

The Secret

The odd thing is that the Secret had not been lost long ago; despite the vicissitudes of the world, despite wars and exoduses, it extends, in its tremendous fashion, to all the faithful. One commentator has not hesitated to assert that it is already instinctive.

Jorge Luis Borges, "The Sect of the Phoenix"

And yellow was the multiplying sand,
Each golden grain spat life into its fellow.

Dylan Thomas, "From Love's First Fever to Her Plague"

In his song "Solsbury Hill," Peter Gabriel describes an encounter—presumably autobiographical—with what the strange German mystic Jacob Boehme once called "sensuous speech": the idiom of animals, plants, and nature that existed, according to Christian myth, before man's fall.

Gabriel tells how he climbs Solsbury Hill one night and unexpectedly encounters the miraculous. He sets the scene simply enough: the city lights are visible below him in the distance; the wind is blowing; and time seems for a moment to stand still. Then suddenly an eagle appears out of the night sky and sweeps down near the ephebe.

"He was something to observe," the singer explains, and as he comes still closer, Gabriel hears a voice. "Standing, stretching every nerve," like an American Indian youth on a vision quest, the singer tells us he "Had to listen, had no choice." The "information" the eagle imparts to the singer requires him to "trust imagination," and yet he makes the most ordinary of requests: "Son," he said "Grab your things, I've come to take you home."

But he does not honor the request. He returns instead to the desecrated, secular world of his ordinary experience and forgets or denies what he has seen:

To keep in silence I resigned
My friends would think I was a nut
Turning water into wine
Open doors would soon be shut.

In Joseph Campbell's terminology, he has "refused the call." Fearing ostracism in an age dedicated to the "eradication of mystery" (B.F. Skinner's definition of the function of science), the visionary witness continues his quotidian life, until one day the eagle's message, always present at the periphery of his thoughts, returns in its full power, jolting him out of the mundane. When it does, he ponders at first "Which connection I should cut": his ties to the "real" world or his indebtedness to this imaginal, preternatural emissary.

He chooses to be faithful to his vision and begins to sever quickly its links to the ordinary world. By doing so he becomes "part of the scenery," he tells us, and the song's final verse invites us to "Watch my empty silhouette," as he evidently follows the eagle back into that invisible world of nature which Rilke liked to call "The Open," which man in his "existence" (a word which means literally "to stand outside") has shunned.

I stood up to my knees in a shallow, gurgling stream in the middle of a scene which, though it was within two hundred yards of a large shopping center, might have passed for a setting in the wild. Neither the mall nor an adjoining apartment complex were visible from my vantage point—only a rough hewn, imitation covered bridge spanning the stream—and I began to gradually lose myself in the scene. I found myself staring meditatively at the water flowing beneath me. The heat of that Florida spring day, the mid-afternoon brightness of the sun—how full of light the world seemed!—and the rapid movement of the clear stream all contributed to making the mud and the silt covering the bottom powerfully vivid and present to my gaze. My eyes felt as though they were pushed open by some strange force in order to absorb, in an ever expanding dilation, every facet of the visible. It was as if I had never seen clearly before, as if my eyes had always been partly closed.

I glanced away for a moment from the creek bed toward the nearby trees—live oaks, dripping with Spanish moss—and noticed that several crows had just alighted in branches directly overlooking my stationary position twenty feet away. What was I to them, I wondered? What do they see when they see me?

Then my eyes returned, their saccadic movements having tacitly noted—doing their job, as usual—the presence of the birds, to again stare at the gestalt of water and mud at my feet.

An indefinite amount of time passed as I stood transfixed, fascinated by the play of the creek below me. Once, during that eternity, I remember that I again

glanced quickly away to look upward at the sky, where clouds passed by—as if captured in time-lapse photography—through the deepest blue.

Then, without my commanding it and without even my immediate realization, I found myself on my knees in the mud (a posture natural enough for a fallen Catholic), my hands folded in instinctive prayer. The muscular coordination of the posture had gone unused for so many years, yet at that moment seemed so natural. The streaming water and soft silt had simply demanded it of me, had summoned me to worship, and I responded in a way indescribably more real than all the nun-enforced, arduous genuflections of my youth.

The spot before my eyes, I thought, seemed like an aleph. Through it I saw, all at once, smelled, tasted, heard, felt the flow of the stream, this miniaturized Tao. It was as if it telescoped, in its completely earthly, implicate order, the motions of eternity. I had, I saw, kneeled to bless it, this angelic being with which I and my species had long wrestled—this Earth.

