

Thomas Taylor, Wisdom's Champion

Temenos Academy, November 2008

Thomas Taylor, described by Kathleen Raine as a genius of metaphysics, will eventually become recognized as the greatest philosopher the English speaking peoples have produced at least until our time. If there is a greater one to follow, then our race will have been blessed beyond its deserts, for this first genius sent down from the orb of light was treated shamefully in his own time, and has been largely neglected ever since. But the recognition which is due awaits a period in the cycles of time when philosophy is again honoured, and regarded as, in the words of Plato in the *Philebus*,¹ “a gift of the gods to men, hurled by a certain Prometheus from the gods along with a fire the most luminous.”

Thomas Taylor was born 250 years ago in London – in fact about a mile from here in Round Court in Aldersgate – on May 15th, 1758: in the sky Halley's comet was visible, as it was again on November 1st 1835 when he died, so if, as Shakespeare tells us –

“When beggars die there are no comets seen;
The heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes.”

– we might claim that that the heavens blazed forth the birth *and* death of this prince of philosophy.

In case your grasp of history is a little hazy, at this point in time George III was about to ascend to the throne and rule for most of Taylor's life – a reign covering the greatest expansion of the British Empire despite the loss of America, and one which saw the maturity of the industrial and commercial revolution. The so-called ‘age of

¹ 16c

reason' with its leading figures such as Newton, Locke, Descartes and Hobbes had given way to the equally misnamed 'age of enlightenment' which, perhaps, culminated in the French revolution, and which was marked by the rise of empiric science, capitalism, and a relative religious tolerance. (The last man to be executed for denying the trinity had met his end on the scaffold some 60 years before.)

Early in childhood Thomas was thought to have contracted TB and was sent to the Staffordshire countryside to stay with relatives for some time; and while he clearly recovered from this potentially serious illness, his health was thenceforth never the most robust. By the time he was nine he was certainly back with his family and had been awarded a place at St Paul's School, 'on foundation' – a development which must have been a matter of some satisfaction: the school already had an impressive roll call of former pupils - John Milton, Samuel Pepys, John Churchill (1st Duke of Marlborough) and, interestingly, Sir Edmund Halley to name but a few.

While at St Paul's Taylor learnt Greek and Latin although only to a relatively elementary level – in fact according to his entry in the 1798 edition of *Public Characters* (which was clearly written on the basis of information supplied by himself) the school's methods of teaching these languages so revolted Taylor that he implored his father, Joseph, to remove him from the school. Eventually he prevailed, although his father was very reluctant to comply – having harboured ambitions for his son to become a dissenting minister, a career the elder Taylor considered to be the most enviable in the world. The whole episode of his three boyhood years at St Pauls (if we take the report of it at face value) perhaps points us towards qualities which would manifest most clearly in the man: St Paul's began their Greek classes in the sixth form, and since each form was entered by virtue of successful examination rather than age, we must assume that Thomas passed through six forms in a matter of three years of less – if so then he must have been an outstanding scholar. Further, his deeply held abhorrence of the treatment of classical languages and his achievement in

convincing his father that he should be removed from the school in an age in which youth had much less say in the ways in which things were disposed, displays an extraordinary strength of will matched only by a strength of feeling about language.

Well before the age of fifteen Taylor became deeply interested in the various branches of mathematics – studying them whenever leisure permitted; he was, to this end, obliged to hide a tinder box under his pillow. Again we will see this habit of nocturnal study flower in later life, once his attention had been caught by philosophy. We can imagine Joseph Taylor feeling rather at a loss about the direction his obviously gifted son might take – the entry in *Public Characters* says that he had little appreciation of the inner value of mathematics, while his son despised the commercial application of its techniques. Eventually the fifteen year old Thomas was placed with an uncle at Sheerness to learn the trade of an officer of the dock yard – but again he found the uncle and the occupation very much at odds with his temperament and his desire to pursue high learning. As a result he returned home, and complied with the wishes of his father to study for the ministry under the celebrated dissenting preacher, Hugh Worthington, under whose tutelage he regained his rudimentary knowledge of Greek and Latin.

Since dissenting protestants were barred from English universities, as well as many other important institutions, there was at this time a kind of parallel intellectual establishment deeply involved in a process of questioning old dogma and philosophies. Hugh Worthington was one of the leading lights of this movement – a classicist, mathematician and linguist as well as a spell-binding preacher. Having thrown off the doctrinaire limitations of the Catholic Church – whether Roman or Anglican – the movement of which he was part was at the forefront of political, scientific and religious radicalism, and was a significant contributor to the so-called new enlightenment, and a hotbed of debate. It was to this movement of “rational dissent” that the seventeen year old Taylor came with his passion for inner truth.

His future would, it seems, have been smooth and relatively unremarkable had it not been for the one other passion of his life: before Thomas had been sent to Sheerness he had formed a deep attachment to Mary Morton, a tradesman's daughter, and upon his return he lost no time in renewing his friendship with her – a friendship which absence had clearly only served to deepen. Along with his studies for the ministry, he wooed Mary who, apart from being well educated, also (according to *Public Characters*), “united with an agreeable person, uncommon modesty, liberality, and artless manners.” As his studies were coming to a close, and he was readied for going up to Aberdeen University (where non-conformism was no bar) he and Mary discovered that her father was planning to exploit his absence by marrying her off to a man of large fortune. This unwelcome possibility was circumvented by the young couple contracting a secret marriage, which was not to go beyond the ceremonial exchange of vows until Thomas had completed his university studies.

