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**Does Science Rob Nature of its Mystery and Beauty? John Ruskin on Science, Religion,  
and the Arts**

Professor Alister McGrath

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to the first of six Gresham lectures which I will be giving during the academic year 2016-17. It’s a very great pleasure to be able to give these lectures in this new venue at the Museum of London, and I very much hope that this new arrangement will allow us to be able to stretch out a bit more and also to accommodate more people! And we also thank all of you who have written to me with kind comments about my lectures last year, which I very much appreciated. I’m very much hoping that this year’s lecture course will be much better, now that I got used to you as an audience, and have a better sense of the right level at which to pitch these lectures.

I do hope that you will enjoy what I have planned for you this year. As I mentioned to you right at the end of my last lecture in May, what I hope to do in this new lecture course is to open up six very interesting and important questions with an obvious religious or theological dimension, which also have much wider cultural and scientific relevance. Each case, I’m going to choose some interesting person to interact with, so that you get to hear other perspectives and voices, and not just mine. Of course, I will always tell you what I think, but my aspiration in these lectures is to help you think things through, and make up your own mind about these ideas, rather than impose my ideas upon you.

The six leading figures that I will be engaging with in this lecture course have been chosen because of their high profile, and the fact that they ask some very interesting questions, as well as giving us interesting and provocative and since. Some of the writers are hostile to religion, somewhat neutral, and some supportive – but all of them, I hope you will feel, are interesting. Today, we are going to engage John Ruskin, the famous Victorian art critic and cultural commentator, as he reflects on the question of how we can encourage the scientific investigation of nature without losing sense of the beauty of nature. In future lectures, we will engage with Dorothy L Sayers; CS Lewis; JRR Tolkien; Richard Dawkins; and finally Philip Pullman.

Let me begin by explaining the question we’re going to look at this afternoon. Many people are deeply appreciative of the beauty of the natural world – for example, the beauty of the night sky, a rainbow, or a landscape up in the Lake District. I’m sure that many of you listening to this lecture in person or by the Gresham website will have experienced a sense of awe and wonder or astonishment at the beauty and majesty of nature, perhaps evoked by a stunning landscape or the cold beauty of the sky at night – just to mention two very obvious possibilities. The fundamental question here is whether that sense of astonishment or wonder is an end in itself, or whether it is a gateway or signpost to something greater. The German poet Goethe for example held that this experience was to be valued in and of itself, and was not to be seen as pointing to something behind it or beyond it.

But others would disagree. As many of you will know, one of the most pervasive themes of Western culture is sometimes described as natural theology – the idea that the beauty of the natural world is both a sign and a Gateway to the greater beauty of God. Here is that line of thought set out in the 13th century by Bonaventure, a writer greatly influenced by the ideas of St Francis:

All the creatures of this sensible world lead the soul of a wise and contemplative person to the eternal God, since they are the shadows, echoes, pictures, vestiges, images and visible manifestation of their eternal origin . . . They are put before us for the sake of our knowing God.

In its most general sense, the phrase “natural theology” is used to refer to a possible link between the natural world and some transcendent realm; or, to use more specifically Christian language, between the created order and its creator. Natural theology has never lost its deep appeal to the human imagination. Many would see it as perhaps the most appropriate and obvious interface between Christian theology and the natural sciences. After all, the sense of wonder evoked by the immensity and beauty of nature can act as a gateway to both the natural sciences and to religious faith. Might they share their insights, and thus come to a deeper and enriched understanding of our strange universe? Perhaps the beauty and wonder of the natural world might point to a deeper order of things, even if this is only partially glimpsed rather than fully grasped.

However, we can also offer natural explanations of the phenomena of nature. A good example is found in Isaac Newton’s explanation of the colours of the rainbow, which offers an optical account of this beautiful natural phenomenon. Some feel – or perhaps I should say *fear* – that their appreciation of this natural beauty is destroyed or diminished by the scientific explanation of what we observe. Now my own answer to this concern is very simple: it could be – but it doesn’t need to be. But in this lecture, I want to explore how this anxiety arises, and how we can begin to explore this question in helpful and constructive ways, including opening up some of the scientific and religious questions that hover over these discussions.

