HOW THE PHILOSOPHER CHARLES TAYLOR WOULD HEAL THE ILLS OF MODERNITY

Enlightenment liberalism fragmented the world by neglecting the social nature of the self, Taylor contends, but the Romantics can tell us how to restore a shared sense of meaning and purpose.

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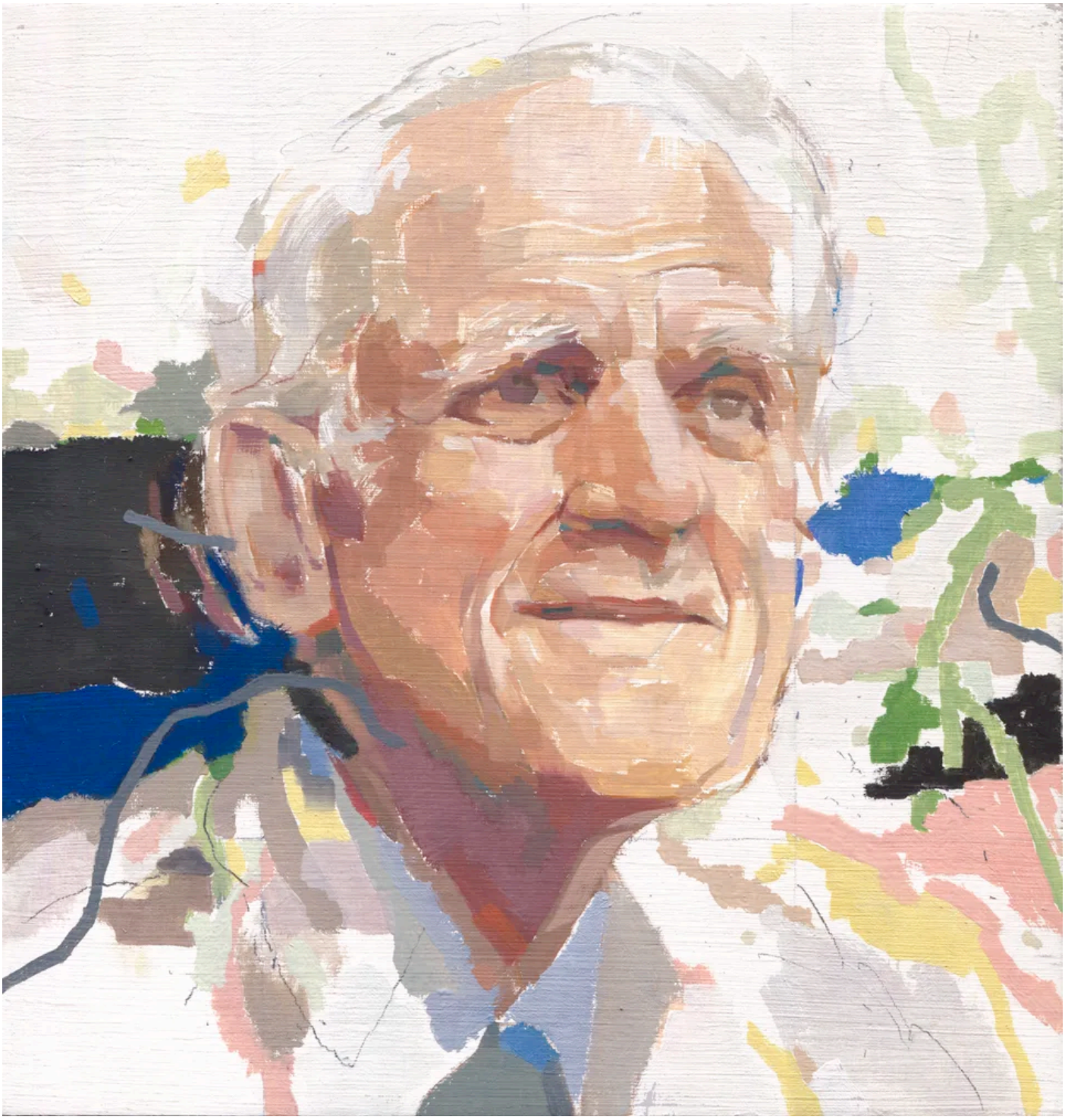

