

5-20-05

Dear Oisin,

On the whole, I really like the nighttime. I don't remember if I've always liked it as much as now, but the years of living in Arizona have certainly endeared the night to me. First there is the sunset, which is a superb example of ephemeral beauty.

Thus the most beautiful moments of life fly,
Fly away as in a dance...

That line is from a very nice and sad song by Mozart that I won't translate for you because I think mommy really will object to that one. But the title of the song is 'Abendempfindung' or 'Evening Sensations.' The poet (whose name I don't remember) is looking at the twilight and thinking exactly about the fleeting nature of life and its pleasures. Mozart set it to a very tender melody. Mozart of course wrote a lot of wonderful music, but strangely enough, he doesn't have too many good songs. Abendempfindung is one of them.

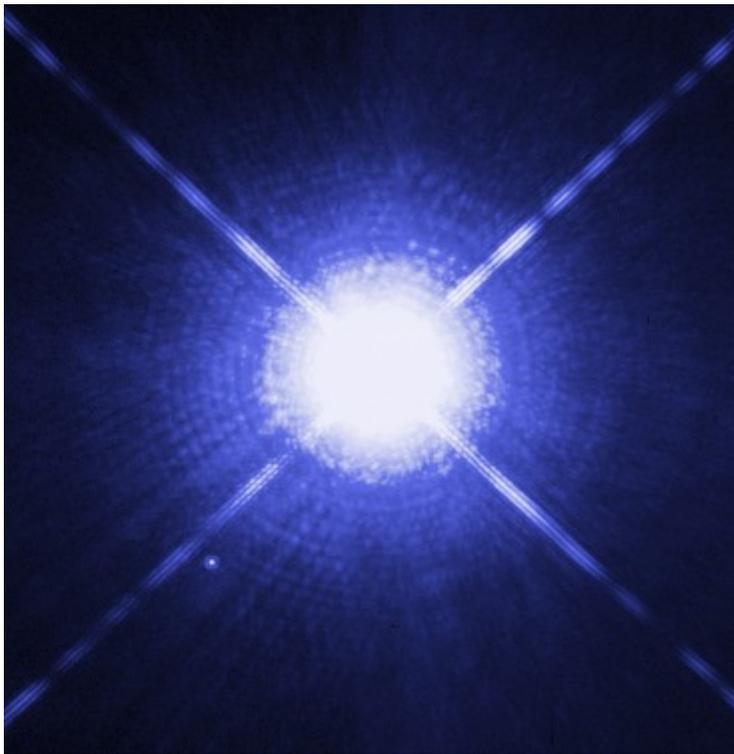
Andante.
Singsstimme.
Pianoforte.
p
A - bend ist's, die Son - neist ver.

Beginning line of Abendempfindung

Before I went to Arizona, I never imagined that sunsets could be as magnificent as the ones we have there. I saw photographs, but I always thought that the photographer was exaggerating, adding colors,

and so on. It's only after I started living in Arizona that I saw how the real sunsets were even better than the pictures.

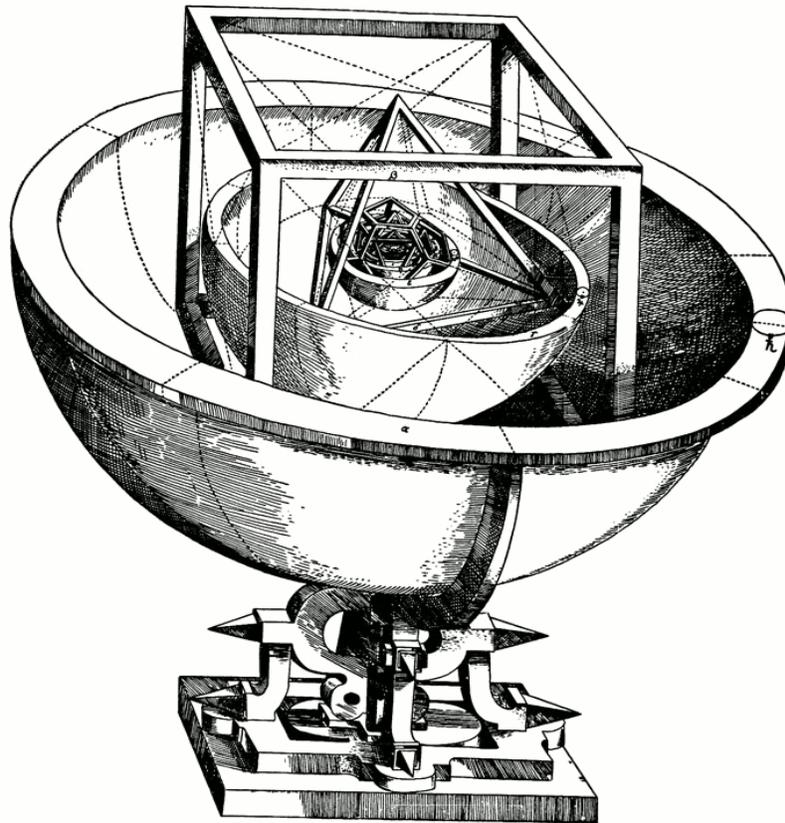
After the sun sets the stars appear one by one, often starting with planets like Venus or Jupiter, and then the true stars like Sirius. (That's the bright star somewhat below the left foot of Orion.)



