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The Perception of Space, Light, Color in Art, Mystical Experience, Science

by Melinda Wortz

Introduction

We are all aware of the enormous importance art has played historically in providing a means of access to the spiritual or supernatural dimensions of existence. So great, in fact, was art's power in this respect that it became a major issue in the split between the Eastern Orthodox and the Roman Catholic churches.[1] At this time in the history of Christianity the Eastern branch argued that imagery should be equal in authority to scriptural texts and the verbal tradition in the preservation and transmission of the faith. Unfortunately, the Western church leaders refused to give visual imagery a role equal to that of the written word. We see this bias permeating our culture today, not just in the context of religion, but in all aspects of knowledge the word reigns supreme over the visual image. One exception perhaps is photographic imagery, whose mere existence is often incorrectly assigned the same aura of "truth" that we mistakenly award the written word. We who find that visual images are often more useful in providing us information, particularly self-understanding, than are words may regret the suppression of images in the history of religion. However, the very fact that spiritual leaders of various traditions felt a need to proscribe visual images attests to their importance to the human psyche.

Both art and religion have lost their claim to universal truth they once had. As has often been noted, the authenticity formerly attributed to the spiritual sage has in the 20th century been transferred to the sceintist, more particularly the physicist.[2] We have erroneously assumed that because physicists can measure physical phenomena and make mathematical equations which can predict the activities of atomic and subatomic particles, their "truth" has a greater authority

than the non

than the physically undemonstrable truths of the spirit, which, though we authentically experience, we cannot measure. Of course Einstein's theory of relativity inherently denies that one particular point of view can stand as a universally true model of the physical universe. What we see or observe, is, in fact, a function of our perspective, both physically and mentally. In other words, our mental set to a large extent determines how we see things, a point that was as well understood by the artist Marcel Duchamp as it was by Einstein. And we forget that one of Einstein's own questions was whether or not God had a choice when He created the universe.[3] As a result, our own age has come to be categorized as scientific and secular, at the enormous expense of art and the spiritual realms of existence.

I have found in my own experience that certain kinds of contemporary art have provided direct perceptions of states of being that are most closely described in mystical literature - a fusion of form and formlessness, for example. When looking intensely at a Robert Irwin disc, mounted out from the wall and illuminated by four lights (this work will be discussed in detail later), we actually <u>see</u> it de-materialize, becoming indistinguishable visibly from the "empty" light and space surrounding it. We know, if we go and touch the disc that it has not in fact dematerialized. Then what are we seeing? The experience is an inner, subjective one, not verifiable objectively. Does this mean that it is not "real"? Not if we relate it to Buddhist philosophy.

> The highest stage of Buddhist experience is reached when a man comes to realize that things are devoid of a self-substance (form) or that they are not after all final, irreducible realities ..... Reality, as it is, or Mind in itself is also called the suchness (tathata) or sameness (samata) of things, as herein are unified all forms of antithesis (i.e. form and formlessness) which constitute our actual world of sense and logic.[4]

It is because of my experiences with contemporary art that I want to examine in this book the relationships between the practice/experience of art and mysticism. Ironically these modes of experience, challenging the boundaries of conceptual thought, found in contemporary art and mystical writing have parallels in Einstein's description of the universe; without fixed mass, only a continuous exchange of matter and energy. Thus, as Fritjof Capra has eloquently stated in The Tao of Physics, science and religion, rather than being antithetical, have become synchronous in the 20th century.[5]

Contemporary art which encourages us to focus on the perceptual experience of light, space or color per se, without specific imagery has enabled me spontaneously to experience altered states of consciousness that approximate those described in mystical literature of all traditions. I suspect that for others a thorough conceptual understanding of the mathematical language of modern physics or the the practice of liturgy can produce states of wonder or a sensed loss of boundaries such as I find in certain aesthetic experiences. For me, focussing attention on perceptually oriented art forms is the same kind of activity and/or experience as focussing attention in meditation or prayer - or for others, ~~I understand~~, in physical exercise.

I do not limit my use of the word mysticism to experiences and/or beliefs framed in a religious or spiritual context. Rather, I would like to use the definition formulated by Agehananda Bharati, based on his linguistic training in ethnosemantics. Bharati posits that

> a mystic is a person who says, 'I am a mystic,' or words to that effect, consistently, when questioned about his most important pursuit.

He elaborates, choosing a specific experience to characterize

the mystic experience

> it is the person's intuition of numerical oneness with the cosmic absolute, with the universal matrix, or with any essence stipulated by the various theological and speculative systems of the world. This alone is the mystical effort

Bharati's mystic is

> a seeker of intuitive union with the cosmic ground, who chooses experiments which would lead to such intuitions.[6]

Although the majority of these occurences, as described throughout history, have been presented in the context of particular religious beliefs, many spiritual practices discourage the pursuit of mystical union. Rarer are accounts of oneness experiences in the presence of nature, under the influence of drugs, or through the conscious and active perception of works of art, irrespective of any religious framework or intent.

For Einstein the mystical experience is accessible through scientific investigation and mathematical physics.

> The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mystical. It is the sower of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead. To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty, which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their most primitive forms - this knowledge, this feeling, is at the center of true religiousness. In this sense, and in this sense only, I belong to the ranks of devoutly religious men..... <u>The cosmic religious experience is the strongest and noblest, deriving from behind scientific research</u>..... (italics mine) [7]

It is interesting here here links mystical experience with the practice of both art and science, as well as religion.

Many contemporary works of art have as their goal the heightening of our perceptual awareness in seeing color, light, or space. In accounts of mystical states of consciousness references to the perception of light, color or space, whether analogical or actual, are recurrent. Consider the following statement made by Jesus in Luke 11: 34-36.

> Your eye is the lamp of your body. When your eye is sound, your whole body is light, but when it is unsound, your body is dark. So take care! Your very light may be darkness! If, therefore, your whole body is light with no darkness in it at all, it will be as light as a lamp makes things for you by its light.

Whether in a spiritual or an aesthetic context, the cosciously directed use of the eye in seeing oight (or color, or space), elusive phenenomena indeed, can result in significant changes in our perceptions of ourselves and the world.

It is because I hope sharing my own experiences in this book will ~~enable others to have~~ facilitate for others similar ones that I have felt the need to put my perceptions into writing. The difficulty of this task frightens me, for the insights and experiences I want to write about are precisely those that are the least adaptable to written description. Even the art works I have found most meaningful -

those dealing with the perception of light, space or color, without content - are the most difficult to put into words, so much so that artist Robert Irwin has consistently argued against the possibility of translating aesthetic experience into words. He is right, of course. Nonetheless,I must do what I need to do. I am committed to communicating with others my understanding of thes art works of minimal content, for I know people who are not familiar with these modes of aesthetic expression often have great difficulty with them, if not outright hostility toward them.

Even among art critics there is today a tendency to belittle art forms that have no recognizable images or narrative content. This point of view argues that art without any recognizable references to the world is too formal, too inaccessible to the public, too removed from human experience. It is true that many contemporary artists express spiritual ideas or experience in the form of specific symbols, rather than in non-representational light, space or color. It is also true that I respect and appreciate art that utilizes particular imagery. However, I personally have responded most profoundly to art without representational imagery because if evokes for me experiences that are both exciting and unprecedented.

