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Charles Taylor, *Cosmic Connections: Poetry in the Age of Disenchantment*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2024. 640 pp, £31.95 US\$37.95 ISBN 9780674296084 (hbk)

In the closing paragraphs of this colossal new work by Charles Taylor, readers are reminded that the book ‘was conceived as a companion study to my *The Language Animal* [2016]’ (p. 597). As *Cosmic Connections* was adumbrated in notes and remarks throughout that earlier book, many readers will now have been looking forward to its release for the better part of a decade. In many respects, *Connections* is akin to those major works of Taylor’s, *Sources of the Self* (1989) and *A Secular Age* (2007), giving *Language Animal* somewhat the air of a prolegomenon. In picking up the genealogical approach of *Sources* and *Secular Age* – of which it has been customary to use the word ‘magisterial’, with reference both to masterfulness and topics of cultural and social ‘magisteria’ – *Connections* is a return to form for Taylor. With 60 years having now passed since the publication of Taylor’s first book, *The Explanation of Behaviour* (1964), *Connections* is a worthy milestone in an extraordinary career.

Though difficult to precis, *Connections* continues Taylor’s long-standing project of philosophical anthropology, posing the question ‘whether [the] aspiration to connection is not a human constant . . . albeit taking very different forms in different epochs and cultures’ (p. 257). Taylor’s concern here is connection in the modern era, and his starting point is German Romanticism, by which he means a literary movement of the 1790s, ‘when the previously viable form of cosmic connection became unviable’ (p. x). Taylor sees the German Romantics as contending with modern disenchantment at its onset; for them, Taylor thinks, poetry was a means of *reconnecting* with an extant but occluded cosmic order. *Connections* pursues this theme through a synthesis of social thought and philosophy of language, in which Taylor brings his concept of ‘subtler languages’ (a borrowing from the literary scholar Earl Wasserman [pp. 30–31]) together with a fuller and more nuanced articulation of what he once termed the ‘malaise of modernity’ (the titular subject of his 1991 Massey Lectures). As mentioned above, the method here is a genealogical itinerary à la *Secular Age*, but one in which the waypoints are poets and poetry. As Taylor puts it, he is ‘following the poetic discoveries / inventions of epiphanic languages, which have come in the wake of the Romantic period’ (p. 137). For Taylor, tracing these developments can reveal something about the nature of human being.

In Taylor’s genealogy, connection was ‘originally framed [i.e., with the German Romantics] as recovering contact with a continuing cosmic order’ (p. 494). But over decades

and across different national contexts, the felt sense of ‘cosmic order’ fades while the longing for reconnection remains. Thus, while the worldview of the Romantics is radically different from our own, Taylor supposes that ‘[the] distinction between dead, “blind” uses of language, and truly revelatory, insightful ones which restore contact, continues after the Romantic period, and up to our time’ (p. 41). Accordingly, the first three chapters of *Connections* (Part I) are largely an overview of German Romanticism and, as Taylor sees it, its aim of restoring connection with cosmic order. These 100-odd pages read like classic Taylor, but what follows is something quite new, with Parts II–V organised according to thematic analysis of particular poets. The poetry here is English, French, and German (French and German texts appear in the original followed by English translation, which is one factor in the book’s considerable length). The trajectory that Taylor traces connects German Romanticism, French Symbolism, and literary modernism, with reference along the way to figures who defy easy classification, such as the English poet and Jesuit priest Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889) and luminaries like German landscape painter Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840) and the Romantic composer Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827). Although the focus here is poetry, Taylor uses the leitmotifs of connection and disenchantment to comment on topics throughout the sweep of Western art, culture, and thought since the early-nineteenth century.

