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Thomas Taylor the Platonist was one of those men who become legends in their own day, about whom myths accrue; who, admired, decried, or mocked, are the subjects of numerous articles during their lives and long after; who appear as characters in contemporary novels [Taylor is the "modern Platonist" in Isaac D'Israeli's *Vaurien* published in 1797]; who give inspiration to famous men [Emerson was almost a disciple of Taylor]; and who provide textbooks for generations of schoolboys [some of Taylor's translations were still in use in 1945]. In 1848 Emerson, in conversation with the aging Wordsworth, declared it a flaw in the English character that Taylor was so little known, "whilst in every American library, his translations are found."

Thomas Taylor was born in London in 1758 at the time of Halley's comet, to "poor but worthy parents." At eight he was sent to a famous school, St. Paul's, founded in the early sixteenth century by John Colet for boys "who could already read and write and who were of good capacity" for "a sound Christian education and the knowledge of Greek and Latin." Three years later Taylor, nicknamed "philosopher," persuaded his father to permit him to continue his studies at home. From fifteen to eighteen he lived with an uncle at Sheerness, studying assiduously and developing an in-

terest in speculative philosophy. From eighteen to twenty he studied under a dissenting minister, because his father, interested in modern theology, wished him to become a clergyman and disapproved of his mathematical studies. He was now ready to enter the university at Aberdeen.

But at the age of twelve Taylor had fallen in love with Mary Morton and, remeeting her, had been spending his evenings courting her. A secret marriage to save her from the wealthy suitor favored by her father was soon discovered and the anger of both fathers made it necessary for Taylor to earn his living. The only post available was at a distant boarding school, from which he was rescued by a friend who secured for him a clerkship at a banking house. Poorly paid, he remained there for six years, fortunately provided by another friend with a suitable house at Walford. Comparatively secure, he pursued his studies at night, augmenting his income by published articles.

To improve his finances he turned to invention, experimenting with phosphorus which, immersed in a mixture of salt and oil boiled together, burned with great brilliance and threw a circle of light a yard wide. Having constructed his "perpetual lamp," he held an exhibition to which too large a group came; the room became overheated and the lamp exploded. Nevertheless, the lamp proved the foundation of a modest fortune for him through

the interest taken in it and the lecture he had given on light, by some of the spectators, wealthy and influential men. The retired merchant William Meredith and his architect brother George, who were interested in the Greek philosophers, found a market for Taylor's dissertations and his translations from the Greek. The popular sculptor Flaxman lent his home for a series of twelve lectures on Plato, with audiences of distinguished people many of whom became Taylor's friends.

In 1798 Taylor was appointed assistant secretary of the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce in London. In recommending him Samuel Paterson, well-known bookseller, publisher, and bibliographer, librarian to the Marquis of Lansdowne, wrote: "I only regret that a man who has the learning and abilities sufficient to govern a City, or even a province, should have no higher prospect in view than the doubtful succession to a Deputyship of inconsiderable emolument." Taylor from 1798 to 1806 apparently found the post congenial and was an efficient and sedulous assistant to his superior executive, as existing letters prove.

In 1802 he visited Oxford, possibly with the thought of an appointment there, though he was self-taught and not a professional scholar, and his translations had not been favorably noticed by the Greek professor, Richard Porson. He was kindly received by the Dean of Christ Church who spoke

admiringly of his books and wished to subscribe to his translation of the complete works of Plato. Heads of other colleges and professors of history, and especially the professors at New College where he was staying, were cordial; he had free access to the Bodleian Library at all times, and found there the manuscripts he had been seeking. Oxford's Gothic Halls he found gloomy and melancholy and he returned to London gladly; no offer had been made.

Through the generosity of the president of the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Charles Howard, the eleventh Duke of Norfolk, who was interested in Plato, and that of William Meredith, who was interested in Aristotle, Taylor was able to resign his post in 1806 and spend his remaining years, 1806-1835, in the work he loved, leaving behind him an astonishing number of translations, including the complete works of Plato and Aristotle, and a creditable number of original works, both prose and poetry. The Duke of Norfolk guaranteed the costs of his *Plato*, the first complete edition in English, so that by 1805 Taylor could include this in the list of his published translations printed at the back of his *Miscellanies in Prose and Verse*. Six volumes were listed there, but in the end when the final volume was finished there were five volumes, the first containing the translations of another self-dedicated Platonist, Floyer Sydenham who, finding no interested public and no patron,

had died of starvation. Taylor's beautifully printed volumes were not offered for sale; they were deposited in the Duke's library at Arundel Castle and not dispersed until 1848. Taylor may have retained some sets aside from presentation copies, for in 1818, three years after the death of the Duke, another advertisement appeared in the list on the back pages of Taylor's *Iamblichus' Life of Pythagoras*, priced at ten pounds and ten shillings the set.

The Duke's action in effectively suppressing the *Plato* was not an arbitrary decision. Plato was in disfavor as a pagan; Taylor was sometimes referred to as a pagan, as one who wished to overthrow the Christian religion and re-establish the Greek gods. He was reputed to have statues of pagan gods in his study, to pour libations to them, to have been expelled by his landlady for trying to sacrifice a bull in his room, to have sacrificed a goat in some public place, absurdities which may have some slight basis in boyish pranks but are, except perhaps an occasional libation, mere gossip. Taylor had no landlady — he owned his house and was happily married, having firm views on monogamy and domestic responsibility, at odds with the views of Mary Wollstonecraft. He had not yet published the anti-Christian arguments of the Emperor Julian or the translation of Celsus' irreverences, both of which were suppressed (copies are still available in a few libraries). He

was, however, known as an admirer of the ancient theology which he interpreted allegorically. That he and his unorthodox views were well known by 1797 is attested by D'Israeli's chapters in *Vaurien* where Vaurien goes to visit "the Platonist" and talks at length with him. D'Israeli shows familiarity with Taylor's publications, including the *Vindication of the Rights of Brutes*.

III

Mary Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Men* was not concerned wholly with political rights or the injustices suffered by the poor. She was angered by Burke's tendency to "vitate reason" which she postulated as man's highest quality, leading him to virtue, and so distinguishing him from the animals, who have not the gift of reason. This is the sounding board for Taylor, who sets out to prove that animals have reason; he supports his thesis with multiple quotation from the Greek philosophers, thereby making his point without direct statement that men are not equally blessed with reason. He believed that "in every class of beings in the universe . . . there is a first, a middle, and a last, in order that the progression of things may form one unbroken chain, originating in deity, and terminating in matter . . . a golden chain of beings" formed by the first and smallest class, the multitude forming the lowest. He set out therefore