Poetry and music escape the constraints of intellect, Taylor argues, persuading us by inspiration rather than argument. Illustration by James Lee Chiahan; Source photograph by Neville Elder / Getty

Lyric poets and mathematicians, by general agreement, do their best work young, while composers and conductors are evergreen, doing *their* best work, or more work of the same kind, as they age. Philosophers seem to be a more mixed bag: some shine early and some, like Wittgenstein, have distinct chapters of youth and middle age; Bertrand Russell went on tirelessly until he was almost a hundred. Yet surely few will surpass the record of the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, who is back, at ninety-two, with what may be the most ambitious work ever written by a major thinker at such an advanced age. The new book, "Cosmic Connections: Poetry in the Age of Disenchantment" (Belknap), though ostensibly a study of Romantic poetry and music, is about nothing less than modern life and its discontents, and how we might transcend them.

A hard thinker to pigeonhole, Taylor has long been a mainstay of Canada's social-democratic left; he helped found the New Democratic Party, running for office several times in Quebec, though losing, inevitably, to the Liberal Party and the charismatic Pierre Trudeau. He's also a Catholic and a singularly eloquent critic of individualism and secularism, those two pillars of modern liberalism. He worries about the modern conception of the self—what he has called "the punctual self"—which he takes to be rooted in Enlightenment thought, and about the primacy it accords to autonomy, reason, and individual rights. By wresting our identities away from a sense of community and common purpose, the new "atomist-instrumental" model was, he thinks, bound to produce our familiar modern alienation. We became estranged from a sense of belonging and meaning. We experienced the attenuation of the citizen-participation politics we need. We wanted to be alone, and now we are. With this analysis, critical of the foundations of liberalism without betraying liberal values, Taylor manages to be at once

precise and prophetic. He may be the most well-regarded philosopher in the English-speaking world, having snatched most of the big prizes, including the million-dollar Berggruen Prize, in 2016. There are now books about his books, study guides and Web sites dedicated to indexing his œuvre.

When I was a kid, growing up in Montreal around McGill University, where Taylor taught for more than three decades, he was a significant if troubling presence: not personally troubling—quite the opposite, he was an amiable faculty friend—but troubling because, in my own science-worshipping (what the other side would have called "positivist") faculty family, Taylor's rehabilitation of Hegel seemed almost sinister. Of such matters are quarrels made in Barchester.

Nonetheless, at some point I began to read Taylor, first with the fascination of the forbidden and then with ever-increasing pleasure. Though Taylor was defending a German idealist tradition that a more empirical-minded tradition had denounced as mere verbiage and wind, he had spent a formative period in the precincts of ordinary-language philosophy at Oxford, where he was mentored by Isaiah Berlin; he spoke the plainer dialects of Anglo-American philosophy. (The phone calls were coming from inside the house.) Indeed, he felt that Berlin had abandoned philosophy for the history of ideas because the moral philosophy of his day was too parched to capture the complexities Berlin cared about.

As a social and political theorist, Taylor emphasized the primacy of shared experience—the idea that identity resides within communities rather than inside brains—without succumbing to nostalgia for some lost organic society. What matters most in life to actual people, he has argued, is not the standard liberal question "Who am I?" but the richer humanist question "Where am I

going?" In expansive volumes such as "Sources of the Self" and "A Secular Age," he has stalked, like a soft-footed cat, a "naturalist" view of humanity which assimilates our minds and morals to a purely materialist and empirical program of study. We are not atoms in a mindless universe, he argues, but agents in a metaphysically alert one, embodied and embedded in meanings we jointly create. Art is not an accessory to pleasure but the means of our connection to the cosmos.

Taylor's new book is formidably chewy, with page after page featuring passages of Hölderlin, Novalis, and Rilke, offered both in the original German and in translation. Long analyses of T. S. Eliot and Milosz arrive, too. But, though Taylor's subjects are often severely abstract, his sentences are lucid, even charmingly direct, and his purpose is plain. We once lived in an "enchanted" universe of agreed-upon meaning and common purpose, where we looked at the night sky and felt that each object was shaped with significance by a God-given order. Now we live in the modern world the Enlightenment produced—one of fragmented belief and broken purposes, where no God superintends the cosmos, common agreement on meaning is no longer possible, and all you can do with the moon is measure it. "I admire the moon as a moon, just a moon," Lorenz Hart sighed, with memorable modernity, adding, significantly, "Nobody's heart belongs to me today." Enlightened, we are alone.

