

THOMAS TAYLOR  
EDITED BY KATHLEEN RAINE  
GEORGE MILLS

# Thomas Taylor, the Platonist

*Selected Writings*



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*BOLLINGEN SERIES LXXXVIII*





*THOMAS TAYLOR THE PLATONIST*

SELECTED WRITINGS

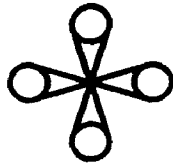
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*EDITED, WITH INTRODUCTIONS, BY*

KATHLEEN RAINE

*AND*

GEORGE MILLS HARPER



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TO

THE SACRED

MAJESTY

OF

TRUTH.



## PREFACE

This book is an offspring of the Yeats International Summer School. When the editors met for the first time at Sligo, Ireland, in the summer of 1965, they discovered that both had intended to edit a selection of the writings of Thomas Taylor the Platonist (1758-1835). Bollingen Foundation had agreed to publish such a work, and Kathleen Raine's essay and a proposed list of contents were already in their hands. As a result of an extended discussion leading to some modifications, the editors decided to collaborate. In the selections included here, Taylor's spelling has in the main been preserved. Some minor changes have been made: misprints have been corrected, the typography has been modernized, several footnotes have been omitted, and here and there punctuation has been altered when that seemed to lend clarity. Other editorial devices—introductory headnotes for each selection; supplementary footnotes and translations of Latin poems, in brackets—have been clearly differentiated from Taylor's own work.

For permission to reproduce illustrations used in this edition, we are indebted to The British Museum; The Royal Society of Arts; Josiah Wedgwood, Ltd.; Arlington Court, North Devon; The National Gallery of Ottawa; The Historical Society of Pennsylvania; Dr. Frances Yates; Mr. Geoffrey Watkins. We are indebted also to many people who have helped with information about Taylor and with editorial assistance, especially to Professor Franklin P. Johnson, of Osceola, Missouri; the staff at the Library of the Missouri Historical Society, in St. Louis; the Concord Public Library, in Massachusetts; the University of Florida Library, in Gainesville; Professor Louise S. Boas; Mr. Geoffrey Watkins. Finally, we would like to express our appreciation of the invaluable editorial assistance of Mrs. Janet Morrell Glover and Mrs. George Mills Harper.

*London and Gainesville*  
*January, 1968*

KATHLEEN RAINE  
GEORGE MILLS HARPER



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*THOMAS TAYLOR THE PLATONIST*  
SELECTED WRITINGS



## THOMAS TAYLOR IN ENGLAND

The wish to see some of the writings and translations of Thomas Taylor reprinted came to me while I was reading the source books from which William Blake learned traditional wisdom. Foster Damon in 1924<sup>1</sup> first surmised Blake's indebtedness to Taylor, and no serious Blake scholar has since denied it. But with few exceptions<sup>2</sup> the importance of that debt has been minimized; and as with Blake, so with the other Romantic poets.

John Livingston Lowes, in his delightful book *The Road to Xanadu*, could not altogether ignore Coleridge's debt to Taylor, whose name appears in the poet's often quoted self-portrait: "Metaphysics, & Poetry, & 'Facts of mind'—(i.e. Accounts of all the strange phantasms that ever possessed your philosophy-dreamers from Tauth [Thoth], the Egyptian to Taylor, the English Pagan,) are my darling Studies."<sup>3</sup> Yet to Lowes this Neoplatonism, admittedly "one of Coleridge's inveterate preoccupations," was "one of the strangest tendencies which marked the tumultuous exit of the century";<sup>4</sup> one of the many curious beads upon Coleridge's string, and not—as is nearer the truth—the thread upon which the beads are strung.

As with Coleridge so with Shelley, whose Platonism has always been known, yet disregarded in the reading of his poems.<sup>5</sup> The nineteenth century has praised, and the twentieth condemned as impressionistic description, the subtle and exact symbolism of the imagery in Shelley's best poems, clear to those (among them

<sup>1</sup> *William Blake, His Philosophy and Symbols* (London, 1924).

<sup>2</sup> See especially Milton O. Percival, *William Blake's Circle of Destiny* (New York, 1938) and George Mills Harper, *The Neoplatonism of William Blake* (Chapel Hill and Oxford, 1961).

<sup>3</sup> Letter to Thelwall, Nov. 19, 1796, in *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. L. Griggs (Oxford and New York, 1956), p. 260. Lowes cited this, with slight modifications, in his *Road to Xanadu* (Boston, 1927), p. 231.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 232.

<sup>5</sup> See, however, as a reversal of this tendency, Neville Rogers, *Shelley at Work: a Critical Inquiry* (Oxford, 1956).

## *Thomas Taylor the Platonist*

Yeats) qualified to understand its language.<sup>6</sup> As for Yeats himself, since it has not been possible to deny, it has been tacitly agreed to forgive in so great a poet whatever can loosely be called his "occultism," a word made to embrace all esoteric doctrine from Plotinus to MacGregor Mathers.<sup>7</sup> But the truth cannot be hidden: the "darling studies" of the poets are just those their academic commentators would like to disregard. Dante studied, besides the scholastic theologians, Dionysius the Areopagite; Spenser venerated Plato's intellectual beauty; Milton learned from that same Thoth the Egyptian<sup>8</sup> and read Plato not for his dialectical method but to unfold

*What Worlds, or what vast Regions hold  
The immortal mind that hath forsook  
Her mansion in this fleshly nook. . . .*

The divergence between those "two cultures" whose frontiers may be variously drawn goes back to Greece; and the ultimate distinction lies in what is thought to be the nature of the primary reality. All normal traditional cultures (Hindu, Buddhist, Judaeo-Christian, or Islamic, besides the Orphic and Pythagorean tradition which lies behind Platonism) assume the primacy of mind, and see nature as a system of appearances, or images, in which a metaphysical order is reflected. The first beginnings of the opposite view (which at the present time dominates the world) are to be found in certain pre-Socratic Greek philosophers; this view has since been associated with Aristotle, in whom the naturalistic bias is strong; while the traditional metaphysics has continued under the name of Platonism. The Platonic mainstream descends through Plotinus, and after him through the Neoplatonists of the early Christian centuries; there is a strong Platonic element in St. Augustine, and the Pseudo-Dionysius is a Plato-

<sup>6</sup> The late C. S. Lewis was another.

<sup>7</sup> F.A.C. Wilson's two books, *W. B. Yeats and Tradition* (London, 1958) and *Yeats's Iconography* (London, 1960) have done much to remedy this neglect.

<sup>8</sup> The "thrice great Hermes" of *Il Penseroso*. Both Coleridge and Milton are referring to the *Hermetica*.

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nist whose celestial hierarchies are the old gods and daemons thinly Christianized. The Hermetic tradition, which survived within Christendom as prophetic of Christ until the seventeenth century, when Isaac Casaubon established the date of the *Hermetica* as A.D. and not B.C., must also be considered as Platonic; and so, in a lesser degree, with alchemy and even with the Jewish Cabala, which embodies strong Platonic elements. These are the most important branches of a current of thought which has flowed unbroken through European civilization, sometimes within Christendom, at other times outside it.

At the time of the Renaissance, Humanism and the mentality which has since developed quantitative science entered, by a reversal in the premises of civilization itself, upon the phase of dominance which has continued to the present time. Spokesmen of the now dominant culture speak of an "advance" from "ignorance" and magic, to "knowledge" and material science; yet in terms of philosophy, religion, and the arts the same event can only be seen in opposite terms, as a decline from knowledge to ignorance. Since each gnosis has its own terms of reference, each to the other must to a certain degree appear "meaningless"—a word whose application, by materialists, in the fields of philosophy, religion, and the arts grows ever more confident as the positivist mentality extends its power. Philosophy has, in post-Renaissance England, been dominated by the Humanist and positivist mentality which stems from Bacon; its premises, in the century of Newton and Locke, seemed self-evident. Religious thought was affected by this climate of opinion, and iconoclastic Protestantism was itself one of the expressions of the reversal of values which took place between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Dr. Frances Yates in her book on Giordano Bruno<sup>9</sup> has studied the causes and crosscurrents of this reversal, and reminds us that what mankind chooses to study and to regard as important is a matter of the will; premises which to one age seem self-evident

<sup>9</sup> *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London, 1964)

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to another become incomprehensible. Whatever the advantages of the new direction in the field of mechanical sciences, its accompanying repudiation of images, both visual and mental ("idolatry" to the new mentality, or merely meaningless), deprived religion and the arts of their normal language and cut away the foundations of their thought. Poetry Shelley defines as the language of the imagination; a language not of definitions which measure, but of images which evoke, knowledge; meaningless to the positivist, this language is, in relation to "facts of mind," exact.

The passage in the *Republic* in which Plato banishes the poets is often invoked (disregarding the reasons he gives, which relate to the excessive naturalism of certain artists and poets of the time) to show Plato as the enemy of the poets. But in fact Plato is the philosopher of the arts, the Platonic philosophy is the necessary basis of all imaginative art. Therefore it is that the Platonic tradition has lived on as the learning of the poets, like a secret language. Together with the philosophy are associated those gods, myths, symbolic figures, and stories which not only Plato himself but Plotinus and all the later Platonic philosophers employ. The Platonic artist and poet philosophize; the Platonic philosopher mythologizes.