This secret was soon discovered and brought down on the pair a storm of “ecclesiastical and parental rage” in which all future plans were washed away. There followed a period of severe trial of great poverty only gradually relieved as a friend helped Taylor find employment at Lubbock's bank as a clerk, and an old schoolfellow helped him find a residence in Walworth – number 15 Manor Place.

The exact sequence of these external events and how they synchronize with Thomas' intellectual development is somewhat confused. However to turn inwards, we can trace the path he took from youthful mathematician to convinced Platonist over a period of some 15 years. During his teens Thomas was primarily interested in mathematics, which during his time at Sheerness expanded towards philosophy of the sceptical kind as promulgated by Bolingbroke and Hume. After the break with his family and his Dissenting studies he became interested in an area of learning which was part of the movement from the alchemy of the medieval era towards the

chemistry and physics of the coming times – reading such authors as Becher and Newton. By the time he was twenty-two he had published a pamphlet, *A New Method of Reasoning in Geometry*, showing, I think, that his interest in mathematics was still primary. It was at this point that the rosy-fingered light of Greek learning began to cast its first rays upon Taylor’s ready mind. On reading a work by Kenelm Digby (another author working between alchemy and chemistry) Taylor was enthused by a passage which asserted that “Aristotle ought never to be mentioned by scholars but with reverence, on account of his incomparable worth.”

Such was the impression that this praise made – coming from one who was by no means a peripatetic – that Taylor determined to search out a suitable work by Aristotle, and further, to recover his knowledge of ancient Greek. Such, reports *Public Characters*, was his avidity to accomplish this design that he was soon reading that great master in the original – in particular the *Physics*, the first text Taylor had been able to find. From then on he claimed that he learned Greek through the Greek philosophy, rather than Greek philosophy through Greek. At this time Taylor was working in the bank, and he trained himself to ponder the meaning of Aristotle while still executing his mundane duties there. He also cultivated the habit of studying late into the night – usually until two or three o’clock – before sleeping for a few hours and then waking and setting off to work at the bank for its lengthy day. From Aristotle, Taylor quickly moved to Plato, and to the ancient commentators: by 1787 he published a paraphrase of Plotinus on the Beautiful. He was 29 years old. During this and the following year he published the *Hymns of Orpheus*, *Proclus on Euclid’s Elements*, a four part dissertation on aspects of Platonic teaching, an *Essay on the History of the Restoration of the Platonic Theology by the Later Platonists*, and *Proclus’ Elements of Theology*.

A significant observation upon this progress is that it so closely follows the ancient Academy’s pattern of induction: in the early days, under Plato and his immediate

successors, the preliminary qualification for entry was an understanding of geometry and mathematics; while in the later Academy, Aristotle's writings were used as an introduction to those of Plato – the dialogues being framed by the ongoing and developing interpretive exercises of the leading late Platonists themselves. Taylor's approach, apparently by chance, by the same route might be taken as either as a sign of providential blessing or at least a vindication of the ancient system.

It was during the 1780's that Taylor educated himself in both Greek and the Platonic tradition: for the first six years of that decade he worked in the bank, but was obviously keen to free himself from the demands of the long working day of a clerk. One attempt to bring this about involved the curious matter of 'perpetual lamps' which Taylor noticed were mentioned by several ancient writers – lamps which would keep alight for centuries and which were said to be found still alight when old tombs were broken into. Having been interested in chemistry for some years this seemed like a possible way out: in 1784 he developed a lamp which used a mixed of oil and salt in which phosphorus was immersed: it was said to shed enough light to read by, and would burn for a great length of time. He arranged to demonstrate it at the Freemasons Tavern in October 1784: his bid for freedom was not to be however – the heat of the lamp caused the room in which the demonstration was given to catch fire, which, in the words of Taylor's entry in *Public Characters*, "raised a prejudice against the invention, which could never afterwards be removed." Thus did Taylor's moment in the 18th century forerunner of the Dragons' Den come to an ignominious end: but if his immediate design failed, his purpose did not.

The exhibition of the lamp had attracted several onlookers who clearly heard and saw something above the ordinary in this failed alchemist and who were to play a significant part in his ambitions to devote himself to the study and promulgation of Platonic philosophy. Perhaps the most immediate influence in this respect was George Cumberland (the author, art critic and friend of William Blake) and John

Flaxman (the sculptor and artist). Flaxman offered room in his house for a proposed series of twelve lectures on Platonic philosophy which in turn attracted more leading lights of London's artistic and intellectual community. Directly or indirectly this brought a friendship with George and William Meredith and other wealthy men who were accustomed to act as patrons to artists and writers. Within two years patronage enabled Taylor to resign from Lubbock's Bank and devote much of his time to his writing, and while he was never particularly well off and needed to take various commissions and positions to eke out his living, it was certainly this failed demonstration that expanded the practical possibilities of his life.

There are many fascinating episodes in Taylor's life which time does not permit more than a passing mention – for example, he was approached by a French revolutionary nobleman, the Marquis de Valady, who was a devotee of Pythagoreanism, and who cast himself at Taylor's feet, begging him to take him on as a pupil in the ancient philosophic tradition. De Valady stayed at Manor Place for some time before returning to meet his end in the reign of terror in his homeland. During his stay he suggested to Taylor that it would be in the spirit of the Pythagorean brotherhood, where everything was held in common, that Taylor should share his wife, Mary, with the Marquis. How very revolutionary; how very French. Taylor, it seems, having listened to this suggestion gave him a pretty sharp lecture on the subject.