Art works that point toward mystical experience without specific symbols are, of course, non-denominational. Particularly at the present time, when excessive religious cultism has brought about mass murders in Jonestown and Teheran, non-specific images can serve a need for spiritual forms without feeding the appetite for personality cults. While presumably the image of a Buddha or Christ would speak most directly to practitioners of those respectiver religions, art works without representational content - the abstract stained glass windows in Chartres Cathedral, for example, or a simple wall in a Zen rock garden - could be more accessible to people not familiar

with the symbology of a particular religion. Without a particular image to focus upon, each individual can bring his or her own experience or meditative practice to the work of art. In this respect, non-representational art works can be more personal to more people than a sectarian image can. Certainly in a time when the dangers of religious extremism are obvious, we should appreciate art which is non-sectarian or ecumenical through its absence of specific symbols.

I am convinced that nonrepresentational art is fully as personaly accessible as that which depicts recognizable things. Just because an experience cannot be related to other kinds of events or objects in the world does not mean that it is impersonal. On the contrary, as far as I am concerned, it is precisely the experiences for which I have no precedent that I find to be the most revelatory, both conceptually and experientially. The value I find in contemporary art is expressly its ability to provide me with safe modes for self-growth through the exploration of the unknown.

I prefer contemporary art to historical art not because I believe it is "better" than past art, but because the styles of past art are more accessible, having been largely incorporated into our shared body of knowledge: the rediscovery of perspective, for example, with its mathematical concept of zero, or the optical analysis of light practiced by the Impressionists. True, the meaning of art produced by cultures very far removed from our own - ancient China, for instance, or Micronesia - has not been fully assimilated by contemporary American culture. I ~~do not believe~~ find that

the aesthetic responses of people very distant from us in time and space cannot be as fully understood or experienced as those produced by whatever culture we happen to share. We can still appreciate the art made by past civilizations, but I cannot be as fully involved with the art of former times as I can with the art of my own time and place.

It is not easy, however, fully to understand the art of one's own time. As Marshall McLuhan has remarked, the artist, like radar, functions as "an early alarm system," sensing what is ahead before it is generally perceived.[69] This predictive aspect of advanced art (as opposed to art which replicates familiar forms) is one we customarily associate with science. Since the language of contemporary art is as specialized as that of science, study facilitates the comprehension of both language systems until they become familiar enough to be absorbed into general knowledge. Recognizing the ability of art to investigate the unknown through perceptual and intuitive modes, Robert Irwin has defined the art activity as an ongoing act of inquiry (a definition that could as easily apply to science), a visual philosophy.[70] Irwin's definition of art making is strikingly similar to Capra's description of Eastern (mystical) art forms;

> They are not so much means for expressing the artist's ideas as ways of self realization through the development of intuitive modes of consciousness.[10]

I should say something about the intention of the artist, and its relation to what we, the viewers, see in the art work; how we interpret or experience it, what it means in our lives. When looking at very ancient art forms we can, for the most part, only guess at the artist's intentions. In more recent times many artists have

been nearly as productive in ther verbal expression as in their visual. Leonardo da Vinci and Joshua Reynolds are among the many artists who have written extensively, creating their own aesthetic philosophies rather than leaving this task for others to complete. The 20th century has been a time in which many poineering artists, particularly those who struggled to free art from the need to represent the world, have written comprehensively about their own work. These include Wassily Kandinsky, Kasimir Malevich, Piet Mondrian, Roger Delaunay and Jean Arp. During the past two decades artist Robert Morris has been one of the most articulate spokesman regarding the kinds of issues being explored by perceptually oriented art forms. Marcel Duchamp described the artist as a mediumistic being, who simply puts an object into the world. The subsequent fate of the art object, Duchamp maintained, is controlled by what the spectator or posterity chooses to do with it. The audience, then, ultimately determines the value of a work of art, either by venerating, praising and preserving it, or by rejecting and ignoring it, thus probably ensuring that it will be lost to history.

For the most part, public decisions regarding the validity of a work of art have little understanding the artist's intentions. When studying contemporary art, we do have the opportunity to ask the artist directly about his or her intentions, which may or may not correlate with our own understanding or experience of a work of art. Whether or not the audience is able to see exactly what the artist intends is not a measure of the work's validity. I feel that the best works of art must in fact transcend the specific intentions of the artist in order to remain

meaningful throughout the centuries. If our understanding of the artist's intentions were mandatory for us to be able to find meaning in a work of art, how could we respond to Stonehange, to the ruins at Macchu Picchu, to mysterious Pre-Hispanic or ancient Chinese vessels?

The artist's intent, as expressed in words, is conceptual information about his or her own perspective regarding his or her art work. Visual art, however, conveys experience in perceptual modes that transcend language. It is for this reason that people often experience works of art in ways that the artist neither intended nor desired. For example, both Robert Irwin and the late Ad Reinhardt deny that there is any spiritual content intentionally expressed in their work. Nonetheless, viewer after viewer will see the works of these two men as meditative or inspirational; or even mystical in the sense of experiencing a loss of ego, or a merging of seer and seen. As Capra puts it, "The experience of oneness with the surrounding environment is the main characteristic of the meditative state." [10] If an artist denies there is spiritual content in his or her work and a viewer experiences it, who is right? Obviously both. An art work can potentially have as many levels of meaning as there are perspectives in which it is seen.

At any time there are probably similar ways of perceiving and understanding the world arrived at independently, by people who have no knowledge of each other. This is particularly evident in the 20th century. Nobel prizes for science are seldom awarded nowadays to a single person, but are received by two or more people who have been doing similar research in different parts of the world. I am convinced that the world views expressed in perceptually oriented, non-representational forms of contemporary

art, in modern physics, and in mystical writings of all traditions are synchronous. That their synchronicity is not necessarily obvious is a function of the extreme specialization of knowledge in the 20th century, and the abstract language systems in which knowledge is presented. These are enormously different in art, mysticism and science - visual forms, paradoxical or poetic language which alludes to states of consciousness, and mathetics. It is important to break through the barriers presented by unfamiliar language systems in order to gain access to the insights they express.

In the 20th century advanced art is the least understood and most neglected of these three types of knowledge. A statement like the following, found in a book which provides a very thorough summary of both historical and contemporary theories of perceptual psychology, is perhaps typical of the laymans's understanding of the nature of art.

> On the one hand all artists, except for some atypical extremists,(italics mine), use certain technical artistic effects to produce an impression of "reality," but on the other hand, they make their real artistic contribution by a personal and original reworking of the perceptual material. (italics mine)

Articulated by two highly educated and sophisticated authors, K. von Fieandt and I.K. Moustgaard, this point of view assumes that art's primary purpose it to replicate in some manner the objective appearance of things in the world. From the scientific perspective of our time, however, we know that the real nature of things in the world - their ongoing participation in the exchange of matter and energy - cannot be discerned from their outer appearances, that is the "perceptual material" they present to our senses. The expression of abstract or

non-objective forms has been a key factor in 20th century art history. The non-representational language of contemporary art is dedicated to the philosophical conviction that art does not have to represent the exterior guise of the physical world in order to be authentic, but can create images or forms that have never been seen before. The struggle to free art from the bondage of representation has meant art can construct new worlds, and world views, of its own. Far from being the pursuit of some "atypical extremists," abstraction, or non-objective art is considered by many to be the major development of 20th century art, a "paradigmatic breakthrough," as Phil Leider puts it. [13]

In the conclusion to their book The Perceptual World, von Fieandt and Moustgaard suggest that the evolution of our perceptual prosesses has not kept pace with our technological innovations. [14] What they fail to see is that art forms which focus the viewer's attention on pure, uninterrupted or non-representational light, color or space are perhaps in fact pointing the way toward the evolution of perception itself. In order to survive biologically we have learned to focus on the objects in our environment, whether for the purpose of contacting or avoiding them. As a result we have spent little time attending perceptually to the "empty" space between the objects, or to light or color in themselves. Learning to attend to these phenomena will open up whole new perceptual worlds.

