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‘Vitality with Repose’: Reflections on the Romantic-Neo-Platonic Legacy in Hepburn’s Aesthetics

Douglas Hedley

‘Le poète immobilise l’espace ;
il tâche de le guérir de sa maladie, qui est le temps.’
Charles-Ferdinand Ramuz

Religion and literature lay at the foundations of Ronald W. Hepburn’s education. Antony Flew and Donald MacKinnon were early influences and mentors at Aberdeen: Hepburn was Mackinnon’s assistant for a year. Hepburn studied Divinity at King’s College, Aberdeen after an MA in Philosophy and English and then returned to Philosophy. His doctoral dissertation was on the theme of cosmos and fall in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In ‘Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty’ (1966), Hepburn insisted that philosophers should not neglect the study of nature in philosophical aesthetics. Indeed, he considered the pre-occupation with artefacts a source of distortion since the aesthetics of nature furnishes a particularly significant model of the interaction between imagination, thought and feeling. Hepburn diagnoses an aesthetic impoverishment that he thinks can only be addressed by considering a metaphysical or religious view of nature. He hints, though they are just hints, that these can be drawn from the seventeenth-century and Romantic tradition of British Neo-Platonism. This strand of thought, from the Cambridge Platonists through Lord Shaftesbury to Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth, left a profound impact upon Hepburn’s thought. It is the legacy of Christian Platonism and the Romanticism it continues to foster: where the aesthetic always involves awareness of a just-out-of-reach, absent, hinted at, greater beauty and more ultimate reality. Such a mode of experience and mental set are compatible with both theistic belief and with an agnosticism about deity (and about Platonic Forms, for that matter).[1]

1 Ronald W. Hepburn, ‘Aesthetic and Religious: Boundaries, Overlaps and Intrusions’ in idem, *The Reach of the Aesthetic: Collected Essays on Art and Nature* (Aldershot, 2001), 96–112, 110.

Hepburn's early training in seventeenth century thought deserves mention because it is pivotal era in western thought, particularly for aesthetics and the emergence of modern notion of sublimity. The Cambridge Platonists are indispensable for a full appreciation of this period.[2] The Cambridge Platonists were the first great Platonists to accept modern science. They did not reject corpuscularian science like their Aristotelian contemporaries. But they did recognise what they viewed as the dangerous reductive tendencies of the New Science. The Romantic poets were drawing upon the subtle and metaphysical critique evinced by Ralph Cudworth and Henry More, especially their attack upon intellectual Parnassus of the Radical Enlightenment: mechanistic naturalism. The Cambridge Platonists accepted the Galilean-Cartesian inheritance, unlike the seventeenth century Aristotelian critics of Cartesianism. Yet they were deeply sensitive to the division or rift between mind and nature, spirit and matter, subject and object that pre-occupies Idealist and Romantic thought. The 'Romantic' answer to this division is beauty. More was a poet as well as a philosopher and a rough contemporary of John Milton. The view of nature developed by More and Cudworth influenced English poets from Thomas Traherne through Alexander Pope to Wordsworth and Coleridge. Cudworth would concur with Wordsworth in 'The Tables Turned' that:

> Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;
> Our meddling intellect
> Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things: –
> We murder to dissect.

The Wordsworthian vision is presented by Hepburn as a peak in the history of the subject:[3]

> for I would walk alone,
> In storm and tempest, or in starlight nights
> Beneath the quiet Heavens; and, at that time,
> Have felt whate'er there is of power in sound
> To breathe an elevated mood, by form

2 Cf. Ernest Lee Tuveson, 'Space, Deity, and the "Natural Sublime"', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 12 (1951), 20–38.

3 Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty' in Bernard Williams and Alan Montefiore (eds), *British Analytical Philosophy* (London, 1966), 285–310, 286.

> Or image unprofaned; and I would stand,
> Beneath some rock, listening to sounds that are
> The ghostly language of the ancient earth,
> Or make their dim abode in distant winds.
> Thence did I drink the visionary power.
> I deem not profitless those fleeting moods
> Of shadowy exultation: not for this,
> That they are kindred to our purer mind
> And intellectual life; but that the soul,
> Remembering how she felt, but what she felt
> Remembering not, retains an obscure sense
> Of possible sublimity, to which,
> With growing faculties she doth aspire,
> With faculties still growing, feeling still
> That whatsoever point they gain, they still
> Have something to pursue.

