

Climate Change and Cultural Transformation

Part 4 The Good, the True and the Sublime

Chapter 16 **Experiencing the Sublime: the “I” of the Beholder.**

Persevere, do not only practise your art, but endeavour also to fathom its inner meaning: it deserves this effort. For only art and science can raise men to the level of gods.

Beethoven, Letter to Emilie

A fool sees not the same tree that a wise man sees.

William Blake, *proverbs of Hell*

If you can sit quietly for a while, all-time - ten thousand ages, a thousand lifetimes - is penetrated from this. All phenomena revert to stillness. Truly inconceivable is this sublime truth.

The Secret of the Golden Flower, III, 11
(Thomas Cleary translation)

Form is emptiness. Emptiness is form.

Buddha Shakyamuni, *Heart Sutra*

I have been watching over and over again Professor Brian Cox's inspired television series, "Wonders of the Universe", transfixed, as we all are, by the revelations of current physics, chemistry and astronomy about the scale and simple, yet infinite complexity of the material universe. ¹ I have always thought of the daytime sky as a roof which opens at night enabling us to see out, into the night sky, a mysterious and deep darkness which is also full of light. How wonderful to have the revealing photography taken from the Hubble telescope, see the beautiful pictures of galaxies and patterns of colourful nebula and learn that we can know with certainty the chemical constituents of stars, light years away, through the magical science of spectroscopy. The universe is a great rainbow of light.

The perspective present-day astro-physics gives us on the material reality of our lives, as recounted by Professor Cox, is astounding, whether on the time-scale of the birth and

death of stars, the forging of chemistry's elements in their cosmic life-cycle, our embodiment of that chemistry - proving that we are truly "stardust" - the shaping of all life by gravity, the evolutionary nature of the "arrow of time", illustrating the evanescent and finite nature of the universe, and the interconnectedness of everything by the universal substance of light, which manifests in the infinite variety of creation's forms, including us, "the human phenomenon".

Professor Cox knows how to tell science's twenty-first century creation story with great televisual skill, using unfamiliar landscapes across the Earth as backdrops to simple but profound lectures on the subjects he clearly feels so passionate about. We know the universe is large but current-day astronomy has computed just how large. It is beyond our imaginations, though Professor Cox comes close to quantifying what our minds can't really grasp. But he also convincingly demonstrates how "beautiful" - a word physicists use a lot - the universe is, both in its simplicity and complexity. He may be a physicist by profession but he is also an artist by instinct. The opening shot of him, perched precariously on a snow-bound mountain top, recalls Casper David Friedrich's well-known 1818 painting of *The Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*.

At the same time, to anyone trained in the humanities, physics seems a reductive discipline in the arrogation it makes that everything can be explained by its understanding of the material, sub-atomic world. What about immaterial realities? Feeling, language, music, thought and the human imagination - how does physics account for these? Professor Cox may be demonstrating humanity's wonderful insights into the nature of the material universe but, like many highly intelligent scientists, he is less aware of himself as observer of those insights. Physics seems to be oblivious to human psychology, but equally wonderful to the actual nature of the universe is the mind apprehending it. The contemplation of nature outside us reveals how beautiful it is, but is not the awareness of ourselves as a part of that nature even more sublime?

The ancient Greeks: Longinus, Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus

In his study of the art of poetry, *On the Sublime*, the Ancient Greek writer, Longinus, identified the "five sources" that led to a knowledge of the sublime. They were the ability to form grand conceptions and the stimulus of powerful and inspired emotions, which are "innate" elements, the remainder being the product of art, such as the proper formation of

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figures of thought and speech. The fifth source of grandeur is “the total effect resulting from dignity and elevation”.² He added: “Sublimity is the echo of a noble mind”, a simple idea within greatness of mind - “The truly eloquent man must have a mind that is not mean or ignoble” - and he must organise his material well, having the ability “to relate elements to one another in such a way as to make of them a single organism”.³

Plato distrusted art altogether, as he recounted dogmatically in *The Republic*, while Aristotle believed art - poetry and theatre - could make a person more human. In fact, where Plato placed art third in line after philosophy and history, Aristotle promoted it, ranking them as philosophy, art, then history. Plotinus was more psychological and subtle than either and wrote in his famous chapter in *The Enneads* on beauty: “To any vision must be brought an eye adapted to what is to be seen, and having some likeness to it. Never did the eye see the sun unless it had first become sunlike, and never can the Soul have vision of the First Beauty unless itself be beautiful”.⁴

Rousseau and the Counter-Enlightenment

The revival of Ancient Greek civic and personal values was an important part of the Romantic sensibility. The reaction against pure reason and instrumental science is also known as the counter-Enlightenment movement of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It may be said to have begun with Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-78), himself a central but critical figure of the European Enlightenment. Rousseau famously declared that “man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains”. Our freedom is to be found in the human heart and in our feelings, but these, according to Rousseau, are obscured by the activities of egoistic individuals who have formed the corrupt political and civil institutions of the modern state. Rousseau was concerned with education as a means to recover the noble purity he believed we are born with. He died before he could witness the “terror” which the ideal values of fraternity, equality, and liberty of the French Revolution led to.

