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Secret Selves: A History of Our Inner Space
(Bloomsbury, 2021)
by Stephen Prickett

THE ENORMOUS PLEASURE I DERIVED FROM READING Stephen Prickett's latest, and sadly his last, book was heavily tinged with sorrow following his death in October 2020. We were colleagues for a number of years at the University of Glasgow, and his ready wit, his vast reading, and above all his boundless energy are clearly evident in *Secret Selves*. In some ways it is a drawing together of all his previous published work in a new form and with new focus. This is a kind of history in literature, religion, and art of our 'inner selves', our self-consciousness or perhaps sub-consciousness—a story that might be told in many ways. It might, perhaps, begin with God's question to Adam after his act of disobedience, 'Who told you you were naked?' (Genesis 3:11). This is the moment when Adam becomes aware of himself. Prickett, however, begins a little later in the biblical narrative, in I Samuel 3:4, when the boy Samuel is summoned by a voice calling him by name. It is the voice of God. And so we progress, traversing the mountains of the mind, until religion and the voice of God give way nearer our own time to science and the language of psychology that seeks to map our inner selves. It is a complicated story, and no one version of it stands alone. Stephen's story is not the only one. The art historian Joseph Koerner, for example, explores the crucial moment in the sixteenth century when artists like Albrecht Dürer and Hans Baldung developed the art of self-portraiture. Prickett, on the other hand, as a literary scholar, finds the key moment within English Romanticism, and above all the Coleridge of 'Kubla Khan' and the Wordsworth of 'Tintern Abbey' and *The Prelude*. And both Koerner and Prickett are, in a way, right.

From a modern, or perhaps post-modern perspective, Prickett's version of the story makes good sense. There is, of course, no escaping the massive interior and theological world of Dante, or the plays of Shakespeare, or the mighty edifice of Milton's *Paradise Lost*—and Prickett brings them all in with extraordinary deftness and learning. But the modern dream-world might well be said properly to begin with Coleridge's fragment of verse, recollected after the intrusion of the 'person from Porlock'. We will never know if 'Kubla Khan' is merely a convenient fiction or a vision of supernatural proportions. But that, in a sense, is the point. As Prickett puts it, 'the ambiguity is all'. Then Prickett returns to the account of the ascent of Snowdon in *The Prelude* (70–71) and to 'Tintern Abbey' (98–99) to 'complete our internalization of landscape'. The sheer breadth of Prickett's references is breathtaking. In his portrait of the interiority of the mind, he moves from Hieronymus Bosch in the fifteenth-

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century Netherlands to the global imagination of the eighteenth century and the world of Dr. Johnson from China to Peru, to the fantasies of the nineteenth century, above all George MacDonald, and then on to C. S. Lewis, Tolkien and the fantasy literature of the twentieth century. But the key for the modern mind is always the creative imagination of the Romantic poets—Coleridge above all—honed upon the philosophy of Kant and his idealist view of the world (102). That is the real miracle—that not only are we conscious but we are conscious of being conscious, of, as Kant expressed it, the ‘moral law within’—a double consciousness in which ‘things in themselves’ are essentially unknowable. All that we can know are impressions of things (102). After Wordsworth, it was perhaps only the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins who most fully realized in his verse the ‘complex relationship between nature and the perceiving mind’, a perception that doomed him to a finally terminal depression, trapped within the consciousness that has mountains and cliffs ‘no-man fathomed’ (105).

In this book, religion is rarely directly acknowledged but ever present. Prickett’s vision is a *religious* one that is ultimately tragic. For the mind after Romanticism is doomed to a profound loneliness, felt most acutely, perhaps, in Samuel Taylor Coleridge, for, in Prickett’s words, ‘Coleridge, also a deeply religious man, with as highly developed sense of self as anyone in his century, was also a profoundly lonely man’ (205). Such metaphysical loneliness is the fate of the modern human being, felt already in Milton’s Satan and the sense of isolation ever increasing to the existential crisis of the twentieth century and beyond. The move from community and identity to isolation seems inexorable.

Prickett’s last chapter begins with the slogan ‘know thyself’, inscribed on the forecourt of the Temple of Apollo in Delphi, and echoing down the last two and a half thousand years. From the collective solidarity of the Hebrew tribes of the Old Testament we move, step by step, to the existential fragility of our present condition. Victims of the virtual worlds that we have invented, the inner spaces of our lives have become enormously inflated to the detriment of our very sense of identity. Who, in the end, am I? Simply the product of my own imagination? We have moved very far from Samuel listening with full alertness to the voice of God that he, without hesitation, obeys.

Secret Selves is the product of lifetime of reading and teaching, moving with ease across texts and the images of Western art. It is a reflection on the selves whom we think we know well, and the selves in all of us that remain ‘secret’. There are moments in the book which are anecdotal, and some will be familiar to those who knew Stephen and his work well: his fascination with the mystery of the ‘still small voice’ of Elijah’s ‘vision’ in I Kings 19:11–12, his love of the fantasy literature of George MacDonald (which, I admit, I find it hard to share), and above all his deep rootedness in the minds and literature of the great English Romantic poets. Perhaps they—Wordsworth and Coleridge—are the true keys to this book, and the reason why, behind all the energy and love of literary stories (like Schleiermacher’s early fascination with the first European encounters with the aboriginal tribes of New South Wales in the late

eighteenth century) there is an even more deeply and seriously felt sense of the religious—or perhaps the absence of it. There is a sadness that cannot be dismissed.

Readers seeking something new in the scholarship of the great tradition of European literature will perhaps be disappointed with this book. But it offers something far more, and far more difficult precisely to grasp. Stephen was known for his study of the interdisciplinary field of literature and religion. I deliberately avoid the drier word ‘theology’. That is what this book is, in the end, concerned with—religion, or more precisely for us, its absence. It tells the story of a journey of the human mind and soul from the divine summons heard by Samuel, to a world in which the greatest fear is that we are simply alone—like Coleridge’s Mariner, ‘alone on a wide, wide sea’. Prickett begins and ends with Etty Hillesum’s moving writings on the ‘infinite steppes’ of her own mind—vast inner spaces that were terminated by her extermination in the gas chambers of Eastern Europe in 1943. Stephen notes that Hillesum, like St. Augustine of Hippo, ‘wanted to invite God to share her inner space. Whether that made her “religious” in the normal sense is doubtful’ (2). Whatever normal means here, it is that doubt which haunts this book, and haunts me as its reader. Religion is at its very heart—but somehow ‘religion’, whatever that is, has become ungraspable for our lonely inner selves.

Secret Selves is a remarkable book, at once deeply personal and also a reflection on a profession spent with literature and art. As I write I have five of Stephen’s earlier books on one side of my desk. Most of them are referred to in this his last book. On the other side of my desk is this one book, in some sense a summary of them all. It is perhaps a proper literary conclusion to the life of a scholar and, I hope, a friend.