Let me turn now from Thomas Taylor's life to his philosophy, the reason, of course, why we still celebrate him two centuries later. To understand why he is still revered by a small but growing band of philosophers we must digress a little and explore the nature and origins of philosophy itself.

Where and when did philosophy start? And what were its original aims? In the West it is common to consider its starting point as sometime around the sixth century BC, and in Greece: how we interpret that starting point will lead us to an approximation

of what we consider to be the nature of philosophy. Over the last three or four centuries a theory has developed and been accepted to a greater or lesser extent by nearly all those who give the problem much thought. This theory suggests that individuals in the Greek-speaking world during the sixth to fourth centuries became dissatisfied with their inherited mythological explanation of the world and humankind's place in it, and began a slow crawl out of an irrational worldview into a reasoned and scientific one. These were the earliest philosophers – Thales, Parmenides, Empedocles, Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle amongst others. Of course, runs this story, the earliest philosophers were still in varying degrees in thrall to the irrational mythological worldview and almost everything they thought has been proved wrong as we have thoroughly mastered the techniques of reason and scientific analysis. Perhaps the only useful thing that remains from this early phase is the sceptical approach which is identified especially with Socrates as portrayed in the so-called early Platonic dialogues, and in the proto-scientific observations of Aristotle. Philosophy is, in this standard analysis, a re-explanation of everything in and around us into a logical and reasoned scheme, with a few untidy edges (due largely to the inadequacy of language to reflect the reasons which underlie things) – edges there to keep professional philosophers in academia in useful employment. They pass their time building castles in the sands of the mundane world and amuse themselves by kicking over previous sandcastles, and rebuilding them anew. The clever ones kick over other philosophers' castles, the really clever ones kick over their own – perhaps several times – in order to make way for their next variation of the general philosophic outlook of scientific and material realism.

If this is philosophy, then pass me the hemlock now.

The assumptions upon which modern philosophy is based are deeply questionable. These are that, firstly, reality can be explored and *fully comprehended* in terms of reason and the kind of science which measures physical things and their powers; secondly,

that human beings are at their most fulfilled when they exercise discursive reason – that is to say the kind of reason that moves step by step from one concept to another; thirdly, that there are no absolutes to which the relatives of mundane world are relative, and from which such relatives might otherwise gain a certain intrinsic stability and meaning.

These assumptions lead modern commentators of Platonic philosophy into profound error: it is quite clear that Plato and his true fellow thinkers rejected these false conceptions, and that they considered philosophy in a very different light. It was this light in which Thomas Taylor attempted his heroic task of translating for English readers as much as possible of the ancient Greek texts. It was this light in which golden truths, long overlaid with the dust of neglect and ignorance, began once more to glitter and catch the mind's eye.

Modern philosophies do not arouse the soul, nor do they inspire great works of art, nor great deeds of selfless sacrifice. The original philosophy of the west – which we now call Platonic philosophy – in profound contradistinction urges the soul upwards and inwards in a search for those truths beyond ordinary thought and language, urges the artist to much celebrated beauty, and alights upon the hero – the lover of the good – and demands that he or she unfold every inborn excellence in the quest for perfection. It was not for nothing that Plato, in the *Phaedrus*,² couples the musician (or follower of the Muses) and the lover of goodness, with the philosopher as those to whom the divine law gives the highest allotment of life.

This philosophy starts with the highest possible conception of the human mind: an affirmation of the simplest source of all, which is sometimes called *The One*, and at other times *The Good*. As the *simply One* this principle of principles has no adhering characteristic by which it can be known in language, by sense perception, or by any

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form of intellectual activity. Although for title we call it *The One*, we must immediately acknowledge that as a name it is no more than an approximation, an approximation which says more about the dullness of our minds than the thing itself. It is truly ineffable. Hidden beneath its lack of characteristics is the possibility of all characteristics which the great universe can manifest. Although it is unknowable, yet it underlies and sustains everything which can be known, and everything which knows. It is the great paradox.

Can those so-called philosophers who seek to reduce the universe to a series of measurements and rational steps ever hope to comprehend this source? *That* philosophy is forever trapped in the multiplicity of the world. *This* philosophy, however, continually leads towards the simply one, and every exercise in the system of Platonic endeavour – Platonic Yoga (to use an Eastern term because the true Western term ‘Philosophy’ has been so abused) – every exercise is valued because it brings us into a condition of oneness. That is why, for example, the Platonist, while valuing the clarity and pleasure of sense perception, seeks over and above this the greater clarity and goodness of intellectual perception. And within intellectual activity he or she seeks to move from the multiplicity of reason to the greater unity of intuition, and thence to the stillness of Nous, or pure intellectual vision. Ultimately the call is to union with divinity.

If this is the goal of philosophy we must understand that it is an extraordinarily high one: one that requires the most careful research, so that the attempt to become like the one is not undermined by our misreading of reality. It is especially difficult today because several points on the path to this end have been badly misunderstood, and one in particular presents a real problem to the modern mind.