Perhaps the best point at which to begin is to allow two writers who are concerned about this issue to express their fears. You will probably not be surprised to know that I’ve chosen to Romantic poets – William Wordsworth and John Keats. Both of these were writing in the early 19th century, when there was a growing fear about the impact of the Industrial Revolution on the natural beauty of rural England, and also a more theoretical concern about the reductionism of scientific explanation, which seemed to offer a diminished and impoverished vision of the natural order. Here is Wordsworth, writing in 1798, putting some of these fears into words:

One impulse from a vernal wood

May teach you more of man,

Of moral evil and of good,

Than all the sages can.

Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;

Our meddling intellect

Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:

We murder to dissect.

Many of you will know these lines from *The Tables Turned*, which express a fundamental concern that the interposition of human rational reflection diminishes the natural beauty of the world. Yet perhaps many of you will feel that the same concern is expressed more powerfully and realistically in Keats’s difficult poem *Lamia*, published a decade later. In this poem, Keats complained of the effect of reducing the beautiful and awesome phenomena of nature to the basics of scientific theory. Such a strategy, he argued, is aesthetically impoverishing, emptying nature of its beauty and mystery, reducing it to something cold and clinical.

Do not all charms fly

At the mere touch of cold philosophy?

There was an awful rainbow once in heaven:

We know her woof, her texture; she is given

In the dull catalogue of common things.

Philosophy will clip an Angel’s wings.

Although many here today will know these lines very well, it might be helpful if I were to add a few words of comment. First, Keats uses the word “philosophy” in this context to refer specifically to natural philosophy – that is, the scientific explanation of nature. Second, notice how Keats’s fundamental concern is that scientific accounts of natural phenomena – such as the rainbow – reduce things that are seen as awe-inspiring (which is what Keats means by “awful” in this context) to a “dull catalogue of common things”. But there is a third issue here. Note the final line of the quote, which speaks of natural philosophy clipping an angel’s wings. What is Keats getting at here?

The fundamental issue is that of the rupturing of some link between the natural world and a transcendent world. Keats clearly believes that the natural world signposts a greater vision of reality, and that this capacity of the natural world to point beyond itself is compromised or even destroyed by the reductionism of a scientific explanation. This idea has played a major role in western culture. We find it, for example, in G. K. Chesterton, who remarked that: “Every true artist feels that he is touching transcendental truths; that his images are shadows of things seen through the veil.” Keats is clearly worried that this deeper capacity and significance of the natural world is damaged by scientific explanation.

I suspect that some of you here today will feel that Keats has overstated things, perhaps even that he is the victim of some delusion about a greater vision of reality which does not really exist in fact. For this reason, Keats needs to be criticised and corrected. A good example of this critical approach can be found in Richard Dawkins book *Unweaving the Rainbow*.

Now Keats clearly feels that a loss of any sense of wonder or beauty in the presence of nature can be attributed to reduction of scientific explanation. Later in this lecture, I’m going to look at this in more detail, and see what we can make of this. But before we go any further, I would like to make what I think is a very obvious point, which is that there are much more obvious and significant contributing causes to the loss of any sense of wonder in the presence of nature. The most important of these is simply overfamiliarity, which dulls our senses to both beauty and a sense of wonder. Let me give you a good example of this.

Many of you will enjoy reading the American novelist Mark Twain, and some of you may be familiar with his 1883 reminiscences of his time as a steamboat pilot on the Mississippi River in the years immediately before the American Civil War. *Life on the Mississippi* includes what I believe to be one of the finest literary descriptions of the evaporation of a sense of awe and delight in the presence of nature as a result of habitual overfamiliarity. In his early period as a steamboat pilot, Twain tells us that he found it easy to appreciate the wonder of the Mississippi’s depths and raw beauty.

