

**Floyer Sydenham, James Harris,  
and the forgotten Platonic Revival of the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century**

Throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century England was impoverished by war and demoralised by gin. Scientific learning led to the harnessing of power and the enslavement of the working population in the industrial revolution.

A philosopher of the time, with a taste for Plato (a very rare thing) would know what the root cause of the evil was.

Philosophy and religion had driven God out of Nature. The world was a mechanical system, clockwork set turning by a God who then stepped well back. To John Locke, Nature was a thing that reason could exploit. Religion's role was to provide moral guidance by which people could order their lives and find a road out of the satanic mills to heaven. Or, alternatively, some enthusiasts would suggest that God could intervene by sending his Holy Spirit into the darkness. But, even then, the world was still a machine, ticking away and mostly left to its own devices.

In the early years of the century Bishop Berkeley had opposed this materialist view of Nature with a philosophy that argued that only Mind was real. Matter had no meaning. Everything existed in the Mind of God. Samuel Johnson was incensed by this Idealist philosophy.

...Johnson answered, striking his foot with mighty force against a large stone, till he rebounded from it, "I refute it THUS."

(James Boswell, *The life of Samuel Johnson*, Vol. 1, London: Dent, pp. 292-3)

The famous refutation took place in 1763, fifty years after Berkeley had published his principal works, the "*Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*" (1710) and "*Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*" (1713). In 1763 Johnson may well have been thinking about this new flowering of such distasteful ideas.

By the end of the century Thomas Taylor had no doubt that materialism and empiricism was the cause of evil:

Materialism, and its attendant Sensuality, have darkened the eyes of the many, with mists of error...Impetuous ignorance is thundering at the bulwarks of philosophy, and her sacred retreats are in danger of being demolished...Rise, then, my friends and the victory will be ours.

(Thomas Taylor, *Concerning the Beautiful*, (1792)

This was a call to arms. Taylor's antidote to "impetuous ignorance" was a revival of Platonic philosophy. Plato taught that Nature flowed from God (or, if one prefers, the more abstract "One",) and had within it reflections of the ideal forms of Goodness and Truth. By contemplating the eternal reality within Nature, we could raise our souls to Truth. If we and Nature have a divine Law within us the use of Reason should guide us to living according to that Law, in a life of Virtue, rather than exploiting Nature.)

Pat Rogers' introduction to the 18thc (before William Blake) in "*Platonism and the English Imagination*" (ed. Anna Baldwin and Sarah Hutton, Cambridge U.P. 1994) is a mere five pages long. It explains that Greek was barely studied in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Plato was unfashionable, his reputation "besmirched" as Pat Rogers writes, with its association with "secret society activity, equivalent to

Rosicrucianism or freemasonry.” In general, the mood of the time was that it was proper that religion and philosophy should be “not mysterious.”

Taylor set about a project to publish the works of Plato into English, with the addition of the important texts of later Platonists. This is often as a key gesture of the romantic movement.

Taylor’s work depended on the appropriation of earlier translations of Plato by Floyer Sydenham. Taylor’s interest in promoting a mystical and esoteric view of Platonism has obscured the contribution of the forgotten Sydenham.

Floyer Sydenham is one of the small group of friends who make up a forgotten revival of Platonic philosophy which inspired the more visible Greek Revival in the arts, forty years before Taylor and the romantics. Their motives, driven by an opposition to materialism and empiricism, were the same as Taylor’s but their philosophy had a different tone, and is inseparable from an interest in a wider view of art, culture, politics and virtue.

James Harris (1709-1780), MP for Christchurch was born in Salisbury in 1709. His father’s first wife had been Catherine Cocks, whose sister Margaret married Philip Yorke, later Lord Hardwicke, Lord Chancellor, father-in-law of George Anson.

James Harris’s mother, Lady Elizabeth Ashley (1681-1743) was the sister of Harris’s greatest inspiration and influence, Lord Shaftesbury, though Shaftesbury died when Harris was only four.

Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury. Shaftesbury, as a philosopher of the Enlightenment, was an influence throughout Europe. Shaftesbury wrote rambling dialogues examining matters of morality and ideas. Importantly, he encouraged the use of “raillery”, the value of making fun of mistaken ideas and to deflate pomposity.

Shaftesbury was not the only encouragement for a young Salisbury philosopher as the city already had a tradition of Platonic, idealist, philosophy in John Norris (1657-1712) and Arthur Collier (1680-1732). As Clive T Probyn writes

during the childhood and early manhood of ‘Hermes’ Harris the intellectual atmosphere of Salisbury was thick with Idealism.

(Clive T Probyn. *The Sociable Humanist. The Life and Works of James Harris 1709-1780*, OUP, 1991)

Another idealist philosopher whom Harris knew was John Petvin (1691-1745.) Harris published Petvin’s “Letters Concerning Mind” and “Remarks on Letters Concerning Mind”, edited from shorthand notes, in 1752. Petvin is an idealist in the style of Bishop Berkeley, seeing Mind as the only reality. Coleridge read and annotated the book many years later and seems to have found it amusing, especially Petvin’s thought that all minds might swim in one great Mind like fish in a river.

At Wadham College, Oxford, Harris was a contemporary of Floyer Sydenham. Sydenham was born in 1710 in Dulverton, Somerset. Harris and Sydenham can only have been at Oxford together for two

years before Harris left to study law. Harris soon had to abandon law when his father died in 1731. After Oxford Sydenham studied law at Lincoln's Inn and was called to the bar in 1735.

Harris was a public figure, with a wide circle of friends. He was close friend of Handel and deeply involved in musical life. Two of Harris's published books brought him a degree of fame as philosopher, "*Three Treatises*" and "*Hermes*". Though Sydenham published a far larger body of work, principally his translations of some of Plato's dialogues (and some attributed to Plato) far less is known of him.

There are only two mentions of Floyer Sydenham in Burrows' and Dunhill's massive edition of extracts from the Harris family papers, 949 pages apart. In his penultimate year, 1779, Harris notes that Sydenham spent the evening with him. 41 years earlier, on 19<sup>th</sup> May 1738, Harris's brother Thomas wrote that he was sending "Handel's print" (a new portrait) and some music with Sydenham to Salisbury.

George Friderick Handel stayed with Harris in Salisbury in 1739. He had been ill and he was trying to find a new way forward after abandoning the unprofitable world of opera. Questions about the power and effect of music were in the air. Handel's setting of Dryden's *Alexander's Feast* told the story of the poet Timotheus whose songs raised the passions of war and love in his audience, but was it absurd for the music to depict a conflagration? Harris's *Treatise on Music Painting and Poetry* suggests that music can create moods or affections in which the meaning of words can better be absorbed but is very limited in what it can depict. The early 18<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, even Harris, could not find the language to explain how music in itself could have meaning.

Immediately after leaving Salisbury Handel set Dryden's *Ode for St Cecilia's day*, a celebration of the divine power of music, and, at Harris's suggestion, Milton's *L'Allegro and Il Penseroso*, which gave him the chance to depict the widest possible range of scenes and emotions. It was Harris who encouraged Handel to set the lines:

O let my lamp, at midnight hour,  
Be seen in some high lonely tow'r,  
Where I may oft out-watch the Bear,  
With thrice-great Hermes, or unsphere  
The spirit of Plato...

The third work that followed this visit to Salisbury was the set of 12 Concerti Grossi, instrumental music that explores all the possibilities of expression, contrast and form.

Handel, who never explained his own religious or philosophical ideas, had produced what appears to be a great Platonic celebration of the power and value of music.