The usual view of Plato is that he divides perceptible reality into two: a lower, more or less material world which is the realm of the senses and which is in constant flux –

in a phrase it “is becoming but never truly is.” On the other hand there are the famous “platonic forms” or “ideas” which are perceptible only to the mind, and which are stable, eternal and the paradigms for all sensible things. But this crude view of Platonic metaphysics is really inadequate for explaining how the almost infinite multiplicity of the manifested universe arises from the first principle, or The One.

We can, perhaps, see how a number of instances of justice arise from a single overarching idea of justice, or how a number of things that are characterized by beauty arise from a single idea of beauty. Our acceptance of this theory does need us to be clear that the ideas which Plato speaks about in this way differ from, and only have an indirect relationship to, human concepts which are usually very far from stable. But how are we to explain the fact that there is a multiplicity of ideas? How are we to understand the way in which a pure oneness produces a multiplicity of ideas?

To answer this question, philosophy must dare to look at the highest levels of reality: in truth we must raise our eyes to divinity and ponder the deepest mysteries accessible to the human mind. Now if our highest consciousness was that of discursive reason, such a task would be in vain – to look beyond eternal ideas themselves with a faculty which is tied to temporal process is obviously a nonsense. So if our ambitions reach that high, it is clear that we must involve ourselves in exercises which open an eye which sees without the movement of time – this, says Plato,³ is an eye “better worth saving than ten thousand corporeal eyes, since truth is perceived by this alone.”

To go back to our question, and to consider the way in which The One proceeds towards multiplicity, requires meditation and contemplation: however the outline of

³ *Republic* 527e

the causal procession is put with as much clarity as is possible by Thomas Taylor in these words:⁴

“That the cause of all things is perfectly simple, unindigent, and beneficent, and that in consequence of this he cannot be more fitly denominated than by the epithets of *The One* and *The Good*; the former of these appellations denoting that all things proceed from him, and the latter that all things tend to him, as to the ultimate object of desire. That as it is necessary (the principle of things being *The One*) that the progression of beings should be continued, and that no vacuum should intervene either in incorporeal or corporeal natures; it is, also, necessary, that every thing which has a natural progression should proceed through similitude. That in consequence of this, it is necessary that every producing principle should generate a number of the same order with itself, *viz.* *nature* [as a principle], a natural number [of effects]; *soul* [as a principle, effects that are] psychical (*i.e.*, belonging to soul); and *intellect*, an intellectual number. For, if whatever possesses a power of generating generates things similar prior to things dissimilar, every cause must deliver its own form and characteristic property to its progeny; and before it generates that which gives subsistence to progressions far distant and separate from its nature, it must constitute things closest to itself according to essence, and conjoined with it through similitude. It is, therefore, necessary from the preceding axioms, since there is one unity the principle of the universe, that this unity should produce from itself, prior to every thing else, a multitude of natures characterized by unity, and a number the most of all things allied to its cause; and these natures are no other than the gods.”

In other words, when things generate from their essence, their productions are most like themselves: when a cat generates, it produces kittens; when a dog generates, it produces pups; when a human generates, it produces human babies; and when The

⁴ This is taken from Taylor's introduction to Proclus' *Theology of Plato*. TTS vol. VIII, p. 2.

One generates from itself it produces Ones. Or in more familiar terms, if we accept that The One is God, when God generates from his own nature, he produces gods.

For most ages, and in most cultures this is a most natural idea, and it is only because of the peculiar way in which the Christian religion overthrew its fellow religions – largely through antagonistic condemnation – that we may find this concept alien. As late as the close of the second century A.D. Maximus of Tyre wrote:⁵ “In such a mighty contest, sedition and discord, you will see one according law and assertion in all the earth, that there is one God, the king and father of all things, and many gods, sons of God, ruling together with him. This the Greek says, and the barbarian says, the inhabitant of the continent, and he who dwells near the sea, the wise and the unwise. And if you proceed as far as to the utmost shores of the ocean, there also there are gods, rising very near to some, and setting very near to others.”

I have spent some time on this area of Platonic philosophy because this unfamiliar doctrine is actually the key to intelligent religion and also devotional philosophy. Thomas Taylor, you will have noticed, says that in the progression of beings there should be no vacuum: but this is precisely what is produced in metaphysical systems if one tries to dispense with the Gods – there is a gap which cannot be intelligently filled if we jump straight from The One to a multiplicity of ideas, let alone if the jump is from The One to humankind and its reason. Most of the great schisms of early Christianity centred on the precise nature of Christ, as theologians stretched that principle first one way and then in another, in an attempt to bridge the chasm that appeared after the doctrine of the Gods had been rejected. Since a philosophical understanding of the nature of things divine became virtually impossible in the Christian era, the problem was compounded in the revolutions of the so-called enlightenment: the philosophic cultivation of the Gods, painted as irrational

⁵ Dissertation I, TTS vol. VI, p. 9.

superstition by Christianity, became considered doubly so when that religion was itself rejected as superstitious, by the new prophets of the enlightenment.

In the Platonic system, the gods are most similar to the One, but they take the first step towards multiplicity – they remain rooted in the One, but they make possible the subsequent movement of oneness into being. Or, in other words, they, by being many ones, allow the emergence of co-ordinated but different states of being. In the light of this, the whole of reality can be seen as theophany, or a manifestation of a divine play, a play which comprehends intellectual ideas, physical manifestation, and all intermediate realities including ourselves. Because these henads, unities, or gods are above the division between eternal being and temporal existences, the whole of reality is an organic whole bound together by providential gods whose light penetrates all levels of being, from the very highest to the least particle of sub-atomic matter. Modern commentators claim that Platonism is dualistic – and it would be, were it not for its recognition of the gods who make all things one.