The face of the water, in time, became a wonderful book – a book that was a dead language to the uneducated passenger, but which told its mind to me without reserve, delivering its most cherished secrets as clearly as if it uttered them with a voice. … There never was so wonderful a book written by man; never one whose interest was so absorbing, so unflagging, so sparkingly renewed with every re-perusal.

Twain’s description of a sunset stands out as one of the most lyrical portrayals of the awesome. He stood, spellbound, “like one bewitched”, absorbing the sight “in a speechless rapture.” This world was new to him, and he had never seen anything like this before.

Yet gradually Twain lost any sense of the “glories and the charms which the moon and the sun and the twilight wrought upon the river’s face.” His inhabitation of this new world made it over-familiar and routine. As he “mastered the language” of the great river, and came to “know every trifling feature that bordered the great river as familiarly as I knew the letters of the alphabet”, Twain found that he had lost something. “All the grace, the beauty, the poetry had gone out of the majestic river!”

Yet, more disturbingly, he found that what he had lost was irretrievable. “I had lost something which could never be restored to me while I lived.” The Mississippi had not changed; the change lay within Twain himself, as he slowly changed from being a young apprentice overwhelmed by the beauty of the river to an experienced riverboat pilot concerned to know its currents and avoid its dangers. He found himself unable to recapture or recreate his early naïve sense of wonder, which lingered only as a nostalgic memory.

Mark Twain’s loss of any sense of wonder at the natural features of the Mississippi River raises the question of how he – or for that matter anyone else – could recover this sense of wonder, once it has been lost. To begin to answer this question, as well as those raised by Keats and Wordsworth, we are going to turn to the writings of John Ruskin (1819-1900), one of the most significant figures in English Victorian culture. Ruskin was particularly noted for his emphasis on seeing things as they really are: “we want, in this sad world of ours, very often to see in the dark – that’s the greatest gift of all – but at any rate to see; no matter by what light, so only we can see things as they are.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

One of the core themes of Ruskin’s writings is the need to see things as they are – which often demands seeing through outward appearances, and discerning a hidden or veiled reality, which we have not invented but have rather discerned. It is very difficult to give a simple summary of Ruskin’s complex approach to the discernment of beauty; however, I can at least sketch some points he makes, and begin to make connections with the issues that we have been discussing. Ruskin understands the human response to the beauty of nature as involving a number of elements, beginning with sense impression, and culminating in appreciation of the implications of what is being seen. Ruskin sets out his thinking on this matter in a highly significant passage in one of his volumes on modern painters:[[2]](#footnote-2)

It is necessary to the existence of an idea of beauty, that the sensual pleasure which may be its basis should be accompanied first with joy, then with love of the object, then with the perception of kindness in a superior intelligence, finally, with thankfulness and veneration towards that intelligence itself.

You will see that Ruskin is working with some concept of natural theology, in that he proposes a process which begins with what he calls sensual pleasure, leading into the worship of God – the “superior intelligence” which Ruskin refers to in the quotation above.

What is really interesting is that Ruskin realises he needs to find a new term to describe this process of the appreciation of the beauty of nature. In the end, he chose the Greek word *theoria*. Ruskin explains this as follows:[[3]](#footnote-3)

The mere animal consciousness of the pleasantness I call *Aesthesis*; but the exulting, reverent, and grateful perception of it I call *Theoria*. For this, and this only, is the full comprehension and contemplation of the Beautiful as a Gift of God.

Ruskin uses the phase “the theoretic faculty” to refer to this human ability to make a fundamental connection between a perception of beauty and contemplation of God as the source and goal of that beauty.

Now where does Ruskin take us? Well, let’s go back to the anxieties expressed by Wordsworth and Keats. I have already said a lot more about Keats than I have about Wordsworth, so let’s redress that balance by quoting again from Wordsworth:

Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;

Our meddling intellect

Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:--

We murder to dissect.