Education, then, implied understanding human nature better, as it was evolving in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Self-realisation was essential to the effective harmony of community life and the social justice that would accompany it. Following Rousseau, the German Romanticism of poets such as Hoelderlin, Goethe and Schiller were complemented by the profound idealistic philosophy of Kant, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel. In England the origins of Romantic poetry lay in the early work of Wordsworth and

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his partnership with Coleridge, whose *Biographia Literaria* drew on the thinking of German idealistic Philosophy, particularly Schelling. Wordsworth and Coleridge published the *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798, along with their Preface in the 1802 edition, which was their Romantic manifesto, and paved the way for the second generation of poets, such as Keats, Shelley and Byron.

If the universe is a great work of art and if we are an essential part of it, as Brian Cox's "Wonders" programmes suggest, then we, ourselves, must be an aesthetic phenomenon of cosmic significance. The Romantics glimpsed this but the view was lost to modernity. Poetry, philosophy and music offered paths to its realisation but the forces of materialism alone were too strong. Science, industrialism and technology, allied with the expanding commercialism, prevailed.

Wordsworth and Coleridge

Wordsworth wrote his epic poem, *The Prelude*, "not about heroes and gods, not about his nation, nor about the spiritual journey of humankind, but about himself. The most ancient of poetic forms was made new and made personal, turned inward to address the growth of the poet's own self." ⁵ Jonathan Bate described in the opening chapter of his recent book, *Radical Wordsworth*, how at Christmas, 1806, Wordsworth read his epic poem to the small gathering that was staying with him at Hall Farm in Coleorton, Leicestershire - Coleridge, Wordsworth's wife, Mary, his sister, Dorothy, and sister-in-law, Sara Hutchinson. He declared that he and Coleridge would one day be seen as "Prophets of Nature" and would offer mankind "A lasting inspiration sanctified / By reason and by truth", a philosophy of the love of nature and a blueprint for 'how the mind of man' may become 'A thousand times more beautiful than the Earth / on which he dwells.'" ⁶

Wordsworth never himself named his autobiographical poem *The Prelude*. It was 'The Poem to Coleridge', 'The Poem on my own Life' or simply 'The Poem on the Growth of my own Mind'. It was a mind that could say, as he travelled in revolutionary France at the end of the eighteenth century "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive". Wordsworth's radicalism waned as he grew older, as did his poetic inspiration, and, to Keat's dismay, he even came to support the forces of conservatism, but he and Coleridge were still looked up to as the founders of a new imaginative spirit in their younger days.

Wordsworth and Coleridge did their best work in collaboration. Wordsworth wrote about the power of poetry in *The Prelude* and expressed it nowhere more forcefully than in *The Lines Written above Tintern Abbey*, where he described:

a sense sublime
of something far more deeply interfused
whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
and the round ocean and the living air,
and the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
a motion and a spirit that impels
all thinking things, all objects of all thought,
and rolls through all things.

This was Wordsworth writing, as Bate put it with a quote from *The Prelude*, “From the dread watch-tower of man’s absolute self’ to a place in nature, a vision of the divine and a sense of community.”⁷ This may have been a dread view but it was also sublime.

Coleridge

Coleridge is thought to be one of our greatest romantic poets but also perhaps because he was a romantic philosopher and thinker. He wrote and discoursed with great learning on the problems of social and political change, the nature of literature, the role of education, the function of myth and symbol, religious experience and the world of drugs and dreams. But it was his concept of the creative imagination that drew him to Wordsworth and which has so influenced our notions of growth and culture after Coleridge. His sense of a spiritual crisis and the anxiety at the heart of our existence makes him very modern.

Both he and Wordsworth had a sense of nature as alive and whose power was reflected in us. As Coleridge wrote in the pivotal chapter X111 of *Biographia Literaria*:

The primary imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perceptions and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.⁸

Coleridge's biographer, Richard Holmes, commented on this passage: "We create - or re-create - the world through our imagination in the same sense that God, 'the infinite I AM', originally created and continues to create it. The imagination of the poet, the 'secondary' imagination, is a special, shaped and conscious form of this primary act".⁹ Quoting from the same paragraph of chapter X111, Holmes described how, in Coleridge's words, the poet's imagination "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create.....it is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead."

