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David Newsome

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‘ASSUREDLY not every one who saith “Plato, Plato”’, John Morley once observed, ‘is admitted to that intellectual kingdom.’<sup>1</sup> The remark is incontestable, I think you would agree; and it is true not only of self-styled Platonists who are pleased to see themselves as continuators of a noble tradition or who take refuge in the shelter of a great name, but also of those for whom the claim is made by historians and commentators who love to categorise and are perhaps rather too inclined to suppose that what a man has studied in his formative years he retains without substantial modification to the end of his days. The nineteenth century saw many English men of letters who could be described as Platonists. It is a little disturbing, however, to note the extraordinary range of answers supplied by twentieth-century scholars to the question: which of these writers would you select as the *quintessential* Platonist? Dean Inge has given pride of place to Wordsworth, because of his concept of the poetic imagination;<sup>2</sup> A. E. Taylor would appear to favour John Ruskin because the social message of *Fors Clavigera* was the purest interpretation in that century of the teaching of *The Laws*

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and the *Republic*.<sup>3</sup> The American classical scholar, the late Professor Paul Shorey, unhesitatingly selected John Stuart Mill who had the clearest understanding of the meaning of 'dialectic',<sup>4</sup> and our own Sir Ernest Barker sang the praises of Carlyle, because he had the most vivid sense of the spiritual reality of the universe and combined this with a healthy contempt for the evils of democracy.<sup>5</sup> An equally strong case could be made out for Coleridge, Shelley, Jowett, F. D. Maurice, Matthew Arnold or Walter Pater.

Enough has been said, however, to establish my point. Can all these great originals really belong to the same philosophical tradition? Only, it would seem, if one admits very considerable variations in the interpretation of the tradition itself. That this is undoubtedly so, we shall hope to substantiate presently. The one sure thing that can be said is that in the nineteenth century the Greek philosophers really came into their own, and—as the century progressed—this renaissance seemed to represent a victory for the Platonists. Even Aristotelian Oxford which had nurtured that master rhetorician, John Henry Newman, and the archetypal schoolman, William Ewart Gladstone, succumbed to the Socratic spell in the second half of the century. Who could have foreseen it? Certainly not their ancestors of the Augustan Age, who had admired the Roman virtues, cultivated a Latin style and shown as scant

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respect for the giants of Greek antiquity as the befuddled medieval translator of a series of Greek texts who represented Alcibiades as a seductive damsel wooed by Alexander the Great and, after blinking uncomprehendingly at Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*, supplied the ingenious, if intriguing, rendering of its title as 'The Book of the Behinds'.<sup>6</sup>

Of course John Morley, in deprecating the taking of Plato's name in vain, was not lashing out wildly. He had Emerson in particular in mind, of whom he thought very little—an opinion shared by Hort and Westcott, it may be observed in passing.<sup>7</sup> Also the agnostic in him made him understandably resent the irritating habit of many contemporary churchmen of appealing to Plato as a witness to Christian truth. As is well known, this was by no means a specifically nineteenth-century phenomenon. Indeed, if it is valid to make a distinction between Plato himself and the philosophical tradition to which his writings gave rise, then the Christian claim both to belong to that tradition and to interpret it for successive generations is a very sound one. Even to regard Plato himself as one of the prophets, which Westcott was inclined to do, is not completely absurd. It is true that one would have to omit from the canon the fact that Plato in the *Phaedo* was indiscreet enough to let Socrates ask Crito to sacrifice a cock for him to Asclepius,<sup>8</sup> and one might have to gloss over Plato's conception of the