The Platonic tradition may be likened to an underground river that from time to time sends up a spring; wherever its waters flow, the soul is reborn, and with it the conception of intellectual form, the beautiful, and true art. Yeats wrote: "The mystical life is the centre of all that I do and all that I think and all that I write. . . . I have always considered myself a voice of what I believe to be a greater renaissance—the revolt of the soul against the intellect—now beginning in the world."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Letter to John O'Leary, July 1892, in *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade (London, 1954). Yeats uses the word "intellect" to mean the dianoetic power, as in the modern phrase "an intellectual" in the sense of a discursive reasoner or a scientist. The word "reason" was used by Milton and revived by Coleridge (who quarrels with Taylor's preference for the word "intellect") to mean *voûs*: but in English, whatever the word used to describe this faculty, so little understood except by the poets, it

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The Irish Renaissance, like every renaissance in Europe, was accompanied by a revival of Platonism and the Hermetic tradition, the European branch of the learning of the soul or *mens*. What Yeats here calls mysticism is not piety but a great body of knowledge with its own terms of discourse, including those magical images by which he sought to discover and express a kind of knowledge which only the symbol can mediate, since it is of a mental kind and is immeasurable. Our own time has been enriched by tributaries from Indian metaphysics, from the philosophy and art of China and Japan; all the mythologies of the world lie open to us; yet there can never be anything essentially new, or essentially other than is contained in our native tradition of Platonism as it has lived on both apart from, and within, Christianity. Plotinus and Porphyry, Proclus and Pythagoras, with Plato himself, have at all times been the "singing masters of the soul." In England it is to the poets rather than to the philosophers (Berkeley is the notable exception) that we must look for the continuity of this tradition. Milton, Spenser, Shelley, Yeats, Blake, and Coleridge are poets of (in the Platonic sense of the word) intellect: they are more, not less, "intellectual" in content than such a poet as Donne, whose intricate thought is at the level of *dianoetic* reason, and whose ingenious imagery is almost without intellectuality or metaphysical content. The understanding of these poets requires (as with Raphael, Botticelli, and Michelangelo) not only a higher intelligence, but also a much greater learning than that of the superficially more complex "metaphysical" poets. Beauty as such has, within this philosophy, an intellectual content; experience of the beautiful is a mode of knowledge, of *gnosis*; is indeed the supreme intellectual experience, though "meaningless" within the context of quantitative thought. The concept of the beautiful invariably accompanies the

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soon becomes degraded into the lower sense; even Blake's words "vision" and "imagination" a Nation of Shopkeepers will sooner or later use in the sense of business acumen. Yeats, however, uses the word "intellect" in Taylor's sense in many contexts, as in the line "Monuments of unageing intellect."

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traditional metaphysics of which Platonism is the European expression.

It was Thomas Taylor who took upon himself, at the close of the eighteenth century, the task of placing before his contemporaries the canonical Platonic writings, in which are embodied the essential learning of the imaginative tradition. The texts Taylor placed in the hands of the Romantic poets were the same that Ficino<sup>11</sup> had made accessible to Botticelli, Raphael, and Michelangelo;<sup>12</sup> Coleridge and Shelley alone among the Romantic poets habitually read their Greek authors in the original; Taylor's translations were the texts, his interpretations the guide. Flaxman and probably Blake were close friends of Taylor during the formative years of all three; Shelley's friend Thomas Love Peacock knew him later in life. Keats, though not a scholar, may at a remove have caught the enthusiasm of his Greek polytheism from Taylor;<sup>13</sup> and the gleam from Plotinus that illuminates Wordsworth's most famous Ode (and other of his poems) certainly comes through Taylor. Samuel Palmer, F. O. Finch, George Richmond, and Edward Calvert affirmed, in the name by which they called themselves, "the Shoreham Ancients,"<sup>14</sup> an intention to revive, in their art, a traditional vision, restored to their generation by the rediscovery not only of the arts, but of the philosophy of ancient Greece.

Samuel Palmer, in a letter written to his sister-in-law Elizabeth Linnell from Pompeii, July 8, 1838, recalls evenings spent in reading what can only have been Thomas Taylor's translation of the works of Plato; declaring himself a Platonist in no uncertain terms: ". . . Blessed also will be the mind that is imbued with Plato—would that mine were so!—the very antithesis of the literary impudence, dandyism and materialism with which most of our modern periodicals tend imperceptibly to imbue

<sup>11</sup> See Plates 4 and 5.

<sup>12</sup> See Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (London, 1958).

<sup>13</sup> See Bernard Blackstone, *The Consecrated Urn* (London, 1959), *passim*.

<sup>14</sup> Shoreham in Kent; the home of Samuel Palmer for seven years during the 1820's and 1830's.

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the mind. If I am ever to open a book again & not to 'live a fool & die a brute,' may I open once more the divine leaves of Plato in some happy Grove St. evening with you and dear Anny by my fireside—but it is too good to be hoped for in this world except with Euripides in his cave; too deep to hear the rumbling of her rubbish carts. . . ."<sup>15</sup>

The Platonic mainstream has gathered tributaries in every age. Volumes of Taylor crossed the Atlantic, there to fertilize a flowering of American culture.<sup>16</sup> Emerson, Bronson Alcott, and their friends dreaming of an America that should approach to Plato's never-to-be-realized Republic, read the same books that a generation earlier had inspired Blake's prophecies of an England whose national life should reflect, like Plato's city, the order of eternal perfection. And in this century, when "the sceptre of intelligence had passed to Dublin"<sup>17</sup> we find that the same works were fertilizing the thought of AE and the poetry of Yeats.

In the eighteen-eighties the Theosophical Society became interested in Taylor; G.R.S. Mead and other members and associates of the Society edited and reissued a number of his works. During the period between Taylor's death and this rediscovery there was nothing in England comparable with the cult of Taylor in America which stemmed from the Transcendentalists and Thomas M. Johnson's *The Platonist*; but there is one curious link between Taylor's own revival of the ancient gods and the theosophical and magical societies of the end of the nineteenth century: Mrs. Mary Anne Atwood's *A Suggestive Inquiry into the Hermetic Mystery*, "with a dissertation on the more celebrated of the Alchemical Philosophers, being an attempt toward the recovery of the ancient experiment of nature." This rare book (reprinted in 1920 by the theosophical publisher J. M. Watkins) is

<sup>15</sup> See *Samuel Palmer's Italian Honeymoon*, by Edward Malin (Oxford, 1968), Grove St, Paddington Green, was Palmer's home.

<sup>16</sup> See below, George Mills Harper's introductory essay.

<sup>17</sup> A telegram sent to George Moore by Yeats on the occasion of the first performance of the latter's *The Countess Cathleen*; quoted in Moore's *Ave* (London, 1911), p 72

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a work of quixotic learning compiled from long extracts from the Hermetica, Dionysius, Aquinas, Boehme, Saint-Martin, Henry More, Paracelsus, the Alchemists, and Thomas Taylor. Mary Anne Atwood was the daughter of Thomas South, a Hampshire country gentleman with a fine library of classical, philosophical, and metaphysical works, and a taste for all the new sciences of magnetism, hypnotism, mesmerism, spiritism, and the like. His daughter wrote and published her *Suggestive Enquiry* at the age of twenty-three, and then was persuaded by her father to withdraw a book which he regarded as a betrayal of a secret tradition. Mrs. Atwood, born in 1817, lived on to 1910; in the 1880's she presented the fine library which had been her father's to the Theosophical Society, whose President at that time was A. P. Sinnett. She seems to have hoped that the Society would develop into a school upon Pythagorean lines in which students would pass through an ordered course of spiritual instruction. Later she lost interest in the Society and her library passed into other hands.

The interest of the Theosophical Society, and even more so the Hermetic Society of the Golden Dawn, in traditional *gnosis* was less learned and more practical than Taylor's own, though Taylor himself had started a fire in the Freemason's Hall while attempting to demonstrate a perpetual flame. It was in the context of the theosophical movement that Yeats and AE came to know Taylor, and they no doubt read his work in the reprints and new editions promoted by the Society. If Taylor's polytheism was philosophic, Yeats's was above all magical.

Yet the Platonic ground was never abandoned; AE in a letter compares the Irish revival to that of the New England Transcendentalists; nor is it only in poetry and the arts that the resemblance holds, but, in the original sense of the word, in politics also, again and again fertilized by Platonic thought. Wordsworth's remark to Emerson, quoted in George Mills Harper's essay (below, p. 54), illustrates the deep-rooted unwillingness of the English to attempt to relate, like the Transcendentalists or the makers of Eire (to use the words of AE) "the politics of time" to "the politics of eternity"; yet never to do so may in the long run destroy a nation.

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Stephen MacKenna gave to the Irish literary movement his fine translation of Plotinus, but Taylor's works also were in Yeats's library, as they had been on the shelves of Coleridge and Shelley. There were reprints of a few of these, both in England and in America, at the turn of the nineteenth century, following the revival of theosophical studies.<sup>18</sup> Taylor did not write for the many, but the few who have valued him have been the intellectual aristocracy of their time; AE called him "The Uncrowned King."<sup>19</sup>

Taylor was more than a man of learning. G.R.S. Mead (whose own interpretation of Orphism<sup>20</sup> is but an expansion of Taylor's preface to the Hymns) called him "more than a scholar, he was a philosopher in the Platonic sense of the word."<sup>21</sup> His object was "to diffuse the salutary light of genuine philosophy." For Taylor, erudition was not an end but a means. His learning was inspired by a zealous wish to combat the mentality of his age—the same mechanistic materialism denounced by Blake, Coleridge, and Shelley—and to bring about, by making known the literature of the Platonic tradition, long neglected (and to the increasing number of otherwise literate persons unable to read Greek, inaccessible), a return to traditional wisdom. Taylor neither wished nor attempted to isolate the teachings of Plato from the continuous tradition of "Platonism," which can no more be arrested at any historical moment than can Christianity or Buddhism<sup>22</sup> be abstracted from the continuous vitality of their

<sup>18</sup> The Theosophist G R S Mead, closely associated with Helena Blavatsky, and the publisher J M Watkins were the moving spirits and agents of this work. No doubt AE (George Russell) and Yeats first heard of Taylor through their association with the Theosophical Society. See *Letters from AE to Yeats* (Dublin, 1936).

<sup>19</sup> This I was told by Mrs Constance Sitwell, friend of AE, Yeats, and others of their circle.

<sup>20</sup> *Orpheus* (London, 1896).

<sup>21</sup> *Select Works of Plotinus* (London, 1895), p. ix.

<sup>22</sup> "The Buddha Himself was always at pains to repudiate, as a monstrous heresy, any suggestion that he had come to teach anything new in the matter of doctrine." Marco Pallis, *The Way and the Mountain* (London, 1960), p. 180.

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history. Platonism, as Taylor saw it, is an informing principle rather than a formulation, transmitted through a "golden chain of philosophers": a doctrine received by Socrates and Plato from the Orphic and Pythagorean past, and transmitted to the future, to reemerge, enriched, in the school of Alexandria. We find it again in the Florentine "School of Athens," fertilizing in the Renaissance an art as authentically Platonic as any in Greece, and so in the works of Spenser, Shelley, Yeats, and whatever works of poetry, music or architecture have received and transmitted its current.

