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Review Essay

A Poetical Imaginary for our Time: Charles Taylor's cosmic connections

Charles Taylor, *Cosmic Connections: Poetry in the Age of Disenchantment*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2024.

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Abstract

In his most recent engagement with the philosophy of language—*Cosmic Connections*—Charles Taylor charts a poetic journey through early romanticism to our present time. In this companion piece to his earlier work, *The Language Animal*, Taylor traces the movement of key 19th and 20th century poets from the pain of disenchantment to new possibilities of reenchantment—or what he calls re-connection. This essay follows Taylor's hermeneutic itinerary through some of the greatest poets of modern Western literature, culminating with a plea for a new poetical imaginary for our ecological times.

Keywords

Charles Taylor – *Cosmic Connections* – poetic imaginary – disenchantment – Romanticism – anacarnation – interspace – expressivism – perennialism

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Let me begin, if I may, on a personal note. In 1976, I attended Charles Taylor's lectures on the philosophy of language at McGill University, Montreal. I was on a graduate scholarship and had traveled from University College Dublin to study with him for my Masters. From our first meeting in McGill's Bronfman Hall, I was mesmerized by his towering figure and intellect, his wild bushy eyebrows and fluent bilingual tongue. He arrived to class carrying a mountain of books and within minutes was pacing the floor of the amphitheater extolling the 'expressivist' powers of language. Throughout the course of that Fall semester, Taylor explored the scintillating insights of Herder, Herman, and Humbolt—the three masters of Romantic expressivism, closely accompanied by the other two H's, Hegel and Hölderlin. The whole course was an enchanting introduction to the creative power of language as meaning-making and world-disclosing, a theory which would find echoes in 20th century thinkers like Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty (whose lectures Taylor had attended in Paris while writing his dissertation on Hegel at Oxford). The seminal ideas of Taylor's brilliant lectures of the Seventies would find their ultimate voice in his two late major volumes, *The Language Animal* (2016) and more recently, *Cosmic Connections* (2024).

I

In *Cosmic Connections*, Taylor calls for a revisiting of the fullness of language—a linguistic bounty challenged and occluded by our contemporary age of disenchantment. The modern dissociation of sensibility began in the late 17th century with the rise of capitalist industry and modern science, epitomized by the Galilean-Newtonian framework grounding the laws of the natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*). Taylor makes a plea for reenchantment through close readings of a series of Romantic and modernist poets rather than straight-up philosophical arguments, though strong ontological claims are not absent from his deliberations. His chosen Romantics are from three major language traditions—German (Novalis, Hölderlin, Rilke); English (Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth); and French (Baudelaire and Mallarmé). To which he adds Eliot, Milosz and his ostensible favorite, Gerard Manley Hopkins (who also received keen attention in the concluding section of his earlier book, *A Secular Age*). There is much philosophical wisdom informing his interpretations of these poets of cosmic 're-connection'; and it is here we find Taylor revisiting several thinkers of language from his previous work, *The Language Animal,* which may be read as a companion study.

Taylor's literary hermeneutics does not get lost in theory but invites a direct engagement with the *poems themselves.* In fact, a singular feature of his

approach is the presentation of several long poems—by Rilke, Hölderlin, and Baudelaire for example—in their bilingual entirety. We get to savor both the German and French originals and their English translations. These fulsome renditions sometimes stretch over several pages; Baudelaire's '*Le Vovage*' runs for eight whole pages in both host and guest languages. This citational generosity enables the reader to appreciate the original voice of the poet, the attentive voice of the translator, and the interpretive voice of the philosopher, Taylor himself. A triple helping, if you will, amounting to a veritable hermeneutic feast—something all too rare in our age of Literary Theory with its almost exclusive emphasis on formal structures and signifiers at the expense of the poetry itself. Taylor is ultimately sounding an ontology of language as an expression of our deep being in the world—what he calls, following Rilke and Merleau-Ponty, an *interspace* of cosmic connection. In short, Taylor's engaged readings are both semiological in breadth and ontological in depth.