The Platonic imagery of the shadows and the visionary power of the soul through recollection is clear. The lines of Wordsworth articulate the mood of an unseen world pressing upon the perception of the physical cosmos; the solemn consciousness of archetypal timeless Being in the images of the temporal world. It is well known that Hepburn inspired the development of environmental aesthetics. It is less widely observed that one might view natural beauty as a window of transcendence in the work of Hepburn just as Wordsworth's poetry arouses a sense of the eternal in nature. This theological dimension in Hepburn's thought did not vanish in his mature work. I suggest that the philosophy of Hepburn is a kind of late Romantic God haunted aesthetics in which beauty and the sublime sustain a vision that traditional or scholastic metaphysics can no longer sustain.

1 The (metaphysical?) deficit in contemporary aesthetics

Nature is evidently a source of aesthetic delight. This may not be on a grand scale of magnificent scenery of mountains or waterfalls. R. G. Collingwood wrote of 'the bright eyes of a mouse or the fragile vitality of a flower are

things that touch us to the heart […] with the love that life feels for life.'[4] The aesthetic appreciation of nature was a persisting concern for Hepburn, and he was a fervent walker in the Lakes and the Highlands. Philosophy and life coalesced.

Artists, Hepburn noted in his 'Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty', have turned from representation to the production of new objects. Characteristically, a broad contemporary account of aesthetic excellence does not refer to the experience or imitation of nature. Indeed, the last widely accepted theory of aesthetics, expressivism (Hepburn is presumably thinking of Benedetto Croce or Collingwood) is a theory best equipped to deal with *artefacts* rather than nature.

The 'Linguistic turn', according to Hepburn, has exacerbated matters since analysts tend to concentrate upon the writings of art critics. The neglect of natural beauty has the unfortunate tendency of diverting attention away from significant *phenomenological* data. Hepburn stresses the reflexive dimension of our aesthetic experience of nature: detachment and involvement. An artwork is 'framed' and thus set apart from the environment. Natural items, by contrast, lack such a frame and can furnish perceptual surprises. Hepburn notes that in nature, aesthetic qualities are often provisional and elusive: the initial perceptions may often be corrected by a wider or more focussed perspective. Hepburn further notes that the forms of nature offer rich scope for the imaginative play. Its beauty often requires imaginative engagement. One might think of mountains in this context. In Reformation and Counter Reformation Europe mountains were often associated with the flood or the fall, symbolising Divine displeasure.[5] Samuel Johnson was blind to the beauties of the Highlands. Yet shortly afterwards, mountains represented the very heights of contemplation to the rapt soul of Wordsworth and the Romantics.

Hepburn offers various reasons for the eclipse of the kind of aesthetics of nature common in the eighteenth century. He notes the 'disappearance of a rationalist faith in nature's thorough-going intelligibility and its ultimate endorsement of human visions and aspirations'.[6] Hepburn's approach to this eclipse is not, however, a simple endorsement: he is attracted by the idea of theological dimension to the aesthetic, even if he is ultimately sceptical about its cognitive import. He writes: 'one of my own longest-lasting concerns is to

4 Robin George Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (Oxford, 1938), 39.

5 Cf. Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory. The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite* (Ithaca, NY, 1959).

6 Hepburn, 'Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty', 286.

elucidate the way in which aesthetic experience approaches experience delineated in theistic language, without however presupposing or implying that there exists a divine being who possesses the corresponding properties in fullest measure.'[7]

The idea of God provides a model for an ontological basis or ground for the phenomenological experience of beauty in nature. Furthermore, he notes:

> When I say that I am drawn to a cognitivist-realist account of the most fundamental human values, I have the following familiar thoughts in mind: that such values as beneficence, justice, respect and our commitment to them cannot be adequately accounted for as expressions of feeling or emotion; that our emotions are themselves proper objects of our moral self-monitoring and not final moral arbitrators; and that, besides, there is such a thing as moral *authority* – not itself reducible to strength of feeling.[8]

It is significant that Hepburn's collection *The Reach of the Aesthetic* starts with the question of the seriousness or trivial in aesthetic appreciation of nature. The neglect of natural beauty, he suggests, may in part be the legacy of Darwinism since this generated a disturbing model of nature.[9] Hepburn is clearly attracted to the Romantic idea of visionary moments and as an example uses the wonderful Wordsworth passage in the *Prelude* about realizing the motion of the earth while skating on ice in darkness.[10]

