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BOOK REVIEW

Cosmic Connections: Poetry in the Age of Disenchantment by Charles Taylor (Harvard, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2024), ix + 598 pp.

For the past two centuries, the record of philosophers engaging poetry has been decidedly mixed. An extreme instance would be Heidegger's readings of Hölderlin, which Adorno for one regarded as tone-deaf. Yet Adorno's own, often unsparing attempt to strap poets like Heine or Eichendorff onto the Procrustean bed of Frankfurt-School dialectics also disconcerts with its overdetermined appraisal of art as entangled in ideological tensions that the artist can neither transcend nor comprehend. Other, more supple and sensitive philosophical treatments of poetry would include the wide-ranging oeuvre of Maurice Blanchot or the more classically humanistic taken by Hans Georg Gadamer in his various essays on Goethe, Hölderlin, George, and Rilke. Such readings often teem with suggestive and profound insights, even as close textual analysis required to clinch the case that's being made is rarely offered in full. Similarly, modern theologians have also struggled to find the right focal length when exploring literary works, though their usually robust training in Scriptural exegesis, and consequent sensitivity to multiple layers of textual meaning *beyond* the conceptual, has caused them to fare better overall. We might think, for example, of Rowan Williams's exploration of Dostoevsky, Romano Guardini's readings of Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, or Jean-Luc Chrétien's work on Traherne, Whitman, and Claudel.

Meanwhile, Charles Taylor's latest book attempts a wide-ranging discussion of modern poetry, running from Wordsworth, Novalis, Hölderlin, and Keats in the Romantic era, via Baudelaire and Mallarmé all the way to Rilke, Eliot and Miłosz. Those familiar with Taylor's previous synthesis of European thought will not be surprised to find the habits of inquiry here to be once again very much those of a Hegelian committed to a single, all-encompassing synthesis of rich and strikingly diverse voices and viewpoints. The book's central claim is that the poets in question sought to reestablish a "deeper" connection to the cosmos (i.e., "the universe considered as a morally relevant order" [187]), a connection that in the pre-modern era was intuitively felt and ritually celebrated but, at some not entirely specified point in time, had largely faded away:

> We were originally in touch with all these—now hidden connections—but without fully understanding what this involved. We became alienated from them in the course of our development as rational and free beings, because this progression undermines and ultimately dissolves our original inarticulate sense of cosmic orders. Our freedom required that we develop the powers of abstract reasoning, which objectifies our world, and obscures some of its meanings for us. … But our complete

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fulfillment comes in a recovery of this contact on a higher level, integrating our gains of reason and freedom. This completes our self-realization. Recovering the language of insight isn't just adding to our dispassionate knowledge: it also reconnects us to the cosmos, and this realizes our essential purpose (12; see also 39).

Building such a sweeping thesis about Romantic, post-Romantic, and modernist poetry is undoubtedly difficult to do, and based on the evidence one must wonder whether the attempt should have been made at all. Unmistakably Hegelian in its diction (note the profusion of "we" and "our"), confidently integrative, and steadily progressive in its narrative thrust, Taylor's argument exhibits the same irenic manner of his earlier, high-altitude surveys in *Sources of the Self* and *A Secular Age*. Yet if in those works, particularly the 1989 *Sources*, the style of argument appeared to be reasonably well matched to its mostly philosophical subject matter, it is far less so in a book whose materials are as inexhaustibly varied and often resistant to conceptualization as the poetry of Novalis, Mallarmé, Rilke, and Miłosz. Taylor's claim that "a movement in Nature, as with Wordsworth and Hölderlin, … comes down to an issue of the good life, this central ethical notion" seems so broad as to be neither verifiable nor falsifiable; and his repeated contention that "Romantic art has loosened the connection to cosmic claims, … [and that] it explores our relations to the cosmos, through constitutive expression which carries conviction with it" (181), is ultimately just baffling and disconcerting in its generality.