What woke me from my trance, I do not know for certain. My eyes began to pivot about, freeing themselves from total immersion in the stream. The wisdom contained within them—in their completely tacit adjustment and accommodation to the complexity of the visible—was greater than my own; they knew that the hold of the Aleph upon me must be broken before, like Semele in the Greek myth, I disintegrated face-to-face with its majesty. They turned away, turned to the woods, where the birds had landed, and closed protectively on the effulgence of day.

But the light would not be stopped. The scene continued to present itself. With my eyes shut tight, the trees, the birds, the creek winding off into the nearby woods, all remained immediately present before my inner eye, as in those Rene Magritte paintings where the images on a canvas form a stationary continuum with the surrounding world, but alive, in motion, and undeniably a vision of the "real" world.

And then the crows spoke to me. As the spirits of the place, its laral guardians, they warned me I should leave, that I was not safe or welcome. I nodded in agreement, grateful for their concern and anxious to respond. I was out of my element, they informed me, here for a moment in this raw world. I opened my eyes then onto a scene which did not change from the one present to my closed-eye vision. I arose from my knees and crawled out of the stream. Something in me found and donned the tennis shoes I had left on the bank.

The mud in which I knelt, I know now, was—as Annie Dillard has informed me—an emanation of what esoteric Christianity commonly called "Holy the Firm," a primordial substance, "in touch with the Absolute at base," the "ultimate ground of every root." Although it existed in North Florida, the mud in which I had genuflected must have been seen by them as well, actually seen, but more predisposed to metaphor than I—who take myself to be a practicing phenomenologist—they had converted their glimpses of the world's aseity into a transcendental metaphorical substance and neglected its sensual reality. But my vision created, nonetheless, a new believer in an ancient tradition: a member of what Borges has described as the "sect of the Phoenix," whose sacred rites require, I was pleased to learn, not only cork, wax, and gum arabic for proper performance, but silt as well, and in whose literature—a jubilant praise of life—appear the lines:

May the Nine firmaments know that God
Is as delightful as cork and muck.

And my communication with the birds? It would not have seemed odd to the ancient Greeks, who were directed to build a shrine at Dodona by a pigeon, lately arrived from Egypt, a shrine in which not only the movements of the birds, but the very rustling of the oak leaves hermetically conveyed the messages of Zeus. It would not have been a surprise to Wallace Stevens, who knew that a "A man and a woman/are one./A man and a woman and a blackbird/are one," and described a man (perhaps himself) who

rode over Connecticut
In a glass coach.
Once a fear pierced him,
In that he mistook
The shadow of his equipage
For blackbirds.

Nor would it have surprised Rainer Maria Rilke, who described in his autobiographical "An Experience"

that time in that other southern garden when a birdcall in the open and in his inner consciousness were one, when it did not, as it were, break on the barrier of his body, but gathered both together into an undivided space, in which there was only one region of the purest, deepest consciousness, mysteriously protected.

When I understood the commands of the crows that day, my eyes were already closed, and Rilke, as a result of his experience, attempted as well to shut off his most dominant sense in order to better comprehend the sensations flowing into him.

On that occasion he had closed his eyes, so that he might not be confused by the contour of the body in such a generously granted experience, and infinity passed into him from all sides in so familiar a manner that he could believe he felt within him the gentle presence of the stars which had now appeared.

Birds, ethologists inform us, possess a nearly universal signal system by which they warn each other of an approaching enemy. Two distinctly different calls, understandable by nearly all birds, regardless of species differences, indicate "enemy on the ground" or "enemy in the air." Had I, in my closed-eye vision, inexplicably intercepted such signals, perhaps even reacted to them, like any sensible bird, by my flight from the stream? But if such were the case, what enemy were they warning of? Was it not me? Did I flee from myself then, from my biologically disastrous ecstasy in the creek? If I had been discovered at that moment by other men, they would surely have thought me mad.

Like Gabriel's persona, I have kept my experience almost to myself. Yet it has informed nearly every act I have performed since that day and nearly every word I have written. That stream and those crows were my benefactors; they gave to me my life's work; they were (to borrow a metaphor from Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*) my "seed crystal." Since that day, I have tried to be their spokesman, not to disappear into the scenery with them, but rather to point the way toward the sacred invisibility of that instinctive world order from which they beckoned. Like the Sioux holy man Black Elk, the recipient of a powerful vision as a youth that he could not make known until old age, I understand the crucial fact "that a man who has had a vision is not able to use the power of it until after he had performed the vision on Earth for the people to see.