II

Taylor concentrates on a series of salient cosmic epiphanies. These range from Goethe's walk in the mountain forest and Wordsworth's Tintern Abbey, to Hopkins's celebration of the sacred 'freshness deep down things' and Rilke's song to the 'tree of life' in the 9th Duino Elegy. Taylor notes how the *Elegies* gleam with intimations of a passionate transitory, a double poetic witness attested by the world without and the world within (*Weltinnerraum*). The encounter between poet and earth discloses an 'interspace' which transmutes both our human interiority and the surrounding cosmos into a mutually enhancing co-existence. In Rilke's masterful *Elegies* and *Sonnets*, the animals and the trees of the forest become transformed in the song of the poet into a transcendence-in-immanence—'O tall tree within the ear' (*ein Baum im Ohr*). The song itself is existence (*Gesang is Dasein*). For in the deepest 'inwarding' of poetry, nature achieves its glory (*Herrlichkeit*). We experience illuminations fitting together in a mystical instant (*Jetztzeit*): 'once for each thing, only once. Once and no more, And we, too, / Only once…' (9th Duino Elegy). Rilke's eschatology of the everyday raises things to a higher space and time, lifting them from mere perishing into a mutual calling of inner and outer, of mortal and angel. But there is no easy poetic redemption. We must first pass through the gaps and breaks of existence—death, loss, and homelessness—before we can arrive, momentarily, at a renewed sense of connection. The movement of renewal reveals our human vocation as a double belonging or *Doppelbereich* (Merleau-Ponty would say 'chiasmus') between human interiority and the call of the earth—a

call and response which, put theologically (which Taylor rarely does), passes from theism to atheism to ana-theism. A passage summoned by Rilke's angels. Poetry thus serves as a 'transfiguration' (*Verwandlung*) of the alienated earth into song, ratifying our aspiration for wholeness. Taylor refers to this as Rilke's 'Elegies moment' where the poet's 'description of the universe meets with a confirmation from the universe itself' (p. 248): an experience which echoes Cézanne's famous epiphany at the Mont Sainte-Victoire in Provence when the painter experienced the mountain painting itself through him. The mountain forest he was looking at was looking back at him. Double sensation as double belonging. Or as the Irish ditty goes, 'I see the trees and the trees see me.'

Another poet of reconnection is Gerard Manley Hopkins. Taylor's close reading of his verse extends the range of cosmic connectivity from angels to everyman. Hopkins celebrates the sacred in the ordinary. Deeply influenced by Duns Scotus' 'univocity of being', he performs a Franciscan poetics of 'aftering' where the sacred singularity (*haeceitas*) of each being is revisited after a prior experience of abandonment or dejection. Having traversed the dark night of the soul, one returns to the ordinary universe and realizes that the divine goes all the way down—and up again. This rebirth in the wake of God signals a moment of *ana-basis* or *ana-theos* where cosmic connection comes 'after God'; it involves a dual movement of loss and renewal. And it is in such ana-theist instants that Hopkins' ana-poetics recovers the 'pied beauty' of creation, the divine 'freshness deep down things'—everyday epiphanies of what is 'counter, original, spare and strange'. Here Hopkins intimates the cosmic Christ who 'plays in ten thousand places, lovely in eyes and lovely in limbs not his, to the father through the features of men's faces' ('When Kingfishers Catch Fire').

Taylor's seventh chapter is entitled 'Hopkins, Inscape and After'. The 'after' captures the 'ana' moment (defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as what comes 'after, again, back, up in time or space'), while 'inscape' refers to the inner force which forms a given particular thing, another word for haecceity: 'that being indoors each one dwells/….Crying What I do is me, for that I came'. Hopkins sought to create a special music of sound and image, which he called 'sprung rhythm', to 'instress' this otherwise hidden essence. A song which, he hoped, would recreate for his reader this secret inner being. It is the interstitial liaison between poet, poem, and reader which triggers such poetic anacarnation—a triadic relation which Taylor perfectly captures in his masterful close reading of Hopkins' 'The Windhoverer' which identifies a falcon in flight with the prince of creation. Once again, Taylor references Merleau-Ponty's notion of '*entrelacs*' to capture this deep correspondence of human imagination and nature prior to the analytic division between subject and object. Inscapes pre-exist the dualism of inner and outer, occupying a hidden milieux which

poetic instress seeks to reanimate in verse. Breaking with the representational model of mapping and imitation—typical of the optocentric bias of modernity—Hopkins' poetry draws on a 'penumbra' of primal belonging to nature. And here we find an ontological solicitation which defies the 'pathetic fallacy' of subjectivism. Hopkins' poetry, writes Taylor, 'goes beyond creating a mood, an atmosphere of feeling, and claims to give access to the inner force in a thing, not by describing it, but by making it palpable. Poetry enters a new terrain' (p. 177). In other words, Hopkins 'sprung rhythm' signals another way of dwelling in things through sound and touch, rather than sight, measurement, and information. And as such it escapes what Taylor, following Heidegger, terms the modern 'age of the world picture' and recreates inscapes of 'God's creative power'. But Taylor is quick to note that Hopkins' 'dark sonnets' resist cheap grace. The 'ana' of 'aftering' contains the double 'a' of abandonment and advent, the reality of human loss before and after poetic epiphany and inherent in the very notion of epiphany itself. The three wise kings came *late* to the new born child, as Hopkins observed in his death bed diary. A certain sense of distance and delay is intrinsic to our mortal experience of the sacred. And it is often in the lowest and least of these that the divine shines:

> 'This Jack, Joke, poor potsherd,/ patch, matchwood, immortal
> Diamond,
> *Is* immortal diamond'
> ('That nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection').