It is above all Romanticism's gravitational pull that centers Taylor's argument, and here his selection of protagonists seems perfectly reasonable. More worrisome, however, is the fact that Taylor's thesis often comes close to paraphrasing, even echoing verbatim, the oddly abstract and oblique convictions of some Romantics, above all the early Wordsworth's affirmation of something "far more deeply interfused" in "Tintern Abbey" (quoted on p. 42 and again on p. 126). In the event, beginning with Francis Jeffrey's notorious 1814 review of *The Excursion* ("This will never do!"), readers have often and understandably found fault with Wordsworth's abstract imagery and his moral vision, often couched in complacently self-assured and excessively vague language. The contrast with, say, John Clare's laser-sharp and subtly unsettling portrayal of rural life around 1820 is palpable. Meanwhile, Taylor's claim that "orthodox Christianity offered [Wordsworth] an underlying story to the cosmos he invoked" (189) seems either untrue (in the case of "Tintern Abbey" or the 1805 *Prelude*) or, where applicable, unconvincing, such as in the poet's clumsily moralizing *Sonnets upon the punishment of death* (1839) or his lamentable revisions to early and splendid work (e.g., "The Ruined Cottage") in *Poems Chiefly of Early and Late Years* (1841)—unhappy results of Wordsworth having yielded to Coleridge's insistent promptings at a time when genuine inspiration had evidently left him.

Too often, Taylor's attempt to illustrate the Romantics' "life-enhancing" (129) and "deep connection with the larger milieu of life" (131) remains at the level of a commonplace, such as when he insists that "we [always 'we'] need to access the eternal dimension, a gathered eternity" and, to that end, must incorporate "our ordinary expressions of what these activities do for us (e.g., 'renewing,' 'recharging our batteries')" (136-37). Likewise, when discussing Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" "through the lens of the German Romantics" (who then go all but unmentioned), Taylor's claim that Keats's lyric "connect[s] to a deeper truth, [not] about the universe *an sich*, but about the interspace" (153) and places us within

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"a wider space of meaning" (185) remains distressingly vague. "Deeper" and "wider" than what? one wonders. The reader's perplexity is only compounded by the fact that the structural irony and frequent negations found in Keats's great odes, also acknowledged by Taylor, present us not with any "cosmic (re)connections" but, on the contrary, with a *via negativa*, a pattern of articulate frustration unfolding in "lived time." We thus are confronted with multiple and incommensurable scenarios: do Keats's and Baudelaire's lyrics *fail* to establish the "cosmic (re)connection" (157) of which Taylor speaks? Or, alternatively, do they show such "connections" to be categorically *impossible*? Or, again, are the ironic subversions and negations in these lyrics absorbed into a second-order, dialectical narrative, that is, productively reclaimed by a Hegelian double negation?

Sensibly, Chapter 3 finds Taylor qualifying what until now has been a single, sweeping thesis about Romantic poetry's quest for (re)establishing a connection to the pre-modern cosmos that is to be more than a function of contingent psychological projection. Thus, he concedes, this quest may paradoxically "include the failure to connect," leaving us with a lyric that, precisely by lamenting "the loss of cosmic orders, begets the aspiration to reconnect" (89). Yet this (in essence Hegelian) attempt at incorporating "negation" into a meta-narrative rather than accepting it as an definite impasse, risks flattening the rich formal and idiomatic variety of Romantic lyricism. In the absence of any control group, all poetry is liable to be read as affirming, either forthrightly or indirectly, "the meaning of an interspace—the situation of a human being before a given scene, in relation to nature, or even, more generally in relation to time and the world—in such a way as to encompass and convey a powerful sense of its meaning for our purposes, our fulfillment, or our destiny" (84).

Chapter 4 proposes to demonstrate the book's thesis with more focused discussions of Novalis and Hölderlin. Yet here, too, the poetry itself, though quoted extensively often over multiple pages, receives surprisingly little detailed consideration. In vain will readers look for specific insights into the bearing that poetic form (elegy, hymn) has on its meaning, such as in the distinctive syntactic, rhythmic, and phonetic organization of Hölderlin's verse. What's more, Taylor's characterization of "Der Archipelagus" as filled with "intimations of what is still there, and could perhaps return" (114), that is as operating "in the register of nostalgia and longing" (117) is misleading at best. In fact, it is precisely the recognition of classical Greece's "naïve" culture as irretrievable that furnishes the central premise for the elegies of 1800-1801 and, even more so, for the Christ-hymns of 1802-1803. Here, the absence of copious and probing scholarship is felt most acutely. Indeed, scholarship on all the principal writers is sparse at best, often dated, and rarely engaged substantively (e.g., Unger's and Bénichou's work on Hölderlin from the 1970s; Wassermann, Frye, W. J. Bate on Shelley, Blake, and Keats from the 1960s; Käthe Hamburger as the lone critical voice on Rilke, and F. O. Matthiessen's 1935 essay on T. S. Eliot etc.).