"And as to the philosophy, by whose assistance these mysteries are developed, it is coeval with the universe itself; and however its continuity may be broken by opposing systems, it will make its appearance at different periods of time, as long as the sun himself shall continue to illuminate the world. It has, indeed, and may hereafter, be violently assaulted by delusive opinions; but the opposition will be just as imbecil as that of the waves of the sea against a temple built on a rock, which majestically pours them back, 'Broken and vanquish'd foaming to the main.'"<sup>23</sup>

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Already during Taylor's boyhood the Greek Revival was transforming taste in the visual arts. Perhaps the most important single work in inspiring the passion for things Greek which was to possess a generation was Stuart and Revett's *Antiquities of Athens*,<sup>1</sup> published in four volumes between 1762 and 1816; Taylor's *Pausanias* (1794) is illustrated by several of Stuart's engravings that were taken from that work (see Plate 6). Already the collectors were at work, bringing into the country gems and intaglios, vases, sculptures, sarcophagi. Yet one has the impression that Taylor was not himself much interested in the visual arts; he makes no mention of them, and this omission is striking when

<sup>23</sup> *A Dissertation on the Eleusian and Bacchic Mysteries* (London, 1790), below, p. 345

<sup>1</sup> *The Antiquities of Athens*, "measured and delineated by James Stuart F.R.S. and F.S.A. and Nicholas Revett, Painters and Architects" (London, 1762-1816).

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we consider the immense excitement such things were causing at the time. He never cites any work of visual art as a source of iconographic evidence or confirmation of myth or symbol. When he came to have his portrait painted, although he had known Romney, it was by the fashionable Sir Thomas Lawrence<sup>2</sup> (see Plate 1), and of the maker of the bust of Taylor in later life (Plate 2) nothing is known except the self-evident fact that it is not by "Flaxman the statuary," in whose house Taylor had, at some time in the 1780's, given his twelve lectures on Platonic philosophy. Yet Flaxman had been one of the moving spirits at the very heart of the Greek revival in the visual arts, and it was to Flaxman and his circle that Taylor's message was first delivered.

In an autobiographical sketch (see below, p. 105) Taylor tells that as a schoolboy at St. Paul's School (famed for its excellence in the classics and in Hebrew) he was already noted for his interest in the philosophic aspect of the classics. In the same work he says that he was led to his Platonic studies through his interest in mathematics. But Taylor moved in that small circle which was, then as now, the "world" of the artists and men of letters of his time, and it was among these that the Greek revival was a living reality.

His lectures at Flaxman's house were, he said, attended by "Sir William Fordyce, the Hon. Mrs. Damer, Mrs. Cosway, Mr. Romney and others"; among those "others" William Blake must have been one; for he was at that time an intimate friend of Flaxman. In that world the same names constantly reappear in different contexts, as lives cross and recross. So we find that William Pars (1742-1782), whose brother Henry Pars's drawing-school Blake attended as a boy, went to Greece with Nicholas Revett to work on *Ionian Antiquities*.<sup>3</sup> James Basire (Plate 7), to whom Blake was later apprenticed, was one of the engravers of Stuart's drawings and Blake himself another (Plate 8). At the time Blake was with

<sup>2</sup> Son-in-law of Taylor's patron William Meredith.

<sup>3</sup> "Published by the Society of Dilettanti," R. Chandler, N. Revett, and W. Pars (2 vols.; London, 1769, 1794).

### Thomas Taylor the Platonist

Basire, the work in hand included Bryant's *Mythology*,<sup>4</sup> which played so great a part in turning the thoughts of a generation toward myth and symbol (Plate 12). Flaxman was already working for Wedgwood and Bentley by the time he was twenty (Plate 11), and it was he who interested Josiah Wedgwood in the Barberini (afterward the Portland) Vase (Plate 9), when in 1784 he wrote a letter in which he urged his employer to come to London to "see Sir Wm. Hamilton's Vase; it is the finest production of Art brought to England."<sup>5</sup> Blake (who also worked for the Wedgwoods from time to time as an engraver) made the engravings of the Portland Vase (Plate 10) for Erasmus Darwin's *The Botanic Garden* (1789-1791). Darwin, an intimate friend of the Wedgwoods, believed the emblems on the vase to be representations of the Eleusinian Mysteries; and Taylor's *Dissertation* on those Mysteries appeared within the same year. In which of those fertile young minds did this idea (never before suggested in accounts of the vase) originate? In that *Island in the Moon* (1784-1785) in which Blake has represented Taylor (Sipsop the Pythagorean?) and Flaxman (Etruscan Column?) was the vase one of the topics of those wild, irrational discussions? And the Eleusinian Mysteries? Was Fuseli (Blake's friend) ever among those present, and did he propound the views of the ancient Greeks given by the Abbé Winckelmann, whose work on ancient Greek painting and sculpture<sup>6</sup> he had translated into English as early as 1765? In that work is pictured a race of ancient Greeks whose physical beauty and intellectual and moral qualities were as far from the moderns as perfection is from imperfection. Had Taylor read this work? His friend and patron George Cumberland certainly had, and his own *Thoughts on Outline* (1796), illustrated by drawings some of which were engraved by another friend, William Blake (see Plate 13), is the product of a similar enthusiasm for the ancient world.

<sup>4</sup> Jacob Bryant, *A New System of Ancient Mythology* (3 vols.; London, 1774).

<sup>5</sup> Feb. 5, 1784. Quoted in Wolf Mankowitz, *The Portland Vase and the Wedgwood Copies* (London, 1952).

<sup>6</sup> Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks*, tr. Henry Fuseli (London, 1765).

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So ideas are, within a generation, exchanged and transmitted; the written records of such interchanges are but the unconsumed residue of a once-living organism. Thus when a generation later Palmer, Calvert, and their friends called themselves "the Shoreham Ancients" they were perpetuating an idea long current among those in revolt against "progressive" science, of an ancient tradition, lost and recovered, from which true art is at all times drawn; a veneration for some symbolic antiquity is (as in Plato himself) the constant accompaniment of such thought; as against science, whose truths are experimental, and whose future is a perpetual invalidation of its past. Yeats and the Irish Renaissance were again to turn (as all poets must) to the riches of the past; for renewals in the arts are never iconoclastic, they come about through re-orientation and return to the source.

Taylor was therefore in the heart of the excitement of his generation. The revolutionary Mary Wollstonecraft was Taylor's lodger, Blake's friend Johnson the bookseller's translator and reader, and mother of Shelley's wife. If later in life Taylor worked himself into scholarly seclusion, this was by no means his character as a young man. One has the impression that Taylor as he grew older moved less among such wild friends; and the books of his later years are correspondingly less enthusiastic and imaginative. His immense scholarly labors have since been superseded, and the works for which he will most certainly be remembered are his early expositions of myth and symbol, undertaken not only for the love of learning but above all in order to change the world and to help to create that New Age of which Blake too was a prophet, in those days before the French Revolution when everything seemed possible.

But if we catch only glimpses of Taylor's relations with the artists and firebrands of his own generation we have from his own account a clear picture of his relations with Floyer Sydenham (1710-1787), who between 1759 and 1780 had translated nine of Plato's fifty-five dialogues.<sup>7</sup> Of these the *Io*, the *Greater*

<sup>7</sup> Taylor gets fifty-five by counting the *Republic* as ten and *Laws* as twelve.

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*Hippias*, the *Lesser Hippias*, and the *Banquet* were published in 1767, when Taylor was ten years old; the *First and Second Alcibiades* in 1773; and in 1779 the *Philebus*. The *Meno* and the *Rivals* were published after Sydenham's death, in 1804; all these (revised and edited) are included in Taylor's own *Works of Plato*, and there can be no doubt that the idea of translating the whole of Plato grew out of his acquaintance with Sydenham (in whose translations he may first have read Plato), whose self-appointed task he completed. In the Introduction to his *Plato*<sup>8</sup> Taylor gives an account of his acquaintance with the old and ailing Floyer Sydenham in which we see the young Taylor, warm in his sympathy for Sydenham's private troubles, but already assured of his own superiority as scholar and philosopher (he was twenty-nine when Sydenham died) and prepared rather to teach and to proselytize than to learn. Already, as in his earliest written works, we see Taylor fired with enthusiasm for the Neoplatonists:

“. . . this excellent though unfortunate scholar died before he had made that proficiency in the philosophy of Plato which might have been reasonably expected from so fair a beginning. I personally knew him only in the decline of life, when his mental powers were not only considerably impaired by age, but greatly injured by calamity. His life had been very stormy: his circumstances, for many years preceding his death, were indigent; his patrons were by no means liberal; and his real friends were neither numerous nor affluent. He began the study of Plato, as he himself informed me, when he had considerably passed the meridian of life, and with most unfortunate prejudices against his best disciples, which I attempted to remove during my acquaintance with him, and partly succeeded in the attempt; but infirmity and death prevented its completion. Under such circumstances it was not to be expected that he would fathom the profundity of Plato's conceptions, and arrive at the summit of philosophic attainments. I saw, however, that his talents and his natural dispositions were such as might have ranked him among the best of Plato's interpreters, if he had not yielded to the pressure of

<sup>8</sup> I, cvi-cvii.

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calamity, if he had not nourished such baneful prejudices, and if he had not neglected philosophy in the early part of his life."

Taylor when he was young no doubt hoped, naively we may say (as did Blake, that other prophet of a New Age), for an easy victory. Those who have seen some truth can never imagine others cannot see what to them is plain: "Truth can never be told so as to be understood, and not be believ'd,"<sup>9</sup> Blake wrote; and Taylor dedicated his Proclus's *Commentaries* "To the Sacred Majesty of Truth" (see p. v). In 1787, in a style reminiscent of Blake's, and perhaps caught from him in the enthusiastic days of their early acquaintance, while Blake was proclaiming Swedenborg's "A new heaven is begun,"<sup>10</sup> Taylor was summoning the men of the New Age to the standard of Plotinus:

"Impetuous ignorance is thundering at the bulwarks of philosophy, and her sacred retreats are in danger of being demolished, through our feeble resistance. . . . The foe is indeed numerous, but, at the same time, feeble: and the weapons of truth, in the hands of vigorous union, descend with irresistible force, and are fatal wherever they fall."<sup>11</sup>

What young man would ever set out upon such a task without the belief that truth is great and will prevail? But experience taught Taylor, as it taught Blake, that the victories of truth are not so easily or obviously won; for in 1805 he wrote more soberly of "that sublime theology which was first obscurely promulgated by Orpheus, Pythagoras and Plato, and was afterwards perspicuously unfolded by their legitimate disciples; a theology which, however it may be involved in oblivion in *barbarous*, and derided in *impious* ages, will again flourish for very extended periods, through all the infinite revolutions of time."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in *Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London, 1932), p. 152.

<sup>10</sup> *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Keynes, Plate 3, p. 149.

<sup>11</sup> Plotinus, *Concerning the Beautiful* (London, 1787), below, p. 160 n.

<sup>12</sup> *Miscellanies in Prose and Verse* (London, 1805), p. viii. This statement is based upon the tradition of the Great Year, as described in Plato's *Laws*. The same doctrine is taught in India. The revolution of the Great Year is an ever-recurring theme in European poetry—Virgil, Shelley, and Yeats come to mind.