Hepburn puts the problem in terms of the trajectory in the history of philosophy from Baruch Spinoza to Immanuel Kant and G. W. F. Hegel. One might initially think that Hepburn is proposing a Spinozistic espousal of pantheism. He certainly rejects a Kantian dualism of fact and value. Equally, he rejects the Hegelian priority of the realm of art over nature as the privileged realm of spirit (*Geist*):

> To put it very schematically, a serious aesthetic approach to nature is close to a Spinozistic intellectual love of God-or-Nature in its totality. It rejects Kant's invitation to accord unconditional value only to

7 Hepburn, 'Aesthetic and Religious: Boundaries, Overlaps and Intrusions', 104.

8 Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Values and Cosmic Imagination' in idem, *The Reach of the Aesthetic*, 148–65, 153.

9 Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Trivial and Serious in the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature' in idem, *The Reach of the Aesthetic,* 1–15, 1.

10 Ibid., 5.

> bearers of freedom and reason, and to downgrade phenomenal nature save as it hints at a supersensible, an earnest of which is furnished in nature's amenability to be perceived, its purposiveness without purpose. It rejects, likewise, Hegel's downplaying of natural beauty in favour of the spirit-manifesting practice of art.[11]

Spinoza was a momentous figure in the emergence of what we think of as Romanticism. A Spinoza renaissance in the late eighteenth century constituted a key element in the Romantic devotion to nature culminating in Wordsworth. It is not clear, however, that Hepburn wishes to follow the pantheistic path of the *Deus sive natura* of Spinoza, and it is not the case that Hepburn is proposing a Spinozistic solution to the aesthetic question. There is a duality in our experience of nature, according to Hepburn, which resists the Spinozistic *Deus sive natura*:

> This combination, in our aesthetic perception of nature, of the readily graspable and the opaque, sheerly contingent and alien, merits more than a sentence. The realization that the combination characterizes our aesthetic dealings with nature in general must again count as a mark of seriousness. It is a distinction vital, for instance, to a monotheistic view of nature. If the world of nature were itself divine, then one would expect intelligibility to prevail throughout. If the created world were distinct from God, though the product of his all-rational mind, one would expect a nature with a magnificently intelligible structure, but with signs of the insertion of divine will – the contingent, the might-have-been-different. Even if we do not hold a theistic belief-system, there can be a parabolic application of this duality, indicating truthfully enough that the distinction runs very deep in our experience of nature.[12]

The theistic account offers the advantage of doing more justice to the felt experience of order and beauty in the natural realm while holding on to the opaque and the inscrutable.

11 Ibid., 6.
12 Ibid., 11–12.

2 Joint fashioning or co-operation

Hepburn cites Coleridge approvingly for viewing art as the 'spiritualizing' or 'humanizing' of nature. It is 'the power of humanizing nature, of infusing the thoughts and passions of man into everything which is the object of his contemplation.'[13] Yet is this not what critics designate as the 'pathetic fallacy', the bestowal of exclusively human emotions to an inanimate world and thereby the crude and narcissistic personification of nature? We see our emotions in nature because we project our feelings onto the world. Hepburn is clearly dissatisfied with the view that the human approach to nature is narcissistic. The appreciation of nature is not a mirroring of inner life but a shaping part of interiority. It is not that we merely project our longings onto the canvas of nature. The imagination is an instance of the significance of the productive interaction of mind and world. He quotes the lines of Wordsworth:

> By sensible impressions not enthrall'd,
> But quicken'd, rouz'd, and made thereby more fit
> To hold communion with the invisible world.[14]

Hepburn expounds the relations between the inner world of subjectivity and the realm of physical nature in the following terms:

> the life of the mind is, in important measure, shaped by its imaginative annexing of the outer world – that is, by the sensible impressions derived from it, but also imbued with thought. Our topic is not simply the search for the descriptively apt metaphors from nature for the structure and the ongoings of human inwardness, structures and ongoings that would exist or occur identically or independently whether or not the search is successful: but the annexing is also a moulding and making of that inwardness, reflectively or perfunctorily achieved.[15]

Hepburn is speaking of an intuition of the power of the soul as renewed by the power of nature itself, inner by outer being. We create as well as discover, according to Wordsworth, in lines that resonate with Cudworth:

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13 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria, vol. 1*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (1817; Princeton, 1983), cv.

14 William Wordsworth, *Prelude*, XIII, 103ff.

15 Hepburn, 'Trivial and Serious in the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature', 9.

> All the mighty world
> Of eye, and ear?
> Both what they half create
> And what they perceive.[16]

To commune with Nature is to engage with an enigmatic script that both inspires and instructs, while unleashing creative energy.