Art's role in the course of life has not always been so poorly understood, so marginal in the culture as a whole. Hopefully, understanding the parallels among advanced art, mystical experience and modern science can help restore art's relevancy to everyday life. As John Cage suggests in an interview:

> .... We get ourselves into traffic situations either on highways or in supermarkets where, even if we're in a rush, it does us not good, because we have to go at a snail's pace if any pace at all. No so long ago in New York I was brought to a complete halt because of two trucks, neither of which would give in to the other. At such points if we paid attention to modern paintings and modern music we can shift our attention to the things that surround us.... things to hear, things to see.

What Cage proposes, a shift in awareness to an inner experience of modern art, is the same technique used in meditation; a turning within in order to alter the content of one's consciousness. Contemporary art can and should be a valuable tool in shifting awareness in the direction of heightening perception and perhaps simultaneously relieving stress. In a very literal and direct way contemporary art should thus be put to use to enrich enormously, if not to make transcendent, our everyday expereince.

Chapter 1: What is the Nature of Seeing?

The experience of seeing has been accounted for in a wide variety of ways, the extremes of which might be considered as ranging from behavioristic stimulus/response on the one hand ~~and subjective~~ to mystical visions on the other. The behaviorist point of view describes seeing as a passive reception of an external stimulus which elicits a response in the sense organ (s) receiving the signal. In the case of the eye, the complex response results in the creation of an image. In ideal laboratory environments, experiments can be devised to demonstrate the verity of the stimulus/response mechanism which enables us visually to apprehend the existence of things outside ourselves. If whatever we perceive to be present is actually there, external to the eye, we expect to find a concensus among other people regarding its size, color, shape, location, and so forth. Concensus is the cornerstone of truth in science. If there is no concensus, the object we perceive will not be considered to be objectively present. ~~Thus the criterion of concensus is mandatory in order for objects to be ascribed as existing outside ourselves.~~

Although the criterion of concensus is commonly employed to point to the existence of objective reality, it does not in fact prove that what we are experiencing coincides with anyone else's experience. Even if we receive completely consistent agreement that what we call red, for example, is also what others consider to be red, we can never fully know if others are encountering the same sensations that we are when we refer to the word "red." We can only assume that approximately similar experience is occurring. ~~The point -- one widely conceded today - is~~

In subjecting this question to logical analysis, Wittgen-

stein makes the following observations.

> 32. Is it possible then for different people in this way to have different colour concepts?- Somewhat different ones. (In this case colour-blindness) Different with respect to one or another feature. And that will impair their mutual understanding to a greater or lesser extent, but often hardly ar all. (italics mine)
>
> 33. Here I would like to make a general observation concerning the nature of philosophical problems. Lack of clarity in philosophy is tormenting. It is felt as shameful. We feel: we do not know our way about where we should know our way about. And nevertheless it isn't so. We can get along very well without these distinctions and without knowing our way about here.[1]

Here Wittgenstein acknowledges that some aspects of our existence, in this case perception of color, have meaning somewhere outside the boundaries of rational knowledge (or scientific thought) or even consentaneous understanding.

For ideas to become part of a shared concensus they too must be expressed in some objective form - whether written in words or numbers, or made into physical things - that makes them accessible to others. In this way intellectual concepts are translated into forms which can be perceived either intellectually or sensorially ~~outside our own minds~~ by other people. Pure geometry, for example, does not exist in nature, but after it was conceived as an ideal system, it was put to practical use to build and structure our environment. The manifestation of geometry in the world required the vision that something could exist which had never before been seen. Once geometric structure enters the world, we can come to a concensus that it exists. Conceptual visions of what might be thus play an important part in what eventually becomes perceptual information. How it is that visionaries - artists, philosophers, scientists, religious leaders and others - can project in the [redacted] their minds' eye things that have never been seen in objective reality is an intriguing question indeed. Obviously more than response to objective data is involved in the way we perceive the world.

When we are presented with contemporary art lacking familiar cues to images or events we can associate with past experience, we usually respond in one of two ways. We can either reject, or turn away from, the work of art in bewilderment or hostility, or we can choose to enter into a more conscious mode of seeing which enables us to become more intimately aware than we normally are with regard to the nature of the perceptual process itself. Non-objective painting's ability to allow the viewer to participate consciously and creatively in the perceptual act has been eloquently described by the artist Mark Rothko.

> A picture lives by companionship, expanding and quickening in the eyes of the sensitive observer. It dies by the same token. It is therefore a risky act to send it out into the world. How often it must be impaired by the eyes of the unfeeling and the cruelty of the impotent who would extend their affliction universally.*2

Several decades earlier, in 1913, the Russian artist Wassily Kandinsky expressed similar sentiments.

> At that time I still labored under the delusion that the viewer confronts the painting with an open soul and wants to harken to a language known to him. There exist such viewers (that is no delusion), but they are as rare as grains of gold in the sand. There are even viewers who, without any personal relationship to the language of the work, are able to give themselves to it and take from it. I have met such in my life. 2a

The implication here is not simply that the seer is affected by the object perceived, but that the quality of the seeing impacts upon what is seen. Just who and what we see is highly variable, personal and selective. Two people who have travelled together will report completely different experiences of what they have seen. If we ask several people to describe a room they have just been in, their accounts will differ significantly. Some will respond primarily to colors and forms, others to texture, scale, sound, space, scent and [redacted] number of other variables. No

two people process the same objective stimuli in exactly the same way. Any or all of the senses usually come into play in the process of seeing, as reflected in Jasper Johns' statement that "looking is and is not eating and being eaten."*3 Richard Bandler and John Grinder have suggested that people's verbal translations of their sense experiences tend to reflect a dominant sense modality - seeing, hearing, smelling and tasting, or feeling - which takes precedence over others in our interactions with the world.*4 Whichever mode we unconsciously use as our primary means of response necessarily implies the neglect of others. Hence Bandler and Grinder, in their Neurolinguistic Training program encourage attentiveness to those sensory experiences we normally slight in order to alter and enrich both our perceptual and our conceptual experience of the world.*5

No P For the senses are not the only means whereby we choose how and what we want to see. P At any given moment it is virtually impossible to process all of the sensory stimuli we are receiving. Even to try to do so would make it impossible to function practically in the world. If, for example, we were to pay as much attention to the dust motes in the air as we do to the position of objects in a room, we would probably end up stumbling over or into things. When driving we have all probably had the experiencing of allowing our attention to focus on something other than the activity on the road only to be rewarded for this perceptual enrichment with a traffic citation. Without thinking we habitually allow some kinds of perceptual information into our consciousness while remaining unaware of other. What we see depends upon what we want to see, consciously or unconsciously, and derives from our personal associations with

memories of past pleasure and pain, expectations, emotional states and so forth. The unfamiliar perceptual situations presented by many non-representational forms of contemporary art, however, provide means of exploring new perceptual experiences in a positive way, without interfering with our ability to function practically in the world.

Two major theoretical premises in the 20th century, one from art and one from science, exemplify how what we see depends on how we use both our perceptual and our intellectual processes to organize the world. The artist Marcel Duchamp, when exhibiting his Readymades - unaltered found objects - took the position that the only difference between an are object and any other object in the world was his judgment, as an artist, that a particular thing was a work of art. In other words, the perception of a work of art is largely a function of a mental act, one's intent to see it as such. As a corollary to this thesis he added that the audience is always in a position to accept or reject the artist's judgment, thus determining the fate of the work put into the world by the artist. It is posterity that makes masterpieces, according to Duchamp. Whether the aesthetic perception of an object is made by the artist or audience, our idea about the object strongly conditions what we will see.