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Why, then, is the name of Thomas Taylor so seldom found in works of literary history and criticism? Let it be said at once that if Taylor had written better English his translations might have been more widely read. Yeats called his style atrocious, and Coleridge wrote that Taylor translated Proclus from "difficult Greek into incomprehensible English." MacKenna, who praised him as a pioneer, objected to his translations for reasons "mainly literary."<sup>13</sup> Taylor was first a mathematician, then a metaphysician; he used words for the communication of precise but abstruse meanings, often lying outside the genius of the English language, the English being, in Yeats's words, "babes in philosophy" and possessing the poorest philosophical literature in Europe. He does not, like MacKenna, make Plotinus a delight to read; he even—which might seem no less difficult—makes Apuleius unreadable; but he does compel attention to the subtleties of ideas and in this he is often superior to MacKenna. "The gold that was in them the Platonist thought deserved the trouble of toilsome digging."<sup>14</sup> If he never makes the way smooth, he does not approximate or blur, or in any other way allow us to evade the exacting demands of philosophy: "in perusing the works of these great men, the reader must not expect to find the sublimest truths explained in a familiar manner, and adapted, like many modern publications, to the meanest of capacities."<sup>15</sup>

Yet he writes with intellectual passion, and passion is infectious. Of the theology of the ancients he reminds us that "its intrinsic excellence and truth will extend its existence beyond the wreck of modern systems, and the desolation of ages."<sup>16</sup> Taylor understood that the most excellent cannot be obtained without effort, and wisdom is not to be had at the cheap rate our age demands. The best that can be said of Taylor's style is that it does not allow us to think that we have understood the philosophy because we have admired a work as literature.

<sup>13</sup> *Plotinus: The Enneads*, tr. Stephen MacKenna (London, 1917-1930), Introduction.

<sup>14</sup> W.E.A. Axon, *Thomas Taylor the Platonist*, below, p. 132.

<sup>15</sup> *Commentaries of Proclus* (1792), I, xxiv.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, II, i.

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There is good reason for not reading Plato and Plotinus in Taylor's translations now that better versions exist, but why in his own day was he not thanked for his labors? "His efforts were unfavourably—almost contemptuously—received," according to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (11th edition). In the answer to this question lies the secret of the quality of greatness that sets Taylor above men of mere learning.

Men who, like Taylor, become learned not for the sake of erudition but of truth must always be an embarrassment and a reproach to the merely erudite. Taylor was calling in question received values of his time; his Platonism was too obviously subversive. History was repeating itself: as scholastic theologians and humanists alike would have none of Ficino, Pico, and Bruno, so did the pedants of Oxford and Edinburgh unite against the English Pagan. He was not, like Bruno, burned, nor like Shelley driven into exile; but he suffered continual attack and ridicule for his defense of that philosophy which has again and again been the inspiration of sublime art and anathema to dull minds. He was, besides, disturbing the sleep of the Universities. As the son of a nonconformist father, Oxford and Cambridge had been barred to him, and because of a rash, romantic (but apparently very happy) early marriage he did not go up, as his father had intended, to Aberdeen. It is true that in 1802 he was invited to Oxford, was entertained at New College, and worked at the Bodleian; but the clerical hosts of the first translator of Plato into English, whose books "were produced without regard to, and hopeless of, profit,"<sup>1</sup> cannot have forgotten that they themselves, with every advantage of security and leisure, had not done what he had done. Taylor, in poverty and obscurity, carried to completion the translation of Plato begun by Floyer Sydenham, who died at seventy-seven years of age, in a debtor's prison. B. G. Niebuhr, the German classical scholar, thanked God, a propos Taylor, that he was not born a poor scholar in England. In our own century the premature death of MacKenna was, also, hastened by the hardship of poverty. Oxford, for whatever reasons,

<sup>1</sup> Axon, below, p. 132.

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assaulted Taylor with "black melancholy," and he made his escape as soon as he possibly could.<sup>2</sup>

Nor was the hostility to Taylor merely that of all entrenched authorities toward those who invade "their" field of study; what was worse, he presented "the classics" in an entirely new, and revolutionary, light. Whatever Taylor's faults may have been it was not for these but for his excellencies that he was castigated. Possessed of a genius for metaphysical thought in an uncomprehending age, the nearer he approached those premises which are, in terms of the philosophy he expounded, most fundamental (and therefore most subversive) the more angrily he was derided.

The *Edinburgh Review*<sup>3</sup> devoted twenty-four angry pages to

<sup>2</sup> A letter from Taylor, published in an article by Edward Peacock in *The Antiquary* (July 1888), pp. 1-5, describes this visit. The letter (see Plate 21) is dated June 20, 1802, and tells that the Dean of Christ Church, "as he received me in a very flattering manner, said he was well acquainted with my works, and professed himself a great admirer of Plato and Aristotle; and he told me yesterday that he would subscribe to my Plato. I have also received great civilities from Dr. Smith, the head of Trinity College, Dr. Winstanley, Professor of History in Corpus [Christi] College; and particularly from the Professors in New College, where I reside. I have, likewise, found the manuscripts which I expected to find in the Bodleian Library, to which I have the liberty of access after the usual hours. . . .

"I shall perhaps surprise you by saying that Oxford, independent of the Bodleian Library, has no charms for me. For though I have received the greatest civilities from the black-coated gentlemen, yet they appear to me to be in general haughty and superficial, and they flaunt through the streets with that self-importance, as if wisdom and wit were inseparable from the robe. And as to the numerous Colleges and Halls in Oxford, these, though they may be considered as so many palaces, are to me so gloomy from their Gothic structure, that they give a melancholy aspect to the town and its vicinity. Even the trees, in which these proud edifices at a distance seem to be embosomed, appear to me to lose all their verdure as the barbaric towers and spires tower above them. In short everything is infected with monkish gloom; and I am not yet reconciled to my apartments, which are very much in the style of some of the rooms in Mrs Radcliffe's castles. If it were not, therefore, that I consider my residence here for a short time as necessary to the accomplishment of an object to which I shall always consider everything else as secondary, whatever and wherever be my situation in life, I should leave Oxford immediately, so black is the melancholy with which it assaults me."

<sup>3</sup> Vol. 14 (April 1809), pp. 187-211.

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an attack on Taylor's *Plato*, but the reviewer turns aside for a moment to describe the state of classical learning in England. In spite of the immense amount of education devoted to "the classics," England had contributed very little of value to classical learning: "the preposterous share of time, labour and esteem . . . bestowed upon the comparatively unimportant business of prosody" (regarded as a cardinal point in English education) was the cause of the rarity, even among the most celebrated scholars in England, of "anything like a familiar acquaintance with the orators, the philosophers, and the historians of Greece."

It must also be remembered that the academic world at that time consisted of Protestant clergymen, to whom the Platonic theology must have been extremely distasteful. Taylor's defense of the polytheism of the philosophers whose mythological discourse suggested "idolatry," so detestable to the Protestant mentality, must have seemed as outrageous as Shelley's "atheism" did a generation later to the Master and Fellows of University College. Edward Peacock<sup>4</sup> wrote that Taylor, "though saturated with Greek learning was a self-taught man, and therefore never acquired the kind of scholarship which is useful for schoolmasters and has a commercial value at British universities. . . . It has therefore been the fashion during the last half-century for prigs, who find it by no means easy to stumble through a chapter in the 'Acts,' to jeer at him as a man who translated Aristotle and Plato without knowing Greek grammar. . . . The same young men will assure us with edifying calmness that the Pauline epistles present no difficulties to them. . . ." Peacock also says that Taylor was "a mortal foe to Greek accents, treating them with a righteous scorn. . . . This opinion laid him open to the charge of avoiding accents from ignorance. This was certainly not the true reason why he hated them. It was, however, too telling a point for popular writers to neglect."

A display of critical apparatus is no proof of intelligence; and Taylor had no illusions about the "verbal critics" who "look with great disgust on a translation at the bottom of which no variety

<sup>4</sup> *The Antiquary*, XVIII (July 1888), 1-3

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of different readings, no critical acumen of verbal emendation presents itself to view." Such notes are of no use to an English reader who does not know Greek; the pedants who set so much store by this "egregious trifling" have, as he truly says, "become so mentally imbecile, as to mistake *words* for *things*."<sup>6</sup> It is very much easier, besides, to count commas and breathings than to experience a poem, or to understand an idea. Taken all in all, Taylor was not a man likely to be loved by the academic profession.

René Guénon, who as a metaphysician of the perennial philosophy has in this century occupied a position not unlike that of Taylor, writes of a danger always present in academic studies: "As soon as erudition becomes a 'speciality' it tends to be regarded as an end in itself, instead of a means to an end, as it normally should be. It is this invasion of the intellectual field by erudition with its special methods which constitutes a genuine danger . . . because the habits which grow with the use of such methods narrow the intellectual horizon and cause irremediable harm to those who submit to them."<sup>6</sup>

Taylor criticized Fabricius in similar terms. Fabricius had blamed Proclus for "uniting to the doctrine of Plato a thousand dogmata, foreign to his philosophy"; and Taylor comments: "When men mistake their abilities, they always act absurdly, and often dangerously. As a laborious and accurate critic on philological matters, Fabricius merits the highest commendation such attainments can deserve; but when he leaves the beaten road in which nature designed him to walk, and attempts the trackless paths of philosophy, he perpetually stumbles, and often falls on the ground. The wings of philology, like those of the swallow, were never destined for a lofty flight;—it must be the eagle wing of genius, which can alone soar to the sun of philosophy."<sup>7</sup>

G.R.S. Mead, in his foreword to the 1895 edition of Taylor's

<sup>6</sup> *The Phaedrus of Plato* (London, 1792), Introduction.

<sup>6</sup> *Introduction to the Study of Hindu Doctrine*, tr. Marco Pallis (London, 1945), p. 19.

<sup>7</sup> *Commentaries of Proclus* (London, 1792), I, 38.

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*Select Works of Plotinus*, wrote: "It is true that the perfected scholarship of our own times demands a higher standard of translation than Taylor presents; but what was true of his critics then is true of his critics today: though they may know more Greek, he knew more Plato. . . . Taylor was more than a scholar, he was a philosopher in the Platonic sense of the word." Taylor's knowledge was, besides, of a kind that his world (and still, to a great extent, our own) did not want. It is not merely that the mechanistic scientific phase of Western culture is not interested in traditional metaphysics; there is a positive wish to not know, to shut out a body of knowledgē incompatible with existing values, and with the ends to which our civilization as a whole is directed. There is at all times a kind of criticism that takes up trifling points for attack to disguise the real motives of hostility. It is always possible to pick upon some minor fault and to use this as a pretext for avoiding the only important question, which is: does a work succeed in fulfilling its real purpose, and is that purpose a worthy one?

