masterpiece, *The Prelude*, he attempts to describe such personal encounters with the natural world, recurrently admitting that he would need ‘Colours and words that are unknown to man’ (*Prelude*, XI, 310) to do justice to his visionary experience. In a sequence in the final book of *The Prelude*, he first of all pays tribute to those ‘higher minds’ who live ‘in a world of life’ because they are ‘By sensible impressions not enthralled ...’ (ll. 90, 102-03). He saves his clearest, bluntest denunciation of the merely empirical – what he terms ‘the laws of vulgar sense’ – for a passage some forty lines later. He could not be clearer as to the dire consequences if we adopt that sadly limited perspective: for we

substitute a universe of death,  
The falsest of all worlds, in place of that  
Which is divine and true.

(XIII, 139-43)<sup>4</sup>

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In his monumental work, *A Secular Age* (2007), Charles Taylor traces the rise of secularism in the modern world. The first sentence of his opening chapter includes the question he sets out to answer: ‘why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?’<sup>5</sup> Among the usual suspects touched on by Taylor are science (the ‘new philosophy’ for the seventeenth century and beyond), and Enlightenment rationalism. Romanticism questioned much of the Enlightenment project; and in a post-Newtonian culture it took issue with the dominance of

3 *L’Ame Romantique et le Rêve* (2nd ed., 1939; repr. 1967), p. 78. Quotation translated from the original French.

4 I have quoted throughout from the 1805 version of *The Prelude*, but it is worth referring at this point to the slightly fuller and possibly more eloquent version of this passage as it appeared in the 1850 version: ‘substitute a universe of death/For that which moves with light and life informed, /Actual, divine, and true’ (XIV, 160-62).

5 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (2007; The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018), p. 25.

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scientism, later to be identified as positivism when it emerged in the mid-nineteenth century (positivism can be regarded as an extreme form of empiricism : one dictionary definition calls it ‘a philosophical system recognizing only that which can be scientifically verified or which is capable of logical or mathematical proof, and therefore rejecting metaphysics and theism’). In their range of responses Romanticism emphatically reinstated the metaphysical, and a (predominantly non-Christian) sense of the divine. It is thus possible to see the numerous prestigious writers who contributed to the Romantic way of viewing the world as the last great pan-European collective outside Christianity to oppose the secularisation of Western society. As one who taught English Romantic literature for many years, I believe myself to have been truly privileged.

**Christ, Creation and Poetry.** It has been too easy over the centuries to dismiss the Christ from any hold over and love in the wonders and beauty of creation. I have always held that poetry ought to be engaged in this area, questioning ecology and Christian faith. I was introduced to a book in French, in the year 1965, a small book, that transformed my instinctive love of this earth into a new faith; that book was called *La messe sur le monde (Mass on the World)*, written by a Jesuit priest called Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, whose work in the early twenty-first century has become central to Christian belief and Christian action.

– John F. Deane, *The Outlaw Christ*, 2020, (Dublin: Columba Books) p. 12.