In modern physics there are two accepted modes for describing and measuring the phenomenon of light. Scienticists can choose to describe it either as a particle or as a wave, but cannot do both at once. Thus what is perceived is in fact what one is looking for, or depends on how one is doing the looking. In science, as in Rothko's description of aesthetic experience, or Duchamp's radical challenging of contemporary aesthetic expectations, how we approach a situation determines what we find in it.

If two people cannot have completely equivalent perceptual ex-

periences of the same objective data, what exactly is it that we do see? Modern physics tells us that we do not in fact see objects, but only light reflected from objects in differing wave lengths that are translated into hues of the spectrum by photo-chemical activity within the nerve cells of the eye and the brain. But, as noted above, even physicists cannot agree whether light is a particle or a wave, so we still return to the question of what it is that we perceive when we see light. Light is currently described as consisting of photons, which are in turn made up of neutrinos. Whatever photons may be, they cannot be observed under a microscope, and we certainly cannot get a concensus as to their appearance by means of direct sense experience. Are photons, then, only a conceptual label? They are, we are told, what we see when ~~we think~~ we are perceiving objects, space, it al.

It is possible to agree with one another that we are responding to the same light stimulus in a given situation. But there are many incidents reported in which light has been perceived with apparently no external stimuli of photons. The following account is interesting in this respect.

> In 1825 in Germany a prominent citizen was attacked and beaten one night by a political enemy. He sues for damages. The plaintiff told the court that the night was so dark he could not see his hand in front of his face and the judge was led to ask how then he had recognized his assailant. "It was very easy," replied the plaintiff," in the lightning that occurred when he struck me in the eye I easily recognized the evil face of the accused." *5

This is an instance of synaesthesia, the experiencing of a sensory experience in a sense organ other than the one being stimulated. When pressure was applied, and the plaintiff's sense of touch was stimulated, a visual as well as a tactile experience

was evoked. Similarly, blind people have reported seeing light when undergoing electrical stimulation of their cerebral cortexes.*6 What, then, are they "seeing?" The question of what it is we are seeing when we discern light remains unanswered.

It is evident that the perception of light can occur with or without the presence of photons, and we can speculate that these two kinds of light perception are experientially similar. In fact, experimental evidence seems to verify that inner visualizations are closely analogous to perceptions originating from objective physical stimuli outside ourselves. Researchers have observed that a person dreaming of clombing stairs executed eye movements which correlated with those he would make if he were actually climbing stairs, and that people move their eyes when scanning eidetic imagery in the same way they do when looking at physically present pictures.[7] The American physiologist Niesser has stated

> .....visual images (i.e. visualizations) are apparently produced by the same integrative processes that make ordinary perception possible..... Visual memory differs from perception because it is based principally on stored, rather than current information, but it involves the same kind of synthesis.[8]

And finally, Eccles, A British neorphysiologist, describes the

> ...working of the brain as a patterned activity formed by the curving and looping of wavefronts through a multitude of neurons, now sprouting, now coalescing with other wavefronts, now reverberating through the same path.[9]

From Eccles' observations Mike Samuels, M.D. and Nancy Samuels conclude that only the right neuronal pathways must fire in order for an image to be perceived; that the neurons may fire in this manner as a result of either outer or inner stimuli.[10] This point of view can be related to a phenomenological

plane of color with a soft, skylike texture," Katz called the phenomenon "film" color.[19]

The phenomenon of after images -- the spontaneous appearance of the complement of a color after one has been looking at it intensely - also provides the experience of floating, or de-objectified color. Goethe called these phenomena physiological, or fleeting colors.

Outside the laboratory this atypical color perception - color as floating, atmospheric - is often accompanied by altered states of consciousness. The uncommon appearance of film color is commonly experienced when looking attentively at the work of some color field and monochromatic painters, and installations utilizing fluorescent light.

However precise the scientific models for describing the nature of color perception may be - our discrimination of hue, value, saturation and brightness through complex rod and cone specialization - they cannot account for the emotional impact which accompanies the experience of color.

It was Goethe's emotional response to colors, which he called "the exploits and sufferings of light," that impelled him to formulate a color doctrine, Zur Fabenlehre, in refutation of theories developed by Newton from experiments with prisms. For Goethe, colors were the turgid or opaque world between the polar opposites of darkness and light. He saw this primordial opposition, or Ur phenomena, as an embodiment of the metaphysical and dualistic forces inherent both in the universe and in the individual human soul. He posited only two pure colors, blue (darkness) and yellow (light). Because of the metaphysical and emotional power he invested in color, Goethe felt that his color theories were his most important life's work; far more than a mere contribution to scientific thought, but rather a manifestation of the nature of existence, a doctrine of life.[19a]

approach to perception, employing a philosophical method which suspends the question of existence in order to concentrate on the question of meaning. For the phenomenologist, "things exist for us because we can think or talk about them," and the question of whether truth is in fact the case is bracketed out so that the question of truth as meaning may be explored.*11

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Thus, when miraculous visions occur, it is often indeterminable if not irrelevant, whether the perceived is external or internal. For example, the conversion of Saul (St. Paul) was initiated

> ...as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round him a light from heaven: and when his eyes were opened he saw no man.[12] (Acts: 9; 3, 8)

Apparently when Saul was granted access to the light of heaven, he lost his earthly sight. Whatever its source, the meaning of this perceptual event amounted to a conversion which completely changed Saul's life.

Paul's experience of seeing light that may or may not have been "objectively" present is recorded in a spiritual context, although from what we understand of Saul's personality in the New Testament, he was not at all inclined to expect a spiritual vision. Mysterious perceptions of light are experienced in secular as well as religious contexts, context itself being a powerful determinant of meaning, whether for art or any other activity. Commenting on context in a recent lecture, Robert Irwin pointed out, "When Moses saw the burning bush he perceived the presence of God. When we see a burning bush we call the fire department."*12 In response, a friend of the artist added, "If we said we had seen God in a burning bush we would probably be locked up." In another era Joan of Arc was burned at the stake because she had heard and/or seen God.

In the context of everyday life we seldom have the oppor-

tunity to look at light in and of itself. In fact, everyday life rarely presents us the opportunity to do so. Probably the closest we come to the direct observation of light, dissociated from the surfaces of objects, is in contemplating the colored light of the sunrise, sunset or other dramatic phenomena in the sky. Still, sunsets and the like are usually orchestrated by clouds, forming interesting shapes which attract our attention away from the sensation of light in itself. Uncommon indeed for 20th century urban dwellers is the opportunity to experience limitless space and an accompanying sensation of weightlessness by gazing deeply into a clear sky, uninterrupted by clouds, horizon, or any other forms. Perhaps certain kinds of contemporary art that are involved with the perception of light, or colored light, without images or references to anything extraneous to the light itself, may provide some of the few situations (outside the experimental laboratory) in which we are encouraged to concentrate fully on the phenomenological experience of seeing light itself.

When contemporary art presents us with ~~this~~ an uncommon perceptual situation we can start to ask ourselves about the nature of our own seeing, and begin to allow into our consciousness an awareness of what it means to see. In this regard, the teachings of Don Juan on the nature of seeing in a Separate Reality, especially seeing the unfamiliar, are relevant.

> "When you see there are no longer familiar features in the world. Everything is new. Everything has never happened before. The world is incredible!"
> "Why do you say incredible, Don Juan? What makes it incredible?"
> "Nothing is any longer familiar. Everything you gaze at becomes nothong! Yesterday you didn't see. You gazed at my face and, since you like me, you noticed my glow. I was not monstrous, like the guardian, but beautiful and interesting. But you did not see me. I didn't become nothing in front of you. And yet you did well.