The violence with which Taylor has been over and over again consigned to oblivion is reminiscent of the positive force which, according to modern psychologists, is necessary in order to forget what we do not want to remember. De Quincey<sup>8</sup> wrote in 1846 that Taylor was "far more distinguished [than Taylor of Norwich] for absurdity and is now equally illustrious for obscurity." An examination of the *Edinburgh Review*<sup>9</sup> article that states that "the hand of oblivion has passed over him" reveals the attack on Taylor as, in reality, a violent rejection of the Neoplatonists, and of all those aspects of Plato himself which are at variance with the Scottish school of philosophy. Taylor incurs the indignation of the Lowland Scots "by exhibiting Plato as the mortal foe both of reason, and of taste" (those enthroned values of the Enlightenment): "He has not translated Plato; he has travestied him, in the most cruel and abominable manner. He has not elucidated, but covered him over with impenetrable

<sup>8</sup> *Works* (Edinburgh, 1860), Vol. 13, p. 60.

<sup>9</sup> Vol. 14 (April 1809), pp. 187ff.

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darkness." How so? By adding, by way of notes, Proclus's commentaries: "In the character of commentator, Mr. Taylor has scarcely done anything, or indeed professed to do anything, but to fasten upon Plato the reveries of Proclus, and of the other philosophers of the Alexandrian school." How can any reader follow Plotinus without "disgust"? Here the ghost of Knox rises to denounce witchcraft and superstition: Plotinus and his school "were, almost without exception, impostors and mountebanks, *THAUMATURGI par métier.*"

The names of the current pillars of reason and taste—Jacob Bryant, Cicero, Horace, Brucker, and Gibbon—are invoked as witnesses against the "wild, and mystical, and obscure" writings of Proclus and Plotinus, their extravagant fancies, absurd reveries, strange allusions, forced etymologies; "the solemn trifling and impenetrable obscurity of those sages, who professed to reveal the system of the universe." Did not Plato himself, in the *Timaeus*, speak the same language? Not at all—the *Timaeus* and the *Parmenides*, far from expressing Plato's thought, were written with the intention of exposing the follies of those "ridiculous quibblers" whose names they bear! Another Edinburgh publication—*Blackwood's Magazine*<sup>10</sup>—abused Taylor as unscholarly: he is "an ass, in the first place; secondly he knows nothing of the religion of which he is so great a fool as to profess himself a votary. And thirdly he knows less than nothing of the language about which he is continually writing. . . ."

But the *Monthly Magazine*<sup>11</sup> used another stick to beat him—he was too accurate: "The philosophy of Aristotle, wrapped in the deepest mysteries by the Platonicians, has been relieved from its long night of darkness by the luminous interpretation of Dr. Gillies," it begins; "Mr. Thomas Taylor, however, indignant that the philosophy of Aristotle should be made intelligible to common understandings, and convinced, with Mr. Burke, that obscurity is a principal source of the sublime, has written a virulent '*Answer*' to Dr. Gillies, in which the unfaithfulness of that excel-

<sup>10</sup> Vol. 17 (June 1825), p. 737.

<sup>11</sup> Vol. 18, No 124 (January 1805), p. 579.

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lent Grecian's translation of the Ethics is inferred from the want of that creeping verbal accuracy which distinguishes his own."

Let us give Dr. Gillies a hearing: "The nature and scope of my literary labours are so totally different from those of Mr. Taylor, that it is not easy to understand how our roads could cross. . . . Utility, common and vulgar utility, above which that sublime author proudly soars was my great, or rather sole aim."<sup>12</sup> Such complacency is only to be found in a man who knows that public opinion is with him; what Englishman at the turn of the nineteenth century could resist that blessed word "utility"?

Taylor's views, not his Greek, are the real motives of attack; he held the opinion—a usual one now—that "Aristotle did not essentially differ from Plato on the doctrine of ideas."<sup>13</sup> Blakey, in his *History of the Philosophy of Mind*, fairly describes his position: "Mr. Taylor strenuously contends that Aristotle was not only the pupil, but in the strictest sense a holder of the Platonic dogmas, contrary to what he considered the ignorant and rash deductions of some modern writers, who, never having fully comprehended either master or scholar, have fancied the Stagyrite the founder of an opposing sect. . . ."<sup>14</sup>

Taylor's denial of an *essential* antagonism between the Platonic and Aristotelian schools turns, again, upon what we consider "essential" in the two philosophies. "My object in translating the whole of Aristotle's works," wrote Taylor, "was not to comment copiously on all that he has written, but to bring to light all the sublime and most important dogmas of his philosophy . . . and, also, to prove that these dogmas are perfectly conformable to those of Plato. . . . For if it shall appear that I have faithfully unfolded these dogmas from genuine sources, I shall neither envy those who have illustrated Aristotle better in less particulars, nor regard the criticism of those who may censure me in failing where it would have been easy to excel."<sup>15</sup> Great as are the dif-

<sup>12</sup> John Gillies, *Aristotle's Ethics and Politics . . . and a new analysis of his speculative works* (London, 1797), Supplement, p. xlvi.

<sup>13</sup> *An Answer to Dr. Gillies's Supplement* (London, 1804), p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> (London, 1848), IV, 67.

<sup>15</sup> *The History of Animals . . .* (London, 1809), p. xviii.

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ferences between Plato and Aristotle in method and in formulation, it may be said that there is no essential difference in their metaphysical doctrine; or, to put it more carefully, it is possible for the metaphysician to find as many essential points of resemblance as it is for the logician or the moralist to find points of difference. Taylor found in Aristotle (as did Aquinas) an exponent of traditional metaphysics; and Aristotle himself would scarcely have shared the anti-metaphysical thought of those who claim him as the father of modern empiricism. But Aristotle's name had become associated with a whole structure of rationalist thought, from which had stemmed the philosophy of Bacon, Newton, Locke, and the experimentalists. The last thing such Aristotelians wanted was to have Aristotle made, after all, into a Platonist.

In reply to those who would object that Taylor fails to appreciate precisely what was original and new in "the Greek miracle," we may quote from Guénon once more, who saw in those originalities the germ of the development which all but divorced dialectic method from spirituality in the West. "Any new tendencies in the Graeco-Roman world are really almost entirely of a restricting and limiting nature," he writes. Their originality was of a purely dialectical order; indeed their dialectical subtlety amounts to no more than (as in many of Plato's dialogues) "an apparent desire to examine each question interminably, under all its aspects and in minutest detail, in order to arrive finally at a rather insignificant conclusion."<sup>16</sup> If Taylor found a residue of Platonic truth in Aristotle, Guénon discerned the seeds of Aristotelian pedantry in Plato. Wherever we may choose to discover its origin, the divergence itself is a real one, between an ancient metaphysical view of reality, and a new naturalist bias which now has, for the time being, prevailed. Guénon has described the present phase of civilization as "The Reign of Quantity"—a reversal of the due order of things, an abnormal exaltation of quantitative above qualitative value. Taylor, like Guénon, saw this reversal in terms of those gyres that Plato describes in *The Laws*:

<sup>16</sup> Guénon, *Hindu Doctrine*, p. 40.

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“. . . the circle of time, as it produces continual variations, at length reverses the objects of pursuit; and hence, that which was once deservedly first, becomes at length, by a degraded revolution, the last in the general esteem.”<sup>17</sup> It is not abnormal that Proclus and Plato should be, to the average reader, obscure; nor that a minority only should understand the Mysteries; but it is abnormal that those who have knowledge should be objects of the contempt of the ignorant, that ignorance should with unchallenged assurance pass judgment upon knowledge.

The *Edinburgh Review* and the rest knew that they could flatter the vanity of “the modern reader” by making their appeal to his own prejudices (the same thing is done in the critical journals of every generation), and we may quote that glass of fashion Horace Walpole,<sup>18</sup> who, with less caution than the men of Edinburgh, says what he (and they) really think of Plato: “Taylor’s book was shown to me this summer by one of those wisecracks that call themselves learned men, and who told me it was tremendous. I was neither alarmed nor curious: yet, on your Ladyship’s notice, I borrowed the ‘Monthly Review,’ and find that the world’s future religion is to be founded on a blundered translation of an almost unintelligible commentator on Plato.” (So much for Proclus.) “I guess, however, that the religion this new apostle recommends is, not belief in the pantheon of Pagan divinities, but the creed of the philosophers, who really did not believe in their idols, but whose metaphysics were frequently as absurd; and yet this half-witted Taylor prefers them to Bacon and Locke, who were almost the first philosophers who introduced common sense into their writings, and were as clear as Plato was unintelligible—because he did not understand himself.”

After this complacent revelation of the mentality of an unphilosophic age, Walpole (whose worldly wisdom was unquestionable) foretold that “Taylor will have no success; not because

<sup>17</sup> *Commentaries of Proclus*, I, cvi.

<sup>18</sup> Letter to the Countess of Ossory, November 26, 1789, in *Letters of Horace Walpole* (Oxford, 1903-1905), XIV, 238.

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nonsense is not suited to making Proselytes—witness the Methodists, Moravians, Baron Swedenborg, and Louthenburg<sup>19</sup> the painter; but it should not be learned nonsense, which only the *literati* think they understand after long study.”

These adverse judgments reveal just as well as praise wherein the originality of Taylor's classicism lies, and its revolutionary and subversive character, as it seemed to the Enlightenment; and as it seemed no less to the Romantic poets who read Taylor with a delight equal to the indignation of his (and their) opponents. One may recall the divisions over Chatterton and *Ossian*: were the real motives in these cases also different from those alleged? Would poor Chatterton have been accused of “fraud” if he had written smooth couplets instead of rough ballads, on Roman themes instead of “Gothic”? And was Dr. Johnson's moral indignation really aroused against Macpherson for taking too great license with his folklore sources (the “improvement” of Shakespeare, Chaucer, and the classics was freely interpreted by the Augustans), or was it because in the free rhythmic prose-poetry of *Ossian* and its romantic and novel themes he saw a threat to established literary values? It was from *Ossian* that Blake developed his highly original long free lines; and no “exposure” by

<sup>19</sup> Philip de Louthenburg, an Alsatian by birth, painter and scene designer at Drury Lane, where he worked for Garrick. He was the inventor of the “transformation scene,” first used in 1781-82. He also invented the “eidophusicon,” a model theater in Pall Mall, where by means of lighting effects and moving scenery spectators were entertained by “Fallen angels raising the Palace of Pandemonium,” “Eruption of Vesuvius,” the Armada, the Fire of London, etc.