3 Sublimity, life-enhancement and imaginative play

Hepburn is interested in the idea of sublime, of a greatness beyond human measure.[17] Hepburn mentions, but dismisses, views like those of Theodor W. Adorno who thinks of the sublime as a temporary bourgeois aberration. Hepburn shares the view expressed by Rudolf Otto that the sublime has a numinous component, one that is both disturbing and attractive. 'The gain would be that we screen ourselves off from the natural immensities that daunt us; the loss that we cut ourselves off from "that renewal of our inner being" which the Romantics saw as derived from meditating on the great permanencies of nature.'[18]

'Central to sublimity – at least common to many of its diverse forms — is the idea of a grave difficulty or threat being transformed (through free and sustained effort) into an austere but valued experience.'[19] Hepburn could have drawn upon a range of theories of the sublime, but Kant remains central for him. Yet it is associated with a stress in Kant upon the idea of play, or more specifically, the 'play of faculties'. Hepburn writes:

> A frequent theme of Kant's aesthetic writing is his contrast between mere sensuous stimulation (which yields no reliable inter-subjective agreement in response), and the 'play of faculties', active and reliably constant between subjects. The work of art or beautiful natural object produces a 'quickening' or animating of our 'cognitive powers',

16 Cf. Eckhard Lobsien, 'Der Entzug des Schönen: Neuplatonische Ästhetik bei Samuel Taylor Coleridge' in Verena Lobsien and Claudia Olk (eds), *Neuplatonismus und Ästhetik. Zur Transformationsgeschichte des Schönen* (Berlin, 2007), 185–212, 188.

17 Hepburn, 'Aesthetic and Religious: Boundaries, Overlaps and Intrusions', 110.

18 Hepburn, 'Trivial and Serious in the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature', 10.

19 Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Aesthetic and Moral: Links and Limits, Part One' in idem, *The Reach of the Aesthetic*, 38–51, 50.

> imagination and understanding, 'to an indefinite, but … harmonious activity'. The mutually quickening activity of those faculties yields 'the sensation whose universal communicability is postulated by the judgement of taste'. Kant's emphasis falls on the triggering and animating of the subject's own activity – self sustained but sharable.[20]

The *playful* dimension of the relationship to nature is significant in Hepburn's account of Kant's aesthetics. It is a play with a pedagogic dimension: the soul is transformed, educated and inspired through its encounter with the beauties and sublimity of nature.

> Kant repeats this account of enlivened or animated faculties, with variations, in his treatment of the beautiful, the sublime and the 'aesthetic ideas'. Objects are sublime because 'they raise the forces of the soul'. The huge energies of nature trigger a self-discovery, of our 'power of resistance of quite another kind' – different from nature's, that is. They instigate an autonomous, self-enhancing inner activity. Even the awesome thought of God as sublime does not crush or humiliate the soul. Active does not shrink to reactive. Rather, the quality of reverence, *Achtung*, in the sublime is an intimation of our trans-empirical activity, as free, rational and moral beings. The 'idea of the supersensible … is awakened in us by an object … which strains the imagination to its utmost'. Although imagination cannot 'lay hold' of anything positive 'beyond the sensible world', 'still, this thrusting aside of the sensible barriers gives it a feeling of being unbounded; … a presentation of the infinite' which '… expands the soul'. As in the case of the pure idea of the moral law, what is 'quickened' in us is a pattern of reflection; but it is not on that account of a 'cold and lifeless' meditation on our rational and moral status. 'The very reverse', wrote Kant, 'is the truth'. Not lifeless, but enlivened to the limit.[21]

Hepburn concludes this discussion by observing: 'Commentators have often given less attention to this theme of aesthetic "animation", "quickening" in Kant than it deserves.'[22]

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20 Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Life and Life-Enhancement as Key Concepts of Aesthetics' in idem, *The Reach of the Aesthetic,* 63–76, 66.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid. 67.

Kant himself was more inclined to consider the aesthetic properties of nature than aesthetic artefacts. Hepburn argues that the forms of nature furnish a unique sphere for the delight and play of the imagination: 'it is a kind of exhilaration, in this case a delight in the fact that the forms of the natural world *offer scope* for the exercise of the imagination, that leaf pattern chimes with vein or pattern, cloud form with mountain form'.[23] The mind is stimulated by nature in a way that demands philosophical reflection, and was the subject of such investigation in the eighteenth century.