Particularly where Hölderlin is concerned, it is unfortunate and, given Taylor's long-standing interest in religious thought, also surprising that his book should show so little interest in unfolding the theological dimensions of Romantic and post-Romantic poetry. Thus, to claim that the Romantics "embraced a Spinoza-derived pantheism" (5) while true for particular writers at particular moments, can hardly be justified in the sweeping manner in which it is here advanced. Like his colleagues at Tübingen, Hegel and Schelling, Hölderlin, for example, was temporarily immersed in the study of Spinoza, as was Coleridge a few years later. Yet already by the late 1790s, this pantheist

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framework—clearly unsettled by Jacobi's incisive critique—had been displaced by questions about history and eschatology, and more particularly by a millenarianism (e.g., "Friedensfeier," "Der Einzige," and "Patmos") that reveals Hölderlin's profound debt to the Pietist theology of Bengel and Oetinger.

Undergirding Taylor's readings of the Romantics is what he terms the "dual-language thesis"—that is, a fundamental distinction between the communicative and revelatory dimensions of language (13 ff.). The point seems true, indeed uncontroversial, considering how it has helped found poetic figuration and variously expressive or ironic modes of every conceivable kind for centuries. Rather more doubtful is Taylor's claim that, specifically in the modern era, "we have no direct contact with archetypes." Inevitably, one will ask: did we ever? Neither the (Neo) Platonic nor the Judaeo-Christian (apophatic) tradition, so significantly influenced by the former, has ever maintained that we could "directly read and reproduce God's language" (127). Hence, the Romantic claim that humans could only "offer … fallible and approximate 'translations'" of God's language does not, on the face of it, constitute a break with earlier poetic and more robustly metaphysical poetry. Taylor is right, of course, to note the Romantics' strong concern with the symbolic dimension of linguistic meaning (cf. 18-23) and their fundamental belief "that signs really do inhere in things, and that we have lost the capacity to read them" (22). Yet was that capacity lost at some point in early modernity (as a Hegelian might argue), or was it lost as the result of mankind's Fall (as Augustinians have maintained)? Taylor's recourse to Hamann's concept of human language as translating "God's signs in the world" (26) makes ample sense here, provided we bear in mind that the practice of "re-creating, reexpressing" the things of the world is understood as operating *per analogiam* rather than purporting to accomplish outright a fusion of the expressive human subject with the divine *archetypus intellectus*.

Taylor's decision to break with chronology by moving from his discussion of G. M. Hopkins to Rilke (in Chapter 8), before looping back to Baudelaire and Mallarmé, suggests basic continuities between the Romantics and Rilke's early and guarded modernism. It is an entirely reasonable way of proceeding, even as Rilke's poetry after 1906 greatly complicates Taylor's central thesis. For Rilke's *Neue Gedichte*, to say nothing of his *Duino Elegies* and his *Sonnets to Orpheus*, far from celebrating a profound connection with the "cosmos," tend to trace, at times obsessively so, the modern individual's existential isolation and its profound dissociation from the cosmos and any sense of normative moral order that the word implies. Still, that, in spite (or because) of this pervasive estrangement, "Rilke is looking for a deeper, more intensely felt reconnection with the world" (206) seems true, perhaps trivially so. More persuasive is Taylor's discussion of the language of "praise" (*Preisung*) and "transformation" (*Verwandlung*) in the *Duino Elegies* (esp. nos. 7 and 9 (222-36).

