



RESISTING INTERPRETATION

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One of Tarkovsky's Russian correspondents wrote to him after watching *Mirror*: "The film is about me."¹ How is such an experience possible? This comment, and a number of similar comments that occur in the records of first responses to the film, raise at least two issues in our attempts to understand not only Tarkovsky's work but response to art more generally. First, Tarkovsky's films are notably individual, stamped with his unique personality as auteur, yet they elicit strongly personal responses from many viewers. What is it in Tarkovsky's vision that evokes that sense of personal implication? Second, viewers of his films often experience strong feelings for fictional characters and their situations, a phenomenon that has puzzled a number of philosophers and literary theorists. I have no specific solutions to offer in this regard, but in reflecting on these paradoxes in what follows I wish to develop several suggestions that draw in part on research in studies of literary reading.

My chief concern is in the parallels associated with the issue of interpretation. As is well known, Tarkovsky himself explicitly disapproved of attempts to interpret his films. In the light of our empirical studies of readers, I have suggested that attention should be given to experiences of reading, especially the experiences of ordinary readers, who generally have little or no interest in interpreting texts in the ways this is typically done in literature classrooms.² What are literary readers doing, then, if they are not interpreting the texts they read? Some of the answers to this



question will help consider the issues mentioned above. “Our knowledge is like sweat, or fumes, it’s a function of the organism inseparable from existence”, wrote Tarkovsky in his diaries.³ Such a remark suggests that the physicality of the experience of his films, their sensory and emotional impact, is where one should focus; it is what Tarkovsky’s style as a director uniquely provides.

I begin with my own responses to Tarkovsky’s films which I first encountered over 30 years ago with *Solaris*. While I was a student of literature at Stirling University in Scotland I attended two showings of *Solaris* (this was around 1975). I was struck in particular by the final scene—Kris apparently back on Earth at the family house goes to embrace his father, whereupon the camera progressively pulls back to show that the house is in fact on an island in the Solaris ocean.

Certain aspects of the film are striking at a first viewing. The space-station at which Kris arrives appears haunted by an alien presence; an inexplicable threat seems to hang over Kris during the first part of his sojourn (he blocks his door against it). The ocean too, shown as if swirling and boiling, seems inexplicably threatening. This uncanny atmosphere dominated my early feelings for the film.⁴ It evokes a sense similar to the one Wordsworth describes experiencing in his early boyhood after stealing from others’ snares, a sense that other agencies are at work that one may only glimpse momentarily: “I heard... low breathings coming after me, and sounds of undistinguishable motion.”⁵ Later, after repeated viewings of the film, the uncanny aspect receded into the background, and my attention is now mainly absorbed by the dilemma of the principal characters, especially Kris Kelvin.

Although Tarkovsky found Donas Banionis who plays Kris unsympathetic to work with—he was a method actor who always needed to know exactly what he was doing—his performance in *Solaris* is remarkable.⁶ He has an air of dogged obduracy as he sees through the contradictory demands made on him, and which lead him eventually back into childhood (ie. the scenes he imagines during his fever). The physicality of Kris’ presence is developed during the film; Hari presents him with a steadily increasing set of bodily challenges, most acute as she recovers painfully from having drunk liquid oxygen. This culminates in Kris’ delirium that unfolds during his fever, especially at the moment his mother washes dirt off his arm (a scene that echoes Kris’ rubbing of the blood-stained arm of Hari to tend her wound, only to find



Still from *Solaris*, where Kris’ mother washes dirt off his arm as part of the dream sequence that occurs during his fever.

the skin underneath already largely healed over). The way he holds his head, his expression, and how he trots after his mother as she disappears through a door at the back of the room, are all remarkably well observed, child-like behaviours.