The eighteenth century was a pivotal period in the history of western aesthetics. Shaftesbury, in particular, was a decisive figure. The question of taste was extensively discussed by British philosophers from Shaftesbury to David Hume. Kant in some respects seems an unlikely candidate as a great aesthetician and his thought bears the influence of the British tradition of Shaftesbury and the German rationalist tradition of Alexander Baumgarten. Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790) is one of the landmark texts in the field. He claims that 'every art presupposes rules by means of which in the first instance a product, if it is to be called artistic, is represented as possible.'[24] Fine art, for Kant, is founded in the productive power of genius, i.e. a creativity which transcends any rule-determined activity. His stress upon the role of genius exerted a profound influence upon subsequent theorizing, defining beauty as purposiveness without purpose, targeting utilitarian and reductionist accounts of the experience of beauty. Another key aspect of Kant's legacy was his stress upon the idea, derived from Shaftesbury, that specifically aesthetic judgments are disinterested. Perhaps the most significant Kantian contribution is, however, the claim that aesthetic judgments have universal validity – on the one hand, and yet, on the other, we cannot establish their validity. Aesthetic pleasure has a subjective universality because beauty demands general and not isolated or arbitrary agreement. Yet lacking concepts aesthetic judgments remain suspended between the imagination and the understanding. The ancient adage *De gustibus non est disputandum* (Tastes cannot be disputed) is firmly rejected:

The imagination (as a productive faculty of cognition) is very powerful in creating another nature, as it were, out of the material that actual nature gives it. We entertain ourselves with it when experience becomes too commonplace, and by it remould experience, always indeed in accordance with analogical laws, but yet also in accordance with principles which occupy a higher place in reason (laws, too, which are just as natural to us as those by which

23 Hepburn, 'Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty', 292.

24 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York, 1951), 150.

understanding comprehends empirical nature). Thus we feel our freedom from the law of association (which attaches to the empirical employment of imagination), so that the material supplied to us by nature in accordance with this law can be worked up into something different which surpasses nature:

> Such representations of the imagination we may call *ideas*, partly because they at least strive after something which lies beyond the bounds of experience and so seek to approximate to a presentation of concepts of reason (intellectual ideas), thus giving to the latter the appearance of objective reality, – but especially because no concept can be fully adequate to them as internal intuitions. The poet ventures to realise to sense rational ideas of invisible beings, the kingdom of the blessed, hell, eternity, creation, etc.; or even if he deals with things of which there are examples in experience – e.g. death, envy and all vices, also love, fame, and all the like – he tries, by means of imagination, which emulates the play of reason in its quest after a maximum, to go beyond the limits of experience and to present them to sense with a completeness of which there is no example in nature. This is properly speaking the art of the poet, in which the faculty of aesthetical ideas can manifest itself in its entire strength. But this faculty, considered in itself, is properly only a talent [of the imagination].[25]

In this passage Kant presents the imagination of the poet as a great power to create another nature, free from the law of association – i.e. what Coleridge named fancy. In this manner, the poet is able to furnish a sensible dimension for the ideas of Reason, and discusses themes and aspects of an invisible world: the poet is a 'second maker, a just Prometheus under Jove', as already Shaftesbury said. The poet imitates ideal forms through the imagination.[26] Note that 'such representations of the imagination we may call *ideas*, partly because they at least strive after something which lies beyond the bound of experience and so seek to approximate to a presentation of concepts of reason (intellectual ideas).' Here Kant is linking the imagination to the ideas of Reason: the poet through the imagination makes invisible ideas sensible and presents the transcendent in discernible form. This is a characteristic instance of Kant both insisting upon the limits of knowledge and yet gesturing beyond these limits. Judgment is a faculty that mediates between knowledge and

25 Ibid., 158.

26 Cf. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria,* 295ff.

morality. Kant nevertheless insists that art bears no evident relation to truth. This apparent subjectivisation of art in Kant has provoked the criticism of many commentators since. Yet, as we have seen above, the status of art for Kant remains ambiguous. The aesthetic is a decisive element in the idealistic dimension of Kant's philosophy since for him it reveals a link between or bridge across the otherwise great gulf or rift between the realms of theoretical and practical reason. The Imagination is of signal value in this regard.