Ruskin knew this passage well. While respecting Wordsworth’s concerns, he nevertheless believed that these anxieties were misplaced. Wordsworth, he suggested, “could not understand that to break a rock with a hammer in search of crystal may sometimes be an act not disgraceful to human nature, and that to dissect a flower may sometimes be as proper as to dream over it.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Let me try to explain the point that Ruskin is making, and see how you respond to it. Wordsworth was committed to the notion of “truthful perception”, which he understood in terms of an emotional fusion between the artist and what he observed. Ruskin regarded this as dangerously subjective, and made it clear that, at least at this point, he preferred the objectivity of the scientist to the subjectivity of the poet. Science must be allowed to establish an object’s individual identity and properties. This objective analysis then leads into subjective engagement with what is observed. Ruskin does not consider science and feeling to be mutually exclusive; rather science provides a firmer basis for the human aesthetic response to nature, which is grounded on an objective appreciation of its structure and character.

Let us now turn to consider how Ruskin engages the question of a loss of our sense of wonder at nature – or, indeed, the perception that a landscape lacks any beauty at all. Let me explore this point by looking at Ruskin’s reflections on a “monotonous bit of vine-country” just north of Lake Leman in Switzerland. In his diary entry for 3 June 1849, Ruskin noted how his attitude towards a “tiresome” scene of “sticks and stones” and a “steep dusty road” was transformed through an act of aesthetic imagination, driven by a determination to see the scene afresh through an active application of his mind:[[5]](#footnote-5)

I had a hot march among the vines, and between their dead stone walls; once or twice I flagged a little, and began to think it tiresome; then I put my mind into the scene, instead of suffering the body only to make report of it; and looked at it with the possession-taking grasp of the imagination – the true one; it gilded all the dead walls, and I felt a charm in every vine tendril that hung over them. It required an effort to maintain the feeling: it was poetry while it lasted, and I felt that it was only while under it that one could draw, or invent, or give glory to, any part of such a landscape.

What Ruskin describes here is an intentional decision to see the world in a new way. Instead of relying on a passive perception that this landscape was uninteresting and tiresome, he would actively engage it, deliberately choosing to see it in a more positive and vibrant way – not *inventing* this beauty, but rather holding that this beauty was veiled or hidden, and that it could be uncovered or disclosed through the “possession-taking grasp of the imagination”. We may need to look harder to find beauty in nature; nevertheless, it is there to be found, if we can only see things in the right way.

So let me begin to explore Ruskin’s emphasis on seeing things as they really are, echoed by many other writers of his age – such as Matthew Arnold. Ruskin used the term *theoria*, deriving from the Greek word which we might translate as “beholding” or “envisaging”. It is an act of seeing something in a certain way. We’re familiar with this from the word “theory”, which is often used in a scientific context to mean a way of seeing reality, which allows us to make sense of our observations of reality by proposing a “big picture” which holds them all together in an intelligible and coherent manner.

What use are they? What advantages do they confer? And how can they go wrong? The important point to appreciate here is that it is deeply human to search for a “big picture” or a larger narrative of life, including our place in the universe. Whether this is right or wrong, good or bad, it is deeply embedded within our nature as human beings. Many of those who deny having any theories or beliefs about life – including some representatives of the New Atheism, such as Christopher Hitchens – actually turn out to have implicit theoretical commitments or assumed beliefs, which are simply treated as self-evidently true, and hence require requiring no justification of any kind.

There are two fundamental benefits of the kind of “big picture” which I have just described. First, it gives us a way of seeing the world which brings it into focus, and allows it to be seen more clearly. Second, a good theory shows how things are interconnected, allowing us to place events and observations within a web of meaning. A good “big picture” thus discloses – but does not invent – both the intelligibility and coherence of reality.

Yet there are potential dangers to such an approach, of which three are of particular importance. The first is that a theory can easily make us blind to certain things, which we fail to see because we believe there is nothing to be seen. Peter de Bolla, who is presently Professor of Cultural History and Aesthetics at Cambridge University, points out how this problem arises in viewing works of art. The viewer can easily become “mired in a set of expectations and beliefs—in ideological positions—to such an extent that any reading can only reiterate the grounding ideology.”[[6]](#footnote-6) But this is a much wider problem. To put it bluntly, we often become so enmeshed within our own core assumptions that we become unable to see and appreciate the evidential dissonance between evidence and belief which is apparent to an outside observer.