Coleridge and Schelling

Thus, the power of the poet's imagination is brought to life by the primary imagination within nature, but also beyond and within himself. Coleridge understood this philosophically, as well as poetically, as a result of his reading of the German idealistic philosophers, particularly Schelling. From the latter's *Nature Philosophy and System of Transcendental Idealism* Coleridge would have gleaned a philosophical understanding of nature as an organic unity and also of the relationship between the manifest plurality of the world and the singular ineffability of the Absolute. He was sometimes accused of plagiarism of the German philosophers but his originality is as a poet, not a philosopher: "I regard truth as a divine ventriloquist: I care not from whose mouth the sounds are supposed to proceed, if only the words are audible and intelligible".

Interestingly, one of Schelling's later works was *The Philosophy of Art*. Schelling was able to emphasise "the metaphysical significance of the work of art as the finite manifestation of the infinite Absolute".¹⁰ Or, to quote Schelling himself, writing about divine ideas, "beauty exists where the particular (the real) is so in accord with its idea (divine idea) that this idea itself, as infinite, enters into the finite and is intuited *in concreto*".¹¹ The poet is able, through his imagination, to intuit both the idea of the Absolute and its expression in the manifest world of the particular. For Coleridge as poet, they are a unity. In an entry in his notebook of April 1805 he wrote:

In looking at objects of Nature while I am thinking, as at yonder moon dim-glimmering thro' the dewy window-pane, I seem rather to be seeking, as it were *asking*, a symbolical language for something within me that already and forever exists, than observing anything new. Even when that latter is the case, yet still I have always an obscure feeling as if that new phenomenon were the dim Awakening of a forgotten Truth

of my inner nature. ¹²

Goethe, Schiller and Beethoven

What we know as the force of Romanticism was finding expression throughout Europe, particularly in Germany. Similar to Wordsworth and Coleridge's collaboration, Goethe and Schiller complemented each other, the one, as poet, expressing the phenomenology of nature within himself, Schiller, providing the energy of revolutionary and educational thought. Schiller believed man was defined by his deeds and, in analysing politics, revolution and human nature, asserted in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* his conviction that only an aesthetic education could achieve a real revolution leading to a truly free society, while Goethe, as Faust, made the journey, through his poetry, from a morally limited world of the orthodox Christian imagination to the natural man of the second part of *Faust*, a man with a very human, flawed nature but whom Goethe could never bring himself to condemn.

Like Goethe, Beethoven, the other great Romantic force, was born into a classical age, but declaimed the new spirit of the age much more loudly and more insistently from the outset, waking people up and gaining their adoration as he did so. His music was quite revolutionary, when compared to Mozart and Haydn. Perhaps the great loss of his physical hearing enabled him to hear transcendentally and with an unmistakable clarity and assurance of vision unavailable to we ordinary mortals. His music expressed every kind of feeling, including transcendent joy, such as in the ninth symphony when he famously set Schiller's *Ode to Joy* to the music of the last movement.

Beethoven was very flawed in his personal life. This split in his personal and greater awareness is described in moving detail in Jan Swafford's recent biography. ¹³ He and Goethe, the two titans of the Romantic spirit, met only once, in Teplitz. Beethoven was twenty years younger and made fun of the poet's aristocratic's pretensions, but played for him, much to Goethe's admiration, though he found Beethoven too loud and passionate and made no effort to remain in personal contact. Interestingly, Rüdiger Safranski's recent biography of Goethe was subtitled *Life as a Work of Art*.¹⁴ Beethoven's life was anything but a work of art, although his music we consider eternally sublime. Nature, for him, was absolutely transcendent, while, for Goethe, poetry was the bridge between the transcendent and the earthly.

Mimesis

In *Hamlet* Shakespeare famously suggested that art was a matter of “holding up the mirror to nature”, a process which has become known by the Greek word, *mimesis*, which is often translated as “imitation”. But as Stephen Halliwell has suggested this is not an accurate translation.¹⁵ The truth of nature is that it never imitates exactly. In our machine and industrial-technological age we have forgotten this. Nature’s “products” are always unique. They are never exact copies. No single atom, nor sub-atomic particle, can be the same. They are all unique. It is difficult in our mechanical culture to understand and appreciate this.

Halliwell follows Goethe in suggesting there are two concepts of mimesis. Firstly, the conventional view of art as depicting a world that is accessible and knowable. And secondly the principle of “penetrating beyond natural appearances to nature’s inner truth”,¹⁶ art’s capacity to point to the reality within nature, which will always be more than mere imitation. And, since we are a part of nature, this points to the truth, that there is something essential and unique within each of us, beyond the personal experience we have of ourselves. In our essential nature we are never copies merely of each other.