III

Hopkins and Rilke are just two bracing examples of Taylor's many intimate engagements with modern poets, each charting the creative collision between waves of disenchantment and enchantment, of dissociation and recovery. In these readings, one can detect the presence of the later Heidegger's writing on poetic dwelling and Merleau-Ponty's musings on Cézanne and Proust ('Eye and Mind'). Not to mention the recurring ghosts of the Three Hs of Romanticism—and Minerva's late owl, Hegel, to whom Taylor devoted one of his first books. But Taylor refuses to reduce his triple tale of enchantment-disenchantment-reenchantment to a dialectic of Absolute Spirit. His gestures to poetic transcendence resist sacrificing our fragile finite existence to a theodicy of ineluctable Salvation. We have soundings rather than solutions; cyphers rather than syllogisms; intimations rather than proofs. There are no guarantees for Taylor, no triumphalist marches to a Grand Finale. And if it is true that Taylor

is constantly edging toward ontology, it is a poetic ontology that concerns him, one whispering hints and guesses of what Rilke called 'the Open': an imaginary becoming that never congeals into fixed Being.

Taylor's philosophy of poetic expression accompanies his readings rather than preceding them as a theoretical a priori of which the poems would be illustrations. Here the philosophical message *is* the poetic medium. And the message runs like this: 'Cosmic connection seems to be a goal, or a need, of at least some human beings throughout our history. But it takes very different forms … and any adequate philosophical anthropology must give an account of this dimension. The objectifying, even instrumental stance to our world which has dominated the modern world sees this as a nonquestion'; to which he adds this candid verdict: 'The objectifying dismissal of all religions has produced a blindness, which prevents us from asking questions whose answers are crucial to our self-understanding as humans' (pp. 194–195). Taylor ventures that the yearning for cosmic connectedness is a perennial desire, albeit one which takes multiple shapes in different ages. And it is clear that Taylor himself privileges the age of romanticism as it passes through disenchantment without losing the 'aperçus of something higher which occurs in the flashes of insight that arrest us' (p. 195).

This something 'higher' usually carries echoes of Christian revelation in the Western romantics chosen by Taylor; but he suggests that it also extends to non-Western and indigenous cosmologies. (Taylor has championed the cause of Inuit culture, for example, as a public intellectual in his native Canada.) In this sense, Taylor might answer the hermeneutic question—*d'où parlez vous?*—with something like this: as a Canadian Catholic bilingual perennialist educated in the romantic, phenomenological, and ordinary language traditions of modern European thought. But the cultural situatedness of his hermeneutic perspective remains, qua perennialist, always open to non-western cultures where the 'higher power' attested in the fullness of literary languages—written or oral—continues to address us.

Taylor is aware that the idea of reclaiming a deep sacramental connection between humans and the living earth, associated with Romanticism, is commonly dismissed as illusory, not to say delusory, in our secular post-enlightenment culture. In the 'age of disenchantment' our sense of cosmic connectivity has been seriously severed and the origin of meaning reduced to human subjectivity. This disconnection tends to see nature as a wild wasteland—or industrial resource—out there, whose explanation is consigned to empirco-metric calculations of the natural and mathematical sciences. The Cartesian split between the inner world of consciousness (*res cogitans*) and the outer world of matter (*res extensa*) epitomizes this dissociation of sensibility. And it is no accident that Descartes proclaimed human cogitos to be 'masters and possesses

of nature'. A view which reaches its exclusive humanist conclusion in Sartre's claim that all meanings are projections of human consciousness. But Taylor pushes back. He wants to keep the swing doors open between what he calls the 'immanent frame' and transcendence, which means resisting two modern 'reductionist' tendencies—idealism (spiritualism/psychologism) and positivism (naturalism/materialism). Both ignore the 'interspace' between human consciousness and the lived world, in favor of either purely subjective/psychological/transcendental experience, on the one hand, or purely empirical material data, on the other. Over and against these polar reductions, Taylor makes a passionate plea for the existence of an 'interworld' *between* the human mind and external nature. A middle space or mi-lieu which precedes the division itself.