Taylor now loops back in chronology to writers who either open up a more capacious perspective on Romanticism's fading appeal (Baudelaire, Mallarmé) or whose post-Romantic outlook (Eliot, Miłosz) reveals both the urgency and precarity of "cosmic connections" against the backdrop of the twentieth century's social, political, and spiritual upheavals. In many ways, Baudelaire is the ideal author for the thesis advanced in this book: a poet forever vacillating between a Christian doctrine of the visible world as an inexhaustible source of redemptive beauty and a gnostic view of Creation as an ontological miscarriage. Running to nearly 100 pages, Taylor's account

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of Baudelaire on "spleen" and beauty offers an expansive diagnosis of modern poetry's struggle to locate beauty and salvation in a desecrated and ruinous world whose imprint on the human psyche takes the form of pervasive dissociation and melancholy (*spleen*). Where "the things which surround us have no meaning, do not speak to us," the poet's attempt to transpose a "taste for nothingness" (*le Goût du Néant*) into the medium of poetic form "brings [the word] close to music" (278); it restores to otherwise empty, repetitive, and distended time "a shape, a meaning" (278-79); and it "break[s] the tyrannic hold of Spleen," even as the relief "is only momentary" (298) and "the transfiguration is clearly limited" (305). Taylor's discussion resumes and expands upon his earlier exploration of "modernist epiphanies" in *Sources of the Self* (1989); and his juxtaposition of "cosmic" and "lived" time (287) seems broadly relevant, even as Hans Blumenberg's eponymous distinction between *Lebenszeit und Weltzeit* goes surprisingly unmentioned.

Extending the argument, Chapter 11 considers how, in the aftermath of Baudelaire, particularly in Proust, Benjamin, Hofmannsthal, and Valéry, the idea(l) of a "cosmic connection" undergoes a profound change, away "from the 'spatial' relation … to the dimension of time" (373). As in *Sources of the Self*, Taylor's argument seems particularly rich and suggestive when exploring modernism's guarded reclamation of the epiphanic, that is, instances of "duration without succession … [when] different layers are crowding into the same instant" (384). Already in Chapter 9, Taylor had speculated on the ways that mid-nineteenth-century, scientific naturalism and its underlying, anti-metaphysical stance likely impinge on his book's overall thesis. "What," he asks, "becomes of the desire for cosmic connection? Does it just disappear? No, rather it mutates" from a holistic and "unchanging" conception into one "evolving over time" (263). Perhaps it does, though by the time we reach the work of Czesław Miłosz, so tellingly vacillating between a Catholic and Gnostic outlook, Taylor has to qualify his thesis. For a poetry such as Miłosz's, in tracing connections between the anti-metaphysical naturalism of the nineteenth century and the violent upheavals of the twentieth, no longer permits us to speak of a process "teleologically directed upward à la Hegel." Instead, Miłosz finds abundant evidence to suggest that the "evils" in question were themselves "generated by past efforts at improvement" (564), causing nature's onetime promise of "cosmic connections" to expire in a Manichaean vision where "the lament of a slaughtered hare fills the forest" and where "In sap, mush, glue, millions and millions / Of entangled legs, wings, and abdomens / Struggle to free themselves, weaken, stiffen forever. / The fat flesh of caterpillars being devoured alive / By the rapacious progeny of inquisitive flies" (*NCP* 285; 288).

Given that at issue is a book of some 500 pages *on poetry*, something ought to be said about its prose and organization. As regards the latter, readers will be perplexed by numerous loose ends, sections running between two and five pages perplexingly tacked onto chapters in the form of an "Explanatory Note" (185; 245), an "Excursus" I and II (253; 262), or a "Coda" (245; 525). The amateur musicologist in me naturally wonders: how many codas can a single work really have? Such organizational wobbles might be overlooked were it not for the fact that large portions of the book read rather like a rough draft, with the prose feeling stiff, formulaic, and the argument often obscured by excessive generalization and unexpected shifts from one topic or figure to another, such as the backward and forward leaping to T. Gray and Rilke in a discussion ostensibly focused on Hopkins (175-79), or a discussion of time in Baudelaire segueing into

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generalizations about Scheler's *Leistungswissen* only for the author to interrupt himself: "But what has this to do with the experience of Spleen as invoked by Baudelaire? The answer is: nothing. But that doesn't mean people who hold this view can't experience acedia, even acutely" (290), a point that, it bears recalling, had been rather forcefully made as early as 1918 in Max Weber's *Wissenschaft als Beruf*.

No doubt, different readers will vary in their judgment as to whether the scope and ambition of this book are ultimately matched by its execution. For this reader, the impression remains that less would have been more; that a smaller cast of poetic characters, appreciated more for their formal and expressive variety rather than their adaptability to a single thesis (and supplemented by a fuller and more wide-ranging engagement of critical literature) would have greatly strengthened this book.

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