The “Awakening” of the Romantic movement, as a reaction to the limitations of the European Enlightenment and the mechanical thinking of industrial culture, did not last. It burned bright - and still does in many ways through the power of its poetry and music - but it gave way to the greater force of modernity, whether scientific or artistic. The nineteenth was what we have since called the century of Romanticism, characterised, for instance, musically by the spirit of Beethoven at the beginning, through Brahms to Wagner, Bruckner and Mahler at the end, and, poetically, from Goethe to Victor Hugo to the French Symbolist poets and the great novelists such as George Eliot, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. But it was also the century of a scientific industrialism, imperialism and adventure capitalism which led to the cataclysmic events of the twentieth century.

The dimming of the Romantic spirit may have been partly due to its own internal shortcomings, whether we see them as a form of divine egoism, an ungrounded idealism, or lack of scientific understanding and education, but the era of scientific modernity led to a culture split between a scientific materialistic world-view and an artistic modernism focused

on the senses and the individual mind. In his 1830 *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics* Hegel acknowledged the importance of art. Like the Romantics, he thought Christianity's unworldliness had deprived man of his spontaneous and direct relationship with his essential spiritual self, as his ironic detachment from life had cut him off from his deepest feelings. But he was pessimistic about art's capacity to address the problems of the modern world by itself. It needed to be thought of in relation to philosophy and religion. Art was the expression of the Absolute within man but Hegel's philosophic understanding led him eventually to identify the Absolute with the Prussian political state, which was a concept far removed from the original impulse of the poets and composers before him.

The modern mind

Modern culture was not simply a picture of decline. In his major philosophical work about "the making of the modern identity" the Hegelian scholar, Charles Taylor, pointed to the moral space achieved in the twentieth century by the turn towards "Inwardness", "The Affirmation of Everyday Life" and "The Voice of (material) Nature". He noted how divided modern commentators can be, either too optimistically upbeat in their belief in progress or too pessimistic in their assessment of modern decline. Both views, in his opinion, miss "massively important features of our situation..... We have yet to capture, I think, the unique combination of greatness and danger, of *grandeur et misere*, which characterises the modern age. To see the full complexity and richness of the modern identity is to see, first, how much we are all caught up in it, for all our attempts to repudiate it; and second, how shallow and partial are the one-sided judgements we bandy around about it." ¹⁷

The same attempt to understand the values of modernity in a historical evolutionary perspective has been made by his contemporary German philosophical colleague, Jurgen Habermas, who characterised modernity as "an unfinished project". ¹⁸ Habermas also understood the importance of integrating the three great value spheres of ethics, science, and aesthetics, and the corresponding "three validity dimensions" of "truth, rightness and truthfulness", which modernity had separated and which constituted, in his view, the nature of the unfinished project - and of the European Enlightenment. Kant had begun the project by identifying these separate value spheres in his three famous critiques of "Pure Reason", "Practical Reason" and "Judgement". Habermas reasoned that the emergence of secular morality was an important step in the achievement of the modernity project.

The twentieth century may have been an apocalyptic one when we consider the litany of destructiveness it experienced - two world wars, a major economic depression in the thirties, the proliferation of annihilating nuclear weapons and a Cold War in the second half of the century, genocides throughout, the violent slaughter of more than 100 million people, a potentially fatal acceleration of carbon emissions resulting in global life-threatening climate change, and an ecological emergency responsible for the sixth mass extinction we are now experiencing. But an apocalyptic age is also a period of great cultural change.

The century began with a work that transformed our understanding of ourselves. Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1898) invited us to look into the phenomenology of the human mind and had implications, not just for the practice of psychology but also for the whole artistic and conscious world. Painting and sculpture were experimenting with revolutionary forms and ideas and the great novelists of the twenties imagined a new consciousness, whether Marcel Proust remembering the past as an experience of the present, Thomas Mann using the symbolic location of *The Magic Mountain* as a microcosm of Europe in turmoil, or James Joyce re-inventing the English language by describing the stream of thoughts in the mind of its modern hero, Leopold Bloom, in the span of one day in pre-war Dublin, *Ulysses* being a narrative that also seemed to contain reference to the whole of human thought and poetry since Homer. At the same time physicists were forging a new scientific revolution with Einstein's relativity theories and the revelations of quantum mechanics which confounded and opened up all our conventional thinking.

There was a revolutionary growth in consciousness through the twentieth century, but without the "organic unity" felt within nature by Schelling and the Romantics in Germany and the Revolution in the poetic imagination in Britain, led by Coleridge and Wordsworth. Our estrangement from ourselves, as a part of the unity of nature and as an aesthetic human phenomenon, may have been felt by the Romantics but the cultural focus of modernity has been, perhaps necessarily, much more modest and more local. Freud captured this mood in the title he published after his dream book, *The Psycho-Pathology of Everyday Life*. Everyday life, with all the gadgets and comforts science could provide, kept our eyes firmly on the earthly material nature of human society and our imaginations off any transcendent and universal view of the stars.

