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LOSS OF VISION:
A SEQUENCE OF FIVE MEDIAN ODES

By J.R. Christopher

One
Within this room of shelved books I sit
and muse upon the greater odes I read,
on Wordsworth's "visionary gleam"--a seed
which sprangtime grew and bore no autumn fruit--
on Coleridge's loss of "joy," and Shelley suit
that "beauty" might return upon his need,
but though they stoic-stood or they did plead,
no youth-felt breeze did touch th' aeolian lute.

And I, likewise, had felt the "ecstasy",
the fire within the soul, in nature, art,
sometimes in church--but that has gone from me,
the words are simply words again, no more;
and so from habit, still with pleasure, I start
and read these odes, which teach redundant lore.

Three
Shall I confess my pride? for I had said,
some fifteen years ago when student I,
while talking to a priest 'bout prophets high,
unprofitable to myself, that led
were all of us by ecstasy which fled--
those sudden golden moments, no brazen lie--
which meant but voiced no meaning, no angel's cry--
a splash of gold, a pang of joy instead.

"Nonsense!" the priest replied, "the prophets tell
that God spoke clearly to them, not through art
but in the midst of life: no ecstasy
unmeaningful, but meaning sharp and full!"
After that hour, no more I felt the dart
of fire, no more the burning soul for me.

Four
Two ways did Meaning come primord'ally:
the first was law discovered in the mind,
the moral law, which should the impulse bind,
the moral law of human love so free;
the second, awe impress't in imagery:
the burning bush aflame within the heart--
the gleam, the joy, the beauty, ecstastic dart
there, from the image burning, burning me
until mine eyes no more could see, dark blind;
for both ways merg'd at last and do not part--
the mind-felt law, the heart-felt awe--one kind,
one nature; for Christ, the Tao, the Law, can start
the pang of joy from any circling Dove--
my hand, my heart: with Dante burn,
"Come climb the sunlit hills and aye rejoice!"

Five
O subtle Lord, tho I do kneel and plead
for ecstasy's return, or stoic-stand;
tho I do write an ode, by impulse fanned
in emulation of the odes I read,
no breeze my fanning stirs, no fruit my seed
can grow, no light produce, from darkness bannd;
since golden joy, ecstastic joy, no hand
can snap its fingers for, at any need.

O subtle Lord, my need is great, and great
the gift which once was given--give to me
no "philosophic mind" too deep for tears,
but yet the momentary sunbeam--I wait
the joy which lights the intervening years
and from the dark night of my soul, saves me!