Was Sydenham in Salisbury with Harris and Handel that year? He disagreed with Harris but agreed with Handel about the communicative power of music. In his last book, *Onomasticon Theologicon*, (1784), he writes about the development of language and words

the *Sound* of which may have, like *Handel's Musical Compositions*, the Power of raising in the Soul *Ideas*, or *Images*...

(p.288)

Tantalising snippets about Sydenham are to be found in letters to Harris from mutual friends, John Upton and Arthur Collier, the son of the Salisbury Platonist of the same name. These fragments suggests Sydenham was an eccentric and volatile character, though, despite his oddity, Harris remained a loyal friend throughout his life, giving the archetypal penniless scholar financial support which Harris's son, the first Earl of Malmesbury, continued to pay after Harris's death in 1780.

The earliest of these references, from an uncertain date in 1741, shows that Sydenham, though resident in London, was an occasional visitor to Harris's home in Salisbury.

John Upton (1707-1760) edited an edition of the original Greek of Arrian's Epictetus, and, during the period of these letters, was working on an edition of Spenser's "Faerie Queene." Sydenham may have helped Upton's work. He refers to Spenser as "my own great master" in a cancelled passage in his epic poem, "Truth", which also has other references to the poet.

Upton writes:

We have Mr Frankland here at present. Is Dr Collr at Salisbury? ....

Has Sydm been at Salisbury, or has his Genius not consented to his going from London? Sydm had something to carry to Mrs Barker from me: but I fancy chance and the carrier had the management of my intended presents & perhaps it might be wth ye?

(Hampshire Archives 9m73/G643/3)

"Dr Collr" was Arthur Collier, a doctor, and son of the Salisbury clergyman and philosopher of the same name.

James Harris's "*Three Treatises*" is the key publication of this Platonic Revival. The "*Treatises*" are, in effect, platonic dialogues, on Art, on Music, Painting and Poetry, and, by far the longest and most elaborate, on Happiness. Harris's discussion concludes that it is the pursuit of Good, or Virtue, rather than its achievement, which is the source of Happiness.

This third treatise gives an unusually precise date of completion on its title page, from 1741, the year in which Upton was wondering if Sydenham had been with Harris in Salisbury.

Finished Dec. 15 A.D. 1741.

Its first section is headed with a very simple dedication to Sydenham.

J. H. to F. S.

In Part 1 of the Treatise Harris writes, as if to Sydenham, that "among the many long exploded Systems, there was one, you remember, for which I professed a great Esteem." Harris's favoured system had probably been Stoicism. Sydenham may have persuaded him of the value of Platonism, but some years later Elizabeth Carter, whom Harris advised about her translation of Epictetus, felt he was still a Stoic. Carter wrote distinctly Platonic poetry, but she was also deeply Christian, and she disliked some aspects of Stoicism, particularly its justification of suicide.

Theophilus, the character in Part Two Harris's Treatise, is Sydenham. This is not a simple record of Harris's beliefs but a record of the conversations between the two friends. The first two treatises in the book are very dry. In the third it is the character who represents Sydenham who launches into extravagant speeches, as he and Harris are wandering (as they almost certainly did in real life) in the grounds of Wilton, near Salisbury, a setting with its own symbolic history, as home of Philip and Mary Sidney. (Wilton is mentioned in Sydenham's epic poem "Truth.")

We were walking, not (as now) in the chearful Face of Day, but late in the Evening, when the Sun had long been set. Circumstances of Solemnity were not wanting to affect us; the Poets could not have feigned any more happy a running Stream, an ancient Wood, a still Night, and a bright Moonshine. — I, for my own part, induced by the Occasion, fell insensibly into a Reverie about Inhabitants in the Moon. From thence I wandered to other heavenly Bodies, and talked of States there, and Empires, and I know not what. WHO lives in the Moon, said he, is perhaps more than we can well learn. It is enough, if we can be satisfied, by the help of our best Faculties, that Intelligence is not confined to this little Earth, which we inhabit ; that tho' Men were not, the World would not want Spectators, to contemplate its Beauty, and adore the Wisdom of its Author.

The author is restrained in his manner but Theophilus is inspired to use the language, and capital letters, of enthusiasm:

"THIS whole UNIVERSE itself is but ONE CITY or COMMONWEALTH — a System of Substances variously formed, and variously actuated agreeably to those forms— — a System of Substances both immensely great and small, Rational, Animal, Vegetable, and Inanimate..."

(James Harris, *Three Treatises*, 1744. Second edition, 1765, pp 224-6)

HERE let us dwell ;— — be here our Study and Delight. So shall we be enabled, in the silent Mirrour of Contemplation, to behold those Forms, which are hidden to Human Eyes' — ...

...Be these our Morning, these our Evening Meditations — with these may our Minds be unchangeably tinged — — that loving Thee with a Love most disinterested and sincere; enamoured of thy Polity, and thy DIVINE ADMINISTRATION...

(James Harris, op. cit. pp 233-234)

Clive T Probyn, in his biography of Harris, quotes a description of a similar stroll, this time involving James Harris and Lord Lyttelton, builder of that significant Doric temple, at Hagley, possibly during Harris's six day visit there in 1767. This comes from a dedication to Lyttelton in a manuscript copy of his "Essay on Criticism".

Harris reminds Lyttelton of their conversations -

...that striking one in particular, when I heard you with such attention, as we were walking together in the groves of Hagley, during the calm silence of a starry night. Yr Lordship remembers the time, & knows wt I relate to be no poetical reverie. The scene was actual nature exquisite in its kind; the subject founded not in fiction, but in truth, and such a one, as might well become a wise & good man, the nature of whence those Beautys were derived.

(Clive T Probyn, *The Sociable Humanist. The Life and Works of James Harris 1709-1780*, OUP, 1991, p. 69.)

Sydenham seems to have had no regular income. His decision to take Holy Orders may have been out of necessity, to enable him to take a job, rather than from religious conviction. He was clearly an enthusiastic Platonist, but his religious beliefs may have been rather unstable.

John Barker (c1709-1749), a physician of London and Salisbury, to whose wife Sydenham was to have taken a package in 1741, wrote to Harris in Salisbury:

January 26 1743 (1744 new style)

Our friend Sydenham is come to a resolution to take Orders, wch he means to do before ye the living becomes vacant, ...all his Friends here approved his Resolution, & ...great hopes that he will make an Excellent Country Parson.

(Hampshire Archives. 9M73/G363)

In August 1744 Sydenham was presented with the living of Esher, whose patron was Henry Pye of Knotting, Bedfordshire, the father of famously bad poet laureate, Henry James Pye, of Faringdon House, Berkshire.

(Hampshire Archives 21M65/E2/1360)

This would have provided a source of income, but, as rector, the philosopher need not to have expected to have any significant duties there. Only a few months later Sydenham applied for a more exotic appointment. The records for the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (See Access 2 Archives) show that Sydenham was appointed President and Professor of Divinity of Codrington College, Barbados in February 1744/5.

An account of Sydenham's life, told by Thomas Taylor, and recorded by Samuel Rodgers, claims Sydenham abandoned the church when the father of a potential bride had objected to his daughter marrying a clergyman – which sent him into the Law, and then abroad, suffering hardships, and returning as a common sailor.

(Samuel Rogers and William Maltby, *Recollections of the Table Talk of Samuel Rogers*, Appleton, 1856.)

This is incompatible with the known facts, but his application for the post at Codrington College might well have been inspired by an unhappy love affair.