> And yet you did well. You took the first real step toward seeing. The only drawback was that you focused on me, and in that case I'm no better than the guardian for you. You succumbed in both instances and didn't see.
> "Do things disappear? How do they become nothing?"
> "Things don't disappear. They don't vanish, if that's what you mean; they simply become nothing and yet they are still there." [13]

In a number of installations in contemporary art, which utilize the empty space and light of a given environment and depict no things, we are given no choice but to see nothing, to focus on nothing, and then to have the paradoxical experience of seeing that nothing is full of perceptual events.

[redacted]. It appears [redacted] that focused awareness of the act of seeing is a prerequisite for transcendental experience in various spiritual traditions. The Buddhists' Noble Eightfold Path includes "Right Mindfulness" (or Attentiveness) to the activities of the body, sensations and feelings, activities of the mind, and ideas, thoughts, conceptions and things. Simply to experience, or to think, is insufficient unless it is done with awareness. That there are various levels of perception is indicated by Christ, also, "that seeing they may see and not perceive; and hearing they may hear and not understand." (St. Mark 4: 12) implying that seeing can be blind without focused awareness. With Wittgenstein, we ask

> 85. But can I believe that I see and be blind, or believe that I'm blind and see? [14]

With or without a spiritual context, many works by Robert Irwin, Jim Turrell, Larry Bell and others, which will be described in detail in a later chapter, provide access to a focussed awareness of perceptual processes, particularly the perception of light. That a clear seeing of light is somehow important to the human psyche is indicated not only in spiritual texts, but also in our vernacular, in expressions like "seeing the light," which implies both cognitive and intuitive "tuning in."

Particularly compelling is anthropologist Roger W. Wescott's speculation in The Divine Animal that consciousness itself may be comprised of internal bioluminescence,

> .... a literal form of light generated in, by and for the brain ..... Awareness itself may consist of the internal generation, and reception or perceptible radiation - in a word, of light. [15]

If we accept Wescott's notion of light as the fundamental stuff of our awareness, a description with which mystics concur, our task becomes to perceive this light directly, as is explicitly stated in Don Juan's teachings.

> "Yes," she continued, "we are pieces of the sun. That is why we are luminous beings. But our eyes can't see that luminosity because it is very faint. Only the eyes of a sorcerer can see it, and that happens after a lifetime struggle. [16]

Likewise in the tantric litany of the Bhairava Yamala, we learn that

> She is light itself and transcendent. Emanating from Her body are rays in thousands, two thousand, hundred thousand, ten millions, hundred millions there is no counting their great numbers. It is by and through Her that all things moving and motionless shine. It is by the light of this Devi that all things become manifest. [16a]

Experiencing the work of many contemporary artists may serve to orient our awareness toward the luminous nature of all existence.

It is technically impossible to speak of the perception of color separately from the perception of light, for color by definition is light reflected in the visible range of the electromagnetic radiation, between 380 and 760 nanometers, or between the invisible boundaries of ultravioset and infra red at the two ends of the spectrum of sunlight. However, both artists and perceptual psychologists distinguish between color as light, which can be mixed additively, and color as pigment, which is mixed subtractively. Under ideal laboratory conditions experiments mixing the projected hues of red, blue, and green, an experiment originally conducted by Newton, will produce white light. When pigments are mixed together to make various hues of paint, the process is considered subtractive because the potential for absorbing wavelenghts (or, conversely, not reflecting color) is greater when two pigments are combined than that which exists in an isolated hue. But whether we speak of color as light or color as pigment, the physical phenomenon we perceive is reflected light in differing wavelengths that are experienced as different hues.

In addition to hue, that is the location of reflected light in the visible color spectrum, the characteristics of value and saturation are also used to describe the nature of color. The so-called achromatic colors, black and white, are not found in the prismatic color spectrum, but are experienced when no colors are reflected (black), or when all colors are reflected (white). The achromatic colors can be mixed in a tonality, or value, spectrum ranging from black at one end, through a number of intermediate grays to white at the other. In subtractive mixing, add-

ing black or white to a particular hue determines its value, that is its relative lightness or darkness. On the other hand, a fully saturated color would be undiluted by either black or white; would be experienced as a pure hue, rather than a dark or light green, for example. The contrast in value, hue or saturation, between figure and ground, or object and field, will affect the quality of perceived color.

Not only do hues appear more or less intense, or saturated, depending upon how much white or black is added to them, but their perceived degree of saturation can also be radically altered by the degree of luminance in which they are seen. With increased luminance effects on color can be either a change of hue or a neutralization, decreased saturation.[17] In our own time the development of ultraviolet radiation electrically discharged by mercury vapor in fluorescent lighting has altered the nature of perceived color. Laboratory experiments have in fact determined that hues measurable under fluorescent lighting are different from those existing in the light of incandescent lamps or the sun.[18] In other words, with fluorescent lighting, which now constitutes the majority of artificial light in the world, we experience hues that have never before been observed by scientists.

Psychologists, as well as our own experiences, distinguish the perception of surface color from that of transparent color. The discrimination of surface color equates hue with the surface of a form, a yellow table top or shirt. Transparent color (sometimes described as "volume" or "illumination" color) by contrast seems to occupy space in front of colored surfaces. When creating conditions in the laboratory for the perception of color not as inherent in a surface or object, but rather as an "objectless

¶ While it has long been argued that we associate the color red with feelings of heat, fire, excitement, love; and blue with coolness, calm, quiet, these correlations have as often as not been dismissed as subjective impressions which are scientifically undemonstrable. However, in his Ph. D. dissertation Robert Gerard, a Los Angeles psychologist, recorded increased physiological activity of blood pressure, brain waves, eye blinks and other functions when subjects were exposed to red, and a decrease in the same activities when people were exposed to blue, verifying that red can in fact induce excitation and blue tranquillity.[20]

However, these responses must result in part from cultural conditioning, for in Islamic cultures green rather than red is felt to be an aggressive color.[20a]

Of course we don't need the validation of scientific data to know that color affects our moods. We need only to recall how different we feel when we wake up in the morning and see a bright, blue sky than when we see a dull, gray one. The psychological impact of color has been a major component of art forms and rituals of all cultures. From ancient Egypt to early Christian times, golden light has been a manifestation of the

Godhead, originally the sun, itself the source of all light. Early twentieth century artists like Piet Mondrian and Wassily Kandinsky have posited that certain meanings and feelings are inherent in the use of particular colors. For Mondrian the primaries, red, blue and yellow, as well as black and white, were chosen because of their purity, their unadulterated natures embodying for the artist an ideal state in the Platonic sense. Kandinsky found red warm, yellow brash, green restful, and blue evocative of the infinite. We can no longer glibly discount such speculations regarding the psychological affects of color as "merely" subjective, for the studies of Gerard and others have consistensly found objectively measurable physiological responses to the stimuli of particular colors.

Percpetual psychology tells us that the visible spectrum of light, broken by a prism into the hues of violet, blue, green, yellow, orange and red, represents only a small fraction of the entire range of electromagnetic radiation, whose invisible components include cosmic rays, gamma rays, x-rays, (ultra-violet-infra-red), FM, television, short waves, radio waves and as yet unnamed electromagnetic radiations of both higher and lower frequencies.)