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Godhead in the *Republic*, which represented the Almighty as both unbending and unbendable, a Being not to be propitiated by ‘mendicant prophets’ or timely repentance.<sup>9</sup> The whole point of Socrates’ reply to Glaucon and Adeimantus was that ‘virtue is its own reward’. On the other hand Plato did look beyond the traditional pantheon (he had Hesiod rather than Homer in mind), pouring scorn upon ‘stories of the King of Heaven eating his infant son in order to avoid the danger of dethronement, and the son later retaliating by castrating his parent’,<sup>10</sup> and sought something that would more plainly answer to the needs of man. The real anticipation of the Christian revelation in his writings was—as Dr Paul Shorey pointed out—not what the Neo-Platonist made of his teaching on the immortality of the soul, the nature of Divine Judgement and the doctrine of recollection through the myth in the *Phaedrus* of the heavenly procession and the winged charioteer, but the simple message, which was expressed so succinctly by Matthew Arnold, that ‘conduct is three-fourths of life’. An even purer rendering of the essence of Platonic ethical teaching comes in the words of Christ: ‘What shall it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his own soul?’<sup>11</sup>

Now the Neo-Platonists would not leave well alone. They elaborated Plato—most particularly the Plato of the *Parmenides*, the *Phaedo* and the *Timaeus*

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—rather as the medieval schoolmen ‘went to town’ on Aristotle. A gap appeared to exist between the doctrine of the Forms and the idea of God; so first Plotinus, and finally Proclus, must attempt to bridge it by inventing ‘scales of being’ and ‘ladders of perfection’. The poetry and symbolism of Plato became the subject of ‘obsessed meditation or of hair-splitting refinements of dialectics’.<sup>12</sup> All was subordinated to ‘the passion for a fully articulated vision of the world as a structural unity’.<sup>13</sup> Finally, the intuitionism of Plato came to be regarded less as a means of discerning Truth and more as a mystical process towards the contemplation of the Ineffable One. Dean Inge, in his Hulsean Lectures of 1925, chose to define Platonism in the words of Professor J. A. Stewart thus: ‘Platonism is the mood of one who has a curious eye for the endless variety of this visible and temporal world, and a fine sense of its beauties, yet is haunted by the presence of an invisible and eternal world behind, or, when the mood is most pressing, within the visible and temporal world, and sustaining both it and himself—a world not perceived as external to himself, but inwardly lived by him, as that with which in moments of ecstasy, or even habitually, he is become one. This is how personal Platonism, whether in a Plotinus or in a Wordsworth, may be described in outline.’<sup>14</sup>

Well, this is a pretty woolly definition, but it has

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some relation to Platonism, one would have to admit. The key words—‘mood’, ‘ecstasy’—were the words which attracted the late Dean of St Paul’s, student as he was of Plotinus and—at the time that he first enunciated it at least—the rather solitary advocate of the mystical way. So let us clarify our first point. In the nineteenth century, there were Platonists like Coleridge and Maurice who were intuitionists, Platonists like Mill and Ruskin who wanted to reform the world, Platonists like Matthew Arnold—and before him, Coleridge again—who were moralists and enunciated a doctrine of the élite. But there were Platonists also who, although they may have shared one, more or even all of these notions with those who were prominent in their time in expressing them, were attracted by the more mysterious and elusive elements in Plato—the myths and the symbolism, the apprehension of the world of the unseen, the notion of the One behind the Many, the transcendentalism. For them Plato was not the anti-democrat, the moralist or the social reformer. He was—as Basil Willey put it—‘the Orphic enthusiast who longs to be delivered from the wheel of life, and to enter the realm of essence where the soul’s true pasturage is to be found’.<sup>15</sup> Coleridge, as usual, supplies us with the clue, when he complained how habitually men confounded Platonists with Plotinists.<sup>16</sup> The Romantic Poets were, on the whole, Plotinists; those through-

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out the history of the Western World who have followed the Plato of tradition rather than the Plato of the Dialogues have been Plotinists; Dean Inge's Hulsean Lectures were concerned with Plotinists; and it is to this number that Brooke Foss Westcott properly belongs.