Taylor’s poets are on the whole familiar names. The poetry chapters (from Part II) begin with Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843) and Novalis (1772–1801) in Germany, alongside William Wordsworth (1770–1850) in England, and a poetry that ‘offers the experience of order without claiming the confirmation of its truth that an underlying story (theistic or other) would give it’ (p. 138). Moving through the second-generation English Romantics Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822) and John Keats (1795–1821), Taylor outlines a fissiparous development by which the Romantics’ conception of cosmic order undergoes a metamorphosis in two directions – into the recognisably contemporary ideas of both ‘history’ and ‘Nature’ as access points to transcendence. The late-nineteenth century (Part III), with Hopkins and Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926), marks a kind of caesura at the maturation of ‘epistemic retreat’ (on which, more below). The itinerary then reverses chronologically, picking up (in Part IV) with French poets Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867) and Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–1898) before concluding (Part V) with the modernism of Anglo-American poet and critic T. S. Eliot (1888–1965) and the post-war reflections of Polish-American Nobel laureate Czesław Miłosz (1911–2004). From here the two concluding chapters (Part VI) deal with contemporary possibilities – and foreclosures – of connection.

For those wondering whether it is necessary to read *Language Animal* before taking up *Connections*, the answer is no. The two books might be thought of in terms of theory (*Language Animal*) and practice (*Connections*). As Taylor says, ‘the view of language which I develop in *The Language Animal* was built around this theory [of language], which was elaborated in the milieu which came together in the 1790s in Germany (to a large degree in Jena)’ (p. 598). Although there are some sections of *Connections* for which readers will find it helpful to know the earlier book – such as the chapter on Mallarmé, which contains references to ‘Cratylan’ language – *Connections* is not a sequel. The theory of language that links the books has at its core a (somewhat recon-

dite) notion of ‘ontic indeterminacy’ (p. 39): briefly, the idea that an experience of contact may precede any language or encoding for that with which contact is being made. Where *Language Animal* theorises ontic indeterminacy as a built-in feature, as it were, of language generally, *Connections* explores how poets have used ontic indeterminacy in language to cope with modernity’s constraints – or, with the ‘immanent frame’ (p. 260), to use one of Taylor’s influential formulations.

In pursuing the thesis of ontic indeterminacy, *Connections* covers new ground in the hermeneutical form of social theory that Taylor first developed substantially in *Sources and Secular Age*. These methodological and thematic links are not surprising, in view of the fact (which those who have read *Language Animal* will recall from its preface) that Taylor began the *Language Animal–Connections* project in the late 1980s, coterminously with the publication of *Sources*. What is new in *Connections* appears in two characteristically Taylorian coinages. First, there is the notion of the ‘interspace’, ‘the undistributed middle, between the “ontological” and the “psychological”’ (p. 52), where, for the German Romantics and those who have followed them, irreducibly meaningful experience takes place. The interspace – an idea as much temporal as spatial – is always shifting, and acquires greater importance in Taylor’s narrative as possibilities of reconnection move away from the Romantic idea of cosmic order: ‘earlier writers and thinkers asserted their notions of cosmic orders as fundamental truths; but their post-Romantic successors could only claim to characterize the interspace’ (p. 66). Keats’s idea of ‘negative capability’ (pp. 148–49) and Mallarmé’s injunction ‘peindre non la chose, mais l’effet qu’elle produit’ [don’t paint the thing, but rather the effect it produces] (p. 397) are, for Taylor, pointing towards the interspace.

If *Connections* has one central concept, it is that of ‘epistemic retreat’ (the second coinage), a process that unfolds largely over the nineteenth century by which art and poetry become increasingly removed from direct reference to things in the world. On Taylor’s account, higher truth gradually loses its association with a sense of order as unchanging – due in part to the uptake of evolutionary thinking – and attaches instead to the temporal: ‘the aspiration to cosmic connection shifts to the time dimension, and involves larger shapes and patterns in time’ (p. x). Of particular importance for Taylor in this regard is Baudelaire, a crucial link between the Romantics and the Symbolists whose use of the term ‘symbol’, Taylor thinks, ‘represented what one can call an “epistemic retreat” from the early Romantic one’ (p. 473) – which had already been an instance of epistemic retreat from a ‘traditional pre-Enlightenment’ world picture (138). In this way, Taylor’s genealogy describes a ratchet effect of advancing ontic indeterminacy.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, Taylor’s story continues, history in itself has come to acquire a transcendental significance, in a process that reaches its zenith with Eliot. Taylor describes Eliot as attempting the reconstruction of a specific cosmic order, one to be found inter alia in the *Divine Comedy*. But, crucially, access to this order is not understood as being immediately available – as through direct experience – to Eliot and his contemporaries, requiring instead an elaborate kind of mediation, through layers of time and a stance of detachment and forensic distance. ‘The emerging primacy of time that I noted in Chapter 11 is reflected in Eliot’s having to extract and