Thus what seems most striking now is the way I am drawn into empathy with Kris, especially in the second half of the film as he confronts the increasingly intractable situation he finds himself in with Hari. From the beginning of the film I live Kris’ experiences as I watch him; my feelings respond to his situations. The film seems to align me almost continuously with his point of view, I seem to feel what he feels—indeed, familiarity with the film has only intensified the depth and complexity of such feelings. Only briefly, in regard to Berton when he gives his report, and with Hari in the library scene, do I inhabit another point of view with a similar degree of engagement. Tarkovsky, then, while creating a manifestly Tarkovskian film, is also able to create the character of Kris such that I, as a viewer, find my own personality merging with his for the duration of the film. As we have found in studies of reading, a reader often refers to the merged entity as ‘you’; for instance, one reader of a story, referring to her interest in the maturing of the main character, a young girl, remarked at the end: “She’s made the first step towards maturity, although... you don’t become mature overnight... it takes time, and you’re not aware that you’re becoming mature until many years down the road.”⁷ At such moments, the reader appears to be acknowledging the strivings

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Still from *Andrei Rublev*.

and experiences of the character as her own, as something shared. In the same way I find, watching the film, that I have taken on Kris' quest, his moral dilemma over Hari, and his pain at having finally lost her.

Tarkovsky's achievement in this respect recalls the paradox referred to earlier, that of the viewer experiencing genuine feelings for a fictional character. It also reflects the well-known characterisation of Keats in his description of what he most admired in a writer. In a letter to his brothers, written in December 1817, he says:

It struck me, what quality went to form a man of achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean negative capability, that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason—Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetrallium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge.⁸

Tarkovsky, without imposing his own personality or views is able, like Shakespeare, to create a character such as Kris that lives according to his own laws; and, especially in the case of Kris, evokes uncertainties that continue to absorb and perplex the viewer, that resist "fact and reason". Kris' behaviour is intelligible, whether his first shameful response to Hari in jettisoning her from the space-station in a rocket, or his later painful affirmation of commitment to her as his "wife". Yet his predicament on the space-station is due to factors in the given situation, in his proximity to the ocean and its unpredictable reaction to human presence, that oblige the viewer to remain "content with half knowledge". Tarkovsky as author is that "poetical character", as Keats puts it, that "has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen".⁹

The underlying story of *Solaris* from Lem's novel deeply interested Tarkovsky: the appearance of "guests" that represent an issue of conscience for the scientists on the space-station. Yet this issue remains in the background while Tarkovsky focuses on the characters' relationships (especially Kris and Hari), their conflicting feelings, and their attempts to figure out the meaning of their situation. The film only shows the ocean of Solaris from a distance. In Lem's novel the astronauts descend to the surface and view the extraordinary growths, the "mimoids", that temporarily thrust themselves above the ocean, and that possess beauty but present



Still from *Solaris*, where Hari contemplates the Brueghel painting *Hunters in the Snow* and begins to develop human characteristics, resonant in her acute sensory perception and her tears.

an unthinkable level of complexity. Tarkovsky achieves a similar level of complexity through the situation of Kris and Hari, which is also an outgrowth of the ocean, and which finds the viewer asking what Hari knows, how does she understand her situation, what is the basis of her remarkable recovery and reduplication processes. She becomes recognisably and touchingly human, particularly in the long scene in the library. But this achievement is presented in bodily and sensory terms: in the sounds of Earth that accompany her long contemplation of the Brueghel painting *Hunters in the Snow*, in her trembling as she attempts to drink from a glass of water, and in her tears.

It is at this level that the felt sense of the predicament of Kris and Hari bypasses our intellectual faculties: this is where Tarkovsky presents the central issues of the film. The characters have an immediacy, a physical presence, capturing meanings that communicate directly with the viewer's own embodiment. But meanings conveyed are non-verbal: they are expressed as gestures, feelings shown in the face, in an angle of the head—that is, as a stylistic repertoire.¹⁰ One complex example of this style is shown through camera movements.