The second is that we become so fixated on the intellectual pattern that we find in theories that we lose sight of the greater wonder and beauty of the universe itself, which that these theories represent or describe. The Christian novelist Dorothy L. Sayers (1893 – 1957), for example, from time to time found herself wondering whether she had fallen in love with the intellectual pattern that she found in Christian theology, which led her to lose sight of the central figure of her faith – Jesus Christ. (And, by the way, we shall be returning to think more about Sayers in our next lecture.)

Yet when rightly understood, theory is not an end in itself; it is a means of enriching our delight and grasp of what it represents. When wrongly understood, it leads to an over-thinking of things, in which we end up focussing on provisional and partial representations of reality, rather than an untamed and undiluted reality itself.

Yet there is a third cause for concern here – the risk of excessively ambitious or dogmatic theory-driven readings of nature. We might think, for example, of Arthur Koestler (1905–83), whose commitment to a Marxist-Leninist ideology in the 1930s led him to see the world in a simplistic and highly politicized way. In his autobiography, Koestler describes his own gradual movement away from his youthful ideological certainties about the world to a reluctant recognition of its obscurity and resistance to definitive interpretation.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In my youth, I regarded the universe as an open book, printed in the language of physical equations and social determinants, whereas it now appears to me as a text written in invisible ink, of which, in our rare moments of grace, we are able to decipher a small fragment.

Koestler’s account of his disenchantment with the theoretical certainties of Marxism-Leninism makes fascinating reading. In the end, however, Koestler’s problem was not that he recognized the need for a theory to understand the world, but his dawning realization that he had chosen the wrong theory. We all need some sort of theoretical framework – however modest, provisional and correctable – for making sense of nature, history, and life. Whether consciously or unconsciously, we all see life through theoretical spectacles, which that shape what we see and – perhaps more importantly – what we fail to see. That’s why it matters to get the theory right. If we use the wrong theory we don’t see things as they really are, but an illusion or distortion.

To help explain this important point, let me tell you about a mysterious block of stone discovered in Canford School, in the southern English county of Dorset. The school was founded in 1923 when an old country manor house was purchased and renovated for educational use. The house had previously been owned by Sir Henry Layard (1818–94), a prominent Victorian archaeologist who had spent much of his time excavating ancient sites in Mesopotamia, and was credited with the discovery of the ‘lost’ city of Nineveh in 1845.

The builders who converted the house into a school found some large blocks of stone in one of the rooms. The school management had no idea what to do with them. For a while, one of them was used to prop up the school’s dartboard. Eventually, it was moved to the school’s ‘tuck shop’, which sold drinks and confectionery to students.

In 1994 John Russell, a professor of art history at Columbia University, who was researching a book about Layard, visited Canford School. While exploring the premises, he noticed this slab of stone. Russell’s curiosity was aroused. After a trip to the British Museum in London, he realized that it was a 3,000-year-old carved panel that Layard had brought back to England from the throne room of the Assyrian King Assurnasirpal II (883–859 BC). It was sold at auction at Christie’s later that year for a record $11.8 million.

When Russell first saw the stone, he assumed that he was looking at a cheap plaster copy of an ancient Assyrian carving. Then his eyes were opened and he realized what the stone really was. He discerned its true significance. As a result, the way the object was understood and valued changed radically. What was once seen as a useless lump of rock was now recognized as an important historical relic, worth nearly $12 million.

The key points are, first, that the stone *was seen with new eyes*, and second, that *it was seen for what it really was*. Russell displayed what the philosopher Iris Murdoch called “attentiveness” – a careful, principled, committed attempt to perceive things as they really are, rather than as they merely appear to be. We may approach an object with a set of assumptions, then discover as we look at it that these do not tie in very well with what we are actually observing. So we begin to look for another way of seeing which fits better.