There is no doubt that Sydenham took up his appointment in Barbados, as, in 1759 Arthur Collier wrote to Harris that as to Sydenham's state of

mind or intellect or whatever else you please to call them, it is now and has been ever since his arrival from the Country of the Blacks as good as in his best days you ever knew him, how steady and uniform that was you can best answer for yourself...

(Hampshire Archives 9M73/G346/99)

This implies that this steadiness had not always been the case.

On 1<sup>st</sup> February 1746 (or 1745/6) Upton wrote to Harris:

Syd tells me has been with you. Our old friend is deep in Jacob Behmen, & commentators on the Apocalypse, so he soars above my pitch vastly: he looks on critics as enemies to the metaphysicians, & jokers as the pest of human societies.

(Hampshire Archives 9M73/G646/5)

BOEHME Freher, Allen Lippington

On December 8<sup>th</sup> 1746 Upton wrote:

When I was in Town I called on Sydenham why by the bye will die one day in Bedlam. He is quite a Papist & Wch is worse has not sense to keep his opinions to himself, but talks of them in Coffee houses. This is no great sign of sense you know: If I think different from the rest of mankind; wh but Vanity (& that of the lowest kind), can make me talk before children & women? This has taken air: so our friend is ruin'd. Wt if you wrote to him a Lettr, but pray let not me be mention'd. But don't let him chicane with or answer your arguments, but only reflect on them. He told me there should be a publick and a private RI (Religion?). This was owning a great deal. So I fancy he will commence next public Deist & then Atheist: or if any thing can be still more absurd, that absurdity he'll embrace: for our friend has a very paralogous head. Nil extra est in nice duri. But his defence to me of Popery was as low as ever I heard even amongst the papistical crew at John West's.

....

How do you spend yr time? About wt speculations? You are not going to turn Calvinist or Papist I suppose, or Behmenist? Are all accounts made use & adjusted within? Or are you still a seeker? As to myself I have given up all thoughts in this life about Happiness, & my seeking is after ease and quiet...

Rochester Dec 8<sup>th</sup> 1746

(Hampshire Archives 9M73/G644/3)

Sydenham resigned from the living of Esher on 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1747. His religious uncertainties, or seekings, continued. On 5<sup>th</sup> July 1751 Upton wrote to Harris for advice on "Pythagorean numbers" in Spenser's "Faerie Queene" and asked:

What does your bp do? Can he read and write?...

Upton then passed on the latest from Sydenham:

But the worst of all, or best of all, I know not wt to call it, He is no more a papist than you or I am; and so I told him, He seem'd displeas'd: but he has all the tricks to cheat himself, as ever a cunning Jesuit did to cheat others. Syd heads more from me than he would from any one else, because I presume on the priviledge of a Critic to call in question his tenets: and he spins his cobwebs as fast as a spider & as flimsy: I come wth my critical broom & sweep away. I think he cannot well leave the papists. Who will like him? No one for a politician.

(Hampshire Archives 9M73/G645/8)

James Harris's "*Hermes, or a philosophical enquiry concerning universal grammar*" was first published in 1751. The second edition, revised and corrected, appeared in 1765, and included a frontispiece by James Stuart, as did the second edition of "Three Treatises". This is, on the surface, a very abstract account of the building blocks of language, but a glance at the layout of the publication shows that it is also a compendium of quotations from Greek writers, with translations, in footnotes that sometimes greatly exceed the amount of text.

By Book the Third the footnotes take over altogether and there are pages with only one or two lines of text – but this is, surely, a visual and dramatic device, as by pages 383 onwards a climax is reached with the crucial discussion of Platonic Forms and Ideas, as having reality beyond the world of matter, and the outstandingly Platonic statement –

The WHOLE VISIBLE WORLD exhibits nothing more, than so many *passing pictures* of these same immutable archetypes."

(James Harris, *Hermes*, Second edition, 1765 pp 383-4)

Harris's Preface explains that the purpose of this odd book is

...to excite his readers to curiosity and inquiry...to become Teachers to themselves...

He hopes that the variety of sources, Greek and Roman, will help the reader understand that

there is ONE TRUTH, like one Sun, that has enlightened human Intelligence through every age, and saved it from the darkness both of Sophistry and Error.

(James Harris, *ibid*, Preface,)

By "One Truth" Harris is referring to the "TRUTH" which is also the source of all being, which, soon after, became the subject of his friend's unfinished epic poem, "Truth, or the Nature of Things."

In the same year, 1751, Harris published a poem, "Concord", which looks at the idea of harmony both socially and cosmically:

Ere yet creation was, ere Sun, and Moon,  
And Stars, bedeck'd the splendid Vault of Heav'n,  
Was GOD; and GOD was MIND; and MIND was *Beauty*  
And *Truth*, and *Form*, and *Order*: for all these  
In Mind's profound Recess, and Union pure.  
Together dwelt, involv'd, inexplicate.  
Then Matter (if then Matter was) devoid,  
Formless, indefinite, and passive lay;  
Mysterious Being, in one Instant found  
Nor any thing, nor nothing; but at once  
Both all and none; none by *Privation*, all  
By vast *Capacity*, and pregnant *Pow'r*,

This passive Nature th'active Almighty Mind

Deeming fit Subject for his Art, at once

Expell'd Privation, and pour'd forth Himself...

(Clive T Probyn. *The Sociable Humanist. The Life and Works of James Harris 1709-1780*, OUP, 1991)

The poem was dedicated to, and included flattering lines, to Lord Radnor, a near neighbour of Harris's friend Richard Owen Cambridge, at Twickenham.

Some years later, in 1767, Floyer Sydenham referred to *Concord* in his notes to Plato's Banquet.

But such as have a Taste for Philosophic Poetry may be obliged to Us for informing them, that they may see this Subject finely illustrated in a very elegant Poem, intitl'd CONCORD, inscribed to the late *Earl of Radnor*, about ten years since, but of which so very few Copys were printed, or at least made public, that 'tis little known even amongst the Few able Judges of its Merit. Posterity will be inquisitive after every Work, penned by the Author of HERMES,

(Plato, *The Banquet*, translated by Floyer Sydenham, 1767, p.74, fn. 52)

Is there a slight feeling in this that Sydenham knew he was addressing a very small, private, audience – with a very slim hope that Posterity would be inquisitive about his friends and himself?

In October 1753 Upton reported to Harris that Sydenham wanted to return to the Church of England, and on 27<sup>th</sup> July 1754 he wrote:

- But who do you guess I was with several times – Sydenham – he has renounced popery, or popery has renounced him (I know not whether). & he has commenced more protestant than ever. Collr told me he has a mind to be my curate. Ld have mercy on us both, & deliver me from the dilemma of taking him or refusing him, wt can be done for those who will act their doubts and paradoxes? They draw in all who come within their Vortex. – Collier very wisely I thought advised Sydm to write to you & to apologise for part of his conduct at your house, as putting the whole affair (as indeed it was) on a feverish indisposition wch got into his head. But Syd's pride (wch was is and will always be uppermost whether drunk or sober) made him turn about & whistle to the dog, & afterwards to keep a sullen silence till the discourse was changed. – my discourses with Syd were as usual, but I doubt much, or rather don't doubt at all, of things being right within his own pale? He is like our Pembroke man of war, at Chatham, all sail high masts & no balance, no wonder as soon as out of the haven if it oversetts.

(Hampshire Archives 9m73/g645/11)

This does all suggest an unstable and unreliable character, but there is no sign of this at all in Sydenham's published works. His translations of Plato, their introductions and notes, are always lucid, readable, learned and entertaining.