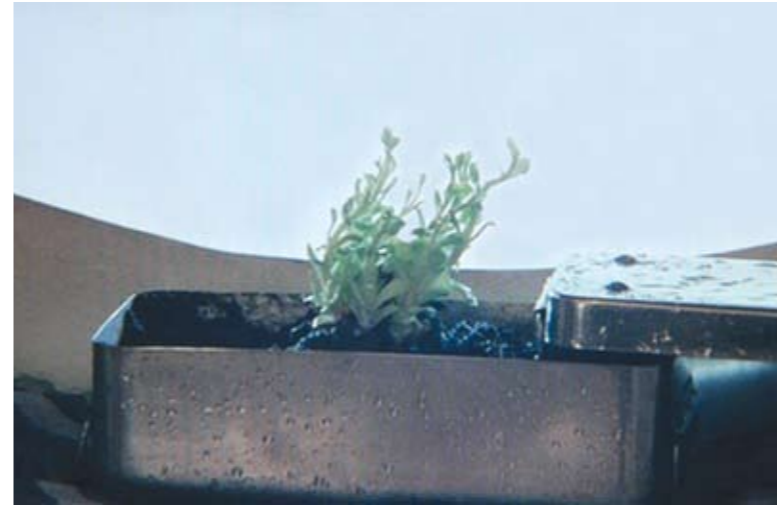
The opening scene of *Solaris* shows Kris in the garden adjacent to his father's house. In most of the initial shots of Kris the camera is still as he walks to the right, but one brief pan to the right follows Kris by the pool as he walks towards the house. If one considers



Still from *Solaris*, where Kris contemplates the lake upon returning from space and proceeds towards the smouldering fire outside the dacha. His mood is one of retrospective memory, full of trepidation.

this in neurological terms, it means that the right-hand margin of the screen where the new part of the scene is emerging projects to the viewer's left hemisphere of the brain—the site of language and of the familiar, immediate associations of objects and actions.¹¹ Considered another way, the viewer can sense that Kris is walking towards the known, the situation of his father's house—a dacha that would be a familiar sight particularly for Russian viewers. Later, at twilight, Kris is seen burning papers outside the house. The camera pans left over Kris, whose physics papers are on fire, and then on to his father who is walking left beyond the fire; the father pauses, then turns back to the right (the camera pans right to follow him), and he says "if something should happen, I'll take care of it" (that is, the collection of papers Kris wishes to preserve). In a leftward pan, it is the emerging left margin that projects to the right hemisphere of the brain, the site of imagery and emotion and more remote and less immediate associations: thus here, with papers being burned and Kris' father appearing in the scene, it is the felt response to the complexities of the past that become foregrounded; then, as the father turns back to the right and he alludes to what might happen, it is a sense of the future that is evoked. When the camera cuts back to the bonfire, focusing first on a photo of a woman (Hari, as it emerges later), then pans left across a pile of unburned papers to the edge of those on fire, it is again the complexities of the past that are represented. Later the camera follows Kris inside the house as he walks to the left and goes to look out of the window—once more indicating feelings relating to the past, shown in Kris' retrospective mood.

Two other examples of this kind occur on the *Solaris* station. When Kris first views Gibarian's room the camera pans left across the disorder until reaching the video screen at which it stops, where an envelope taped up is addressed "K Kelvin"—in other words, this is a focus on the past, evoking wonder at the apparent violence that has taken over the room. By contrast, in a later scene Hari and Kris are discussing their past: Kris says he moved to another town and that Hari didn't want to accompany him. The camera then pans to the right and stops on the black space of the closet, in the right margin of which rain appears to be falling. The rain anticipates the final scene where, as Kris approaches the house (also a pan right), through the window liquid can be seen falling on the father inside. Through this stylistic technique Tarkovsky initiates a vehicle for progressively defamiliarising expectations: in the opening scene Kris walks towards a known and familiar place, but the camera pan to the right that was associated with the future, later



Still from *Solaris*, where the plant on Kris' window sill inside the space station is indicative of the harmonious connection to the natural world on Earth.

introduces an alien, uncanny sense of foreboding. Moreover, given Tarkovsky's concern for the shaping of time, which is at the heart of his film poetics, these two scenes that bookend the film show that the ordinary, quotidian sense of time (Kris walking back towards the house) is replaced with a dislocated sense of time that seems removed from time itself, culminating in an impossible situation: Kris on his knees in an eternal embrace of his father.¹²