After the gods emerge from The One, we see a beautiful chain of being descending in perfectly ordered stages – or, if you like, a continuum of providential power which is transmitted in the best possible way because, as Taylor said, no vacuum intervenes either in incorporeal or corporeal natures. By a procession of similarity, there are no gaps in the downflow of divine goodness.

So much, in brief summary, is Platonic metaphysics, with particular attention to its divine fountainhead. But philosophy is both metaphysical science and an art of human life: the same principles inform the science and art of philosophy. For this reason, when we examine the art of philosophy – that is to say genuine philosophy – we must understand that it provides a path which allows the human soul to move through the same continuum of similarity upwards towards the gods, and, ultimately, through them to The One. As such, our first affirmation concerning ourselves is that

we are participants in the divine drama – a very different affirmation from the insanity of modernism which sees us as extrusions of matter. Philosophy is, literally, the love of wisdom: and wisdom is that which will allow us to play the fullest possible role in this joyful play. In the clarity of the eye of philosophy, wisdom is a goddess, Pallas Athene to give her her Greek name: ‘Pallas’ refers to the step of rhythmic dance, while ‘Athene’ is derived from *θεονοη* *theonoe*, “that which understands divine concerns.”⁶ Our cultivation of philosophy is, therefore, to enter the dance which the whole of the universe performs about the King of all things (or the ineffable One) and to enter the dance *with an understanding of its divine nature*. The secret of this path is the secret of similitude: for what we love and think upon, that we almost become. The path of philosophy is, therefore, one which attempts to raise the soul through steps of ever increasing similarity, to a god-like vision, and god-like action – as Plotinus wrote,⁷ “the aim is not to be without sin, but to be as a god.”

I make no apology for consuming a large part of this lecture’s one short hour, with this attempt to summarize the heights of the beautiful philosophy of the Platonic tradition, the truths of which, wrote Taylor, are coeval with the universe itself. Without understanding something of the majesty and profundity of it, we will fail to understand what drove Thomas Taylor to the Herculean task of bringing it, as much as possible, into the light of day, after its millennium-long neglect, and dressing it in the garb of the English language. (A language, by the way that was rapidly becoming the most widespread as the British Empire formed on every continent in the world.)

Let us now return to the newly formed Platonist: by the end of the 1780’s Taylor was certainly turning his attention to the works of Plato himself and considering how they should be presented to an English speaking readership. We can see that for him the inclusion of many of the observations of the late Platonists (or Neoplatonists, as they were soon to be misnamed) as notes would be central to this project. In 1792 he

⁶ See Plato’s *Cratylus*, 407a ff.

⁷ On Virtue, *Ennead*, I, ii, 6.

published a translation of the *Phaedrus*, and in '93 a volume of four dialogues – The *Cratylus*, *Phaedo*, *Parmenides* and *Timaeus*. In the second of these he wrote: “To convince the reader that I have, at least, been in earnest in my pursuit of the Platonic philosophy, I may inform him that I have the following Platonic manuscripts. The seven books of Proclus on the *Parmenides*, the *Scholia* of Olympiodorus on the *Phaedo*, and large extracts from his *Scholia* on the *Gorgias*, the *Commentary* of Proclus on the *First Alcibiades*, and his *Scholia* on the *Cratylus*. All these manuscripts are copies taken with my own hand, and some of them I have read through twice, and the rest once; Proclus on the *Timaeus* thrice, and on the *Platonic Theology* five times at least. . . I omit mentioning other Platonic authors which I diligently studied because these [above mentioned] are the most voluminous, the most difficult, and the least generally known.”

This study of Plato through the writings of the late Platonists is all-important. In the period between Pythagoras (in the 6th century B.C.) and the second century, C.E., the basic philosophical and religious worldview remained, by and large, unchallenged – that there was to requote Maximus, “One God and many sons of God ruling with him”, and further, that the mythological tradition and the initiatory cult centres provided living insights into the nature of divinity, the universe and the soul’s place in it. In this broad agreement it was perfectly possible to rest the philosophic teachings upon the oral tradition. Plato himself says in both the *Phaedrus* and his *Second and Seventh Epistles*⁸ that the oral was superior to the written tradition and that he himself taught his most important truths “soul to soul” rather than via the impersonal and inarticulate approximations of the written text. What these inner teachings were remained largely hidden from public view until the third century brought about the rise of a form of Christianity which was hostile to philosophy, and did not scruple to suppress any opposition by the most violent of means. It was only then, as first the ordinary populous and then the ruling classes embraced this religion with its

⁸ *Phaedrus*, 275a-277a; *Epistle II*, 312d; *Epistle VII*, 341c.

unphilosophical concepts, that the Platonists who held to an inner teaching began to commit it as best they could to their written commentaries and scholia.

Naturally, the inner teachings related more to the upper reaches of metaphysics and philosophical practice, and since these late works of Platonism are much less easily misrepresented as merely rationalistic and unconcerned with polytheistic drama, the reception of Taylor's translations was never likely to be one of universal acclaim. I'll return to this reception and Taylor's reaction to it soon, but let there be no mistake: a lesser form of philosophy would not have so inspired a translator to have worked with almost no reward of wealth or honour for 50 years, compromising bodily health and sacrificing leisured ease.