No P We are not necessarily aware that in perceiving color we are actually experiencing the energy of the cosmos. As a concept this understanding is romantic, replete with symbolic and metaphoric potential. When the perception of color is intuitively experienced (as opposed to intellectually conceived of) as cosmic energy, the experience is often interpreted or described in mystical terms. Though the mystical perception of color is less fre-

quently described as mystical than is the perception of pure or colorless light, references to unearthly visions of color can be found in various spiritual traditions. Thus in the initiation rituals of Tibetan Tantric Buddhists, the Buddha Vairocana"radiates in the blue light of ethereal awareness, with which in many texts he is identified."[21] The adept's expanded or ethereal awareness is experienced in conjunction with blue light, which in turn is symbolically equated with the limitless space of the heaven.[P] In a number of mystical traditions, the mind, or consciousness, the locus and ground from which the mystical state is perceived, is likened to the sky (and the color blue) because of its expansiveness, ability to fill everything, brightness and emptiness. It was common for the domes of baptistries built in early Christian times to open at their highest points to a blue sky, on which the Baptism of Christ was depicted in shimmering mosaics.[22] Similarly in the Eastern Orthodox church the iconography of divine matter appeared in renderings of Christ's halo as three blue rays.[22] Surely it is as reasonable to speculate that the use of blue in conjunction with images of divine beings or illumination could have as easily derived originally from an experiential vision as from a metaphorical one. Whether or not these mystical perceptions of color originate from the inner eye or the outer world becomes a moot point in many spiritual practices whose manifestations of deities, invoked by ritualistic and meditative activities, are experienced as literally present, though markedly different in quality from ordinary sensory experience.

> Thoughts being things, the yogin, by use of visualization yogically directed, causes his mentally created images of protecting deities to assume concrete form on the fourth dimensional, or psychic plane.[23]

In mystical texts, it is not just the color blue that can assume divine properties, but various hues have symbolic identities with cosmic forces. For the Gnostics, God the Father is blue, the Son yellow (like the sun), and God the Holy Ghost red.[24] Large wquares of red, blue, yellow and white are painted on the walls and pillars of Romanesque churches in simulation of precious stones, whose transparent colored light was considered to be more like divine light than were the colors of ordinary materials.[25] In the esoteric teachings of Tibet, the sounds of sacred syllables are equated with specific colors of radiant light - Om with clear white,[26] Hum with deep blue, Tran with yellow, Hrih with red, and Ah with green. During meditative practices the colors first arise from the sounds as light and subsequently assume the forms of different Buddhas.[27] This synaesthetic association of particular hues with particular sounds in Tibetan Buddhism is also found in the 20th century color theories articulated by Kandinsky,who had a mystical temperament and also experienced spontaneous color visions.[28]

In a secular context, gazing into the limitless expanse of a clear, blue sky often produces feelings of well-being at the very least, and, not uncommonly, ecstatic experience.[29] Surely the description of fusion with the sky which Merleau-Ponty, the phenomenological philospher, gives us suggests a sense of ecstasy.

> As I contemplate the blue of the sky I am not set over against it as an acosmic subject; I do not possess it in thought, or spread out towards it some idea of blue such as might reveal the secret of it, I abandon myself to it and plunge into this mystery, it 'thinks itself within me,' I am the sky itself as it is drawn together and unified, and as it begins to exist for itself; my consciousness is saturated with this limitless blue.[30]

No P In her book documenting the occurence and characteristics of ecstatic experience, Marghanita Laski notes that works of art can act as triggers to ecstatic experience, as well as religion, nature, sex, drugs and other circumstances. In each case the meaning of the event for the individual - whether is is sensed as aesthetic, spiritual, sexual, or something else - is related to one's personal psychological make-up and intent. I have experienced ecstatic states, in the sense of feeling wonder, awe, joyousness, a tingling of the body, heightened sensory experience and a loss of self or merging with everything else, in a number of different situations, in nature, art, sex and meditation. The character of these experiences that arise from the perception of art and of nature is qualitatively identical. In each case the experience has an aesthetic component, a sense of beauty, and originates from an intention to focus with perceptual awareness on the sensory material that is present. For me the only experiential difference between an aesthetic experience of nature and of art is that of context.

We see that contemporary artists interested in creating illusions of colored light floating in space, light unattached to objects, are combining sophisticated theories of perception and technological developments such as fluorescent lights, acrylic paints or transparent plastics, successsfully to present color in unaccustomed perceptual situations. To these mysterious and sensuous perceptual fields of disembodied color we can respond with both sensual pleasure and profound awe. Such uncommon percpetual experiences can also provide rich insights into our own self nature. The new aesthetic conditions for ex-

periencing color, whether the luminous hues of Rothko's paintings or the fluorescent fields of Dan Flavin's, Bruce Nauman's or Hap Tivey's installations, find parallels in spontaneous experiences of natural phenomena, in the laboratory-produces phenomena of Katz's film color and in mystical visions of radiant color.

FOOTNOTES

Chapter 1

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, Remarks on Colour, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press) p. 21e.

2. Mark Rothko, Mark Rothko, (New York, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1978), pp. 62-63.

2a. Wassily Kandinsky, "Reminiscences," in Modern Artists on Art, Robert L. Herbert, editor, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, Prentice Hall, Inc., 1964), p. 29.

3. Jasper Johns, "Sketchbook Notes," reproduced in Pop Art Redefined, John Russell and Suzi Gablik, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969), pp. 84-84, originally published in Art and Literature 4, Spring, 1965.

4. John Grinder and Richard Bandler, The Structure of Magic II, (Palo Alto, Science and Behavior Books, Inc., 1976), pp. 6-9.

5. K. von Fieandt and I.K. Moustgaard, op. cit., p. 55.

6. W. H. Doubelle, M. G. Mladejovsky, J. P. Cirvin, "Artificial Vision for the Blind: Electrical Stimulation of Visual Cortex offers hope for a functional Prothesis," Science, Vol. 183, No. 4123, 1 February, 1974, pp. 440-443.

7. H. P. Roffwarg, et al, "Dream Imagery: Relationship to Rapid Eye Movements of Sleep," The Archives of General Psychiatry, No. 7, pp. 235-258, 1962, and A. Richardson, Mental Imagery, (New York, Springer Publishing Co., 1969), p. 31, quoted in Mike Samules, M.D., and Nancy Samuels, Seeing with the Mind's Eye, The History, Techniques and Uses of Visualization, (New York and Berkeley, Random House Inc. and The Bookworks, 1975), p. 57.

8. V. Neisser, "The Processes of Vision," reproduced in A. Richardson, Perception, Mehcanism and Models, (San Francisco, W. H. Freeman and Co., 1972) and quoted in Samuels and Samuels, op. cit., p. 57.

9. J. Eccles, "The Physiology of Imagination," reproduced in A. Gatz, Altered States of Awareness, (San Francisco, W.H. Freeman and Co.,), 1972, p. 37.

10. Samuels and Samuels, op. cit., p. 59.

11. Joseph Dabney Bettis, ed., The Phenomenology of Religion, (New York and Evanston, Harper and Row, 1969), p. 8.

12. Robert Irwin, lecture at State University of New York, Purchase, April 1979.

13. Carlos Castaneda, A Separate Reality, (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1971), p. 194.

14. Wittgenstein, op. Cit., p. 13e.

15. Roger W. Wescott, The Divine Animal, (New York, Funk and Wagnalls, 1969), p.

16. Carlos Castaneda, The Second Ring of Power, (New York, Simon and Schuster, A Touchstone Book, 1977), p. 137.

16a. Quoted in Ajit Mookerjee, Tantra Art (Basle, Paris, New Delhi, published by Ravi Kumar, distributed by Random House, Inc. ~~1966~~ 1971/2), p. 39.

17. Lloyd Kaufman, Sight and Mind, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1974,) pp. 197-8.

18. K. von Fieandt and I.K. Moustgaard, op. cit., p. 179.

19. Ibid., p. 177.

19a. Richard Friedenthal, Goethe, His Life and Times, (Cleveland and New York, The World Publishing Company, 1965) pp. 392, 400.