Walpole, however, is referring to another of his activities, the faith-healing practiced by de Louthenburg and his wife at their house in Hammersmith Terrace. On “healing days” as many as three thousand people sometimes assembled, selling tickets of admission for as much as five guineas. The crowds caused annoyance to neighbors, who at last put a stop to the practice. In 1789 Cagliostro made friends with de Louthenburg and defrauded him of a large sum of money. Rumor reported an almost successful projection of the Philosophers' Stone, “only spoiled by the crucible breaking”—an episode reminiscent of Taylor's experiments on a Perpetual Flame. (See pp. 114, 129.)

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Johnson could stem the tide of the "Gothic" taste, or save his world.

The Greek revival was as hateful to the Augustans as the Gothic. Walpole (agreeing in this with the Transcendentalists) couples Taylor with Swedenborg; and the *Edinburgh Review* writes that "the ravings of Jacob Behmen are not a more abominable mis-interpretation of the New Testament than the commentaries of Proclus and Company are of the writings of Plato."<sup>20</sup> Coleridge and Blake turned to precisely these as the prophets of the New Age. Not all classicism is Augustan, as Edgar Wind said in lecturing on Classicism at Cambridge, and Taylor's was an integral part of the rise of the soul against mechanism, empiricism, and rationalism, the dynamic impulse of the Romantic movement.

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Let us now turn to the Romantics in whom the Neoplatonists inspired an enthusiasm equal to the chagrin they aroused in the Augustans. Coleridge, by way of contrast with the *Edinburgh Review*, Walpole, and the rest, wrote that "the most beautiful and orderly development of this philosophy, which endeavors to explain all things by an analysis of Consciousness, and builds up a world in the mind out of materials furnished by the mind itself is to be found in the Platonic Theology of Proclus."<sup>1</sup>

He even went so far as to make Proclus the touchstone of a capacity for metaphysics. "Let a prepared Scholar" (so he wrote in the margin of his copy of Taylor's *Proclus*) "attentively peruse Chapter VI, Book I (concerning the essence of Mathematical Genera and Species) . . . if possible in the original Greek: and the result in his mind will inform him, whether Nature has intended him for metaphysical Research.—If I have any conception

<sup>20</sup> April 1809, p. 193.

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Lady Beaumont, January 21, 1810, in *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed Griggs, III, 279. Coleridge is speaking specifically of the philosophy of Jacob Boehme

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of Sublimity as arising from a majestic vision of tranquil Truth, it will be found in this Chapter."<sup>2</sup> Those who wish to know what Coleridge considered the necessary qualifications of a "prepared Scholar" will find them set forth in the same place. Those qualifications are possessed by very few. What to Coleridge was "beautiful and orderly" was to Walpole "nonsense" and to the *Edinburgh Review* "impenetrable darkness." When we read that philosophers are unintelligible, may we not ask, "to whom?"

Taylor raises the question in relation to one of those "Cambridge Platonists" as overrated in the academic world as Taylor has been underrated. "I find my indignation roused by the following words of Dr. Cudworth, in his *Intellectual System*, p. 306. 'Proclus (says he) had some peculiar fancies and whims of his own, and was indeed a confounder of the Platonic theology, and a mingler of much unintelligible stuff with it.' I must confess, (and I am neither afraid, nor ashamed of the declaration,) that I never found any thing in Proclus, but what by patient thought, accompanied by a sincere and vehement thirst after truth, I have been able to fathom. Had Dr. Cudworth been endued with these requisites, he would doubtless have had equal success; but without them, the sublimest truths will certainly appear to be *unintelligible stuff*."<sup>3</sup>

One of the subterfuges used in the name of scholarship for dismissing the Alexandrian school is to appeal to a kind of archaeological snobbery by which the responsibility of making a judgment is evaded by making "early" a synonym for "good" and "authentic" and "late" for "bad" or "spurious": because Plotinus is "late" and Proclus even later, they must be inferior, as philosophers, to Plato and Aristotle. But fidelity to tradition is not to be equated with a reverence for antiquity, as such; human thought has at different periods approached, or receded from, authentic knowledge. Neither antiquity nor novelty can increase or diminish inherent truth, or inherent beauty. If our approach is genu-

<sup>2</sup> Appendix B in *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, Vol. 1 (New York and London, 1957), Notes, p. 455.

<sup>3</sup> *Commentaries of Proclus*, I, 36.

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inely metaphysical, it will be obvious that the period from the second to the fourth centuries A.D. was a golden age in philosophy, including the last fine flower of the pre-Christian, and the first of the Christian era. In St. Augustine, as in Plotinus, many currents united to reemerge with gathered power. Taylor thought that no one for a thousand years had understood the Neoplatonists; and in a "Gothic" flight of fancy he likens their neglected philosophy to "a lamp shining on some venerable statue amidst dark and solitary ruins. And yet," he goes on "though these philosophers have been treated with such undeserved contempt by a pigmy race of critics and sophists, will any man undertake to prove, that since the age of Plato there has lived a philosopher of so much profundity as Plotinus, so learned as Porphyry, so skilled in the deepest mysteries of theology as Jamblichus, so acute as Syrianus, or who has unfolded such treasures of wisdom as Proclus?" But the ignorance of the Lowland Scots and the complacency of the English are not easily charmed away by divine philosophy.

Taylor's road was a hard and solitary one; he attacked on two fronts at once, religion on the one hand, mechanistic science on the other. To the empiricist, men like Taylor must appear as intransigent; but the certainty of those who hold, with Plotinus, that "there is nothing higher than the truth," is different in kind from the fanaticism of opinion. Opinion may be changed, hypothesis discarded, but we cannot un-know. There is unanimity among those who have traveled farthest. This claim would be understood even at the present time if it were made, for example, by a physicist; but that "facts of mind" may also transcend personal opinion has been forgotten. Taylor's impatience with his critics, and, in general, with the religious and philosophic thought of his day, was that of a metaphysician of genius in an environment entirely unable to perceive "facts of mind" which to him were clear. The frequent unashamed allusions to the "murkiness" of the Platonists illustrates the point.

Whatever may be said against Taylor, or against the philoso-

\* *An Answer to Dr. Gillies's Supplement*, pp. 87-88.

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phers whose doctrines he attempted to restore, they cannot be called vague; Yeats wrote to his father<sup>5</sup> of "a religious system more or less logically worked out" that was to give him a new form of poetry. "One goes on year after year gradually getting the disorder of one's mind in order, and this is the real impulse to create." Taylor's friend Edward Peacock understood that "Taylor was a metaphysician, not a poet . . . he was an ardent enthusiast for that form of thought which we will call Neoplatonism, but which was in fact much more nearly like the beliefs of the men of the Italian Renaissance than any form of Platonic thought."<sup>6</sup> But this historical distinction is one that to a metaphysician does not exist; since the final appeal is to ideas whose truth is intrinsic and unaffected by history.

Robert Blakey, in his *History of the Philosophy of Mind*,<sup>7</sup> gives a generous account of Taylor, who was, as he realized ". . . justly entitled to honourable mention in any history of mental speculation. He spent above forty years in an exclusive devotion to what he considered the first and most august philosophy; and is the only modern, since the days of the Emperor Julian, or the age immediately succeeding, who has penetrated to its remotest sources, and effected its perfect mastership." It is not possible that Blakey had forgotten the Florentine school, and his praise of Taylor is high indeed.

"Mr. Taylor conceives that all which the moderns possess of moral science consists of nothing else than small and broken, though splendid, fragments of the great Platonic union of the universe. He employed himself not in studying the truth by their inspection, but in elaborate re-constructions of the whole as a concatenated and perfect system, according to its pristine form and splendour. He therefore, with a contempt which appears narrow and somewhat arrogant, rejects acceptance of, and declines all attention to, the dark and partial systems of modern writers;

<sup>5</sup> Letter to J. B. Yeats, June 14, 1917, in *Letters*, ed. Allan Wade, p. 627

<sup>6</sup> *The Antiquary*, XVIII (July 1888), 2.

<sup>7</sup> IV, 66-68.

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not, however, out of deficiency of powers for judging of them, but from a conceived previous fulness and redundancy of loftier and better knowledge."

But although Blakey understood the grounds of Taylor's rejection of humanist and experimentalist notions, he adds a very fair criticism: "Amongst other peculiarities of this extraordinary man, there is one which is deeply to be lamented. The Platonic Philosophy being strictly and essentially theological—in which, accordingly, all other principles and knowledge become themselves religionised, so to speak—Mr. Taylor adopts it in its fullest extent, with all the old profoundly significant and representative mythology attached to it. . . . This has led him to throw a gorgeous halo around the Grecian system; and to look at pure and undefiled truth through a dim and hazy atmosphere."

To give the title of "pure and undefiled truth" to Christianity in the debased forms in which it existed in England at the turn of the eighteenth century would be absurd. Taylor was the son of a nonconformist family of mean culture, and his early struggles to free himself from this background no doubt helped to embitter his contempt for Methodists and Presbyterians. He knew Christianity in a form devoid of intellectuality; but his conviction that "genuine philosophy and genuine religion . . . always amicably and inseparably accompany each other" was equally evident to Augustine and Aquinas, Eckhart and Scotus. Taylor valued Dionysius the Areopagite, and his rare Florentine copy of the *Celestial Hierarchies* is now in the possession of Mr. Geoffrey Watkins, son of the theosophical publisher who reissued several of Taylor's works. Nevertheless the same incompatibility between Christianity and the Hermetic tradition had been brought to light at the time of the Italian Renaissance, whose best minds had found Christianity, as Taylor did, intellectually stifling.