During the period from 1782 to 1834 Taylor's output amounted to over 17,000 printed pages of philosophy – much of which is the most profound and demanding ever produced, and which requires the utmost care and thought in order to convey its subtle layers of meaning. Before Taylor's 1804 Works of Plato no-one had ever translated the whole of his works into English (although several university scholars had expressed a desire to do so); but as if this were not enough, many of the dialogues had a huge amount of commentary from the late Platonists included as notes. Some dialogues have significantly more commentary than actual text, so replete with meaning is the writing of Plato.

A similar approach to the works of Aristotle (1806-1812) meant that Taylor included several hundred pages of Commentary from Simplicius, Alexander Aphrodisiensis, Syrianus, Ammonius, Hermaeus, Priscianus and Olympiodorus. In all, nine lengthy volumes were published as the Complete Works of Aristotle, and because Taylor was unable to afford to print more than 50 of each volume, he then proceeded to write a summary dissertation on the Philosophy of Aristotle, amounting to some 500 pages. Again, this is a first in the English Language – in fact I think it is not only a first, but

actually unique: as far as I can see no other translator has translated all the surviving works of Aristotle into English.

Taylor's particular favourite amongst the writers of antiquity was Proclus, and during his time he translated the full surviving text of his Commentary on the *Timaeus*, his Commentary on the First book of Euclid's *Elements*, his *Elements of Theology*, his *Theology of Plato*, his essays on the Subsistence of Evil, on Providence, Fate and that which is within our Power, Ten Doubts concerning Providence, and a collection of fragments. Again these had never previously been translated into English, and Proclus's masterwork, the *Theology of Plato*, has not yet been translated into English by any other writer. As far as I know there is only one other edition in any other European language. Furthermore, Taylor considered that the surviving six books of this work were incomplete and that there was once a seventh book – so in place of this he collected writings from other late Platonists covering its probable subject matter.

Other volumes include translations of Plotinus, Porphyry, the Emperor Julian, Sallustius, Iamblichus, Apuleius, Pausanias amongst many others. Taylor himself wrote several works, notably on the *Arithmetic of the Pythagoreans*, and *The Mysteries of Eleusis and Bacchus*, as well as keeping up a steady flow of articles for various journals – the most important of which was a collection of the Chaldean Oracles. He also translated the Hymns of Orpheus, as well as hymns by Proclus, Boethius and Julian.

For a scholar working with the fullest support of modern Academia, such an output would be considered quite extraordinary: for a independent and poorly funded scholar who had very often to copy out any manuscripts from which he needed to work in the British Library or the Bodleian, who had to take hackwork as well as pupils for tuition in Greek, and who suffered from recurring ill-health, all of this work seems to be super-human in terms of quantity alone. But when we consider the

quality of Taylor's translations, then we must admit that Taylor alone of all English speaking philosophers would be worthy of the honour which antiquity gave to Plato, which is to be called the Divine.

This was not however a view that the vast majority of his contemporaries took; in his time there was a clear struggle in the intellectual circles of the West between those who looked back to Christian certainties and who, by and large, had been in control of European Universities, and the new modernistic establishment who would be taking control of very nearly all the centres of learning in the near future. To both camps talk of pagan gods and their myths, of self-realised perfection, of super-rational thought, and of interpreting Plato in the light of his cultural context was anathema. For the Christians, Plato was acceptable so long as he might be thought of as a pre-Christianity Christian, or "the first Christian" as it was put. And for modern rationalists Plato was acceptable so long as he could be thought of as a proto-sceptic, a pre-modern modern. Taylor's entire opus was at odds with both of these interpretations, and it called down upon his head the most malicious criticism.

The *Edinburgh Review*, speaking from the home of the Scottish Enlightenment movement, for example, devoted 24 angry pages to a condemnation of Taylor's Plato and in adding to Plato the notes of Proclus it said that Taylor, "has not translated Plato, he has travestied him, in a most cruel and abominable manner. He has not elucidated, but covered him over with impenetrable darkness. . . . In the character of a 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."

Blackwoods Magazine included this passage on Taylor who was, it says, ". . . 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 of which he is continually writing . . .”

This last criticism, that Taylor, as a largely self-taught Greek reader, did not have the scholarly depths to understand his subject matter is one that is a particular nonsense, and yet one that is still bandied about today. It is an accusation which stands no scrutiny whatsoever: we may note that in 1803, a year before the publication of his *Plato*, Taylor had been asked to produce a new edition of Hederic’s *Lexicon* – a Greek-Latin lexicon – which seems a very strange invitation to someone who, according to the critics didn’t understand Greek. In fact when we look at parallel passages between Taylor and other translators, time and again we can see greater subtleties in his wording. A small example is to be found in the *First Alcibiades* (130e), in a passage in which Socrates attempts to summarize what he and Alcibiades are doing. Taylor translates, “This therefore was our meaning when we said a little before, that Socrates discoursed with Alcibiades, making use of reason: we meant, it seems, that he directed his words and arguments, not to your outward person, but to Alcibiades himself, that is to the soul.” While every other translator I’ve come across uses a variation which runs more like, “And it is proper to take the view that you and I are conversing with each other, while we make use of words, by intercourse of soul with soul?” Which is better, Taylor’s phrase “making use of reason” or the common one, “making use of words”? The Greek word in question, *logos*, can mean words or reason, but those who are knowledgeable about Platonic philosophy will know that souls can be either rational or irrational and that human souls are rational and therefore are self-reflective and ultimately possess the ability to rise to a contemplation of divine ideas. This is, of course, what Socrates is leading up to in the dialogue, as a little while later he says, “Whether then is it not true, my friend Alcibiades, that the soul, if she would know herself, must look to soul, and especially at that place in the soul in which wisdom, the virtue of the soul, is ingenerated.” Taylor, in such small ways, leads us noiselessly into Platonic truth.