It must have been at about this time, in the middle of the 1750s, that Sydenham began to write his unpublished epic poem "Truth, or the Nature of Things." If it had been completed in the twenty or

twenty-four books it promises, his would have been something like 400 pages of print. As it is eight books exist in two bound volumes, and these include references to other books that are lost.

It is certainly an eccentric project for the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and it may not be of any value as poetry, but what survives is completely coherent, if long-winded.

It is an account the Platonic philosophy, as seen by its author. It is, therefore, an indication, though, incomplete, to what aspects of the philosophy were important to Sydenham,

It is written as an explanation of the Nature of Things, a statement of fact rather than a dialogue or argument. There are no references to authorities or sources. The poem avoids any religious language. It speaks entirely in its own terms.

The poet is guided by the muses, but these are not the more familiar muses, but the “syrens” Plato describes in the “Myth of Er”, in “The Republic”, who sing the Music of the Spheres, the harmonies which permeate the whole cosmos.

(The manuscript is British Library Add MS 45181-45182.)

(Book 1. Lines 43ff)

Come all ye Muses, lead the song; not ye  
Parnassian, vulgar, various, of your Aid  
To every Rhymer liberal; but ye  
Celestial, sitting on the radiant Spheres;  
Who rule in Rhythm their Motions, as they roll,  
Now leading, & now following, each by turns;  
Who tune them, as they sound, for Consonance;  
And with their varying Motions while they change  
Their Sounds, form All one perfect Melody,  
Grateful to the Ear of Intellect, compose;  
Ye Syren-Sisters Nine, whom at a Birth  
The Abyss of Things, pregnant by Truth, produc'd;

The phrase “Abyss of Things” may be a relic of his earlier enthusiasm for Jacob Boehme.

Come joyn with Me, to celebrate your Sire;  
To celebrate of all-victorious Truth  
The Triumphs; of fair Truth the Beauty bright  
To blaz'n; of blissful Truth to sing the Joys,

That from his own Life-giving Well spring up,  
Ceaseless supply'd to Those who ceaseless draw.

All things touched by the ill of the material world are transient, even Arcadia.

(Book 1. Lines 206ff)

Thy word divine in all-consuming Fire,  
Goes forth & Fancy's vast Creation, sprung  
Newly out of Nothing, into Nothing turns:  
Those happy Plains of Arcady, the Land,  
Where Love is Life's whole Business, its sole Bliss  
Amorous Enjoyment; there, where Lovers find  
From their Belov'd equal Return of Love,  
Uninterrupted, unremitting Love,  
Untir'd, unchanging, elsewhere sought in vain:  
And all the Realms of Fairy, ravel'd o'er  
In Revery grave by many a musing Mind;  
When th'inward World in Conflagration wide,  
Kindled by Reason, burns and purifys,  
They in a Flash fly; & are seen no more.

This passage inevitably brings to mind the elegiac mood Thomas Anson's "Shepherds Monument" at Shugborough, with its relief of Poussin's "Et in Arcadia Ego", which possibly dates from 1750, or no later than 1756.

The poet hopes that Truth will bring back the Golden Age – guided by Celestial Venus (who is also Astrea) -

(Lines 401ff)

.....for with Thee on starry Throne  
Seated, thy daughter, without Mother born,  
Shall reign, Celestial Venus: while her Son,  
His Ivory Sceptre heading with pure Fire,  
Atherial-pure (less pow'rful strikes the Soul  
He with his flame-tip'd Arrows,) soft shall touch,  
Shall charm his Psyche; & as now the Gods,

Then Mortal Hearts no less shall captivate,  
To serve true Beauty. Under thee shall reign  
Liberty godlike, as in golden Days  
Of Saturn...  
In thy blest Reign Heav'n-sprung Philosophy  
Shall flourish, as of old in her first Spring;  
When taught by the learned Pipe of Samos' Sage,  
The Grecian Songsters warbled Airs divine.  
Then the Platonic Muse, in loftier strains,  
Thy Conquests & triumphant Joy shall sing....

The poet's guide to the sublunary world of change and the working of Good is Virtue. His guide to the higher world of Forms is Wisdom. Virtue is not described visually. Wisdom is described, and reminds the poet of Queen Elizabeth 1<sup>st</sup>.

(Book 19, Lines 37ff)

I saw; her Body saw, of Human Shape,  
But above Human glorious to behold.  
For white with snowy Purity her skin  
Shone silvery, soft-lucid like the Moon:  
But her strong Limbs with Hair of auburn Hue  
Were grac'd: the Sunny Brightness of whose Gloss  
Emitted golden Beams: so happily  
Was Female Softness mix'd with Manly Force:  
Mixture, that shew'd the Temper of her Mind;  
Stable, tho Placid; vigorous, yet mild  
And gentle: founded on so solid Base  
Stands the Tranquillity of Wisdom, fix'd  
And safely seated in a Calm of Air,  
Always the Same, where of true Greatness breaths  
The Spirit.

In spite of the length of the poem the themes are straightforward.

The source of all things is “the All Alone”, the absolute Unity. From this shines the “Ray of Truth” which shines from Unity through the all the worlds, drawing things to Unity.

This “Ray of Truth” makes Sydenham’s Platonic cosmos dynamic and creative. The concept of the Ray comes from Marsilio Ficino, particularly his commentaries on Plato’s *Symposium*. Ficino writes that the ray, which is also the ray of beauty

...begins its descent from God before passing into Angelic Mind and Soul as if they were made of glass. From soul it readily passes into the body which has been prepared to receive it.

(*On the Nature of Love. Ficino on Plato’s Symposium*, translated by Arthur Farndell, Shepheard-Walwyn, 2016, p. 104)

...That Ray

Of Unity, the Fountain-Head of Light;

The Principle of Form, the Source of Mind:

(Sydenham, *Truth*. Book 18, Lines 112ff)

Sydenham makes many references to Ficino’s editions of Plato in his notes to his translations but makes no reference to Ficino’s commentaries. The idea of the Ray seems to derive from Christian Platonism, originally St Augustine, but later from St Bonaventure’s Theory of Illumination. The Ray makes the cosmos Trinitarian. Though Sydenham avoids any Christian references it is as if he making his Platonic cosmos compatible with a Christian point of view.

Unity produces Mind, in which the Forms of all things are contained. The human Mind is an exact copy of Mind and contains the same Forms. In the world of change and matter the Forms are expressed in infinite variety.

Much of the poem, being an Enlightenment view of Platonism, inspired by Lord Shaftesbury, is about the working of Virtue. Virtue is not only good activity, of Man, animals, or the quality of good in even stones and fossils, but the Law of Truth within all things. Virtue and Wisdom are daughters of Truth. Virtue, in this world, is, in fact, indistinguishable from Wisdom in the higher.

The most striking imagery of this very abstract poem is Sydenham’s vision of the Forms.

The poet sees these as globes of light. First, in his own mind, he sees the multi-coloured globes which are the Forms of Ideas of everything. Globes merge with each other and separate. Globes contain smaller globes. He is, himself, a globe.

Every globe is an image of the one sphere, the All Alone. Every globe has those globes in it which it has in common with other globes of the same species. Every globe has globes within it which make it particular, or individual.

(I believe this idea is derived from Proclus, who Sydenham draws on his last published book, *Onamasticon Theologicon*.)

## GLOBES FROM THOMAS WRIGHT???

Virtue lifts the poet so that he can look down on two sublunar worlds – the world of Memory, which contains all that has been (and, perhaps, will be), and the world of Imagination, in which Forms are combined in infinite creativity.