20. Gerard, R. "Differential Effects of Colored Lights on Psychophysiological Functions," American Psychology, 13:340.

20.a Friedenthal, op.cit., p. 401.

21. Detlef Ingo Lauf, Secret Doctrines of the Tibetan Books of the Dead, (Boulder and London, Shambala, 1977), p. 106.

22. Patrik Reuterswärd, "What Color is Divine Light?" in Light. edited by Thomas B. Heww and John Ashbery, (New York, Collier Books, Art News Series, 1969), p. 123.

23. W. Y. Evans-Wentz, Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines, (London, Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 179.

24. Mike Samuels, M.D. and Nancy Samuels, op. cit., p. 93.

25. Reuterswärd, op. cit., p. 104.

26. The concept of clear white is one that Wittgenstein finds untenable.

> 23. "White water is inconceivable, etc. " That means we cannot describe (e.g. paint), how something white and clear sould look, and that means: we don't know what description, portrayal, these words demand of us. Ibid., p. 5e.
>
> 146. A body that is actually transparent can, of course, seem white to us: but it cannot seem white and transparent. p. 36e.
>
> 153. We don't say of something which looks transparent that it looks white. p. 36e.

It is possible either that the tantric visions can include something that is both transparent and white, or that the translation has not been completely accurate.

27. Lauf, op., cit., pp. 105-108.

28. Wassily Kandinsky, "~~Reminiscences," in Modern Artists on Art, Robert L. Herbert, editor, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, Prentice Hall, Inc., 1964),~~ op.cit., pp. 23-24, 33.

29. Marghanita Laski, Ecstasy, (New York, Greenwood Press, 1968), pp. 428, 439-40, 470-81.

30. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), p. 214.

acquired is merely the beginning of a new acquisition. In this way, the notion of change, which is essential to the human condition, can take on a wholly positive aspect.

By a reversal of values, the constant change of the physical world was seen as a real immobility; so too here, permanence in good becomes, paradoxically, the principle of authentic change. He says:

> Here we have a very great paradox: motion and stability are the same. For usually speaking, one who is rising is not standing still, and the man who is standing still is not rising. But here he arises precisely because he is stationary. This means that a man advances farther on the path of perfection precisely insofar as he remains fixed and immovable in good. . . . It is like men who try to climb through sand. It does not matter whether they take big strides or not; they waste their effort. For their feet constantly slip to the bottom with the sand, and so despite all their energy, they make no progress whatsoever. But if, in the words of the Psalmist, a man drags his feet from the mire of the pit and sets them firmly upon the rock, . . . the more steadfast and unshakable he becomes in good, so much the more quickly will he accomplish his course. His very stability becomes as a wing in his flight towards heaven; his heart becomes winged because of his stability in good.[140]

We have thus reached the most important intuition of all of Gregory's mystical theology. The wings of the Dove refer to the participation in the divine life; they are the entire posi-

13. *The Grace of the Spirit* (*On Virginity*, 46.364A–369B)

Those who take a very unreflecting view of reality perceive merely surface appearances, as, for example, of a person, or of anything else they may come in contact with. They do not go beyond what they see. What they have seen is external mass; and yet they feel that this is sufficient, that this is all there is to know about the person.

But the man with the trained, clear-sighted mind will not let his eyes have the complete say in his perception of reality. He does not stop with the external phenomena; he does not think that what he cannot see does not exist. He penetrates into the nature of the soul and the qualities that are inherent in bodies. He scrutinizes these in themselves as well as in their context. First he abstracts each quality by itself; and then he considers all of them in their harmonious unity and their mutual relationship in the actual substance.

So it is with the study of beauty. The man of imperfect intelligence, when he sees an object marked by external beauty, draws the inference that the object is also beautiful within because it happens to exercise a pleasurable attraction on his senses. He does not penetrate any deeper into the matter. But another person, whose mind's eye has been purified, when he sees such phenomena, despises them: they are merely the material on which the archetype of beauty operates. And he uses what he sees merely as a step towards the vision of that spiritual beauty whose communication is the ultimate reason why all other things are rightly called beautiful.

The majority of men, who live their lives in such crass

that was one of his favorites.[1] It means for him, as it meant for Paul, a "straining" Godward that is bestowed upon one by God Himself. It is the *pondus ad sursum* of St. Augustine—but experienced. It is a continual movement, a continuous slaking of thirst where every assuagement awakens a deeper thirst, and every pleasure a more exquisite pain.

Did Gregory truly experience this? Or is he merely providing a doctrinal conclusion under the guise of the personal, much as, it seems, Plotinus does? He would appear to have experienced it. *Epektasis* is a concept wholly counter to the doctrines of the Stoics, of Philo, of Plotinus, and of Origen upon which he draws for many details of his own doctrinal system. And, further, one can see, throughout his writings, his system assuming its distinctive form in continuity with that early, basic experience.

TEXTS[2]

The path of those who rise to God is . . . unlimited. But how does the grace that the soul continually achieves become in turn the principle of a higher good? From the words spoken to the bride, we should have supposed that there would be a halt in her progress towards the heights. For after such an assurance of perfection, what more could anyone hope for? But then we realize that she is still inside and has not yet gone out of doors; she does not yet enjoy that vision *face to face*, but is still making progress in her participation in good merely by the sounds she hears.

[1] Philippians 3:13.

[2] From Jean Daniélou, S.J., ed., *From Glory to Glory*, translated by Herbert Musurillo, S.J. (New York-London, 1961-1963).

Now the lesson we are taught here is that for those who are ever advancing towards higher things there applies the saying of the Apostle: *If any man think that he knoweth any thing, he hath not yet known as he ought to know* (1 Corinthians 8:2). For up to this point, the soul is aware of only so much as she has understood. Yet what she still does not know is infinitely more than what she has comprehended. That is why, though the Bridegroom often reveals Himself to the soul, she never sees Him directly, though He keeps assuring the bride by His voice that she will.

To make this idea a little clearer, I shall illustrate it by a comparison. It is just as if you could see that spring which Scripture tells us rose from the earth at the beginning in such quantities that it watered the entire face of the earth (Genesis 2:10 ff.). As you came near the spring you would marvel, seeing that the water was endless, as it constantly gushed up and poured forth. Yet you could never say that you had seen all the water. How could you see what was still hidden in the bosom of the earth? Hence no matter how long you might stay at the spring, you would always be beginning to see the water. For the water never stops flowing, and it is always beginning to bubble up again.

It is the same with one who fixes his gaze on the infinite beauty of God. It is constantly being discovered anew, and it is always seen as something new and strange in comparison with what the mind has already understood. And as God continues to reveal Himself, man continues to wonder; and he never exhausts his desire to see more, since what he is waiting for is always more magnificent, more divine, than all that he has already seen. So too in our text the bride is in wonder and amazement at what she is beginning to see, yet she never, for all that, puts an end to her yearning for further vision.

Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one: for my head is full of dew, and my locks with the drops of night. Our interpretation will help you to grasp the meaning of this text. Moses' vision of God began with light; afterwards God spoke to him in a cloud. But when Moses rose higher and became more perfect, he saw God in the darkness.