This looks far removed from any philosophical nominalism. On the contrary, the view of the poet as rendering the invisible visible suggests a quasi-Platonism. Kant might be perceived as offering a middle position between the Platonic-Pythagorean realism about beauty and subjectivist accounts. Kant insists upon the irreducibly teleological aspect of nature, albeit in terms of the necessity of viewing the unity of nature as regulative principle of science. It is not clear, however, that this is a sustainable middle ground. It quite reasonably struck Kant's immediate successors as odd that we should treat the world as exhibiting unity, beauty and purposiveness while denying that we are entitled to the (Platonic) thought that the reality is constituted by unity, beauty and teleology. The laws that govern that intelligibility of the world presumably have their basis in facts about reality *per se* and not just the mind. That would be to claim, *pace* Kant, that the ideas are not merely regulative but constitutive.

4 The sacred

Though not avowing theism, Hepburn examines the idea of the sacred, which has a tendency to drive the aesthetic back to the religious source. This is an instance of the significance of the thought of Otto for Hepburn:

> Central to Romantic aesthetic theory, for instance, was the conception of imaginative grasp of reality-in-itself, the universe at large, through episodes of heightened experience. In 'visionary moments' features of the life-world became, to the poet or other artist, symbols or 'ciphers' of the whole or of what transcends the perceptible world: the 'one life of nature' or nature's God.[27]

27 Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Truth, Subjectivity and the Aesthetic' in idem, *The Reach of the Aesthetic*, 16–37, 35.

Hepburn explicitly rejects John Passmore's attack on the notion of the sacred in his work *Man's Responsibility for Nature* (1974) as 'obscurantist and pre-scientific' and generating a 'culpable abdication of human responsibility for nature':[28]

> For the theist, of course, the ultimate background is the pervasive divine (holy) being upon whom the entire world depends. But can we validly argue from the empirical world to such a being? In my own present view, the philosophical critics of the cosmological argumentation to God have not succeeded in refuting it in all its forms, but neither have its defenders succeeded in identifying such a possible Ground of the world with the biblical Deity. It is tempting and indeed plausible to argue that the observable universe, and particularly the regresses of explanation we open and explore some way, cannot be all there is; that not everything and every event can exist and obtain 'by courtesy of' something else or some other event; and that the cosmic 'background' cannot consist of nothing more than those causal dependencies we trace. But if that is the least that can be said, perhaps it is also the *most*. Yet there is mystery enough there.[29]

Neither the theist nor the critic of theism can claim victory. Yet Hepburn is clear that the mystery of the existence of the cosmos cannot be dismissed as a pseudo problem. The reference to 'mystery' is telling. It is suggestive Gabriel Marcel's seminal distinction between a problem and mystery. Marcel gave the Gifford Lectures in Aberdeen in 1949–50, while Hepburn was a student there. These lectures were published as the two-volume *The Mystery of Being: Faith and Reality* (1950).[30] In these lectures, Marcel presents the neo-Romantic view that the modern world, with its obsession with technique and method, characteristically fails to recognise those domains where problem solving is insufficient. Mysteries require a different form of engagement than the solving of puzzles. The existence of the world could be seen as just such a mystery. And mystery resists simple reduction: 'My main concern […] is to generalize and clarify the claim in art, as outside it, the subjectivising way can be a cognitive path,

28 Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Restoring the Sacred: Sacred as a Concept of Aesthetics' in idem, *The Reach of the Aesthetic*, 113–29, 117–18.

29 Ibid., 125.

30 Gabriel Marcel, *Le Mystère de l'être* (2 vols, Paris, 1951). His first work was on Coleridge and F. W. J. Schelling.

and that not all enquiry and exploration is reductive and analytical, concerned with the breaking down of complexes to basic elements.'[31] Indeed, Hepburn views the sacred as an index of the axiomatic, the normative. The sense of the sacred or the numinous, as evinced by the cross-cultural experience of nature, furnishes an intimation of transcendence. The contrast is between the inanimate and animate, the impersonal and the spiritual:

> Normally taken for granted in workaday experience of the world is the emergence – from inanimate matter – of life, sentience, consciousness and self-conscious personal existence. A possible further role for a recovered conception of the sacred can be the dramatizing of these fundamental 'levels' of being, in aesthetic realization: the mental and conscious, the personal, the moral and spiritual being made to stand out vividly from the sub-personal and the inert. They then show up as 'sacred', in their embodying of high values. Instead of pointing 'down' to causal conditions (in analytic and reductionist idiom), the concept of the sacred points 'up' to value-realization, whether moral or aesthetic, emphasizing and exulting in the gap bridged or leapt.[32]

It is evident that Hepburn considers the phenomenon of the sacred and the existence of a normative dimension as issues of decisive metaphysical significance. Moreover, the self-conscious and "personal" dimension of reality cannot be dismissed as merely epiphenomenal. Perhaps, again, Hepburn is pointing – however obliquely, to the great metaphysical exegesis of 'I AM that I AM' of Exodus 3.14 in western philosophy and the identification of ultimate Being with the divine I AM in Christian Platonism.