distil his order from a history, that of European literature' (p. 506). The pathos of this halting, agonistic mode of reconnection is reflected in another coinage of Taylor's, the description of both 'Prufrock' and *The Waste Land* as 'empty markers' (p. 517), which attempt but do not necessarily succeed at reconnection while nevertheless suggesting 'the shape of [an] alternative aspiration and world' (p. 488). In the context of interwar devastation, the quest for connection is becoming a matter of symbols pointing at other symbols.

Taylor's methodological use of poetry is a departure that is sure to be much discussed. On one hand, it has been common to criticise Taylor's sweeping genealogical works for being insufficiently backed up by evidence, and it might be argued that Taylor's close analysis of verse is a corrective to that problem: discussion of Eliot's *Waste Land*, for example, allows Taylor to articulate his intuitions of the interwar zeitgeist in a grounded way. At the same time, readers accustomed to conventions of academic texts may find the argument difficult to follow in places, such as in a passage where Taylor ventriloquises Keats in a skein of allusion: 'I see the Nightingale as a transcendent presence, consoling humanity from above (stanza 7); heard by emperor and clown, and touching the heart of Ruth amid the alien corn' (p. 155). In many places Taylor's language is rich and figurative, as in his comments on Eliot's 'Prufrock': 'even the takedown of higher realities – implicit in the word "etherized," parodic for "ethereal" – doesn't stop and imprison us in the banal' (p. 284). The authorial latitude on display throughout *Connections* reflects Taylor's standing as a thinker, and reasonable minds may differ on whether the style is warranted or apt.

Connections may also show Taylor being less guarded on certain subjects as compared with previous works. The topic of climate change, for example, shows up here with a new consistency and specificity, and one comment in particular – making reference to the thought of French Jesuit polymath Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955) – may give Taylor specialists much to ponder: 'we could say that the whole planet, the entire ecosystem, is striving, is groaning and travailing to some end: to live up to the demands of the space of agape' (p. 554). Readers with expertise in specific poets or genres may quail at the looseness with which Taylor broaches literary opinions: for instance that 'what Rilke did was to transpose Novalis . . . quite out of his Christian framework, where the crucial transcendent figure is not God in heaven, but the *Doppelbereich* [dual realm] through which the angel moves freely' (p. 119). As noted above, it has been a common critique of Taylor at least since *Sources* that he deals too breezily with figures and topics of considerable complexity, and such doubts will not be put to rest by *Connections*. The chapter on Baudelaire, for example, moves swiftly through references to Benjamin, Bergson, Heidegger, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Proust, and Schopenhauer, among others (pp. 291–94). Conversely, those who find Taylor's historical aperçus invigorating will have much here to enjoy. As with any of Taylor's genealogical works, a charitable reading of *Connections* will keep the larger story in view rather than zooming in on specific details.

In a major idiosyncrasy of presentation, the book has special sections that appear at odd intervals between the chapters, bearing titles such as 'Coda Note: Rilke and Visual Art' (p. 245) and marked out by a typeface and margins different from the regular text.

Additionally, the chapters themselves are occasionally interrupted by passages just a few paragraphs in length, set in the same alternative layout and with headings such as ‘Excursus II: Into (Non)explanation’ (p. 262). No rationale is offered for the book’s having this two-tier structure. Some of the set-off material gives the sense of having been added to the manuscript at a late stage, perhaps in response to reviewer comments. The effectiveness and felicity of the notes/excursuses arrangement will be a matter of taste to readers. But the transitions between topics feel true to Taylor’s voice, and a book that ranges so widely in subject matter may benefit from an allowance for regular digressions from the main narrative.