This final scene is startling, especially because it locates Kris on an island in the ocean of *Solaris*. But it also forces a reconceptualisation of the feelings and ideas experienced up until that point, a process whose necessity Tarkovsky signals by taking the viewer back to what appears to be the same place. While at the opening of the film Kris' walk towards the house took place beside a living pool, weeds waving gently in the water, now, after a brief shot of the weeds, the pool appears frozen and the ground frosted; Kris is shut out from his previous engagement with the environment, and his face appears oddly impassive. Feelings for the natural world, alive and harmonious, the empathy the viewer develops for Kris' attempts to relate to Hari, the return of Kris to images of childhood in his fever—all become redefined by the feelings attendant on this final scene. The rain that formerly fell in a refreshing shower which Kris sat outside to savour, now falls strangely, inexplicably inside the house, on his father's shirt and jacket. Interpretation is thwarted: Kris here is translated as though into another realm, and in the light of what they have been watching viewers cannot tell whether this represents the attainment of wisdom, the payment of a debt, the stasis of failure, or a return even beyond childhood to his beginning—a strange conception that perhaps exists only in the mind of the ocean. Despite its irresolvable ambiguity, the ending of *Solaris* appears to represent a catharsis. If *Solaris* is a tragedy—and even that is by no means clear—then whatever hubris Kris may have demonstrated (rebuked successively as he was, first by Berton, later by Sartorius, and later still by Hari's final withdrawal), here it is overcome. And yet this final scene is strangely life-affirming; it has a serenity that both incorporates Kris' previous history and transcends it. The close of *Solaris* has an emotional logic, demonstrating the end point of Kris' descent into himself initiated by the reappearance of Hari and the commitment she came to represent. Therefore, the final embrace of his father evokes what his conscience has enabled him to recognise.

In *Mirror* the ending is also strikingly optimistic. Maria is shown anticipating the birth of her first child after the viewer has



witnessed the breakup of her marriage, war (both the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War), and a series of disturbing historical sequences. And yet this scene is also life-affirming, with a serenity that is of a different order than that of *Solaris*: this comes especially from the closely observed natural scene that Tarkovsky's camera meditates on, amidst the paradoxical shots of Maria as a young woman observing herself as an old woman with her young children. As at the end of *Solaris*, this final scene also takes the viewer into a different order of time, anticipated earlier but unrealised until now. But rather than challenging or overturning the assumptions about what one has been watching, as in *Solaris*, this appears to be the summation and fulfilment of all the prior, often seemingly unrelated, temporal fragments of the film—a unity that was hard to achieve, apparently, given what we are told about how many edits it took to complete *Mirror*.¹³

This final scene of *Mirror* has been celebrated by other writers. It is “this small corner of eternity, situated outside the forces of history and human progress”, according to Synessios; it is “A celebration of the transience of life and of the ongoing force of nature in the moss and beetles, the wild flowers and the crumbling, overgrown timber surround to the well.”¹⁴ Johnson and Petrie remark that Tarkovsky is drawn to scenes of ruin and debris, as in “a shot near the end of *Mirror* that exists simultaneously in the present and the past”, where the camera “tracks slowly over the natural decay of rotting leaves and logs before settling on a silted-up well containing abandoned household goods.”¹⁵ Is this abandoned well the same as the one Maria drinks from early in the film while watching the barn fire? The overgrown garden through which the mother and young children transit also suggests abandonment. The scene thus paradoxically contains elements from the beginning of the story, before the children are born, and after the story is over, when the house and garden have been abandoned. Maria, shown here with her hair loosely bound, which signals her two roles in the film as the protagonist's mother (shown with hair up) and wife (shown with hair down), looks around as though she is able to see this span of history. Furthermore, Maria understands and accepts its significance (like the earlier view of Asafiev on the snowy hill, who appears to see the history that plays out in the interspersed documentary footage), hence its air of serenity.¹⁶

This final scene in *Mirror* is also the most directly evocative of Bergson's concept of duration. As Tarkovsky puts it: “The past is the bearer of all that is constant in the reality of the present, of



Still from *Mirror*, where Maria is seated on a fence outside the dacha. Tarkovsky approaches the subject from behind to allow for an echo later in the film, where the same pose is assumed by an older version of the protagonist's mother.

each current moment.”¹⁷ Or in Bergson's words, in duration the past “follows us at every instant; all that we have felt, thought and willed from our earliest infancy is there, leaning over the present which is about to join it”.¹⁸ Elsewhere in *Mirror* the film often conveys a strong impression of Bergson's notion of duration as the past pressing on and informing the present, beginning with the opening post-credit scene of Maria sitting on the fence (the voice-over narrates the history imbued in that moment); or, as Maria moves towards and into the house, the husband's love for her expressed in the voice-over poem—“In the world everything was transfigured, even/Simple things—the basin, the jug”. According to Deleuze, “Duration is indeed real succession, but it is so only because, more profoundly, it is *virtual co-existence*: the co-existence with itself of all the levels, all the tensions, all the degrees of contraction and relaxation (*détente*).”¹⁹