Sirius

The more you look at them, the harder it is to believe that we are seeing points of light coming from large balls of fire flying across such unimaginable distances. That is probably why the Greeks thought the stars were right behind the planets, and not so very far away. They knew only the five inner planets in the days of Ptolemy, and thought that they corresponded somehow to the five

regular solids. These are the very symmetric shapes some of which we made with the magnetic sticks, the tetrahedron, the cube, the octahedron, the icosahedron, and the dodecahedron. They also thought that each planet and the stars were embedded in something like crystal spheres that rotated around their axes and made the heavens go around the way they observed. There was an idea that if you listened carefully enough, you could hear the most wonderful music emanating from the spheres as they rubbed against one another in rotation. This was referred to as the 'music of the spheres.'



Platonic model of Solar System according to Kepler

These particular Greek theories turned out to be incorrect, but it's too bad in a way. Wouldn't it have been nice to really hear the music of the spheres sometime? By the way, it's interesting that

many Greeks (at least by the time of Archimedes) still had a strong feeling that nature could somehow be explained by mathematics, even when the connection they perceived was a bit too mystical. But you see, even the connections we know now are rather mystical if you think about them long enough (and some day you will). A lot of mathematics is also just mysterious, even after you've understood it. For example, someday I'll explain to you why there are only five regular solids. It's a truly remarkable fact that there are no other ways to make such symmetric three-dimensional shapes (unless you count the sphere, which is kind of the 'obvious' case, and hence, often not mentioned).



Five regular solids as dice

In Korea, people used often to sit outside all evening in the summertime, when it was too hot to stay indoors. Then they sang songs, and sometimes told scary stories. One of my cousins, the father of Joonhwe (who I'm sure you don't remember) was especially good at telling scary stories. Sometimes we ate watermelon. Since we were outside, we could just spit the seeds out onto the ground. That, I remember doing at my grandmother's house. My grandmother was a very energetic lady and had a hard time sitting still, though. I don't remember any time when she wasn't making improvements to her house, building here and there, putting in a new bathroom, or modernizing the kitchen. Since this meant there were always all kinds of working men at her house, it was tremendous fun for the children. We could just any old time find bricks, concrete

blocks, and pieces of wood lying around to build with and many tools which probably were too dangerous for us. My favorite I think was a large pick-ax that made it so easy to dig deep holes in the ground. My grandmother was also good at swatting mosquitoes when we sat outside. We usually burned incense that was supposed to keep them away, but it was rarely very successful.

These days at home we don't sit outside, but it's still nice to get cozy around the bed at nighttime and read our books. And then to turn off the light, get under the covers, snuggle up, and sing a song or two. Even fighting about who gets to sleep where is nice when you think back on it a little afterwards. After all, wouldn't it be terrible if you didn't have anyone to fight with?