5 Imagination

Hepburn's account of the religious imagination straddles these two poles. Imagination must provide a means of moving from the finite to the infinite. He presents three key aspects of the imagination. Firstly, the Kantian sense of imagination as synthesizing, as central to perception. Secondly imagination as the capacity to summon 'alternative orders'. Thirdly, the ability of images to be symbols of a transcendent world:

31 Hepburn, 'Truth, Subjectivity and the Aesthetic', 33.

32 Hepburn, 'Restoring the Sacred: Sacred as a Concept of Aesthetics', 125.

> I acknowledge the (roughly Kantian) sense in which, without imagination, we cannot make the basic differentiations essential to awareness of the world and of ourselves as subjects. Its synthesizing role continues to be vital to knowledge at every level: to personal relations, where we seek to interpret disparate pieces of behaviour as manifestations of a single intelligible character; to the scientist and the historian, who seek pattern in their data. And so with religious imagination, seeking some unity in and beyond religious 'intimations', hints of transcendence, rather than leaving these as sheer anomalies, discrete individual mysteries. That too must count as a cognitive endeavour.[33]

We have already noted the presence of Marcel in Hepburn's thought. The appeal to imagination is a plea for richer sense of the cognitive, as more than tracking empirical facts:

> The great vision on Snowdon as the expression of
> This love more intellectual cannot be
> Without Imagination, which, in truth,
> Is but another name for absolute strength
> And clearest insight, amplitude of mind,
> And Reason in her most exalted mood.[34]

Yet the appeal to Imagination is driven by the recognition of the limits of problem driven rationalism:

> some of the most vivid religiously toned aesthetic experiences are notable not for *alleviating* a sense of ontological insufficiency, but rather for *initiating* and heightening such a sense, a sense of insecurity, loss of everyday bearings, through the dislocation of anticipated, familiar perception, and they are specially valued for doing so. They manifest a power to disturb and to introduce or intensify a sense of ambiguity or mystery in relation to fundamental elements of human experience. They present familiar objects and scenes in a fresh, wonder evoking light, and make us feel very much at home or at ease with them. Perhaps

33 Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Religious Imagination' in idem, *The Reach of the Aesthetic*, 77–95, 94.

34 William Wordsworth, *Prelude*, XIII, 189.

> we are moved by sensed analogies with dream-experience, rather than being more firmly installed in a single incontestably 'real' world.[35]

The imagination serves to awaken a sense of mystery and wonder and a discontent with 'reality' in the quotidian sense of the familiar habitat.

6 Coincidentia oppositorum

The contemplation of nature also highlights the polarity in aesthetic judgment between the particular and the universal, the many and the one. Hepburn's stress upon the significance of unity is uncontroversial, even if one might expect this in a thinker with debts to Neo-Platonism. Yet Hepburn claims the significance of the awareness of vitality and energy as linked to stability and tranquillity. These paradoxically co-present features are those that link Hepburn to the Romantic-Platonic tradition. He uses Wordsworth and Coleridge's image of the waterfall:

> 'What a sight it is to look down on such a cataract! […] – the wheels, that circumvolve in it – the leaping up and plunging forward of that infinity of pearls… – the continual *change* of the *Matter,* the perpetual *sameness* of the *Form* – it is an awful Image and Shadow of God and the World.'[36]

The idea of the world as the *Umbra Dei* is one of Neo-Platonic provenance.[37]

Hepburn refers to the Neo-Platonic model of the coincidence of opposites, the ideal of stillness or tranquillity which 'at the same time, and essentially in tension with that, is the thought that it is not the stillness of unknowing, not the winding down of vitality and vivid experience but contrariwise their maximal intensification.'[38] He quotes Pseudo-Dionysus 'in his eternal motion, God remains at rest', Boethius and Meister Eckhart. Wordsworth's account of

35 Hepburn, 'Aesthetic and Religious: Boundaries, Overlaps and Intrusions', 110.

36 Quotation from Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Data and Theory in Aesthetics: Philosophical Understanding and Misunderstanding' in idem, *The Reach of the Aesthetic*, 130–47, 138.

