

Fall' 91

NEWTON AND ME

At a wholly marvellous point in An Hypothesis, Isaac Newton introduces the pleasing discovery that the colour spectrum can be divided up into ratios corresponding to those of the musical scale -- each "major division" in colour corresponding to musical ratio of considerable importance (with the seven key colours corresponding to the seven notes of an octave). Newton's interest in the issue, has generally been considered odd, at best. In fact, Newton's interest in mystical Pythagorean ideas is only the least concealed hint among many in his writings of a world view I find utterly fascinating. He was convinced the heliocentric (and, importantly, vacuist) conception of the universe he had received from Copernicus, and which his writings finally worked out thoroughly, established at long last the possibility of liberating humankind from the errors of popery, idolatry, and the worship of false kings -- all of which had their basis in a geocentric world-view. He was precoccupied with the image of the sun as the central fire, and believed the structure of the Jewish tabernacle, with a central fire surrounded by seven lights symbolized the sun surrounded by seven planets. The seven tones of the musical scale and the seven key colours of the spectrum had a numerological significance shared by the number of the planets. He insisted all this constituted a demonstration of the validity of Pythagoreanism, and even that Pythagoras had know the inverse-square law (which immediately connects force with distance but also explains the elliptical orbits of the planets) since in order to produce the musical ratios of 2:1, 3:2 and 4:3 strings must have lengths of 1:4, 4:9 and 9:16 -- an inverse square relation! Thus, taking a cue from Macrobius' on Plato's Timaeus, Newton poeticizes: "Apollo's lyre of seven strings provides an understanding of the motions of all the celestial spheres over which nature has set the sun of moderator". He even believed that the fables of Apollo, Pan and Orpheus provided an encoded account of the harmony of the heavens to which such initiates as himself held the key.

Furthermore, he considered that all bodies possessed Active Principles, which I believed he conceived no differently than the Occult Forces of Alchemy (a study he persued with an almost inhuman intensity.) His natural philosophy was just a small part of his efforts to apprehend the Occult Forces. Thus he believed bodies to be composed of "certain aethereal spirits, or vapours". One of these spirits is the ether, which he refers to as "the succus nutritius of the earth, or primary substance". The second substance, disseminated through the first, is light.

ye aether is but a vehicle to some more active sp[irit]
& ye bodys may bee concreted of bothe together, they
may imbibe aether as well as in ern[er]llation & in yt
aether ye spt is intangled. This spt perhabs is ye
body of light becaus both a prodigious active
principle, both are perpetuall workers.

And hence, Newton's Opticks. He was, indeed, the greatest of all
the natural magicians.

From George Melies to Harry Smith and Kenneth Anger, the siren call
of light has been heard as an invitation to making magic. However,
ours is a time when magic has gone from the intelligence, and
largely because professors misread Newton.

Newton was also learned in matters theological, and, manifesting in
Apocalyptic literature wholly consistent with his fiery
fascinations, wrote exegeses of The Book of Daniel and the Book of
Revelations. Thus, a study of the book of His Word completed
Newton's study of God's other book, the book of His Works, that, in
essence, his natural philosophy was.

I share some of these strange ideas with Newton.

R. Bruce Elder

Program Note for NEWTON AND ME

Anxious questions about the legacy of possibly the greatest genius England has produced (his obvious rivals being Blake and Shakespeare.) Yet his anti-trinitarianism represents a rejection of the mystery of the incarnation. Moreover his philosophy is a study in a natural magic, a discipline devoted to the inquiry into occult powers. It is, in the end, a version of gnosticism; and gnosticism identifies knowledge with mastery. Is the idea that humans become godlike by acquiring understanding of the Divine Order blasphemy -- and the source of our technological hubris? What knowledge is it proper for humans to possess?

We have all heard that Newton's science reduced matter to a dull affair, soundless, scentless and colourless -- merely the scurrying about of particles of brute matter. But was it Newton's gnostic disposition that is responsible for the disenchantment of the material world -- and for the arrogance that human subjectivity endows phenomenal reality with its sensuous beauty? Is this conception of reality responsible for moderns' contempt for flesh and matter?

These are the hard questions Newton's legacy poses. Perhaps Blake was correct in this matter as well:

Reason says "Miracle"; Newton says "Doubt"
Aye! that's the way to make all Nature out.

Then again, the great modern saint Simone Weil inclined towards gnosticism...

R. Bruce Elder