Readers interested in social and political thought will want to attend closely to the final chapters. Through the discussion in chapter 14 of Miłosz – whose work largely responds to atomic and totalitarian horrors following the Second World War – Taylor sets the stage for conceptions of order in our own time, when the dulcet idea of cosmic connection often shifts towards a stance of cosmological agonism. The penultimate chapter considers the idea of ‘ethical growth’ in history, taking as its central question Miłosz’s theorem that ‘the poetic act both anticipates the future and speeds its coming’ (p. 553). Here Taylor makes the case for there having indeed been ethical progress, with reference to a hypothesis influenced by the late sociologist of religion Robert Bellah that many will recognise from *Secular Age*: ‘we have come some distance from the Axial Age, when the full ethic of exceptional individuals was not demanded of ordinary mortals. There has in this sense been ethical growth, which might someday make it possible for us to act more humanly’ (pp. 586–87). Yet, thinks Taylor, the imposition of ethical demands also produces reactions, and continual alternation between ethical advance and descent into cruelty and violence means that overly linear accounts of progress will simply be wrong. This chapter (30-odd pages long) differs in tone and content from the literary criticism that precedes it; reading almost like a standalone text and brimming with ideas, it could practically be the subject of a review in itself. Among many salient points, worth noting is the influence here of the Canadian poet Peter Dale Scott and his concept of ‘ethogeny’ (p. 544). Taylor is also drawing on a recent papal encyclical, and the ecumenical idea that a ‘deep movement of ethical growth’ is ‘not carried by any one spiritual or religious tradition, but has somehow been furthered and elaborated between them’ (p. 545). It is not difficult to see how one might connect this conception of ethical growth to Taylor’s earlier theorisations of multiculturalism.

A theme that recurs throughout *Connections* is the entwinement of liberalism – the political default in the West at least since 1989 – with disenchantment. Taylor sees this issue of decadence, for instance, in Baudelaire: ‘we suffer from the distance, the absence from our lives of the spiritual. . . . This is what is happening for Baudelaire in the modern secular consciousness of humans as good, as just requiring a reconstructed society, the liberal or democratic dream’ (pp. 305–06). One may discern in Taylor’s argument for dialectical progress a particular implication: the malaise of modernity might ultimately drive the human project beyond its liberal impasse. As Taylor puts it, paraphrasing a passage by Annie Dillard, ‘we recover our true direction in autumn, the moment of decline’ (p. 590). But ongoing epistemic retreat is always pushing new grand narratives towards obsolescence, whether they’re of cosmic order, history, or

even Nature. Western postsecularity means that proposals of reconnection all along the political spectrum may be dismissed as mere religious atavism. Hence, the neoliberal cul-de-sac of spiritual etiolation.

Those who know Taylor for his graciousness of tone and openness to different viewpoints will find those qualities undiminished in *Connections*. Readers altogether unfamiliar with Taylor's work will not necessarily benefit from beginning here. The supposition that 'the "landscapes" of meaning we live by are never fully explicable by features of the world beyond our experience but have to be explained and justified hermeneutically' (p. 598) will be regarded by naturalist critics as little more than a sophisticated instance of the pathetic fallacy (the human propensity to see faces in the clouds). Readers wishing to get a handle on this sort of challenge will not find here any sustained rebuttal of it. In a sense, that's all to the better. Taylor has spent a lifetime producing such rebuttals. *Connections* is, rather, the author's own positive vision: a robust counterproposal to the post-Cartesian philosophical anthropology which is, as he sees it, deleteriously enmeshed with the Western mindset. Leaving to one side the originary link to *Language Animal*, there's a strong case – on grounds of themes, scope, approach, and aims – for regarding *Connections* as the third instalment in a trilogy with *Sources* and *Secular Age*.

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