

CLASSICAL *pursuits*

LATE EDITIONS 2008

Blindness and Wisdom in Art and Literature

Selected Poems

From the **Tao Te Ching**

-- translation by Stephen Mitchell

*

Colors blind the eye.
Sounds deafen the ear.
Flavors numb the taste.
Thoughts weaken the mind.
Desires wither the heart.

The Master observes the world
but trusts his inner vision.
He allows things to come and go.
His heart is open as the sky.

*

Look , and it can't be seen.
Listen, and it can't be heard.
Reach, and it can't be grasped.

Above, it isn't bright.
Below, it isn't dark.
Seamless, unnamable,
it returns to the realm of nothing.
Form that includes all forms,
image without an image,
subtle, beyond all conception.

Approach it and there is no beginning;
follow it and there is no end.
You can't know it, but you can be it,
at ease in your own life.
Just realize where you come from:
this is the essence of wisdom.

Poems by **R. M. Rilke**

--translation by Stephen Mitchell

Going Blind

She sat just like the others at the table.
But on second glance, she seemed to hold her cup
a little differently as she picked it up.
She smiled once. It was almost painful.

And when they finished and it was time to stand
and slowly, as chance selected them, they left
and moved through many rooms (they talked and laughed),
I saw her. She was moving far behind

the others, absorbed, like someone who will soon
have to sing before a large assembly;
upon her eyes, which were radiant with joy,
light played as on the surface of a pool.

She followed slowly, taking a long time,
as though there were some obstacle in the way;
and yet: as though, once it was overcome,
she would be beyond all walking, and would fly.

The Blindman's Song

I am blind, you outsiders. It is a curse,
a contradiction, a tiresome farce,
and every day I despair.

I put my hand on the arm of my wife
(colorless hand on colorless sleeve)
and she walks me through empty air.

You push and shove and think that you've been
sounding different from stone against stone,
but you are mistaken: I alone
live and suffer and howl.

In me there is an endless outcry
and I can't tell what's crying, whether it's my
broken heart or my bowels.

Are the tunes familiar? You don't sing them like this:
how could you understand?
Each morning the sunlight comes into your house,
and you welcome it as a friend.
And you know what it's like to see face-to-face;
and that tempts you to be kind.

Archaic Torso of Apollo

We cannot know his legendary head
with eyes like ripening fruit. And yet his torso
is still suffused with brilliance from inside,
like a lamp, in which his gaze, now turned to low,

gleams in all its power. Otherwise
the curved breast could not dazzle you so, nor could
a smile run through the placid hips and thighs
to that dark center where procreation flared.

Otherwise this stone would seem defaced
beneath the translucent cascade of the shoulders
and would not glisten like a wild beast's fur:

would not, from all the borders of itself,
burst like a star: for here there is no place
that does not see you. You must change your life.

Two sonnets by **John Milton**

On His Blindness

When I consider how my light is spent
Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,
And that one talent which is death to hide
Lodg'd with me useless, though my soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest he returning chide,
"Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?"
I fondly ask. But Patience, to prevent
That murmur, soon replies: "God doth not need
Either man's work or his own gifts: who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state
Is kingly; thousands at his bidding speed
And post o'er land and ocean without rest:
They also serve who only stand and wait."

Notes from online text by Ian Lancashire, University of Toronto.

1] The date of composition is uncertain, Milton's blindness, to which this is the first reference in his poetry, became virtually complete in 1652.
light: power of vision, to be taken in conjunction with "this dark world."

3-6] The allusion is to the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30); death, like the outer darkness into which the unprofitable servant was cast, stands for the utmost in punishment; the Talent was a measure of weight and hence of value; there is here, of course, a play on the word in its modern sense of mental gift or endowment, in Milton's case his gift of poetry.

8] fondly: foolishly.

To Cyriack Skinner

Cyriack, this three years' day these eyes, though clear
To outward view of blemish or of spot,
Bereft of light, their seeing have forgot;
Nor to their idle orbs doth sight appear
Of sun or moon or star throughout the year,
Or man or woman. Yet I argue not
Against Heav'n's hand or will, not bate a jot
Of heart or hope, but still bear up and steer
Right onward. What supports me, dost thou ask?
The conscience, friend, to have lost them overplied

In liberty's defence, my noble task,
Of which all Europe talks from side to side.
This thought might lead me through the world's vain mask
Content, though blind, had I no better guide.

Notes *from online text by Ian Lancashire, University of Toronto.*

1] this three years day: three years ago today.

"... to external appearance they [my eyes] are as completely without injury, as clear and bright, without the semblance of a cloud, as the eyes of those whose sight is most perfect" (Milton, Second Defence). Composed not earlier than 1655. Cyriack Skinner had been one of Milton's pupils and remained his faithful friend.

6] argue: contend.

8] bear up: a nautical phrase, put the helm up, so as to bring the vessel into the direction of the wind (but with a memory also of the sense, "keep up one's spirits").

10] conscience: consciousness; them: his eyes, i.e., their sight. 10-12. Lines 10-12: Warned of his danger, Milton had deliberately sacrificed his much impaired vision to write his Defence of the English People, a work which spread his fame on the continent.

13] vain mask: empty pageant.

14] better guide: religious consolation and support.

Richard Wagner on Beethoven

A Musician without hearing! Can one image a blind painter? We know a blinded seer, Tiresias, who was shut off from the world of appearances and could therefore see, with his inner eye, the basis of all creation. He resembles the deaf musician, now undisturbed by the noises of life, who listens only to his inner harmonies and speaks from the depths to a world that has nothing more to say to him. Thus genius is liberated from everything outside itself. What wonders would have been disclosed to someone who could have seen Beethoven with the vision of Tiresias: a world walking among men—the face and essence of the world, wandering in the guise of a man!