Romantic poetry—the poetry of Shelley and Keats, in English, of Novalis and Hölderlin, in German—first diagnosed this fracture (the argument goes) and offered a way to heal it. Where neoclassical poets like Alexander Pope appealed to an ordered world, with clear meanings and a hierarchy of kinds, the Romantics recognized that this was no longer credible. The enchanted

world had been replaced by the modern world. We could hardly go back toward ignorance—Goethe, one of Taylor's heroes, participated in the modern world as a scientist—but we had to find a way to reënchant it. The best way to heal the wound is through poetry and music, of the sort that doesn't offer propositions but casts spells and enacts rituals. The arts are not subsidiary places of secondary sensations but the primary place where we go to recall feelings of wholeness, of harmony not just with "Nature"—the craggy peaks the Romantics loved and the Italian lakes they lingered by—but with existence itself. Poetry and music do this by escaping the constraints of intellect, by going at things atmospherically rather than argumentatively. They convey a sublime atmosphere of sound, ineffable intimations of immortality, and so the apprehension of a "cosmic connection."

Taylor reproduces lines from Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" ("And the round ocean and the living air, / And the blue sky, and in the mind of man; / A motion and a spirit, that impels / All thinking things, all objects of thought") and tells us, "To let oneself be carried by this passage is to experience a strong sense of connection, far from clearly defined . . . but deeply felt; a connection not static, but which flows through us and our world." Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" is similarly effervescent in diction, similarly ethereal in effect. The lines "O for a beaker full of the warm South, / Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene, / With beaded bubbles winking at the brim, / And purple-stained mouth" cast a spell as much as they describe a feeling. Taylor writes, "The rhythmic flow between the features as recounted in the poem somehow encounters, meets, connects up with the flow between the features as we live it." Classical art, he argues, moves us by convincing us; Romantic art convinces us by moving us.

Taylor is challenging the belief that science provides objective truth, and art mere subjective feeling—that art produces sensations, and what you make of the sensations is all up to you. He insists that there is intrinsic, grounded human value in the experience of art. At one point, he constructs a table in which he contrasts things toward which our attitudes are subjective with things that have hard, biological significance: I may prefer vanilla ice cream to strawberry, but I *must* have air to breathe. Is listening to Beethoven, he asks, more like preferring vanilla ice cream or more like needing to breathe? Or does it, as Taylor is convinced, belong to the realm of ethical elevation? Perhaps hearing late Beethoven is more like seeing that viral video of a small Chinese boy meticulously cooking a meal of egg fried rice for his still smaller sibling than it is like the experience of eating the egg fried rice. "Strong ethical insights are grounded in what I called 'felt intuitions,' " Taylor writes. "Someone couldn't be said to have a moral conviction about universal human rights, for instance, if she wasn't prone on the appropriate occasions to experience them, to feel them as inspiring (hearing the choral movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony), and their flagrant violation as appalling." We are convinced because we are moved. The reasoning may seem circular—I know it's inspiring because it feels inspiring—but his point is that what great modern poetry does is to encircle us with inspiring feelings.

Art isn't absolute, but it isn't at all arbitrary. Taylor escapes from the divide between subjectivity and objectivity through a concept he calls the "interspace"—not the inner space where I perceive and enjoy but some resonant atmosphere that exists between me and the world. The sound of the cello in a Schubert trio isn't entirely in the cello, where the sound begins, or entirely between my listening ears, where the experience of structured sound as music happens, but somewhere between the two, where the creation of

meaning takes place. The interspace is the phenomenal field of the arts. When we listen to sublime music, then, our experience is not of pleasure but of an overwhelming feeling of encountering and exploring some truth. The music sculpts us, we sculpt the music, and to reduce this to mood misses the cosmic connection that the experience proposes and, quite often, provides.