Like Blake and Shelley, Taylor was bound to reject Christianity as he found it; but, unlike these, his anti-Christianity took its tone of intellectual contempt, though not its philosophical substance, from Gibbon (whose influence on Taylor's sentence structure was

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even more regrettable): "For in our times, the voice of wisdom is no longer heard in the silence of sacred solitude; but *folly*, usurping her place, has filled every quarter with the deafening clamours of despicable sectaries, while the brutal hand of commerce has blinded the liberal eye of divine contemplation."<sup>8</sup> Like Gibbon, Taylor admired the Aristotelian virtues of high-mindedness and magnanimity, seeing in Christian "meekness" the mentality of the populace—the rising lower-middle classes: "meekness suppresses the effervescence of desire, restrains the restless spirit of enquiry, and calms the impetuosity of genius. Hence though we are no longer surprised with the daring exploits, and prodigious talents which distinguished the ancient world, yet we can boast a greater uniformity of character, a more general equality in moderate attainments, and a more interested spirit. In consequence of this universal mediocrity, our capacity for commerce is increased, and our abilities enlarged, for accumulating wealth by groveling pursuits."<sup>9</sup>

Taylor was as far from sharing Gibbon's skeptical Humanism as he was "the delirious visions of Swedenborg" or "the unconnected and impious effusions of Methodistical rant." Southey's jibe at Taylor as "a pagan Methodist" was certainly unjust; his anti-Christianity may be emotionally colored, but his Platonism is that of a true philosopher.

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If Taylor scorned Christianity as a vulgarization of the Perennial Philosophy, still more absolute was his rejection of the scientific philosophy of Bacon, Newton, and Locke. There can be little doubt that the first to define the grounds of Blake's well-known rejection of these philosophers was Taylor:

"As little as the eye of a fly at the bottom of the largest of the Egyptian pyramids sees of the whole of that pyramid, compared

<sup>8</sup> *Commentaries of Proclus*, II, 317. The Platonic Philosopher of Isaac Disraeli's novel *Vaurien* (1797) expresses his contempt for the religious beliefs of "the moderns" in a manner whose style and substance are as close to the original as satire can well be. See Axon's account below, p. 130.

<sup>9</sup> *Commentaries of Proclus*, II, 317-18.

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with what is seen of it by the eye of a man, so little does the greatest experimentalist see of the whole of things, compared with what Plato and Aristotle saw of it, through scientific reasoning founded on self-evident principles.”<sup>1</sup>

The *Edinburgh Review* felt itself on safe ground when it accused Taylor of having “not so much as a tincture of modern science,” and Coleridge himself called him a “blind bigot” for his objections to Bacon, adding, “the modern chemists talk of Bacon,” as if the approval of a Humphry Davy could decide a point that is essentially metaphysical. Taylor is not concerned to discuss the utility of modern science, but purely and simply its metaphysical grounds. “The doctrine of causes was the object of ancient investigation: the enumeration of effects is the busy employment of the moderns.”<sup>2</sup> By a strange irony of fate, Taylor earned his living for many years as Secretary to the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (Plates 23, 24), at the very center of the promotion of agriculture, industrial, engineering, and scientific projects. There are letters from Taylor about the planting of larches near Kendal; the building of locks by the Stratford-upon-Avon Navigation Company, by Arkwright; on the cultivation of turnips; he is said to have been an excellent Secretary. If he rejected modern science it was not in ignorance of its uses. Blake understood what Coleridge apparently did not (and he must surely have talked the matter out with Taylor during the years of their acquaintance), that “Bacon’s philosophy has ruined England.”

“The mischief began at the end of the seventeenth century when men became passive before a mechanized nature,” wrote Yeats, “that lasted to our own day with the exception of a brief period between Smart’s *Song of David* and the death of Byron, wherein imprisoned man beat upon the door.”<sup>3</sup> It was Blake above all who “beat upon the wall,” as Yeats elsewhere writes; but fine as Blake’s reasoning powers certainly were, it is likely that it was

<sup>1</sup> *The Creed of the Platonic Philosopher* (London, 1805), below, p. 441 n.

<sup>2</sup> *Commentaries of Proclus*, II, 318.

<sup>3</sup> *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, p. xxvii. Cf. Blake, *Jerusalem*, ed. Keynes, Plate 91, p. 739: “. . . all his pyramids were grains / Of sand, & his pillars dust on the fly’s wing. . . .”

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Taylor whose metaphysical exactness of thought prepared Blake's position for him. Blake uses the curious but expressive term "labyrinths" (those spectral mazes into which his Tharmas pursues ever-vanishing Enion, and the male and mental principle of *A Mental Traveller* pursues the feminine material principle) in a sense comprehensible only in the sense the word is given by Taylor in such passages as the following comment on Bacon:

"The conceptions of the experimental philosopher who expects to find truth in the labyrinths of matter, are not much more elevated than those of the vulgar; for he is ignorant that truth is the most splendid of all things; that she is the constant companion of Divinity, and proceeds together with him through the universe, that the shining traces of her feet are conspicuous only in form; and that in the dark windings of matter she left nothing but a most obscure and fleeting resemblance of herself. This delusive phantom, however, the man of modern science ardently explores, unconscious that he is running in fog and darkness and infinite perplexity, and that he is hastening after an object which eludes all detection and mocks all pursuit."<sup>4</sup>

Taylor was engaged on his *Commentaries of Proclus* during the days of his presumed acquaintance with Blake. From *An Island in the Moon* we must conclude that Blake knew Taylor well before 1787; in (probably) 1788 Taylor delivered his twelve lectures on Platonism at the house of Flaxman. The substance of those lectures may very well have been the substance of the several Dissertations (on the Platonic Doctrine of Ideas, on the Demonstrative Syllogism, on the Nature of the Soul, and on the End of Geometry) included in the first volume of the *Commentaries*. Taylor's *History of the Restoration of the Platonic Philosophy*, in which his attacks on Locke and Bacon, Johnson and "the moderns" were first launched (included in the second volume of the *Commentaries*), must have appeared at least one year earlier, that is to say in or before 1788, the date of Blake's *Tractates* against "Natural Religion," and it may have been the substance of this Dissertation rather than the four listed above which

<sup>4</sup> *Theoretic Arithmetic* (London, 1816), p xxxiv.

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formed the substance of those famous lectures; it is at all events highly probable that the lecturer would have worked up his material for subsequent publication, and that it lies somewhere embedded in the two volumes of Proclus. There are therefore strong grounds for concluding that Blake learned his arguments against Bacon, Newton, and Locke from Taylor; whose objections, as a mathematician and metaphysician, are precise. Blake, who must have learned these Platonic objections from Taylor, merely gave his characteristically vigorous expression to objections which, from their Platonic character, we may reasonably conclude were first formulated by the "feeder of poets" and not by the poet himself.

To his contemporaries, it must have seemed mere arrogance in Taylor to declare with so much assurance that the thought of Locke and Bacon would sooner or later perish with ". . . the variety of other self-taught systems which, like nocturnal meteors, blaze for a while, and then vanish in obscurity. . . ." <sup>5</sup> Yet in the light of metaphysics he could not have thought otherwise: "self-taught" is an accurate description of knowledge reached by the experimental method.

For the natural scientists, the laws of mathematics are the laws of nature; whereas for Proclus, Euclid, and the Pythagorean tradition, number expresses the order of the soul, "facts of mind." The modern physicist, no less than the modern mathematician, is once again compelled to ask whether mind may not be the limiting factor to all measurement of the universe of nature; and Proclus's teaching that quantity originates in mind has meaning once more: "The essential number they [the Platonic philosophers] considered as first subsisting in the intelligible world, together with being."<sup>6</sup> "And if it be enquired how number subsists in the human soul, we must say, that the soul, by her self-moving energies, procreates number, while she numerates, and by this energy, causes the existence of quantity."<sup>7</sup> Bacon, accord-

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> *Commentaries of Proclus*, I, xiv.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. xv.

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ing to Taylor, in treating mathematics as a natural science, lost sight of its real nature.

The force of these philosophic objections must seem clearer at the present time; and a point of view practically identical with Taylor's was formulated not long ago by Guénon in *Les Principes du Calcul Infinitesimal*.<sup>8</sup> Both Taylor and Guénon were mathematicians before they were metaphysicians; and Guénon's objection, like Taylor's, to the natural scientists since Descartes and Bacon also rests upon the nature of number.

Pythagoras and Plato made mathematics the foundation of philosophic studies. There is a persistent modern misconception that the mental world is "personal," "subjective," and necessarily vague, whereas whatever order there may be is to be found in matter. Yet "the numerative art is essentially inherent in the soul, and is therefore present with all men,"<sup>9</sup> Taylor wrote; and the purpose of mathematical study is "no other than the enjoyment of that felicity congenial to the soul previous to her immersion in body."<sup>10</sup>

"But if it should be asked in what these energies of intellect consist, to which all science ultimately refers? I answer, in the contemplation of true being, or those ideal and divine forms, with which the intelligible world is replete."<sup>11</sup>

Thus the Greek "know thyself" may be better achieved by the study of mathematics than by introspection. Formlessness in the arts, far from being a mark of their "subjective" truth, betrays an ignorance of the order of the soul, and reveals the bankruptcy of a culture that, when it abandons the imitation of natural appearance, is left with no ordering principle whatsoever.

The arts are, according to the Platonic tradition, embodiments of mental forms. Iamblichus tells that whereas Pythagoras taught his disciples by means of music he himself listened to the inaudible "music of the spheres": "Pythagoras . . . seems to have said that he heard the celestial harmony, as understanding the har-

<sup>8</sup> Paris, 1946.

<sup>9</sup> *Commentaries of Proclus*, I, xvii.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. cxvi.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. cxv.

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monic proportion in numbers, of the heavenly bodies, and that which is audible in them."<sup>12</sup> As Taylor says, "according to the Orphic and Pythagoric doctrine, the lyre of Apollo is an image of the celestial harmony . . . caused by the orderly revolutions of the celestial spheres." "The Comparison and conjunction of the musical and astronomical elements are most ancient."<sup>13</sup> Music has, until recently, retained its Pythagorean foundation in the diatonic scale. Architecture like music is an art based upon number and proportion; and the widespread abandonment of the art of architecture for the science of engineering reflects the modern purely quantitative understanding of mathematics for which Taylor held Bacon responsible.<sup>14</sup>

Taylor admired Kepler, and wrote in praise of his *De Harmonia Mundi*: "Kepler was skilled in the platonic philosophy, and appears to have been no less acquainted with the great depth of our author's [Proclus's] mind than with the magnificence and sublimity of his language. Perhaps Kepler is the only instance among the moderns, of the philosophical and mathematical genius being united in the same person."<sup>15</sup> Although Taylor considered Newton to be no philosopher, he fully recognized his genius as a mathematician.

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Taylor printed on the first page of his *Commentaries* a sentence adapted from Isaac Disraeli's *Curiosities of Literature*, a true word, as he must have thought, spoken in jest, and in full calculation of

<sup>12</sup> *Life of Pythagoras* (London, 1818).

<sup>13</sup> *Mystical Hymns of Orpheus* (London, 1792), note on the Hymn to Apollo. See below, p. 247 n.