Man can withdraw into this world and awaken these potential works through the Sciences and Arts.

(Book 4. Lines 260ff)

From there retiring inward, oft to hold  
Converse with Forms Ideal, mental Beings,  
Which, with his Essence, he derives from Mind  
Eternal: for in Mind they always are;  
But in Man's Mind, lye dormant, till awak'd  
By her fair handmaids, Sciences & Arts;  
The prime, the fundamental Sciences  
Of Number & Figure, those sole Founts  
Of Harmony and Beauty; the fine Arts,  
Which, on the Basis of those Sciences,  
Raise rude Materials up to beauteous Forms  
Of the Mind's own Conception; or select  
From every Part of Nature what is found  
In each the fairest, in the Artist's Mind  
Assemble them, still following Nature's Rules,  
And copying thence, exhibit fairer Scenes  
Than Nature ever yielded, fairer Forms  
Than Nature e'er created;...

The role of Imagination and its relationship to innate ideas is the theme of an important passage in James Harris's "*Hermes*". John Locke's denial of "innate ideas" was the principal cause of Harris's detestation of him.

(James Harris, *Hermes*, pp 391ff)

The first works of the union of Imagination and Nature which spring to Floyer Sydenham's mind are gardens, both literary and real. This is a philosophical justification for the 18<sup>th</sup> century idea of "improving" landscapes. If the mind can participate in Universal Forms through the Arts it follows that it is possible to work with Nature to draw things closer to the Ideal.

...Spencer's Bow'r,  
Virgil's Elysium, Milton's Paradise,  
Alcina's gardens, or the Groves of Stow;  
Forms, for Pembroke's or for Orford's Hall,  
Forms, that would Badminton or Blenheim grace.  
That Radnor, Bruce, & Richmond would admire;...

Spencer's "Bower of Bliss" has first mention. "Pembroke's Hall" is Wilton, where Sydenham and Harris probably did stroll and converse on such matters. "Orford" is Robert Walpole, not his son Horace, who did not inherit the title until 1791. Lord Radnor, was the dedicatee of James Harris's "Concord" and Horace Walpole's neighbour in Twickenham. John Robartes, 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Radnor, died without an heir in 1757, which helps date this section of the poem. Radnor left his Canaletto of Old Horse Guards, now in Tate Britain, to Harris.

Elsewhere in the poem other inhabitants of the material world are mentioned, perhaps in the hope of flattering them into patronage. These include Lord Chesterfield, as a lover of Truth, and William Pitt (the elder), but most flattering is an address to Lord Lyttelton, who, the poet hopes "wilt deign to'attend"...

(Book 5. Lines 28ff)

And for the Subject's sake, approve the Song.  
Tho of harmonious Numbers be compos'd  
Thy Soul, & tho in Harmony it breathes;  
Thy Heart, inspir'd with the pure Love of Truth,  
And Liberty, best friend of Truth below,...

Wisdom flies with the poet to the "Intelligible World", the region of perfect Forms.

Then the poet's "fair Patroness" turned to Wisdom to give "this daring mortal" into her care, so they could ascend to the regions of the intelligible world. All is illumined by the intellectual light. Wisdom declares:

(Book 19. Lines 115ff)

"Hail Light original, archetypal!  
Eternal Reason, Intellectual Sun!

I recognise & bless my Source: Hail Sire!

The Parent-Voice of every Muse divine!"

The poet sees that the realm of Intelligible Forms, the Universal Mind, is, like his own mind, composed of Ideas, which he sees, as he does in his own mind, as globes of light...

I could distinguish little spheres of Light

Mixing and parting at will

And these were full of lesser globes

Tinged with various colour...

These colours, like jewels...

Seem'd Juno's darling Sapphire; th'Emerald

The Nereids Favourite; fiery Carbuncles,

And heav'nly-roseate Rubys; Phoebus' Love

The Topaz, and Aurora's Amethyst.

The globes break into lesser globes, which reveals to the poet the relationship of his own Mind with the realm of Intellectual Forms –

While this the Glorys of the Scene I gaz'd

Delighted, suddenly I found my Self

One of those Spheres; whether to such transform'd

Or whether, loosen'd from my Body, now

First I discover'd my own proper Form:

I found my Self to be all Mind.

Every individual Mind was like his, containing all the same Ideas as the Intelligible World.

Every Mental Sphere resembled me in all things.

And yet, though all Minds contain the same Ideas...

Again, One Mind was not the Other, Each  
Its self alone remaining

Differed as individuals of the same species  
Minds separate are all of Universal Mind particulars...

I saw my self all Diamond, of pure  
Uncolor'd Brightness: of my Being I saw  
The rude Simplicity. But when my Sire  
I 'gan contemplate, Universal Mind,  
Ocean of Beauty; ev'n my Brother-Orbs  
I saw not...

...Alone with The Alone

I found my Self...& thought I was Him , Himself  
Eternal All things...

Knowing the "All Alone" is alarming. Solitariness seems to be opposed to human virtue. The poet understands that we delight in diversity, but we can also know a higher love, which is the love of "Sameness", which, in this context, means the love of that which all things have in common, the Unity through which they partake of the highest Truth, the Source, the "All Alone."

While the poet has been contemplating this vision of the Forms Wisdom has wandered away to visit the souls with whom she has an eternal affinity. Wisdom, he writes,

...took her private Solaces  
In the select Society of Minds,  
That in the blest Ages of the lower World  
Bodys inhabiting, had spread her fame  
And uncorrupted Worship in the Earth:  
... the Porch of Athens, or the Walks  
Surrounding, or the Grove far from the Croud;  
To Social Feasts, or Goals & poison'd Draughts (??)

From Samos' isle to the Calabrian Shore.  
Near These now finding, as I after learn'd,  
Lately from Exile in the World of Sense  
Return'd, her Shaftsbury; with Him, who wrote  
Mysteriously of Mind, & gave dark Hints  
Of Highest Truths, so strange to modern Days  
And novel Doctrines;...

In this higher world the poet is aware of the Ray of Truth:

...I saw  
First on my own Sphere falling from above  
A single Ray, that spread its self around  
All o'er me...  
(Book 19. Lines 438ff)

...The Fountain-head of Light, the Source of Form,  
Still in its pure Simplicity the Same  
Remaining...  
(Book 19. Lines 470ff)

Sydenham saw Shaftesbury as a Platonist and his interpretation of Plato, in the introductions and extensive notes of his translations, is inspired by Shaftesbury. As Kyriakos N. Demetriou writes -

In effect, Sydenham argued, Plato's method of writing would appear intelligible only to those who have 'a right Taste for the Writings of the late Earl of Shaftesbury; ... who is a Copier of Plato's Manner of Composition; and all whose Writings, excepting what regards the different Circumstances of the Times in which they severally lived, and the different Opinions prevailing in those Times, so distant one from the other, are as it were a Transcript of Plato's Mind'

(Kyriakos N Demetrio, *Asking for Plato's Forgiveness. Floyer Sydenham: A Platonic Visionary of Eighteenth-Century Britain*. From Academia.edu. Quoting Floyer Sydenham, *The First Alcibiades, a dialogue concerning Human Nature*, London 1773, p. 8.)

“*Truth*” may have been a pastime, a project of such a scope that it would occupy the poet for many years in his garret, or whatever poor habitation he may have had. His friends were concerned that he needed a regular income, and all the later references to him in letters from John Upton and Arthur Collier to James Harris, are about their efforts to encourage his project to translate Plato. Upton and Collier do not seem to have been aware that Harris was supporting Sydenham financially.