All of this is attractive, directed at some unnamed but quite easily imagined contemporary Gradgrind who thinks that poetry is mere décor and music mere entertainment (in a footnote, Taylor cites Steven Pinker's provocation that music is "auditory cheesecake"), and who scoffs at the conviction of aesthetes and humanists that music and art contain a kind of knowledge. Most readers will respond to Taylor's contagious excitement in the presence of Wordsworth and Rilke and Beethoven. His are ideas that one assents to enthusiastically even while realizing that it would be hard to defend them to someone less inclined to assent. Indeed, one recalls the spiral of puzzled questions that apostles of the arts regularly encounter from the science-minded, who insist that when we invoke the ethical allure of music we're just saying we really like those fuzzy feelings. If Taylor's experiential enthusiasms sometimes do not seem too far away from the lyrics to "Misty" ("Walk my way and a thousand violins begin to play"), well, being misty about something is a precondition of transcendence, even if it's only that old black magic called love. And so the interspace between Taylor and the art-infatuated reader is likely to be one of enthusiastic assent: Yes, it does feel like that! Yes, it is a big experience. Yes, I feel the cosmos. When I browse through Spotify, passing from Ray Charles to the obscurer singers of the Stax/Volt catalogue, each stop along the way offers some experience of common space which is not just diverting but deeply reassuring. Yes, there is meaning in the mess; yes, the space says yes.

The last fifty pages of "Cosmic Connections" pivot decisively from the intricacies of poetic imagination to the specifics of contemporary American and Canadian (and, secondarily, European) politics—toward the social interspace, so to speak. A long section turns to questions of white supremacy, civil rights, national identity, the rise of Trumpist populism, and so on. A successful self-governing republic, Taylor believes, requires a community of shared purpose and a common space of deliberation. Antagonistic groups must go beyond the narrow aspiration of winning a contest against adversaries and come to one another with a sense of mutual recognition and regard. And the people best able to make this case, in Taylor's view, "are people who are deeply rooted in their spiritual sources, often religious." These are people who, at least culturally, have retained a sense of the sacred. Overcoming discrimination becomes not just an abstract advance in justice or an instrumental strategy for minimizing conflict but a "source of deep fulfillment."

Taylor is a believer in the importance of place; one does not provincialize his work by situating it within the province it comes from. Born in Montreal, Taylor was shaped by the peculiar social fabric of Quebec. The communal connection among Québécois remains unusually strong. It's reinforced by linguistic isolation, which outside Montreal often produces an inward-turning monolingual culture, and in Montreal an outward-turning bilingual one. The Catholic Church has collapsed as a living force, but it provides a cultural scaffolding in which much else still takes place. (The holiday celebrating the now secularized cause of Quebec nationalism is a religious one: June 24th, Saint-Jean-Baptiste Day.) Quebec is openly cosmopolitan in affect and narrowly communal in arrangement, and, for the most part, the two forces contest peaceably.

Taylor is inclined by his experience to think that the communal and the cosmopolitan can coexist. You can belong to a tribe and still belong to the people. The "politics of recognition" that Taylor has recommended gives weight, accordingly, to the demands that communities—ethnic, religious, or otherwise—make on the state. Given Taylor's emphasis on the embodied dimensions of social meaning, it seems significant that he was reared in a bicultural household; his mother was a Francophone Catholic, and his father an Anglophone Protestant. McGill is a great English-speaking university in the midst of a French-speaking city, and though its autonomy and financing is threatened from time to time by the provincial government, it has survived through even the most extreme independence-minded administrations. Montreal is a very good place to nourish the belief that communities can supply meaning without fomenting mayhem.

The link Taylor wants to make between his readings of poetry and his civics lessons has affinities to the proposals made by a number of writers—many of them Catholic, significantly—throughout the modern period: the meticulous remaking of ritual (which you find in Chesterton and Tolkien alike), the love of the local, the revaluing of ceremony and communal spirit as things essential in themselves rather than leftovers from a barbaric past. The wrong kind of politics, Taylor implies, arises from the loss of a cosmic connection which the Romantics first sensed, and which now is part of the unhappy inheritance of our civilization. Alienated and disconnected, the Trump voter, the Brexiteer, the Le Pen supporter turns to theatricalized reassurances of fascist-style unity, predicated on the demonization of the nearby other. Taylor celebrates Pope Francis's encyclicals on extended families, with their sense of the common good, and those Native religions which get their sense of the sacred from a specific place of dwelling. He turns again to the interspace, now lofted to

become not only the theatre of reception and communication between artist and audience but also the implicit space of political community.