Now Taylor lived in an age in which public argument was never more so framed in wit and savagery, and he himself did not flinch from returning fire with fire. Here is an example of Taylor's uncompromising response to one reviewer:⁹

“Another review, however, (I believe the Critical [Magazine], for I speak from the information of others, as I never read such trash) speaks handsomely of this translation of Mr. Bridgman, though my name is mentioned in the preface to it. I am further informed, that this Monthly Reviewer adds, ‘We repeat that we regarded the name of this gentleman, and the honourable mention with which it is introduced, as rather alarming omens.’ I have no doubt he did, and I trust my name will always be an alarming omen to the stupid, the malevolent, and the worthless; - that it will always be an omen of unceasing hostility, and the most strenuous exertions against folly and vice, and against illiberal criticism and venal defamation. For of all the species of traffic with which this island abounds, that of reviewing books, as it is at present conducted, is the most illiberal, as well as the most tyrannical. It is most illiberal, because it is undertaken from sordid motives; and it is most tyrannical, because it becomes the means of subjugating the opinion of the multitude to the decision of an obscure and worthless few.”

There is, I believe, an excellent little gift book to be made from such rejoinders from the pen of Taylor.

But to return to the rejection of Taylor: this was a time when English speaking readers around the world were given a clear glimpse of the profundities and possibilities of the true philosophic tradition of the West – a moment when our society stood on the brink of change, as the old authority of the Church was losing its grip on the intellectual life of humankind. At that moment we could have chosen the

⁹ See note 16, p. 524 of Taylor's *Dissertation on the Philosophy of Aristotle*, TTS vol. XXXVIII.

philosophical path, with its cultivation of wisdom, its emphasis on meaning and value, and that inner happiness which is the necessary result of the care of the soul. But already rising into view was the brute power of commerce and mechanics, with its promise of earthly pleasures and utilitarian comforts of the body: to our great loss, the leaders of eighteenth and nineteenth century thought were not able to overcome their prejudices and see what true gains could be made if philosophy became a living discipline once again.

There were two exceptions to this rejection: in Britain, the romantic movement was inspired by Taylor and his works.¹⁰ Coleridge wrote of Taylor, as one of his “darling studies”; Shelley is recorded as having several of his books on his shelf at Oxford and there are letters from him requesting that Taylor’s translation of Pausanias be obtained and sent to him; the friendship between Blake and Taylor has been well documented by various scholars in recent times, not least by Kathleen Raine herself. Thomas Love Peacock knew him later in life, and Kathleen Raine suggests that Keats “may at a remove have caught the enthusiasm of his Greek polytheism from Taylor.” Taylor moved in that circle of artist-thinkers who challenged the establishment of his day – for a while Mary Wollstonecraft lodged with him in Walworth, and is recorded as having called Thomas’ study, “an abode of peace.”

The American transcendentalist movement, too, regarded Taylor as one of their prime authorities, and relied on his translations for their access to Greek philosophical thought. Emerson is said to have expressed incredulity on visiting England a few years after Taylor’s death that he (Taylor) was virtually unknown, when, he said, “every library in America has books by him.”

Scholarly appreciation of Taylor continued to be mixed after his death, and even now, I can tell you, it is very difficult to make sales of his books to British and American

¹⁰ For a detailed examination of Taylor's influence on the Romantic movement, see Kathleen Raine's 'Thomas Taylor in England', in *Thomas Taylor the Platonist, Selected Writings*, Princeton UP, 1969.

university philosophy or classics departments. There is, however a small trail of goodwill winding its way through the 170 years since his death; in 1848 Robert Blakey, in his *History of the Philosophy of Mind*,¹¹ gives this generous account of Taylor, who he says is “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 remote sources, and effected its perfect mastership.” As Kathleen Raine points out, “it is not possible that Blakey had forgotten the Florentine school, and his praise of Taylor is high indeed.” More recently a leading (perhaps the leading) university scholar of today’s ancient philosophy studies, Professor John Dillon, in an introduction to a new translation of Proclus’ *Commentary on the Parmenides*¹² says of the Greek text of this work, as published by Cousin, “Cousin was also able to profit (in his presentation of a edited text of this work) from a host of emendations, many brilliant, from the English Neoplatonist, Thomas Taylor . . .” This may also lay to rest the suggestion that Taylor did not understand philosophical Greek – the *Commentary on the Parmenides* being, perhaps, the most profound work of Platonic metaphysics ever written. And mentioning Cousin, a French scholar of late Platonic works, it might be worth adding that Taylor was much honoured by several of his fellow Professors of Platonic studies – Boissonade and Crueuzer included.