It appears that Upton proposed the scheme of translating Plato and he suggested which of the dialogues to begin with. Upton’s plan was that Sydenham should make a deal with a bookseller who would pay him by the sheet as the work continued. This would encourage regular work and ensure a regular income. Arthur Collier, on the other hand, suggested that the edition should be by subscription, hoping that interested customers would promise a larger amount ahead of the publication.

By December 10<sup>th</sup> 1757 Upton and Collier had

had a grievous quarrel about Sydm...

I made choice of Plato for him to translate, Sydm with great alacrity undertook it , & began his work, being to enter upon pay & good quarters , as he behav’d.

I called today on Sydm and found him translating but with a face wch seethed ? Or rather with a fallen countenance, he told me he would have nothing to do with the booksellers , that he had talked wth Dr Collier , who had put him on a better scheme & he would probably be by subscription. I told him I would come into any scheme for his advantage: & that I would tell the booksellers that I had spoken to, our former scheme was over.

(Hampshire Archives 9M73/G645/31)

Collier’s plan won the day, and Upton continued to resent this.

On June 10<sup>th</sup> 1758 Arthur Collier sent James Harris the proposal and hoped he would send the money for his subscription. Sydenham had made an arrangement with Samuel Richardson to print the dialogues, which would appear in individual slim volumes. The work was going very well – in fact remarkably well, as

The dialogues already finished are The Io, the Greater Hippias – The Symposium – The Meno – The Minos and the Philebus

(Hampshire Archives 9M73/G346/99)

Less positive news was that there were only thirty subscribers so far. Collier hoped for 100. This would prove a serious problem for the rest of Sydenham’s life. There were simply too few people who were interested in Plato.

Two weeks later, on June 24<sup>th</sup>, Collier wrote to Harris that the first volume would cost 1 shilling, the second 18d, and that there were some “grander subscribers”, including

My Lord Grace of Canterbury, Ld Macclesfield, the Bishops of Oxford Bristol Norwich and the Ld Prsdt of the Council...

Upton was clearly unhappy about Collier’s scheme. He wrote on 28<sup>th</sup> July 1758:

Syd goes on very well...

Dr Collier will not have his scheme broken in upon in the least particle: one chain of his scheme broken is like breaking a link of the chain of the universe, all would tumble about your ears and we should be reduced to our pristine chaos & confusion

(Hampshire Archives 9M73/G646/4)

The first volumes of the project appeared at the beginning of 1759, the “Synopsis” and “Io”, but the problems continued. On 13<sup>th</sup> February Upton wrote to Harris:

Our friend Dr C has quarrelled with poor S & he is adrift again. He has left Richardson & his gone to Woodfall whom he has nominated and appointed his printer.

(Hampshire Archives 9M73/G646/8)

The “Synopsis” was printed by Richardson, “Io” by Woodfall.

The series of translations would appear, with various printers, until Sydenham’s death in 1787.

Demetriou’s article emphasises the influence of Shaftesbury on Sydenham’s interpretation of Plato, which shows the closeness in ideas and objectives of Sydenham and Harris. Demetriou also makes the differences between Sydenham and Taylor clear. Sydenham’s emphasis is on Truth in Nature and Virtue. He has no interest in the esoteric aspects of Platonic philosophy, or in the writings of the later Platonists favoured by Taylor. Though he was, intermittently, a clergyman, Sydenham also avoids any reference to Christianity. He dismisses any idea of divine rewards and punishments, though souls who have achieved a knowledge of Wisdom remain her friends, as in the case of Lord Shaftesbury.

The object of life is the pursuit of taste and virtue, which should lead to a good life, and God, but a Platonic kind of God.

Sydenham enjoys Plato’s “pleasant good humour” and sees the dialogues as dramatic works that can be funny, and, indeed, actually are funny at times in his translations. This use of a “fine turn of ridicule and raillery” is also an echo of Shaftesbury.

(See Demetriou *ibid*)

The first of the translations to appear was "Io", dedicated to Lord Lyttelton, an amusing, sometimes funny, discussion about inspiration. Sydenham points out the comedy in Plato. Simply performing for money is nothing. The poet and actor must communicate inspiration, the divine spark, which comes from the muses.

For they (the poets) assure us, that out of certain Gardens and flowery Vales belonging to the Muses, from Fountains flowing there with Honey, gathering the Sweetness of their songs, they bring it to us, like the Bees; and in the same Manner withal, flying.

Nor do they tell us any Untruth. For a poet is a Thing light, and volatile, and sacred: nor is he able to write Poetry, till the Muse entring into him, he is transported out of Himself, and has no longer the Command of his Understanding.

Sydenham's "A Synopsis or General View of the Works of Plato", published at the same time as "Io", in 1759, gives a clear indication of what Sydenham saw as the key elements of the Platonic philosophy. This is completely consistent with the themes of "Truth."

The End of all the Writings of *Plato* is That, which is the END of all true PHILOSOPHY or Wisdom, the Perfection and the HAPPINESS of MAN.

(Floyer Sydenham, *A Synopsis or General View of the Works of Plato*, printed by S (Samuel) Richardson, 1759 p. 13)

Now the Power of so governing and so moving is Man's *Virtue*; the *Virtue* of Every Thing being its *Power* to produce or procure some certain *Good*. Thus the Two great Objects of the *Platonic* Philosophy are TRUTH and VIRTUE; Truth, the Good of *all Mind*; and Virtue, the Good of the *Whole Man*."

(Ibid p. 14)

The knowledge of Truth is possible because we have within us "exact Copies or perfect Images" of the real essences of things – the Platonic Ideas.

It is the Nature of the *Human Soul* to have these *Ideas generated* in her, and to *partake* of MIND Eternal and Immutable.

(Ibid p. 15)

None of this is airy-fairy or mystical as this pursuit of Truth is firmly connected to moral and social attitudes.

But since every Man is a Member of some *Civil Community*, is linked with the Fellows of his *own Species*, is related to every Nature *Superior* and *Divine*, and is a *Part* also of *Universal* Nature; he must always of Necessity participate of the Good and Evil of every Whole, greater as well as less, to which he belongs; and has an Interest in the well-being of every Species, with which he is connected.

(Ibid p. 16)

This is very close to the sentiments of Theophilus, who may be Sydenham, in Harris's Third Treatise, "Concerning Happiness."

In this encapsulation of Platonic philosophy we can see that the enthusiasm of a Greek Revival patron, such as Thomas Anson, or Lord Lyttelton, for collecting ancient art, relics of an ancient quest for ideal beauty, is part of an all-embracing philosophy, and not at all abstract or divorced from the “real” world.

Thus all Virtue is Order and Proportion...the Rule, according to which the Mind by her Will then governs is Beauty Itself; and the Science through which She governs, is the Science of that Beauty. For TRUTH and BEAUTY concur in One; and where-ever They are, there is also GOOD. The LOVE of BEAUTY then is nothing different from that First and Leading Motive in all minds to the Pursuit of every Thing, That from whence the Philosopher sets out in his Inquiry after wisdom, the DESIRE of GOOD. Thus the *Perfection of Man* consists in his Similitude to this SUPREME BEAUTY; and in his *Union* with it is found his SUPREME GOOD.

(Ibid pp 17-18)

The first of Sydenham’s translated dialogues, “*Io*”, published in 1759, is dedicated to Lord Lyttelton. It is an amusing, sometimes funny, discussion about inspiration. Simply performing for money is nothing. The poet and actor must communicate inspiration, the divine spark, which comes from the muses.