37 Cf. George A. Craig, *Umbra Dei: Henry More* and the Seventeenth Century Struggle for Plainness (Ph.D. thesis, Harvard University, 1946).

38 Hepburn, 'Aesthetic and Religious: Boundaries, Overlaps and Intrusions', 109.

the Rhine at Scaffhausen as an image of 'the highest state of sublimity', items I 'state of opposition & yet reconcilement'.[39]

For Nicolas of Cusa employs the Neo-Platonic idea that the finite is contained potentially with the infinite as its implication; and the infinite is within the finite. The world is the explication of the primal transcendent unity, the communication of ineffable transcendent goodness. This is not the invocation of God as an explanatory principle or sufficient reason but as the ineffable and enigmatic archetype of the physical cosmos.

There is a common view of Neo-Platonism as a metaphysics of emanation. This term, 'emanation' is a highly problematic and polyvalent term, but it is taken to mean the descent of the finite world from the absolute plenitude of unitary perfection. Here the stress is upon the remoteness of the first principle. Yet an equally potent philosophical image among the Platonists is the idea of the *unfolding* of the Divine Being in the world:

> The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
> It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
> It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
> Crushed.[40]

The cosmos as image is both like and unlike its transcendent archetype. This means that the concrete manifestation of the divine is a mirror and a reflection of its source; not the distance but the presence of the archetype in the image is the key to some of the greatest nature poetry of the western tradition.

7 Conclusion

There is a gentle elegance in Hepburn's writing that can shroud the profundity of his thought. In an era of widespread scepticism about the value of the aesthetic beyond the confines of the art gallery and the museum, he draws aesthetics into the sphere of wider human concerns. The Neo-Platonist likes to pun with the supposed etymology of beauty in Greek (*to kalon*) as derived from the verb to call *kallein*): Beauty calls. Hepburn too contends that the reach of the aesthetic extends into the borderlands of philosophy and theology. 'At its most deeply felt the Wordsworthian experience brought a re-kindling of

39 Ibid., 110.

40 Gerard Manley Hopkins, *God's Grandeur.*

religious imagination for some who found it no longer sustained by the traditional dogmas.'[41]

Hepburn is making an observation about the Romantic era but it hard to avoid the thought that there is some personal autobiography in this account. Hepburn inspired the development of environmental aesthetics: it is less widely observed that one might view natural beauty as a window of transcendence in his work. Might we call it a rueful late Romantic aesthetics of a Neo-Platonic *Deus absconditus*? Hepburn writes of expressivism:

> Although it is now very much in eclipse, the last widely accepted unified aesthetic system was the expression theory. […] The expression theory is a *communication*-theory: it must represent aesthetic experience of nature either as communication from the Author of Nature, which it rarely does, or else (rather awkwardly) as the discovery that nature's shapes and colours can with luck serve as expressive vehicles of human feeling, although never constructed for that end.[42]

Hepburn often expresses sympathy for such an aesthetic that 'involves awareness of a just-out-of-reach, absent, hinted at, greater beauty and more ultimate reality'.[43] The God of traditional western theism is absent in his philosophy but the Neo-Platonic perspective of the world as a theophany, nature as an enigmatic and mysterious image of a transcendent deity, abides in his thought – however cautiously and coyly expressed. In the final words of Dr Faustus: 'All that is transient is an image [*Alles Vergängliche ist nur ein Gleichnis*]'.

This is a view of the deity that Hepburn imbibed from Coleridge and Wordsworth.[44] This theological dimension to his thought did not vanish in his mature work. I do not make this observation in order to diminish Hepburn's originality. Rather, the philosophy of Hepburn stands as a strikingly original endeavour to avoid the Scylla of a crude empiricism and the Charybdis of theological positivism. Once we remove the veil of late twentieth century erudite professional philosophy, we encounter a thinker who loved to walk the mountains and dales of the Highlands and the lakes, and we stumble across a late Romantic-Neo-Platonic aesthetics in which beauty and the sublime

41 Hepburn, 'Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty', 286.
42 Ibid., 287.
43 Hepburn, 'Aesthetic and Religious: Boundaries, Overlaps and Intrusions', 110.
44 Cf. Douglas Hedley, *The Iconic Imagination* (London, 2016).

suggest visions of the transcendent in an aesthetically impoverished and relentlessly materialistic culture.

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