Now the doctrine we are taught here is as follows. Our initial withdrawal from wrong and erroneous ideas of God is a transition from darkness to light. Next comes a closer awareness of hidden things, and by this the soul is guided through sense phenomena to the world of the invisible. And this awareness is a kind of cloud, which overshadows all appearances, and slowly guides and accustoms the soul to look towards what is hidden. Next the soul makes progress through all these stages and goes on higher, and as she leaves below all that human nature can attain, she enters within the secret chamber of the divine knowledge, and here she is cut off on all sides by the divine darkness. Now she leaves outside all that can be grasped by sense or by reason, and the only thing left for her contemplation is the invisible and the incomprehensible. And here God is, as the Scriptures tell us in connection with Moses: *But Moses went to the dark cloud wherein God was.*[3]

But what now is the meaning of Moses' entry into the darkness and of the vision of God that he enjoyed in it? . . . The sacred text is here teaching us that . . . . as the soul makes progress, and by a greater and more perfect concentration comes to appreciate what the knowledge of truth is, the more it approaches this vision, and so much the more does it see that the divine nature is invisible. It thus leaves all surface appearances, not

[3] *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Sermon 11; Daniélou, *op. cit.*, pp. 245-247.

only those that can be grasped by the senses but also those which the mind itself seems to see, and it keeps on going deeper until by the operation of the spirit it penetrates the invisible and incomprehensible, and it is there that it sees God. The true vision and the true knowledge of what we seek consists precisely in not seeing, in an awareness that our goal transcends all knowledge and is everywhere cut off from us by the darkness of incomprehensibility. Thus that profound evangelist, John, who penetrated into this luminous darkness, tells us that *no man hath seen God at any time* (John 1:18), teaching us by this negation that no man—indeed, no created intellect—can attain a knowledge of God.[4]

The soul that does see [God's beauty] by some divine gift and inspiration, retains his ecstasy unexpressed in the secret of his consciousness. . . . The great David rightly shows us how impossible this is. Lifted out of himself by the Spirit, he glimpsed in that blessed ecstasy God's infinite and incomprehensible beauty. . . . And though yearning to say something which would do justice to his vision, he can only cry out . . . : *Every man is a liar*.[5]

This is indeed a strange sleep and foreign to nature's custom. In natural sleep the sleeper is not wide awake, and he who is wide awake is not sleeping. Sleeping and waking are contraries, and they succeed and follow one another. But in this case there is a strange and contradictory fusion of opposites in the same state. For *I sleep and my heart watcheth.*

What meaning ought we to take from these words?

Sleep is the image of death. All the body's sensory perception is suspended: in sleep, sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch do

[4] *The Life of Moses; op. cit.*, p. 118.
[5] *On Virginity; op. cit.*, p. 34.

not perform their function. In sleep bodily tension is relaxed, a man's worries are forgotten and fears are put to rest, anger is calmed; so long as sleep has control over the body, it relaxes the strain of those who are in grief and makes them unaware of any evil.

From what we have said, then, when the bride proudly declares, *I sleep and my heart watcheth,* we learn that she has risen higher than ever before. For indeed, so long as reason lives alone within itself and is undisturbed by the senses, it is as though the body were overcome with sleep and exhaustion. Then may it truly be said that the sight is inactive and asleep, when the soul despises such things as make an impression on the eyes of little children. . . . The contemplation of our true good makes us despise all these things; and so the eye of the body sleeps. Anything that the eye reveals does not attract the perfect soul, because by reason it looks only to those things which transcend the visible universe. So too the sense of hearing is dead and does not function, because the soul is absorbed in things that surpass speech. . . . When all of [the senses] have been lulled into inactivity by a kind of sleep, the heart's functioning becomes pure, the reason looks up to heaven, unshaken and unperturbed by the motion of the senses. . . . Thus the soul, enjoying alone the contemplation of Being, will not awake for anything that arouses sensual pleasure. After lulling to sleep every bodily motion, it receives the vision of God in a divine wakefulness with pure and naked intuition. May we make ourselves worthy of this vision, achieving by this sleep the awakening of the soul![6]

No created being can go out of itself by rational contemplation. Whatever it sees, it must see itself; and even if it thinks it is seeing beyond itself, it does not in fact possess a nature which can achieve this. And thus in its contemplation of Being

[6] *Commentary on the Song of Songs,* Sermon 10; *op. cit.,* pp. 241-242; 40-41.

it tries to force itself to transcend a spatial representation, but it never achieves it. For in every possible thought, the mind is surely aware of the spatial element which it perceives in addition to the thought content; and the spatial element is, of course, created. Yet the Good that we have learned to seek and to cherish is beyond all creation, and hence beyond all comprehension. Thus how can our mind, which always operates on a dimensional image, comprehend a nature that has no dimension, especially as our minds are constantly penetrating, by analysis, into things which are more and more profound. And though the mind in its restlessness ranges through all that is knowable, it has never yet discovered a way of comprehending eternity in such wise that it might place itself outside of it, and go beyond the idea of eternity itself and that Being which is above all being. It is like someone who finds himself on a mountain ridge. Imagine a sheer, steep crag, of reddish appearance below, extending into eternity; on top there is this ridge which looks down over a projecting rim into a bottomless chasm. Now imagine what a person would probably experience if he put his foot on the edge of this ridge which overlooks the chasm and found no solid footing nor anything to hold on to. This is what I think the soul experiences when it goes beyond its footing in material things, in its quest for that which has no dimension and which exists from all eternity. For here there is nothing it can take hold of, neither place nor time, neither measure nor anything else; it does not allow our minds to approach. And thus the soul, slipping at every point from what cannot be grasped, becomes dizzy and perplexed and returns once again to what is connatural to it.[7]

Along the seacoast you may often see mountains facing the sea, sheer and steep from top to bottom, while a projection at

[7] *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, Sermon 7; *op. cit.*, pp. 127-128.

the top forms a cliff overhanging the depths. Now if someone suddenly looked down from such a cliff to the depths below he would become dizzy. So too is my soul seized with dizziness now as it is raised on high by this great saying of the Lord, *Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God.* . . . But *no man hath seen God at any time,* says the great John. . . . This then is the steep and sheer rock that Moses taught us was inaccessible, so that our minds can in no way approach it. For every possibility of apprehension is excluded by the words: *No man can see the Lord and live.*[8]

In order to have us understand its profoundest doctrine, the Scriptures use as a symbol that which is the most violent of all our pleasurable inclinations, I mean the passion of love. Thus we are meant to understand that the soul that contemplates the inaccessible beauty of the divine nature falls in love with it in much the same way as the body is attracted towards things that are connatural with it. But here the entire disturbance of the soul has been transformed into impassibility, all carnal passion is extinguished in us and the soul burns with love by the sole flame of the Spirit.[9]

The soul, having gone out at the word of her Beloved, looks for Him but does not find Him. . . . In this way she is, in a certain sense, wounded and beaten because of the frustration of what she desires, now that she thinks that her yearning for the Other cannot be fulfilled or satisfied. But the veil of her grief is removed when she learns that the true satisfaction of her desire consists in constantly going on in her quest and never ceasing in her ascent, seeing that every fulfillment of her desire

[8] *On the Beatitudes,* Sermon 6; *op. cit.,* pp. 42-43.
[9] *Commentary on the Song of Songs,* Sermon 1; *op. cit.,* p. 44.

continually generates a further desire for the Transcendent. Thus the veil of her despair is torn away and the bride realizes that she will always discover more and more of the incomprehensible and unhoped for beauty of her Spouse throughout all eternity. Then she is torn by an even more urgent longing, and . . . she communicates to her Beloved the dispositions of her heart. For she has received within her God's special dart, she has been wounded in the heart by the point of faith, she has been mortally wounded by the arrow of love.[10]

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Translations

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Studies

The fundamental approach to Gregory's mystical doctrine is to contrast it with Platonism upon which, however, he was so largely de-

[10] *Commentary on the Song of Songs,* Sermon 12; *op. cit.,* p. 45.