<sup>14</sup> Blake, who truly perceived (or learned through Taylor) that Greek art is an expression of "mathematical form," was not aware (and neither, it seems, was Taylor) that the "living form" of the Gothic was itself the flowering of a revival of the Pythagorean mathematics, studied by the monks of Cluny. Enthusiasm for geometric form led the Carthusians to banish the imitative naturalistic arts of sculpture and painting from their churches. See Otto von Simson, *The Gothic Cathedral* (London and New York, 1958). Le Corbusier and his school have more recently attempted to reintroduce a Greek system of proportion into architecture

<sup>15</sup> *Commentaries of Proclus*, I, 114 n.

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the irreverent spirit in which it would be taken: "Mr. T. Taylor, the Platonic Philosopher and *the modern Plethon*, consonant to that philosophy, professes polytheism." Taylor, who, like Pletho, rejected Christianity, was a polytheist only in the sense in which the Florentine painters of so many mythological scenes may be so called; he was always willing to shock the prejudices of the orthodox, whose ignorance in philosophy he held in the greatest contempt. Taylor's polytheism, so challengingly professed on the title page of Proclus's *Commentaries*, could not fail to give rise to countless rumors and anecdotes—that he was turned out of his lodgings for wishing to sacrifice a lamb (in other versions a bull) to Jupiter; that he believed his cats and dogs (he was an animal lover and a vegetarian) to be inhabited by transmigrant human souls, and so forth. Blake, in his *An Island in the Moon*, introduces Taylor as "Sipsop the Pythagorean," who is seen "stroking the cat," and dismissing Giotto as of no importance because he is not in Plutarch's *Lives*. Isaac Disraeli, in his *Curiosities of Literature*, fanned the flame: "The divinities of Plato are the divinities to be adored, and we are to be taught to call God, Jupiter; the Virgin, Venus; and Christ, Cupid! The Iliad of Homer allegorized, is converted into a Greek bible of the arcana of nature!"<sup>1</sup> Disraeli and Taylor seem to have been good friends, and Disraeli is said to have attended Taylor's funeral. He is also the "Mr. Mystic" of Thomas Love Peacock's *Melincourt*.

Nothing could be more untrue than to suppose that polytheism is unphilosophic; it is, on the contrary, a feature of those metaphysical systems which most clearly realize that "the deep truth is imageless"—a thought Shelley himself may quite possibly have first seen stated in Taylor's arguments against the Christian Trinity in his essay *On the Restoration of the Platonic Philosophy*. Polytheism is a most subtle symbolic mode of apprehension of "facts of mind," incomprehensible only to those who, like Locke,

<sup>1</sup> *Curiosities of Literature* (London, 1830), p. 370. This is journalism—the falsification of fact by style. *De Antro Nympharum* is certainly "the Iliad of Homer allegorised"; and if for "cupid" we read "love" the statement ceases to be blasphemous. Disraeli's satire is indeed finely two-edged.

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regard mental processes as mere elaborations of sense impressions. "If by polytheists we mean," Taylor wrote, "men who believed in a multitude of self-existent beings independent of each other, and of one first cause, there were no such men among the Greeks and Romans, as must be obvious to everyone who is conversant with the writings of the heathens, and as is fully evinced by Dr. Cudworth in his *Intellectual System*; nor am I acquainted with any nation who entertained an opinion so monstrous and dire. But if by polytheists he intends to signify men who believed in the existence of divine natures, the immediate progeny of one first cause with which they are profoundly united, Aristotle is so far from opposing this doctrine in his *Metaphysics*, that in the eighth chapter of the twelfth book he demonstrates their existence."<sup>2</sup>

All poets are natural polytheists; a wave of polytheism characterized the Romantic movement, and Taylor's expositions of the Greek mythology became sacred books of the poets. It is chiefly the early essays of Taylor which retain their interest, both in themselves and because the poets learned from them. Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*<sup>3</sup> with its spirits and daemons; Keats's reanimation of the Greek myths with imaginative meaning;<sup>4</sup> the Platonic polytheism of Shelley, all in various ways and degrees reflect Taylor's "restoration of the Platonic philosophy." But the strangest of the Romantic polytheists, and the one most demonstrably influenced by Taylor, is Blake. Blake must have loved Taylor's translation of Porphyry's *De Antro Nympharum* in his youth—for it inspired his art in his old age (Plate 14). Of the part played by Taylor in forming Blake's elaborate pantheon of "gods" that "emanate" from "the Human Imagination" I have written elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> Blake adopted (with tributaries from Christian Caba-

<sup>2</sup> *An Answer to Dr. Gillies's Supplement*, p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> See John Beer, *Coleridge the Visionary* (London, 1959)

<sup>4</sup> See Bernard Blackstone, *The Consecrated Urn*.

<sup>5</sup> *Blake and Tradition* (A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts; Princeton and London, 1968). C. G. Jung's archetypes may also be described as composing a "pantheon" of the "divine natures" as these are manifested and diversified in the psyche.

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lism, alchemy, Boehme, Swedenborg, and related systems) the Orphic and Neoplatonic theology, and many of its myths. A beautiful page of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* illustrates a text that tells how "The ancient Poets animated all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses. . . ." It seems that there was a break between Blake and Taylor, and that when *Milton* was written (1802) Blake wished to dissociate himself from some former assent to Taylor's pagan manifesto: "We do not want either Greek or Roman Models if we are but just & true to our own Imaginations, those Worlds of Eternity in which we shall live for ever in Jesus our Lord."<sup>6</sup> But Blake retained the elements of Neoplatonic polytheism within his Christian framework; and in his later years his love of Plato increased. His Christianity, informed as it was by the study of Platonic metaphysics and Orphic mythology, was no more acceptable or comprehensible than Taylor's paganism; the two rebels had more in common than had either with their amazed contemporaries.

The modern Western mentality has little sense of the relative. Taylor in a late essay<sup>7</sup> shows up Bacon's naturalistic interpretation of myths for the shallow thing it is, in terms whose dispassion contrasts with the fiery indignation of his youth:

"As the mythology of the Greeks is intimately connected with their philosophy and theology, it is not at all wonderful, since the moderns are ignorant of the latter, that they have not genuinely developed the former. Lord Bacon, indeed, has done all, in attempting to unfold this mythology,<sup>8</sup> that great genius, without the assistance of *genuine philosophy*, is able to effect. But the most piercing sagacity, the most brilliant wit, and the most exquisite subtilty of thought, without this assistance, are here of no avail. It is indeed easy for ingenious men to explain an ancient fable, in a way which to the superficial observer shall appear to be the precise meaning which its inventors designed to convey, though

<sup>6</sup> Preface to *Milton*, Book I, p. 460.

<sup>7</sup> "On the Mythology of the Greeks," *Classical Journal*, XXIII (March and June 1821), 33-41.

<sup>8</sup> Taylor is presumably referring to Bacon's *The Wisdom of the Ancients*.

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it be in reality very far from the truth. This may be easily accounted for, by considering that all fables are images of truths; but those of the Greeks, of truths with which but few are acquainted.”

Taylor's importance as a teacher of mythological thought to the Romantic poets cannot be exaggerated. In his Introductions to the first and second editions of the *Hymns of Orpheus* and in his *Dissertation on the Mysteries*, in particular, he presents, with the mastery of a true metaphysician, those first principles of symbolic thought which had long been lost. He translated Sallust's *On the Gods and the World*, and included a passage from that work in his *Dissertation* that may, for those "mythological poets," Keats, Shelley, Blake, and Coleridge, have been a key placed in their hands to the whole body of European mythological poetry; nor was it only classical literature upon which this illumination must have fallen, but also upon Spenser and Milton, the two poets to whom the Romantics chiefly turned. Sallust's distinction of the four kinds of myth, the theological, the animastic (which would now be called the psychological, applying to the soul or *anima*) the natural, and the "mixed," is the key to the correct reading not only of Greek mythology but of all mythological poets since. To a modern reader, indebted as we are to Jungian and other reexaminations of the language of mythology, these distinctions may not seem strange. But how far the mentality of the eighteenth century had strayed from any possibility of understanding the symbolic thought embodied in myths can scarcely be credited unless we read such writers as Bryant and Warburton. It is true that mythology was beginning to capture the imagination even of such authors as these—they would scarcely have devoted their lives to erecting their monuments of unenlightened erudition had this not been so; nor must we forget the growing interest in Norse mythology, embodied in such works as Mallet's *Northern Antiquities*, translated by Bishop Percy (himself the collector of ancient ballads), the *Celtic Researches* of Edward Davies, and the work of other investigators of British antiquities, and the oriental studies of Sir William Jones and his

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circle. The myths spoke to the imagination of such authors, the inadequacy of their rationalizations notwithstanding.

Jacob Bryant's *New System of Ancient Mythology* is a work of extensive learning used in the service of an idea of such naïveté as to excuse Taylor's most contemptuous diatribes against the folly of "the moderns."<sup>9</sup> Bryant, observing that the Flood myth occurs in many versions besides that in the Bible, drew the conclusion—applauded by the learned of his day (the clergy of that time and place were of course committed to a purely "historical" reading of even those parts of the Bible that are quite evidently symbolic stories), commentated, substantiated, and discussed at length in the pages of learned journals—that all pantheons are based upon the eight persons saved from the Flood in Noah's Ark. Scarcely an adverse voice was raised; Sir William Jones<sup>10</sup> went so far as to say that he was not convinced—no doubt a polite understatement by that man of sophisticated intelligence and vast learning; and only Taylor, unheeded, said that the theory was nonsensical. Reason and taste, outraged by Proclus and Plotinus, were satisfied with a theory that could not better illustrate the inability of the English of that time to comprehend symbolic thought. To such lengths could a naïvely "historical" reading of the Bible lead learned clerics. Bryant's *Mythology*, once so widely read, is remembered today chiefly because William Blake as an apprentice assisted Basire in the engraving of some of the plates.

Taylor's warnings against the interpretation of mythology with-

<sup>9</sup> Bryant, however, seems an original thinker when compared with Warburton, whose *Divine Legation of Moses* was no less highly esteemed in its day. Taylor's *Dissertation* refers to Warburton's explanations of the Mysteries of Eleusis. The truth "pure and undefiled" taught by Protestant Christian divines of the eighteenth century, on anything of a symbolic character, is too fantastic to be satirized.

<sup>10</sup> Jones was himself the author of several remarkable essays on the Mythology of the Hindus, and of comparative studies of these myths with Italian and Classical mythology. He was remarkable at that time for his understanding of the subtler meanings of such myths: and also pointed out the similarities of the Indian metaphysics to Berkeley's Immaterialist philosophy