For they (the poets) assure us, that out of certain Gardens and flowery Vales belonging to the Muses, from Fountains flowing there with Honey, gathering the Sweetness of their songs, they bring it to us, like the Bees; and in the same Manner withal, flying.

Nor do they tell us any Untruth. For a poet is a Thing light, and volatile, and sacred: nor is he able to write Poetry, till the Muse entring into him, he is transported out of

Sydenham’s personal voice can be found in his footnotes.

Plato, in “*Meno*” and other works, argues that only true law is the law within Nature. Societies can make laws but they can never be the true law. The True Law is, to Plato, the Good in Nature, which flows from what we might call God. This is Virtue. Virtue cannot be taught, but only discovered from within. Sydenham’s final note shows that there is a point where philosophy gives way to contemplation.

Faith and Opinion are, we find, and must be, unstable and slippery Foundations of Virtue. There is therefore a Necessity for Man, who lives in this World of Sense, if he would continue Good and Happy, amidst all the Sensible Objects, which surround him, and never cease to invite and draw his Attention to them, that he should, as frequently as possible, introvert his Attention, and retire into himself, to converse and hold Communion with the Fountain of his Being, the Author of all Good to him...

(Plato, *Meno*, translated and edited by Floyer Sydenham, 1769)

This is Sydenham the Neo-Platonist mystic.

Though the project to publish the works of Plato by subscription was a financial disaster Sydenham was appreciated by a few.

The Quarterly Review in 1767 marked the publication of the second part of the Banquet, or Symposium by “the learned and ingenious Mr Sydenham”.

But with whatever pleasure we may receive this production, it is hardly equal to the mortification we feel from the causes of its delay. Surely the love of learning and public spirit are at a very low ebb amongst us, when a work of such literary consequence as the translation and illustration of Plato must lie unexecuted for want of pecuniary encouragement, nay, when some of the very subscribers to this work had the meanness to forget their engagements, and others had the dishonesty, after having received the books, to withhold the payments...

...What a gothic negligence of the divine Plato!

<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=zxsyAQAAAMAJ&lpg=PA422&ots=0KiLJX6D3&dq=monthly%20review%20Sydenham%201767&pg=PA423#v=onepage&q=monthly%20review%20Sydenham%201767&f=false>

The nearest thing to a personal account of philosophy that Sydenham published was his last book *Onomasticon theologicum; or, an essay on the divine names, according to the Platonic philosophy*, published in 1784.

This book has an unusually elaborate dedication to Frederick Montague, Esquire. The book

is, from a deep sense of his shining virtues, and in testimony of the author’s gratitude, on whom those virtues have shone so benignly, with the utmost respect presented by his much obliged and obedient servant, Floyer Sydenham.

This implies that Montague had been a genuine supporter in the author’s later years.

Frederick Montague (1733-1800) had been a friend, at Cambridge University, of the poets Thomas Gray and William Mason. Gray was a keen student of Plato, but published nothing on the subject and stands apart from the philosophical group connected with Harris and Sydenham. Montague was MP for Northampton from 1759-1767 and for Higham Ferrers from 1768-1790. He retired to Papplewick Hall, Nottinghamshire, where Mason wrote part of his poem *The English Garden*.

Plato’s philosophy, says Sydenham, teaches that...

...the whole created *Universe* is a *Manifestation* of the *Divine Mind*, a distinct *Declaration*, or as it were an open *Evolution* of those *Ideas*, which at the same time abide in that Mind, inwardly inwrapped and comprehended as having there their natural and eternal Seat.

(p.1)

This philosophy has high antiquity harking back to the

...*Orphic* Theologers, who introduced the Eastern Learning into Greece, and whose Followers in Theology were the *Pythagorean* Philosophers...

(p.5)

The book covers a broad range of topics, with an emphasis on the social and moral. There are a few points which might be worth highlighting here.

Part III Section V has a discussion of friendship, an elaborate description of the effects of a meeting of souls in the quest for Truth. Two souls together can reach heights that are impossible alone. And

...profound Truths, new to them Both, will spring up from the secret and deep Center of their Souls.

(p.84)

For such friends...

...together with their *Souls*, their *Persons*, their *Fortunes*, and their *Ways of Living*, will of Course unite, as far as Nature admits, and the Customs of their Country authorise or allow.

(p.86)

Part IV Section II discusses

...the names, characteristic of the *Divine Nature*, relatively to its continual Influence on the *Created Universe*. Of these Relative Names the most incontestably proper, and universally acknowledged is GOODNESS.

(p.232)

The explanation of Goodness is based on the *Platonic Theology* of Proclus (412-485AD), "the greatest of the *Alexandrian Platonists*", which Sydenham calls "his wonderfully ingenious and fine-spun Treatise." Goodness is the very nature of the Divine Mind and this means that God must be creative and that every created thing must share in Goodness.

GOOD ITS SELF is the same as the ONE ITS SELF; and is the Cause of Union and Good at the same time; - he (Proclus) concludes, the *Goodness is an Uniting of Things together*, and that the *Uniting of Things together is Goodness*.

(p. 236)

This Goodness is also the source of Happiness. He says of the Divine Mind that

in contemplating *Himself*, he views the *Happiness* of his whole *Creation*.

(p.238)

Sydenham argues that this is true regardless of the familiar evils of the world and he criticises dualism, the belief in opposed forces of good and evil.

But how narrow was the Reasoning of these *Persian Magi* on the Subject...

(p.241)

Sydenham is particularly enthused by Proclus, who was one of the last of the pagan philosophers, but whose ideas were absorbed into Christian philosophy via Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite and Boethius, both mentioned by Sydenham. It seems to be from Proclus that Sydenham derived his imagery of the coloured globes in "Truth", as Proclus writes of "henads", individual unities deriving from the absolute unity, and these, to a non-expert, might seem to behave like the creative globules.

In the following section Sydenham has a distinct change of tone as if he is approaching a climactic and significant subject.

The *Divine Names*, hitherto treated of in this *Essay*, had, as far as we have been able to search into Antiquities so remote, their *Origin* amongst a Few *Philosophic Theologers*, in *Nations* styled by the Greeks *Barbarian*. – In process of Time, a Daughter of *Theology* and *Natural Philosophy* travelled from *Egypt* into *Thrace*, under the Auspices of *Orpheus*. But this wonderful Man, who is supposed to have been the Founder of all *Civilisation* throughout *Europe*, by means of *Religious* and *Civil Polity*s, kept the Fair one from Vulgar Eyes, till he had contrived an *Appearance* and a *Garb* for her, agreeable to the Vulgar Taste; painting her Face with Artificial Colours, and dressing her up her whole Person with *Figurative*, *Allegorical*, and *Emblematical* Vestments, hung around with *Images* and other factitious Ornaments; some of which he had brought with him from *Egypt*, and Others perhaps were invented by Himself.

(pp.250-1)

This “fair one” is a personification of the Eleusian Mysteries, the secret initiatory rituals which Sydenham believes communicated the most ancient wisdom, cloaked in allegory so that only a few would understand the true meaning.

At this point the rational enlightenment philosopher, Sydenham, departs from Thomas Taylor, whose treatise on the mysteries would be published only six years after this, in 1790.

Sydenham writes of an intellectual approach to Truth but his footnote to *Meno* shows that he believed that there was a point where philosophy had to give way to contemplation. Taylor is more attracted by the mythological. Sydenham sees the mythological as “emblematical vestments” disguising abstract truths. Taylor is also an enthusiast for polytheism, whereas Sydenham would see the idea of many deities as a distraction from Unity. Taylor saw the key to the Mysteries as the idea of the immortal soul escaping from the material body. Sydenham, the enlightenment Platonism, thinks more in terms of rational knowledge of eternal things.