In *Mirror* it is primarily the narrator's memory of childhood that drives the film, although there are scenes that the narrator clearly did not witness but has presumably heard about, such as the long episode in the printing house. But Tarkovsky avoids mere nostalgia or sentiment by enabling the viewer to sense the historical power shaping such memories. In Tarkovsky's words, reminiscent of a Bergsonian insight, he emphasises the aesthetic dimension of his work: “An artistic image is one that ensures its own development, its historical viability. An image is a grain, a self-evolving retroactive organism. It is a symbol of actual life, as opposed to life itself.”²⁰ In other words, the image has the power to establish the historic in the present, to show how the present is shaped in a way that life itself does not normally allow. Compared with the role of objects elsewhere in cinema, Tarkovsky's films situate the viewer in a world imbued with natural significance (“simple things—the basin, the jug”). To return to Deleuze, “Duration is like a naturing nature (*nature naturante*), and matter a natured nature (*nature naturée*)”—the contrast is between experiencing process from within, a process of becoming, rather than seeing what the process has accomplished.”²¹ Thus, after Maria announces to the children, “it's a fire, but don't shout”, the children are shown leaving the room, but the camera then pauses at the table; a bottle slowly tips over the edge and clatters on the floor. Matter is never merely matter in *Mirror*; it also partakes of duration, a working out of inherent forces that Tarkovsky enables the viewer to intuit. Similarly, in the final scene of *Mirror*: as the camera pans left across the vegetation of the overgrown garden and pauses on the ruined well, as the viewer glimpses insects moving about in their own world, Tarkovsky



Still from *Mirror*, where a bottle tips over and clatters to the floor, revealing the animism of everyday objects.

manages to make this scene epiphanic, celebrating the intimate connection between the natural and the human world (in which Maria is expecting a child). This possibility, the viewer's participation in the natural world, is a *leitmotif* of the film, introduced explicitly by the doctor in the opening scene after he has fallen through the fence. "Look at these roots, these bushes", he says; "did you ever wonder about plants feeling, being aware, perceiving even... the trees, this beechnut... they're in no hurry". Tarkovsky animates nature in particular through the device of the wind irrupting, which occurs when the doctor is leaving via the field in the post-credits scene. The wind also features centrally in the repeated sequence that shows a line of trees and a table set with a lamp, bread, and a cloth; the wind appears to erupt (improbably) from within the trees then reaches the table, where the objects are blown towards the edge of the table and begin to fall off.

Indeed, Synessios suggests that *Mirror* is: "A truly pantheistic film. Nature here is not a backdrop, but the protagonist"; characters are immersed in it.²² This seems only partly true: it is not that Tarkovsky endows nature or household objects with animism; rather, he is alert to their participation in a world of energies and forces that make them what they are, entities with a certain weight, history, and intrinsic energy that enables them to interact, often unpredictably, with the human participants. A similar continuity with human feelings and motives is also apparent in much Romantic writing—in the work of Wordsworth or Shelley, for example, when depicting the sublime or picturesque. Shelley begins his poem "Mont Blanc" with the lines:

The everlasting universe of things Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves, now dark—now glittering—now reflecting gloom.

And he goes on to refer to the ravine of the Arve river as the "many-colour'd, many-voiced vale", and the mountain as perhaps harbouring "some unknown omnipotence". But he is careful not to attribute human thought to nature; it is "from secret springs", he says, that: "the source of human thought its tribute brings/ Of waters—with a sound but half its own."²³ So too, in *The Prelude* Wordsworth refers to the "presences of nature" but suggests that they exercise their power by a parallelism with the mind, what he calls "fitness":

That universal power. And fitness in the latent qualities. And essences of things, by which the mind. Is moved by feelings of delight²⁴