There is, however, one other complication. If the pure, clean water of classical Platonism had been converted into a heady wine by the Romantic poets, so that much of what passed for Platonism in the nineteenth century was more properly a distillation of the metaphysical elements in the Dialogues following the tradition of the Neo-Platonists, the effects of adulteration at the hands of German philosophers, and most notably Hegel, was to add another subtle flavouring to the brew. In the second half of the century (and possibly before as well) it becomes insufficient to guard against the confounding of Platonist with Plotinist; you have to disentangle the teaching of Plato from the interpretations of the Neo-Hegelians. This task is exceedingly complex. In the first place, the traditional guides have let us down. Pfeleiderer, in his general survey, tells us nothing of this; and neither René Wellek in his study of Kantian influences, nor Professor Muirhead in his attempt to chart the impact of Hegelianism on Anglo-Saxon philosophy, has appeared even to recognise that the problem exists—that is to say, how much of Victorian Platonism was in fact (to

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change our metaphor of the liquids) Hegelianism grafted upon a Coleridgean stock?<sup>17</sup> Secondly, too much emphasis has perhaps been laid on the direct impact of the Hegelian translations and commentaries on Oxford philosophy in the late decades of the nineteenth century. Of course the influence of Hegel on Jowett was profound. He was certainly studying Hegel as early as 1845, and he came in time to regard the German philosopher as the greatest interpreter of Plato in all history.<sup>18</sup> 'He has done more to explain Greek thought', he wrote in his introduction to the *Sophist*, 'than all other writers put together.'<sup>19</sup> The dominance of T. H. Green, an avowed Germanist, though not uncritical of Hegel,<sup>20</sup> and then of Edward Caird meant that Oxford men were set on the quest of scaling the Absolute by the ladder of Dialectic practically until the end of the century.

But, of course, there is more to it than this. German ideas were infiltrating for some time before the great Hegelian debates of the closing decades—of the *fin de siècle*, some classical scholars would say, questioning whether philosophy in general and Plato studies in particular benefited from the experience, echoing the opinion of John Stuart Mill that too much conversancy with Hegelian dialectic tended to deprave the intellect.<sup>21</sup> Matthew Arnold's Platonism, for instance, which occasionally has a German ring about it (how else



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could such an urbane writer substitute for the simple monosyllable 'God' the ludicrously unattractive formula 'The Eternal Power not-ourselves, that makes for righteousness'?),<sup>22</sup> was drawing liberally from Fichte and Spinoza; and, it may well be, as Dr Roth has indicated, that much of what seemed in Hegel to make sense to the English mind was what Hegel had himself derived from Spinoza.<sup>23</sup> Too little consideration is given also to the Cambridge Platonists of the nineteenth century, who in the persons of Coleridge and Julius Hare, and to a lesser extent F. D. Maurice, were more familiar with German writings than their Oxford contemporaries. We may illustrate the point by taking one particular Hegelian concept—his teaching on the Unity of Contradictions—which is encountered very frequently in the writings of Victorian Platonists.

Now let us begin with Westcott himself. There are two characteristics of Westcott's mind which—if he had been an Hegelian—would be easily explained. In the first place, his understanding of Truth was that it was never to be found in the mean position, but always at the extremes. It was the union of polarities. Arthur Benson noted this characteristic attitude of mind showing itself time and time again in the Sunday afternoon conversazioni at King's which it was Westcott's custom to hold during term when he was Regius Professor.

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‘Nothing ever seemed to please him more than to confront two apparently contradictory truths.’ ‘I don’t know what to think’, said a simple-minded undergraduate to him once, on some such occasion; ‘both these statements seem true, and yet, either excludes the other.’ ‘Yes, that is so’, said the Professor with a brilliant smile. ‘I am always so thankful when I can get down to a contradiction—then I really feel I am on safe ground.’<sup>24</sup>

That this was very much more than donnish affectation we shall see in a moment. It is interesting, however, to note that the second characteristic is—as it were—the rider of the first. If truth is a contradiction (or—in Hegelian terms—if, as one advances into the higher logic, apparent differences merge), then one’s apprehension of truth must be well served by looking for it in the most improbable places, and particularly in the place where you would least expect to find it—in the argument of your absolute opponent. It is hard to put this into words without using Mauricean terminology, because it is—as you will know—the very essence of Maurice’s theology. Every prophet, party, sect or Church sees a portion of the truth and proclaims it; but what it proclaims becomes a half-truth if it denies the truth of its opponents. Find the half-truth that your opponent has seen, and add it to the portion of truth that you have perceived, and you may get the whole truth. Now look at the opening