This is an idea that is familiar to scientists. The philosopher of science N. R. Hanson (1924–67) pointed out that we all look at the world through “theoretical spectacles”, whether we realize this or not. What kind of spectacles might bring things into sharpest focus? The Harvard psychologist William James declared that religious faith is basically “faith in the existence of an unseen order of some kind in which the riddles of the natural order may be found and explained.” To find that “unseen order” is to open up a new way of looking at things, which allows us to see them differently. This way is not grounded in human wisdom, but rooted ultimately in the reality of God.

It’s also an idea that we find in the New Testament. When Paul urges his readers to “be transformed by the renewing of your minds” (Romans 12.2), he is asking his readers to put on Christian spectacles and see the world afresh. The New Testament uses many images to make it clear that the Christian faith brings about a new way of envisaging the world: our sight is healed; our eyes are opened; a veil is removed.

So how does this approach lead us to see nature in a new way? Let me end this lecture by exploring the general area of the spirituality of nature – a subjective way of reading nature, which complements a scientific understanding. It can easily be seen as a development of Ruskin’s basic idea of holding together objective and subjective aspects of nature through an informing and interpreting *theoria*. The great Harvard psychologist William James had little doubt about the difference that a Christian theoria made to the way nature is seen and understood: “At a single stroke, [theism] changes the dead blank it of the world into a living thou, with whom the whole man may have dealings.”

We can see this changed outlook in the writings of Jonathan Edwards (1703-58), perhaps America’s greatest Christian theologian. Edwards argued that this way of looking at nature “establishes a new vision, radically different from that of natural understanding and sight”. As a result, nature is seen in a new way, its beauty being highlighted and exhibited by the new vision of reality resulting from conversion. This is particularly evident in one of Edwards’s most lyrical descriptions of nature:

When we are delighted with flowery meadows and gentle breezes of wind, we may consider that we only see the emanations of the sweet benevolence of Jesus Christ; when we behold the fragrant rose and lily, we see his love and purity. So the green trees and fields, and singing of birds, are emanations of his infinite joy and benignity; the easiness and naturalness of trees and vines [are] shadows of his infinite beauty and loveliness; the crystal rivers and murmuring streams have the footsteps of his sweet grace and bounty.

The Christian vision of reality, Edwards suggests, allowed him to see nature in such a way that its beauties “are really emanations, or shadows, of the excellencies of the Son of God.”

Much contemporary discussion, however, focusses on a related, though clearly distinct theme – the “spirituality of nature.” The term “spirituality” has found widespread acceptance in recent decades, often being used to emphasise the inner aspect of religious traditions, as opposed to their outward or institutional forms, and particularly to avoid the impoverishment which results from an excessively rational approach to religious engagement and reflection. Let me quote from a recent study of this development by Anna King.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The term spirituality as currently used, indicates both the unity at the heart of religious traditions and the transformative inner depth or meaning of those traditions. . . . It supplies a term which transcends particular religions and it suggests a non-reductionist understanding of human life. It is more firmly associated than religion with creativity and imagination, with change, and with relationship.

As is clear from Edwards’s approach, a Christian spirituality is intertwined with and informed by a Christian theology, even if their points of focus are not the same. So how might a Christian natural theology enable or encourage such a “transformative inner depth” in our relationship with the natural world? Once more, the issue of how we see nature emerges as being of critical importance. As Iris Murdoch regularly observed, “I can only choose within the world I can see, in the moral sense of ‘see’ which implies that clear vision is a result of moral imagination and moral effort.” The Christian *theoria* gives us this way of seeing the world, which enables and informs both reflection and action, and produces “new value in what we see and what we feel.”

