

Book Review

IAMBlichus ON THE MYSTERIES OF THE EGYPTIANS, CHALDEANS AND ASSYRIANS

Translated from the Greek by Thomas Taylor
(Vincent Stuart and John M. Watkins. 63s.)

Review by Kathleen Raine

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THOMAS TAYLOR the Platonist (1758-1835) is one of the most remarkable figures in the history of ideas. Abused by the pedants and critics of his own day, and subsequently disregarded by the academic world, his writings have, from the publication of his paraphrase translation of Plotinus *On the Beautiful* in 1787 continued to exert a transforming effect upon the poets and those few distinguished minds who read the ancient philosophers for the sake of wisdom rather than learning.

It was Taylor, first translator of Plato into English, who supplied the texts from which the English Romantic poets learned the Neoplatonic metaphysics, with its accompanying symbolic discourse, which wrought so revolutionary a transformation in the theory and practise of poetry at the end of the eighteenth century. Blake, Coleridge, Shelley and Keats all are, in various modes and degrees, polytheists; from Blake, whose polytheism is included within a Christian framework, to Keats, the least philosophic but the most mythological of the Romantics. Taylor may best be seen in the context of the Greek revival, whose beginnings were in the visual arts, but whose effects went far beyond the temporary excitement caused by the publication of such works as Stuart and Revett's *Antiquities of Athens and Ionia*, or the ceramics and statuary brought to England by travellers from Sir William Hamilton (who had purchased the Barberini vase) to Lord Elgin. Taylor was a friend of Flaxman, one of the moving spirits of the Greek Revival in the visual arts; it was Flaxman who inspired Josiah Wedgwood to attempt his famous replicas of the Barberini (now Portland) vase, whose emblems were at that time believed to be representations of the Eleusinian Mysteries; and it was Taylor whose *Dissertation on the Eleusinian and Bacchic Mysteries* instructed his generation in the nature of these Mysteries. Taylor gave in the 1880's a series of lectures on the Platonic philosophy at Flaxman's house, to a distinguished audience which included Romney; and among those not sufficiently distinguished to be mentioned by Taylor in his memoir William Blake was almost certain to have been one, for he was at that time on terms of intimacy with Flaxman; Taylor appears as "the Pythagorean" in Blake's early satire, *An Island in the Moon*.

It is in Blake's writings that the first impact of Taylor and the Neoplatonic philosophy may first be discerned. Coleridge, still a schoolboy, was at the same time delighting in the works of "Taylor the English Pagan"; Wordsworth read Plotinus in Taylor's paraphrase translations; Shelley (who of course read the Greek authors in the original) possessed Taylor's Plato.

It was above all Taylor's early writings and translations which influenced the English Romantic poets. A generation later the American Transcendentalists drew their inspiration from

the same works. Emerson and Bronson Alcott venerated him, and were astonished at his neglect in England. Alcott collected, on his visit to England in 1841, a library of wisdom for "the new Eden" at Fruitlands, in which he included as many of Taylor's works as he could find. Alcott's young disciple Thomas M. Johnson founded his magazine *The Platonist* (1880 to 1888) with the avowed purpose of republishing Taylor's writings and translations.

Taylor was again to be the main source of knowledge of the Neoplatonists for the Theosophical Society. Mrs. Mary Anne Atwood (author of *A Suggestive Enquiry into the Hermetic Philosophy and Alchemy*, a work of Quixotic learning full of long extracts from Taylor and the Alchemists) presented to the Society (whose president at that time was A. P. Sinnett) the library of her father, Thomas South, which included the works of Thomas Taylor. Mrs. Atwood had hoped that the Theosophical Society would become a school of Pythagorean learning, and withdrew her gift when this proved not to be so. Meanwhile a number of Taylor's works were republished by the Theosophical Society itself, or by John M. Watkins, the theosophical publisher. G. R. S. Mead's *Orpheus* is an expansion of Taylor's Introduction to *The Mystical Hymns of Orpheus* (the second edition). W. B. Yeats and George Russell (AE) were both members of the Theosophical Society, and doubtless read Taylor first in these re-publications; AE called Taylor "the uncrowned King" and Yeats possessed a number of his works.

Iamblichus *On the Mysteries*, published in 1821, came after the English Romantic movement was spent; its selection for re-publication in 1895 reflects the Theosophical Society's interest rather in theurgy than in metaphysics. When in the 1880's the Hermetic Society of the Golden Dawn was founded, Taylor's philosophic polytheism was translated into ritual and invocation; an influence clearly to be seen in Yeats's plays and poetry.

The new edition is a reprint of the 1895 John M. Watkins reproduction of the 1821 first edition, whose beautiful typography bears the stamp of Taylor's period. Taylor's works have recently begun to be subjected to those academic studies he himself so much despised; and his readers now tend to be members of the academic profession rather than lovers of that wisdom of the Greek philosophers whose transmission was Taylor's sole object. It is to be hoped that some at least will discover that wisdom in the course of their studies. It is also possible that the impulse of quantitative science has almost spent itself, and that a return to the traditional concept of mind as the only substantial reality may have already been reached through the following of scientific investigation to its conclusion. Taylor came to the Platonic philosophy through mathematics; and by a curious coincidence the author of this notice attended, on the day of the re-publication of Iamblichus *On the Mysteries*, a lecture by G. Spencer-Brown, a former pupil of Lord Russell, upon the mathematics of the celestial hierarchies of Dionysius. The relation between the divine and angelic orders and number was understood by the Greek theology, as it is also in cabalism; and it is therefore perhaps less strange than it might appear that a rediscovery of the objective validity of the Greek *mathesis*, inseparable from theology, should come rather from the most advanced students of mathematics rather than from the atheist humanist students of classics and anthropology, or the euhemerist interpreters of myths. On the third page of Taylor's Introduction is a sentence which is almost word for word with the lecturer's exposition of the mathematical inevitability of the Dionysian Trinity: "According to this (the Orphic) theology, as I have elsewhere shown, in every order of things, a triad is the immediate progeny of a monad." So time sifts truth, and restores ancient knowledge, when this knowledge corresponds to the immutable nature of things.

Taylor's translations represent a side of Greek thought that but for him would be

unrepresented in English literature. His writings may be superseded in scholar-ship, and also in style; they will never be surpassed in understanding of the Greek philosophy. As G. R. S. Mead wrote of him "Taylor was more than a scholar, he was a philosopher in the Platonic sense of the word."