Thomas Taylor died on November 1st 1835 according to a brief biographical account by W E A Axon, and was buried in Walworth Churchyard, perhaps appropriately with no stone to mark the spot. Axon ends his account with a simple tribute saying that his name should be remembered by all friends of learning and freedom of thought.

¹¹ IV, 66-68.

¹² p. xliii.

What legacy has this heroic soul left to us? Firstly, he has left a treasury of wisdom, without which our understanding of the central philosophy of the western world would be deeply misunderstood: this treasury is ours only because Taylor himself followed the path as a personal quest. Not matter how clever a theoretician is, there are some truths which are accessible only to those who are practitioners: a recent discovery in a Canadian library of one of Taylor's publications gives us a real insight concerning how far this master metaphysician carried into actual life his understanding of the path of philosophy. The passage comes from a work by Synesius in which he discusses the progress of the soul, and its use of what is termed the phantasy – the faculty which produces images of what has been perceived either internally or externally. It reads:¹³

“For when this intellectual splendour is firmly introduced, and illuminates every part of the phantasy, the smallest spark, and the most glimmering ray of external light, will call forth into energy that sacred light, which is now perfectly seated in the sanctuary of the soul. Such too will be the temperament of the soul in this case, that she will spontaneously utter musical sounds, as indications of the harmony within; and as echoes of the perpetual felicity she enjoys.”

And in the margin against this description in Taylor's own hand are the words, “I myself have experienced this.” There are other yet more inward experiences which the philosopher-soul would undergo, but we can be reasonably sure that our English guide into the mysteries of the Platonic tradition was following the path in the most practical of ways. Evidence of this is from a manuscript found in the archive of Thomas Moore-Johnson, the editor of a magazine called *The Platonist* and a collector of Taylor's writings: this was a notebook inscribed *Hymns and Prayers* by Thomas Taylor. Inside are eighteen hymns published by Taylor between 1793 and 1806, but also a number of unpublished hymns all of which carry the clearest stamp of Taylor's

¹³ See *Oracles and Mysteries* (TTS vol. VII) p. 204. The passage is from Synesius *On Dreams*. The discovery is part of an as yet unpublished update to Steven Critchley's doctoral thesis on Taylor.

philosophy as well as matching other known handwriting samples dating from around 1825. Taylor was worshipping the Gods – for as a Pythagorean maxim says, “No man knows a God except first he worships him.”

Secondly, he has left us in the example of his life, a model of philosophic arête – excellence or virtue – which shines brightly whether the life is one of good or ill fortune. For, as Taylor himself wrote,¹⁴ “Wisdom leaves no place for evil, for the only evil to wisdom is baseness, which cannot enter where virtue and worth reside. . . Fortune takes away nothing except that which she gave, but she does not give virtue, and therefore does not take it away.”

Thirdly, he leaves with us an exhortation to the great goal of the hero soul. Time and again in his notes and introductions Taylor leans out of his pages and speaks to us as individuals. And although the first item on my listing of his legacy – the bestowal of the unperverted conceptions of the true philosophy of the West, the great treasury of wisdom – is perhaps the primary one, nevertheless this last gift is by no means overshadowed by it. Ultimately, the wisdom is ours to discover in the divine depths of our own souls: Taylor does not speak to us as passive recipients of the wisdom of Plato and his school; rather he invites us to address ourselves directly to the task, recognizing only the absolute need for our orientation to divinity. Here, for example, are some of the words with which he introduces the five volume works of Plato, in which he invites us to rediscover the long neglected path of philosophy:¹⁵

“The undertaking is indeed no less novel than arduous, since the author of it [i.e. the translations of Plato] has to tread in paths which have been untrodden for upwards of a thousand years, and to bring to light truths which for that extended period have been concealed in Greek. Let not the reader, therefore, be surprised at the solitariness of the paths through which I shall attempt to

¹⁴ From the *Triumph of the Wise Man over Fortune*, TTS vol. VI, p. 334.

¹⁵ The Works of Plato I, p. 1-2.

conduct him, or at the novelty of the objects which will present themselves in the journey: for perhaps he may fortunately recollect that he has travelled the same road before, that the scenes were once familiar to him, and that the country through which he is passing is his native land. At least, if his sight should be dim, and his memory oblivious, (for the objects which he will meet with can only be seen by the most piercing eyes,) and his absence from them has been lamentably long, let him implore the power of wisdom,

From mortal mists to purify his eyes,

That God and man he may distinctly see. *Iliad, V, 127, &c,*

Let us also, imploring the assistance of the same illuminating power, begin the solitary journey.”

In Plato’s story of the Cave, the prisoner who is eventually to look upon the Sun, that symbol of the One and the Good, starts his adventure when someone takes him by the arm and draws him out of the cave. Who is that mysterious one, who remains unnamed by Socrates? Perhaps someone different for every soul that is trapped by the illusion of the shadows on the cave wall. But perhaps for many English readers now and to come that first impulse comes from Thomas Taylor, Wisdom’s Champion, and her unbowed hero.

Taylor wrote three hymns to the Athene, and it seems appropriate to end with a few lines from one of them:¹⁶

O beauteous virgin! may thy power excite
Far in the deep recesses of my soul
Conception of the Gods divinely pure,
And full of Truth's serenely splendid light.

¹⁶ Hymn to Minerva, Hymns and Initiations (TTS vol. V), p. 234-5.