There are other alternative explanations of the Mysteries and whether Sydenham or Taylor were historically right is not particularly relevant here. Sydenham believes that the knowledge of the key ideas of his Platonic philosophy came from a very distant past and that Orpheus, Pythagoras and Plato were passing on something very ancient and of the deepest significance, spiritually and morally. Sydenham writes as much of the moral and political implications of Virtue as of the mystical.

The secrets of the Mysteries, Sydenham presumes, were the knowledge of certain truths -

...*That of the Infinity of Time past, as well as of Time future; - That of the Immensity of Space, Extension, or the First Matter...That of the World's Eternity, or rather its everlasting Existence:...*

(p.252)

...though everything within

the Corporeal World is incessantly *diversified*; every particle is in perpetual *Flow*...

(p.253)

Most dangerous of the truths is

...the *Doctrine of GOD HIMSELF present within the Soul of Man*, and ready to impart himself, to converse with, and to counsel those *Human Minds*, who consult him with Simplicity of Heart, and a Love of Truth above all things beside.

(P.255)

Misunderstanding of these Truths can lead to the false idea that the stars are deities, or the dualism of belief in opposed good and evil forces, or it could lead people into

*Fanaticism*, filling them with Conceits of their being Better Men than all Others, and Favourites of Heaven, - divinely inspired in an extraordinary way, and divinely commissioned to follow the immediate Dictates of the *All-Wise Being*; tho they are all the while conversing with their own predominant *Passions*, and inflamed *Imaginations*.

(pp.255-256)

Sydenham is clearly thinking of the religious sects of his own time.

Another danger is the idea that only certain people, heroes or rulers, are sons of God, which debases the populace and can lead them into tyranny.

Much of this sounds like a Christian Platonist speaking, though it is clear that much of what is discussed in this book is common to Platonism and Christian theology. Sydenham does stand against most orthodox Christian teaching in his refutation, following Proclus, of the idea of Creation *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. Platonic philosophy is mostly concerned with how the cosmos works, and the relationship of Man and created things with eternal Truth rather than how things began.

I feel that Sydenham is writing a philosophy that is compatible with certain kinds of Christian tradition – those which are opposed to Deism and materialism. Unlike Taylor he is not promoting a pagan alternative to Christianity. He argues that this wisdom, the knowledge of Unity, is more ancient than the mythological deities. He talks of a mystical ascent to Truth but he is concerned with political and social life in this world and the pursuit of Virtue, always remembering the inspiration of Lord Shaftesbury.

Towards the end of *Onomasticon Theologicon* he talks of the process of learning how to find Unity with Nature:

Nature has seeded in us natural affections, and these inspire sympathies with other people and things. Man can follow these sympathies in the world and in meditations...

...and then, finding himself *related* to all *Corporeal Nature*, he will consider Himself as a Part of the Creation; personally interested in the *harmonious Order* of the great *Whole*...

(p.330)

Sydenham's proposed subscription for his edition of Plato was a failure.

Even with the financial support of his friend Harris he was destitute.

According "Chalmer's Dictionary" Sydenham died on April 1<sup>st</sup> 1787.

During the summer recess of the year 1788, an event took place, which tarnished the character of English opulence and humanity, and afflicted the votaries of knowledge. Floyer Sydenham, the well-known translator of Plato, one of the most useful, if not one of the most competent Greek scholars of his age; a man revered for his knowledge, and beloved for the candour of his temper and the gentleness of his manners, died in consequence of having been arrested, and detained, for a debt to a victualler, who had, for some time, furnished his frugal dinner. At the news of that event, every friend of literature felt a mixture of sorrow and shame; and one of the members of a club at the Prince of Wales's coffeehouse proposed, that it should adopt, as its object and purpose, some means to prevent similar afflictions, and to assist deserving authors and their families in distress.

(*The General Biographical Dictionary*, revised by A. Chalmers. 1816.)

According to Samuel Rogers account, which partly, at least, he implies came from Thomas Taylor, Sydenham

...at that time lodged in the house of a statuary in the Strand. He was in very distressed circumstances, & regularly received two guineas a month from Harris (the author of *Hermes*). He used to dine at a neighbouring eating house, where he had run up a bill of 40£. This, as well as several other debts, he was unable to pay, & his acquaintances refused to discharge his debts, though they consented to maintain him during his abode in the Fleet Prison, where he was about to be confined. The night preceding the day on which he was to be carried to jail he was found dead, - having undoubtedly, as Taylor asserted, put an end to his existence. For some time before his death, he had been partially insane.

(Samuel Rogers and William Maltby, *Recollections of the Table Talk of Samuel Rogers*, Appleton, 1856.)

Harris's "two guineas a month", over £24 a year, was equivalent to over four thousand pounds today.

Thomas Taylor's own introduction to his Plato, tells that Taylor knew Sydenham in his last days:

I personally knew him only in the decline of his life, when his mental powers were not only considerably impaired by age, but greatly injured by calamity.

Taylor writes that he tried to remove Sydenham's "prejudices against his best disciples", and lamented that due to his infirmity and troubles

it was not to be expected that he would fathom the profundity of Plato's conceptions, and arrive at the summit of philosophical attainments.

He might have succeeded

if he had not nourished such baneful prejudices and if he had not neglected philosophy in the early part of his life.

(*Thomas Taylor, the Platonist, selected writings, edited, with introductions, by Kathleen Raine and George Mills Harper*, Princeton University Press, 1969 pp 16-17)

Sydenham seems to have been devoted to philosophy from his student days at Oxford with James Harris. His life might have been unfocussed until his friends suggested the Plato project, but he worked on that for thirty years, despite the lack of financial reward. Perhaps these comments might suggest that Taylor and Sydenham did not see eye to eye in their view of Plato.

An identified "A Scott" wrote to Harris's son, Lord Malmesbury, on April 27<sup>th</sup> 1801:

The Primature & much lamented Death of Floyer Sydenham whose friend I was in the strictest sense during many Years, first suggested an Idea at a Trio dinner, which gave rise to forming a Society to establish a Literary Fund for the relief of distressed Authors & their families....

As your Lordship was, much to your credit, the kind Benefactor annually of Dr Sydenham in imitation of his great inseparable friend the celebrated Author of Hermes – many moieties I received from the hands of the late honest Tom Payne & delivered accordingly to the immaculate & grateful Dr , Sydenham I could not but look up to your Lordship from the commencement of the Institution as the most suitable Personage to take the lead & preside over us....

(Hampshire Archives 9M/73/169)

By the time of Sydenham's death this small Platonic Revival had vanished away. The Romantic Platonic Revival of Coleridge, Wordsworth and Taylor was waiting in the wings.

Floyer Sydenham's published works:

A Synopsis, or a general view of the works of Plato (1759)

IO, a Dialogue of Plato, Concerning Poetry (1759)

The Greater Hippias; A Dialogue of Plato Concerning the Beautifull (1759)

The Lesser Hippias (1761)

The Banquet a dialogue of Plato concerning love (Part 1 1761, Part 2 1767)

The Rivals (1769)

Meno (1769)

The first Aicibiades (1773)

A Dissertation on the Doctrine of Heraclitus (1775)

The second Alcibiades (1776)

Philebus, a dialogue concerning the chief good of man (Part 1 1779, Part 2 1780)

Onomasticon Theologicum, or a dissertation on the divine names, according to the Platonic philosophy (1784)