It offers us a conceptual net that can be thrown over our aesthetic experience of nature, holding together its imaginative and rational elements. The experience of beauty is affirmed, and engaged with a “penetrative imagination” (Ruskin), grounded in the Christian vision of reality, that penetrates to the heart of beautiful objects, and grasps what the uninformed senses would otherwise overlook. This imaginarium provides ontological security for the semiotic link between the natural world and God, affirming that nature can be read as a sign of the creator – not as an imposition of an alien meaning, but as a discernment of their true significance. Nature can be seen as a divine work of art – something that is authored, even if discernment of its meaning and value require tutored engagement.

This allows us to make the critical connection between natural theology and a spirituality of the created order. The re-imagination of nature outlined in this volume allows a constant engagement of enrichment of our thoughts about God and creation. It is not a question of a “hermeneutical circle” in which we are locked into certain self-referential modes of thought from which we cannot escape; rather, the Christian theoria enables an iterative process of ascension – a hermeneutical spiral – in which there is a “circularity of motion” between our thoughts of God and creation leading to an enhanced appreciation and enriched understanding of both God and the natural world.

Already being in possession of a concept of God, the community of faith finds that this is imaginatively enriched and expanded by the beauty and vastness of the created order, such as the night sky. And so it returns to its concept of God, and finds that it has been deepened in an “enriched cognition”. This, after all, seems to be the trajectory of thought explored in Psalm 19: “The heavens declare the glory of the Lord”. Israel, we must appreciate, already knew about God. There was no question of an unknown God being disclosed through the night sky. Rather, contemplation of the night sky offered an imaginative enrichment of Israel’s vision of God.

Part of that process of reflection involves the question of our place within the order of nature. The spiral of reflection on the relation of creation and creator outlined above is clearly significant in developing what Iris Murdoch termed “techniques of unselfing,” paralleling Christian contemplative and ascetic practices designed to heighten our attentiveness towards God, and secure liberation from potentially destructive self-preoccupation and self-deception.

In intellectual disciplines and in the enjoyment of art and nature we discover value in our ability to forget self, to be realistic, to perceive justly. We use our imagination not to escape the world but to join it, and this exhilarates us because of the distance between our ordinary dulled consciousness and an apprehension of the real.

The beauty of the night skies or a glorious sunset are important pointers to the origins and the ultimate fulfilment of our heart’s deepest desires. But if we mistake the signpost for what is signposted, we will attach our hopes and longings to lesser goals, which cannot finally quench our thirst for meaning. This enigmatic thought was expressed lyrically by the Russian writer and Orthodox priest Gregory Petrov in his “Hymn of Thanksgiving” (sometimes known as the “Akathist of Thanksgiving”) written shortly before his death in the Stalinist Soviet Union at a Siberian labour camp in 1940. Many of you will know this piece through the work of John Taverner, who set it to music in 1988. Let me read you some of its words:

O Lord, how lovely it is to be your guest.

Breezes full of scents; mountains reaching to the skies;

Waters like boundless mirrors, reflecting the sun’s golden rays and the scudding clouds.

All nature murmurs mysteriously, breathing the depth of tenderness.

Birds and beasts of the forest bear the imprint of your love.

Blessed is mother earth, in your passing loveliness, which awakens our yearning for the happiness that will last for ever,

In the eternal native land where, amid beauty that will never grow old, the cry rings out: Alleluia!

Petrov clearly found immense consolation in these thoughts. The natural world which surrounded the inhuman and degrading life of the Siberian labour camp pointed beyond itself to a future homeland free of oppression and pain. The forests, mountains and lakes around the camp signalled a future hope, which illuminated and transfigured his present situation.

Now I am afraid that I have run out of time! Next time we meet, we will explore the fascinating question of the rationality of religious belief, in dialogue with Dorothy L. Sayers. I will look forward to speaking to you again soon! Thank you so much for listening.

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1. Ruskin, *Works*, [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ruskin, *Works*, vol. 4, 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ruskin, *Works*, vol. 4, 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ruskin, *Works*, vol. 5, 359. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ruskin, *Works*, vol. 5, xix. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Bolla, *Art Matters*, 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Koestler, *The Invisible Writing*, 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. King, “Spirituality,” 346. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)