Before you were born, I often went for walks in the moonlight to Sabino canyon. That is one spot that becomes really magical in the full moon. (It's already quite nice in the daylight, isn't it?) The sloping side of the mountain becomes like glowing tapestry from afar and the shadowy rock walls tower above like giants. When you pass over a bridge, the rushing water below sometimes shimmers and glimmers in a more silvery way than the ornaments on a twinkling Christmas tree. My friend Lu who you met in Paris two years ago sometimes went with me. She carried a flashlight, I think because she was afraid of stepping on a rattlesnake.



Sabino canyon

So I hope you'll agree that nighttime for us is always a light-footed lady with a beautiful dark dress, the kind that Byron was describing. But our friend Michelangelo seems to have had other ideas. I've included with this letter a picture of his sculpture 'Night'.



She is the lady with her head bowed mournfully. The other sculpture is 'Day'. And then, the gallant fellow sitting above them is Lorenzo de Medici, who I guess commissioned these sculptures for his tomb. I think you told me that you once saw a movie about the Medici and how they dominated Florence during the Renaissance. These sculptures are in their chapel. Compared to the image we were discussing a moment ago, she appears quite heavy and brooding, don't you think? What makes her so? It's partly the way Michelangelo works with muscles that adds to the weight of the piece. But it's more than that. She seems to be weighed down by something heavier even than stone. Here is a clue from a poem by Michelangelo himself, translated into elegant English by Mr. Wordsworth.

Night Speaks

GRATEFUL is Sleep, my life in stone bound fast;
More grateful still: while wrong and shame shall
last,
On me can Time no happier state bestow
Than to be left unconscious of the woe.
Ah then, lest you awaken me, speak low.
Grateful is Sleep, more grateful still to be
Of marble; for while shameless wrong and woe
Prevail, 'tis best to neither hear nor see.
Then wake me not, I pray you. Hush, speak low.
Come, gentle Sleep, Death's image tho' thou art,
Come share my couch, nor speedily depart;
How sweet thus living without life to lie,
Thus without death how sweet it is to die.

In this poem, Michelangelo imagines his sculpture speaking to a visitor. He makes it rather obvious that he has many worries on his mind. He claims that the world has so many bad things in it that it's better to sleep and not see them. Better yet to be made of marble and not feel anything at all! He should have visited Medusa, maybe.

Renaissance Italy, it turns out, was also a pretty difficult time to live in. Many kings and princes and dukes were fighting a lot over land, gold, clothes, and other petty things. Michelangelo is clearly depressed about that and would like to be oblivious to evil things. So he makes his statue speak for him. Well, it can't have been so bad if they were making so many beautiful things at the same time. Besides, you and I understand that people only do bad things when they don't quite know what they are doing. Michelangelo should have talked to Socrates a bit. But still, because he thought and suffered so much over what he imagined to be unbearable evil, he left to us many memorable

works of art reflecting his dark mood. Not just the sculpture under discussion, but think about the 'Last Judgement.' You see, not all beauty needs to be light and wondrous. The starry night in Arizona is, as is the ceiling fresco in the Sistine chapel. So are Oisín and Niall when their sleeping faces are aglow in the reflected rays of the full moon that seep through the glass door. But heavy brooding beauty that may have been rather painful for the creator can still turn out alright for the rest of humanity that looks at it from a distant point in space and time.



The Last Judgment

I think Mr. Wordsworth had a pretty peaceful life in eighteenth and nineteenth century England by comparison. Even though his life was in the time of the revolution in France (which Wordsworth even visited and cheered on) England appears to have been pretty stable. Maybe that's why the translated poem has a restful quality that the sculpture doesn't. (Or does it?) In any case, he occasionally lets some melancholy creep into his poems, but he rarely spends much time brooding darkly over the ills of the world. Quite a few years ago, Komo and I drove to a part of England called the Lake District, where Wordsworth grew up and spent much of his life. It really was one of the prettiest pieces of land I remember traveling to. Everywhere you looked the mountain slopes were gentle and covered with grass that continued down to the edge of the water. And then there were the sheep and lambs grazing on the slopes and fields and shepherds watching over them as in a storybook. It wasn't hard to appreciate why Wordsworth thought so strongly that we should learn from nature. The air and the sky and the light playing on the lake were still and comforting in daytime *and* the night. I could easily imagine living there and earning a living as a teacher of small children.

We should go there together sometime.

Mr. D.



Lake Windermere