Aesthetics and art

In his book, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, published at the end of the last century, the Marxist and Catholic cultural critic, Terry Eagleton, gave an account and analysis of the restricted and qualified aesthetic of modernity. ¹⁹ “Aesthetics”, itself, is a modern phenomenon. The concept originated in the work of Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten in the eighteenth century. Derived from the Greek, *aisthetikos*, meaning things perceptible by the senses, it became a branch of philosophy of its own. Baumgarten had first used the word in a book on poetry before he published a treatise in 1750 entitled *Aesthetics*. As a philosophy it became more about a question of personal and social taste, with significant implications for issues of culture and politics in modern Western civilisation. Eagleton contrasted the idea of the aesthetic, which is a modern phenomenon, with the universal reality of art.

What he termed the “moment of modernity” is characterised by the dissociation and specialisation of the Good, the True and the Beautiful . Each becomes autonomous and separate from the other two. Thus art, estranged from cognitive and ethical values, becomes a commodity and “is released from its traditional social functions within church, court and state into the anonymous freedom of the market place”. ²⁰ It has no specific audience but becomes available for anyone who appreciates and can afford to buy it. Art thus becomes marginal, unlike aesthetics, which rescues art, as it were, and gives it a place in the social order again. Aesthetics does bring art back into relation with ethics and science - as cognition - but does so at a cost. As Eagleton pointed out, it effectively swallows up the latter: “Everything should now become aesthetic. Truth, the cognitive, becomes that which satisfies the mind..... Morality is converted to a matter of style, pleasure and intuition. How should one live one’s life properly? By turning oneself into an artefact”. ²¹

The implication in Eagleton’s view would presumably seem to be how to turn oneself back into a natural human being again rather than remain the commercial artefact modernity has made of us. This may not seem simple but, foremost, it may be about finding a way of enquiring into who we really are. In contrast to aesthetics, Eagleton

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contended, art is potentially and ideally free of ideology and class identity. It speaks of “the human and concrete”, is independent of other more specialist discourses and connects us to what we have in common. While, in a Marxist understanding, aesthetics has come to support “the political hegemony of modern bourgeois culture”, art is more democratic - and, potentially, truly subversive: “As far as scientific or sociological questions are concerned only the expert seems licensed to speak; when it comes to art each of us can hope to contribute our own two ha’pence worth”. ²²

Art involves contradictions and ironies which paradoxically challenge the dominant classes who try to employ it, as aesthetics, to bolster their authority and power. The use of art as a conscious or unconscious cultural or political instrument is never straightforward. It can be quite contradictory. As the more discerning Marxist literary critics are aware, art is not just a pillar of the powers that be, but potentially a great subversive force. It is surely also at the heart of the transformation of consciousness that must precede any revolutionary age.

The Sublime

“The Sublime” was a term used in the eighteenth century to describe the new experience of a picturesque nature which also provoked fear and terror in the human heart on account of its great, infinite, often terrible quality. At the same time the vastness of the universe made one feel insignificant and put a person in touch with something formless and indefinable within oneself. To stand on a mountain top or have a wilderness experience put the conventional, everyday world into perspective. For many, in the past, going to Church or worshipping an awe-inspiring God could sometimes stir the same feelings. Kant, in his *Critique of Judgement*, defined The Sublime as our experience of the Absolute, which Enlightenment science and reason were estranged from.

Edmund Burke wrote his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* some thirty years earlier than his well-known *Reflections* on the violent excesses of the French Revolution. It was almost as if the earlier *Enquiry* had prepared him for the later memorable *Reflections*. Perhaps Burke thought our contemplation of the sublime might temper our own human excesses, evident, for instance, in the Terror which followed the French Revolution and the omnipotent military drive of Napoleon’s imperialism.

Burke thought there was “an eternal distinction” between beauty and the sublime which should “never be forgotten by any whose business it is to affect the passions”. He studiously contrasted them: sublime objects are vast in their dimensions, while beautiful ones are comparatively small; beauty should be “smooth and polished”, “the great” - or sublime - “rugged and negligent”; beauty may deviate from right proportion but only slightly, while the sublime “often makes a strong deviation”; beauty should not be obscure but “the great ought to be dark and gloomy”; the great is “solid and even massive” while beauty should be “light and delicate”; the sublime is “founded on pain, the other on pleasure”.²³

Burke was aware how the sublime called into question the limited boundaries of Enlightenment reason and logical science. The Enlightenment had shrunk our experience of the human self but the sublime, in pointing to the infinite dimensions of nature, dwarves man’s ability to understand it intellectually. As Adam Phillips put it in his introduction to the Oxford Classics edition of *The Philosophical Enquiry*, “for both Burke and Kant the Sublime was a way of thinking about excess as the key to a new kind of subjectivity”.²⁴ Despite Burke’s attempt to separate them, the sublime included the profane and the sacred, the mundane and the transcendent, the darkness as well as the light. This was “an ‘incomprehensible darkness’ that reason, as Burke will increasingly believe, must not, dispel”.