Compared with the more familiar "organic" theory of nature in Romanticism and its critics (such as Ruskin and his "pathetic fallacy"), this insight appears more viable and significant, rooted in human sensory and kinaesthetic capacities, as Tarkovsky suggests: "Our knowledge is like sweat, or fumes." Such an insight may also be related to Keats' concept of Negative Capability, since the representation of nature from within (*nature naturante*) is an essential context for Keats' version of empathy: as he puts it in a letter, "if a Sparrow come before my Window I take part in its existence [sic] and pick about the gravel".²⁵

To capture the life revealed onscreen, whether weed in a pool or the emotions of his protagonist, we are told that Tarkovsky took a great deal of trouble constructing his imagery—taking a hand in set design, even requiring the removal of distant dandelions to obtain the mood he sought while shooting *Stalker*.²⁶ If Tarkovsky is so faithful to the detail of his characters, then, how is it that so many viewers reported their profound sense of identification with what they saw on screen in *Mirror*? Tarkovsky himself remarked in 1975: "The further a viewer is from the content of a film, the closer he is; what people are looking for in cinema is a continuation of their lives, not a repetition; look, learn, use the life shown here as an example."²⁷ Perhaps one key to this enigma is the way Tarkovsky reveals familiar situations and objects within a challenging, unfamiliar environment. In the last scene of *Mirror*, for example, he provides an apparently commonplace scene of an old woman leading two young children through a garden and field; yet in the same scene it becomes clear that the children are not yet born and that the old woman is also the young woman who is being asked whether she wants a boy or a girl.

Tarkovsky's scenes evoke what is most general and far reaching yet particular in the viewer's feelings. In his diary for March 1973 while preparing to shoot *Mirror*, Tarkovsky noted that the material he was to use "is simple, but at the same time extraordinarily profound; familiar and banal".²⁸ How can this be? Deleuze, building on Bergson's account of emotion, points out that feeling actually "precedes all representation, itself generating new ideas. It does not have, strictly speaking, an object, but merely an essence that spreads itself over various objects."²⁹ Thus a scene, perhaps showing something "familiar and banal", draws on existing feelings, although these may not have been realised consciously by the viewer until that moment; in this way the film, in Ellis' terms, "offers an affordance for a project of emotional exploration that



Still from *Mirror*.



The final scene of *Mirror*, which simultaneously encapsulates the present and the past. The mother and young children pass through the overgrown garden, which suggests abandonment, while the scene also refers back to before the children were born.

is already underway”.³⁰ The feeling identified in the moment on screen is enactive, recreating the self of the viewer, merging with what is individual in the viewer’s own concerns or strivings.

The images can thus have an extraordinary and at times inexplicable power, as in a striking metaphor, where the subject is transformed by the vehicle term (eg. “It is the East, and Juliet is the sun!”), a given image may be qualified by being radically recontextualised. The banal and familiar becomes numinous, full of possibilities that were unforeseen until this moment; perhaps an image replete with historical tension and promise as in Bergson’s *durée*. Moreover, if in metaphor the vehicle term comes to stand for an ad hoc class (Juliet as one of a class of sun-like objects) not encountered before, as the theory of Glucksberg and Keyser suggests, the transformed image on screen also takes on a generalising power that is both arresting and familiar, both profound and banal (to repeat Tarkovsky’s own terms).³¹

Interpretations of such scenes inevitably fall short. As Tarkovsky puts it, referring to his objection to symbolism, “an artistic image cannot be decoded. It is an equivalent of the world we live in”.³² The challenges to understanding presented by Tarkovsky’s films may be compared with George Steiner’s enumeration of types of difficulty in literature, that is, difficulties in interpretation.³³ Steiner claims to provide a complete inventory with four classes: contingent, which involves looking things up (we don’t understand a word, or a historical reference); modal, when the world view of the author remains out of reach and unrecoverable; tactical, when writers deliberately obscure their meaning, perhaps because of censorship; and ontological, when the instrument of language is itself being called into question. Tarkovsky’s films necessarily raise the first, the contingent (the viewer may have to look things up), and the tactical, given the context in the Russia in which Tarkovsky was working. But Steiner’s scheme doesn’t address the most significant source of difficulty that one experiences in Tarkovsky’s cinema: scenes whose significance one can feel but not explain. But it is better, perhaps, to remain content with half knowledge; in Keats’ terms, able to remain “in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts”.