In the final analysis, Taylor proposes a bold thesis about our relationship to the earth. It reads thus: the ancient, medieval and Renaissance orders of cosmic enchantment have been replaced by a modern age of disenchantment where experiences of cosmic connection have taken refuge in poetry. From the early romantics to the twentieth century verse of Eliot and Milosz there is a counter-history where we witness invocations of deeper and higher times. And the fact that the closing of the spatial channel to cosmic order opens an alternative temporal channel reflects a recurring need for connection. The old ritual invocations of connectivity have found new ways to express a fundamental human aspiration in the work of certain modern writers, artists, and thinkers. The language animal never dies; it always finds new poetic skins to express its irrepressible desire for communication and communion.

IV

So how, if at all, does Taylor's thesis of the poetical imaginary relate to his notion of the social imaginary? The former, it would seem, supplements the latter in essential ways. First, where the social imaginary is collective and largely anonymous, the poetical imaginary is singular and specific. Both express meanings that run deeper than theoretical schemas and spring, each in their own way, from a cultural unconscious which informs how people relate to their lives in a motivated manner. Both signal how we imagine our lived experience, how people and things fit together in meaningful ways, negotiating and sharing diverse desires, motivations, and expectations. Unlike the cult of Enlightenment Reason, with its elite *philosophes*, experts and administrators, poetical and social imaginaries enliven beliefs and desires which run much deeper than theoretical rationality and actually 'move' people. If rational principles measure and manage, imaginaries make things matter.

In his conclusion to *Cosmic Connections*, Taylor cites the view of Merlin McDonald that our current desire for reconnection—after disenchantment—is the 'last phase of the evolution of our species from hominid to full human'. While our ancestors spoke of a sacred mythology of the cosmos or the great Chain of Being, today we speak of an emerging symbiocene—an age of 'anacarnation' after the ages of 'incarnation' and 'excarnation'.[1] Though Taylor does not engage with the contemporary ecological movement per se, I think it fair to say that the emergent sense of symbiotic eco-connection is refiguring a new 'poetics' for our time—using poetics in the broad sense deployed by Ricoeur, Bachelard, or the later Heidegger. Indeed, I would be tempted here to include certain scientists in this work of symbio-cosmo-poetics—figures like Teilhard de Chardin, Ilia Delio, or Robin Kimmerer who reinterpret the work of the earth and life sciences through an ecological or indigenous lens. Poetics, as Taylor's powerful readings show, can be a broad church of minds attuned to the muted songs of nature—'the bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang' (Shakespeare)—offering new voices for a new imaginary. This is what Taylor, following Romanticism, calls the 'subtler languages' of re-enchanting epiphanies. And he reads such languages in the wake of basic paradigm shifts from the original 'mythical' phase of shared human culture (stories of gods, spirits, and elementary terrestrial forces) through a 'theoretic' stage (legal constitutions, censuses, technological, and sociological measurements) to a post-romantic 'poetic' stage where a new set of images and tropes emerges in the shadow of Romanticism. Now the perennial need for a life of shared cosmic affinities finds its 'anacarnation' in this new symbolic imaginary which may in turn, one surmises, announce a new social imaginary in its own time (perhaps more 'utopian' than 'ideological', to cite Ricoeur's two faces of the 'social imaginary'). 'There is no reason', writes Taylor, 'why we should have totally lost the need and the skills, including those of ritual invocation, we had in the earlier phase'; adding: 'They seem indeed, to still survive among our poets, writers, composers, some of whom have been invoked in this book' (p. 597).

1 See *Anacarnation: Returning to the Body with Richard Kearney,* ed Brian Treanor and James Taylor, Routledge, 2023. The notion of anacarnation which I develop in this work and elsewhere is a dialogical response to Taylor's notion of 'excarnation', in keeping with his basic thesis of poetic epiphany and spiritual renewal in *Cosmic Connections* and *A Secular Age.* Anacarnation is an ecological development of the more ontological-eschatological notion of 'anatheism' (see Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God after God*, Columbia University Press, 2012).

Conclusion

We have read 600 pages when Taylor makes this point. And while every book has to end somewhere, this reader was left longing for more hints of things to come. There are many paths opened, I feel, for future dialogue with emerging voices in the whole ecological debate, ranging from life scientists to eco-philosophers and political activists. But no author can do everything. And it is perhaps for Taylor's coming readers to fill in the gaps, especially where it concerns future possibilities for a more ample ecological imaginary. Such an imaginary—like the social and poetical imaginaries it succeeds—would be largely utopian in aspiration while refiguring Taylor's former political interventions in his native Canada and his prior philosophical writings, *A Secular Age, Sources of the Self,* and *The Language Animal*—all of which may be read as companion studies to *Cosmic Connections*. In sum, Taylor's sketch of a poetical imaginary calls, I suggest, for a form of ecological hospitality, where the interspace between the human and non-human—from amoebas and animals to anthropoids and Rilkean angels—may find new ways of dwelling with each other on this earth.