If Burke sensed “the key to a new subjectivity” perhaps today we are about to experience a new sublime that goes beyond Romanticism. If, according to Keats, “beauty is truth, truth beauty”, then “the Beautiful” is sublime insofar as it embraces the enormity of a destructive, as well as a creative universe, sometimes thought of as a “void” or an abyss of being. This is a Sublime that is more than a description of the natural landscape. It includes us.

This new awareness may come at a time and age when we are facing, not just the possibility of a nuclear Armageddon but a climate crisis that threatens all life in the world, a prospect that is certainly terrifying from a purely personal perspective, for, in our personal identities, we are all under threat of annihilation. To be adequate to the challenges of this twenty-first century, we need to re-discover the sublime - beyond the personal - in our own nature. It is time we began to think about who, or what, we really are. We need an

awakening, a form of enlightenment that goes beyond the rational culture of 18th and 19th century Europe.

A global consciousness today implies the integration of East and West. The psychological and philosophical insights of ancient Far-Eastern cultures is now available to the modern scientific West through the revolution in global communication. For example, knowledge of buddhist wisdom and mind practice are beginning to transform our thinking about ourselves. Buddha nature means “awakened nature”, for which mind is the key. Moreover, the art and culture of the ancient East points to a twenty-first century renaissance or enlightenment.

The Dance of Shiva

There are many ways in which the wisdom practices, art and thought of East Asia can complement and deepen the modern culture of the West. The Romantic impulse coincided with the first European translations of great spiritual Asian writings, such as the ageless *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Upanishads* which inspired our most creative poets and philosophers throughout the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the profound teachings of Buddhism were also gradually discovered. They offered an understanding and a way which might help the modern West begin to think more integratively about its own fragmented culture, as, in addition to the contemplative tradition of buddhism, do much of Indian art and mythology.

For instance, the Dance of Shiva, symbolised by the figure of Nataraja, casts light on the natural relationship between science and art or objective and subjective consciousness - a statue of Nataraja stands in the grounds of CERN, the European Centre for Nuclear Research in Geneva. Shiva-Nataraja, is the famous four-armed figure dancing on one leg inside the arch - circle - of fiery nature, and represents the five activities of the cosmic dance: creation, preservation, destruction, embodiment and liberation. Nataraja expresses the active spirit of life “dancing” within material nature, which, without him, would be inert. But, at the same time, without nature he would not be able to dance. The two are inseparable.

In his essay, “The Dance of Shiva”, the historian and philosopher of Indian art, Ananda Coomaraswamy, summarised the threefold significance of the dance: firstly it is “the

image of his (Shiva's) Rhythmic Play as the source of all movement within the Cosmos, which is represented by the Arch"; secondly, the purpose of the dance is "to Release the Countless souls of men from the Snare of Illusion"; thirdly, "the place of the dance, Chidambaram (God), the Centre of the Universe, is within the Heart".²⁵

Coomaraswamy, himself, calls attention to the grandeur of this image of Shiva-Nataraja, as "a synthesis of science, religion and art":

How amazing the range of thought and sympathy of those rishi-artists who first conceived such a type as this, affording an image of reality, a key to the complex tissue of life, a theory of nature, not merely satisfactory to a single clique or race, nor acceptable to the thinkers of one century only, but universal in its appeal to the philosopher, the lover, and the artist of all ages and all countries. How supremely great in power and grace this dancing image must appear to all those who have striven in plastic forms to give expression to their intuition of Life.²⁶

"Stopping and Seeing"

As regards the science of mind, the sixth century Buddhist master, Chih-I, one of the great teachers of the T'ien-t'ai tradition of Chinese Buddhism, wrote a comprehensive course in Buddhist meditation, the *Mo-ho Chih-kuan* or *Great Stopping and Seeing*, perhaps an apt title for the lockdown experience of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, which has put the whole world on retreat, as it were. "Stopping" and "Seeing", as the translator, Thomas Cleary, explains, are stopping delusion and seeing truth: "they are the yin and yang of Buddhist meditation, complementary halves of a unified whole".²⁷

Chih-I, himself, explains "The Great Meaning", which is "broad and hard to see", at the beginning of his book, in terms of five aspects:²⁸

Awakening the great mind, cultivating the great practice, experiencing the great result, rending the great net, and returning to the great abode.

