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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 springtime 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.

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, ecstatic 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!

Two

Surpris'd by joy's loss, in his despair,
wrote Coleridge of th' impatient wind without,
which mountain crags and craggy trees did flout,
reflecting but the storm within, more rare,
more dangerous, and harder far to bear--
which left upon the soul an ice of doubt,
which buried in snow th' imagination's route,
heavy as frost thick frozen, in the moon's glare.

Surpris'd by joy, the longing of the soul,
wrote Lewis of his search, beyond his choice,
for far-off mountains, dim and blue--a goal,
his life's the journey toward; a dryad's voice,
calling with wistfulness but not with dole,
"Come climb the sunlit hills and aye rejoice!"

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 impresst in imagery:
the burning bush aflame within the heart--
the gleam, the joy, the beauty, ecstatic 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, "I love."