The turn from poetry to politics is certainly seductive, but is it persuasive? Certain objections rise even in the mind of the reader stirred by these kinds of accounts. First, and simplest: Should we be so enchanted by "enchantment"? Taylor treats the change from the enchanted world to the post-Enlightenment naturalistic world as a change from one climate of opinion to another, rather than as any kind of progress. But "progress" does seem to be the right word for it: life in the "enchanted" world was poorer, briefer, uglier, and more brutal. The opposition of the enchanted and the disenchanted—one world lacking in technological power but rich in communal spirit, the other rich in machines but poor in soul—is tilted toward the past. To put it plainly, the "disenchanted" universe is one where, increasingly, human suffering is resolved by vaccination and effective drugs, not by bleeding and cupping.

Taylor's response would be to point out that, if we have to look past leprosy and death in childbirth in chronicling the enchanted, we also have to look past Treblinka, the killing fields, Wounded Knee, and more in chronicling the disenchanted. Yet such a rejoinder is corrosive of the neat division between the two worlds he makes. Though he never says it directly, the atmospherics of Taylor's book suggest that great music is an agent of moral growth. So you can wonder what it would be like if we had a civilization where Romantic music was the soundtrack of the people, and where even military victories and defeats were celebrated through the allure of symphonic sound. In fact, such a society existed—in the Third Reich of the nineteen-forties. Loving Schubert and Beethoven, it seems, gets you nowhere at all ethically.

And then the question arises of whether the alteration between the enchanted and the enlightened is really the historical one proposed by Taylor's Hegelian model, with its emphasis on an unfolding one-way plot, or, rather, a permanent tension in all literate times. Shakespeare's language, as Taylor hints at various moments, is structured by a pull between inherited magic and Renaissance cynicism. Ted Hughes made the point that Shakespeare stood balanced on a knife's edge between myth and measurement, between an old, fairy-tale world and a new, empirical one. There's visionary language in the sonnets that seems to say almost more than we can understand ("the prophetic soul / Of the wide world dreaming on things to come") and acerbic worldliness right next door ("My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun"). Enchanted and enlightened sensibilities rise throughout history and seem two points in the cycle of human possibility more than two moments in fixed historical sequence.

A third point relates to Taylor's particular appetite for poetry. He likes the sides of Keats and Wordsworth that are ineffable, symbolic, atmospheric, and mystically resonant. But this taste can lead him, so to speak, to miss the ice cubes in the tumbler while seeking the iceberg in the ocean. Romantic poetry gets some of its meaning by overwhelming us, but it also gets meaning by making a disputable case. There's a lot of atmosphere in Romantic poetry, but also a lot of argument. Shelley was obsessed with the scientific findings of his day, and they showed up in his verse. Keats's claim that "beauty is truth, truth beauty" is contestable on its own terms, and the subsequent claim that this is *all* we need to know puts one in mind of the philosopher's favorite T-shirt: "Surely not *everybody* was kung-fu fighting." One hates to pit one great Polish poet against another, but Taylor's book might have benefitted by having a little more Szymborska and a little less Milosz, since she gets an effect quite

as Romantic as her counterpart's simply by inventorying the actual world of peeled onions and doctors' offices. Humanistic inquiry may not be susceptible to strict empirical measurement or evolutionary explanation. But it remains rational, forcing us to argue out our tastes and values. To treat art as a question of personal taste is, as Taylor thinks, reductive, but it's also impractical. It is to forget that almost all we ever do is argue about taste—and the good arguments often ask how art corresponds to our experience or shines light on our values.

Taylor extolls the communities of meaning that are drawn together by the interspace of enchantment. Yet, as he would be the first to acknowledge, such communities are, first of all, communities of practice. We learn to listen, just as we learn to read. Learning to love Beethoven's music is first to love the sound, then to find it achingly long-winded, then to sustain concentration, then to find the concentration rewarded by new understanding—only to return to the pleasure of the sound.

The interspace is an arena of shared education as much as of solitary epiphany. Ritual without reason has led modernity in many wrong directions. Practical communities are as valuable as poetic communities. The experiences Taylor evokes of being overwhelmed by aesthetic responses scarcely distinguishable from ethical elevation are ones we encounter daily—exploring a stranger's playlist of Chuck Berry and his precursors, reading a newly sent poem, or seeing an Instagram Story of children in a distant land sharing a meal. The interspace is enchanted mainly in its normalcy. Perhaps connecting with the cosmos is not as hard as philosophers sometimes imagine. It's where we live. ♦