By "awakening the great mind" Chih-I is urging us to wake up from our ignorance and delusion and to seek enlightenment from above as well as education from below. He explains:

When ignorance is overturned, it transmutes into enlightenment. It is like ice melting into water; it is not something apart and does not come from elsewhere. All is contained in a single moment of mind. It is like a wish fulfilling jewel.

Thus enlightenment comes naturally from first understanding ignorance.

“Cultivating the great practice” is diligently engaging in meditation in everything we do. We would think of it today as practising mindfulness. “Realising the great result” is not actively seeking but experiencing how “heaven (nature) naturally responds, telling of sublime rewards, comforting and gladdening the mind.”

By “rending the great net” Chih-I refers to people’s tendency to cling to particular ways and doubt others, affirm one and deny another. He wishes to “synthesise the scriptures and treatises, untie knots and free them from this trap”. “Returning to the great abode” is akin to understanding the great emptiness from which all things, including ourselves, come.

If one knows the realm of reality, it has no beginning or end, no passage or blockage: “one’s mind will open up with great clarity and be unobstructed and free”. To be who one really is, is the aesthetic of the 21st century, not just an art that produces great aesthetic objects, whether a painting, poem or great work of music but everyone’s life and mind as a work of art. And, in the spirit of democracy, everyone can do this.

Inner Revolution

The prospect of a deeper inner revolution came with the opening up of the European and North American culture to a global consciousness, heralded by the arrival in the West of Asian traditions of wisdom, such as the Buddhism and Vedanta of India and the Buddhist and Zen traditions of China, Japan and Tibet in the second half of the twentieth century. One account of this is to be found in Robert Thurman’s history of Buddhism and what he suggests it can offer us today, both personally and politically. A political revolution is dependent on a psychological and spiritual revolution for each of us individually. Thurman is a life-long friend of the Dalai Lama, having first met him in the sixties, a few years after

the latter escaped from a Tibet, overrun by the Chinese, to northern India where he set up his government in exile. ²⁹

Thurman's emphasis on the importance of an inner revolution has always been at the centre of Indian art. The Indianologist, Heinrich Zimmer - a friend of Carl Jung - contrasted "the wisdom of the pagans" with the narrower, more dogma-driven belief system of the Western Christian tradition, at the same time pointing out that in our cultural history there has also been "a semi-liberal, timid and guarded acknowledgement" that in pagan traditions there may be a reflection of the truth of revelation. For instance, during the Renaissance, mirrored in the figure of Pico della Mirandola, there was a moment when the likes of Homer, Ovid, the Kabbalah, and the Koran were found to be "in essential concord with the sacred pamphlets of the Christian movement". As Zimmer comments about Indian art:

Behind the variety of symbols, a universally, constant, vastly sophisticated, tradition of human wisdom was joyfully recognised, and was on the point, even, of being officially conceded by the guardians of the "One True Faith". ³⁰

The mythologist, Joseph Campbell, who edited Zimmer's book, adds a footnote here to suggest that the "One True Faith" is reflected today in the notion of a perennial philosophy as expressed initially in Aldous Huxley's remarkable 1946 anthology. ³¹

Awakening

It's as if today we are rediscovering the initial understanding and feeling of the original Romantic generation but now with the benefit of the scientific and psychological knowledge of modern consciousness. Firstly, we understand that nature is not just a beautiful and sublime phenomenon out there, but is within us as well, that the 4.5 billion years of the Earth's history are written in our bodies. Moreover, that the evolution of human consciousness is a reflection of a universal mind. That nature, or the universe, is not just a physical phenomenon but an immaterial life also. And we are a manifestation of this.

Secondly, that we are much more than we think we are. Safranski wrote that

Goethe believed we should “become who we are”.³² And it is through poetry we could begin to realise that. This finds an echo in the twentieth century sages of India³³ who answer that intriguing question which runs through all the *Upanishads*: *What is that by knowing which all things are known?* It is knowledge of the true self. They recommend we simply ask the question: Who am I?, as if simply asking the question would eventually lead, of itself, to an experience of the Self as an answer. And once you experience the answer, you no longer need to ask the question, except to recall the answer.

These twentieth century Indian sages counsel a form of self enquiry, similar to the spirit of modernism’s psychoanalysis, except that the self to be enquired into is not just the phenomenon of the personal self but an absolute awareness, the true, the “nondual” Self of Vedanta.

Awareness is one of the three attributes of self-realisation. The other two are a sense of absolute being, beyond birth and death, along with the “bliss” that accompanies it, a bliss, which they tell us, is beyond any pleasure we may experience. It is a sense of absolute harmony with life, despite all the vicissitudes we are personally subject to. This awareness is beyond the rational illumination of the European Enlightenment, for it takes us to what is universal and timeless, beyond the normality of the mundane and limited.

This may seem, to our conceptual minds, an impossible and idealistic aspiration but it ignores what the Romantics lacked and which Chih-I, the sixth century, Chinese buddhist teacher, insisted was the second requirement of self-realisation - the cultivation of a contemplative practice. Meditation isn’t necessarily about sitting on a cushion for hours or any of the other recommended rituals of a monk’s life. It is a state of mind, an enquiry into, and a constant recollection of, the truth of oneself in relation to the universe. It is the cultivation of a permanent contemplative approach to living, whatever the circumstances of a person’s individual and social life. It is about retaining a sense of wonder and awe for the mystery of birth and death.

The Greek meaning of *aisthetikos* is perception. The “I” of the beholder is essentially a perceiver, a witness. A person is not an object but an awareness that is forever changing. Moreover, an awareness that includes science and ethics, a science that understands the emptiness of relative knowledge, not an empty “emptiness”, but a fulness, whether that is absolute quantum indeterminacy or the total interdependency of all things. Emptiness as

interdependency is the truth of ethics, the certain conviction that we are not separate people but essentially one of another. Our individuality and autonomy is inseparable from our commonality. Ethics, science and aesthetics are a unity and can come together within ourselves, the realisation of human culture as a part, rather than separate from nature.

July 2020

Notes

¹ Prof. Brian Cox, presenter, *The Wonders Collection*, BBC Worldwide Ltd, 2011

² *Classic Literary Criticism: Aristotle, Horace, Longinus*, translated with an introduction by T.S. Dorsch, Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1970 (1963). Chapter 8, pp 108-9.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 114

⁴ Plotinus, *The Enneads*, translated by Stephen McKenna, abridged with an introduction and notes by John Dillon, London: Penguin Classics, 1991 (1917-1930), p 55.

⁵ Jonathan Bate, *Radical Wordsworth: The Poet Who Changed the World*, London: William Collins, 2020, p 5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p 6

⁷ *Ibid.*, p 7

⁸ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, edited with an introduction by George Watson, London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, Everyman, p 167.

⁹ Richard Holmes, *Coleridge*, Oxford:OUP, 1982, p 49.

¹⁰ Frederick Copleston, *18th and 19th Century German Philosophy*, London: Bloomsbury, 2016 (1963) p 121.

¹¹ Quoted in Copleston, *Ibid.*, p 121

¹² Quoted in Holmes, 1982, p 56.

¹³ Jan Swafford, *Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph*, London: Faber & Faber, 2015.

¹⁴ Rudiger Safranski, *Goethe: Life as a Work of Art*, translated by David Dollenmayer, New York: Liveright, 2017 (2013)

¹⁵ Stephen Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems*, Princeton University Press, 2002. See Introduction, particularly pp 1-6

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p 5.

¹⁷ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge, Ms: Harvard University Press, 2001 (1989), pp ix-x.

¹⁸See James Gordon Finlayson, *Habermas*, Oxford University Press, 2005, chapter 5, "Habermas's theory of modernity".

¹⁹ Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2001 (1990).

²⁰ Ibid., p 368.

²¹ Ibid., p 368.

²² Ibid. p 2.

²³ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, edited with an Introduction and Notes by Adam Phillips, Oxford University Press

²⁴ Ibid., p ix.

²⁵ Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Shiva: Essays on Indian Art and Culture*, with a foreword by Romain Rolland, New York: Dover, 1985 (1924), p 65.

²⁶ Ibid. p 65.

²⁷ Chih-i, *Stopping and Seeing: A Comprehensive Course in Buddhist Meditation*, Boston: Shambhala, 1997, p vii

²⁸ Ibid., pp 1-2

²⁹ Robert Thurman, *Inner Revolution: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Real Happiness*, London: Rider, 1999 (1998)

³⁰ Heinrich Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilisation*, edited by Joseph Campbell, New York: Harper and Row, 1962 (1942), p 219.

³¹ Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, New York: Harperperennial, 2009 (1944)

³² Safranski 2013. See his "Final Reflection: Becoming Who You Are", pp 561-66.

³³ See *The Spiritual Teachings of Ramana Maharshi*, Foreword by C.G. Jung, Boston: Shambhala, 1988. Also *Talks with Ramana Maharshi: On Realising Abiding Peace and Happiness*, Carlsbad, California: Inner Directions, 2000. See also *I AM THAT: Talks with SRI NISARGADATTA MAHARAJ*, translated from the Marathi taperecordings by Maurice Frydman, revised and edited by Sudhakar S. Dikshit, 2015 (1973)