Connotations
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Paradise Remembered in Some Poems and Paintings

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Let us begin at the crossroads where place, language, memory, and mind intersect, as Keats imagines, or reimagines. Specifically, with finitude suddenly catapulted to the 2nd, 3rd, or nth power, that is, with what used to be known as the experience of the sublime:

1. Keats, "On First Looking into Chapman' s Homer"

> Much have I travell' d in the realms of gold,
> And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
> Round many western islands have I been
> Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.
> Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
> That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne;
> Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
> Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
> Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
> When a new planet swims into his ken;
> Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
> He star'd at the Pacific—and all his men
> Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—
> Silent, upon a peak in Darien.[1]

If, as Goethe wrote in his *Italienische Reise*,[2] things will speak to us only when we take a close look at them, we might best begin an exploration of the temporal and linguistic paradoxes of an original remembering by paying attention to the modalities of place in this poem. I say exploration because we will be covering a vast terrain, a terra incognita of a peculiarly trans-spatial and trans-temporal sort. Keats writes that he had often heard of one particular trans-spatial and trans-temporal place ruled by Homer.

As we already know, the paradoxes of place are multiple as is shown by the deictics "this," "that," "here," and "there," which refer to a uniquely linguistic reality in a world which knows nothing of time and space. So, I will remark only:

(1) that this (Keats's, Chapman's, Homer's) expansive place is linguistic, part of the cognitive landscape made possible by, or constructed by, language;

(2) that all places are linguistic realities, as much as cognitive or geographical ones—if not more so;

(3) that this particularly expansive place Keats writes of is the place of Homeric language—more specifically, the place of epic origin, ruled by the father of Western epic.

Keats's visit to this place was anticipated by the public relations machinery of canon-formation and the not quite distinct educational system, what Louis Althusser termed the Ideological State Apparatus,[3] as well as by that great abstraction, the *soi-disant* neoclassical age of poetry which preceded his own. Keats's reaction to this programmatic visit to the classics was like that of an astronomer who finds the new planet his mathematics indicate must exist, Platonism regnans, but which has hitherto escaped empirical detection; or like that of an intrepid colonial adventurer who discovered an ocean that his mental maps had not prepared him for—although that rearrangement of mapped space was subsequently figured into the now rather infra-sublime reality of the Pacific ocean.

That is, Keats had heard of the significance of Homer, as all literate Westerners must, but was unprepared for the impact this wide expanse would make upon him—despite the fact that he had been well-prepared in advance by literature's public relations department for an epic encounter with the origin of epic. The place of epic origin was already mapped out for him—and here I annotate my paradoxical theme, that all places we visit for the first time are revisitings—but when he finally arrived there he was rendered wildly silent, so wild at heart that no words could emerge at that punctual moment of origin sprung from other origin—the place revisited had already been anticipated, and found far less than lacking, by many an ephebe before Keats who was alert enough to feel the shock of recognition that, Melville says, travels the circle of genius round.[4]

2. Henry Vaughan: 1621-95

I announce these dates so that historicists of both the critical and non-critical variety will observe, with pleasure or annoyance, that I am moving in a nonlinear fashion.

As I have already indicated, sign and referent are impossible to disentangle, even for an Ariadne, two sides of the same sheet of paper as de Saussure said of the signifier and signified;[5] or, as Nietzsche acidly put it, we have no right to assert that anything external, such as a *Ding-an-sich*, anchors our phenomenalizations, although an ancient cultural prejudice keeps literature students of common sense immune to the challenges of this paradox.[6] Places are inevitably psychic, symphonies of hill, dale, street, steeple, dome, river, sky, and forest—collections of signs that speak to us deeply of those who have written upon the landscape before us, or of those gods we imagine to have written upon the landscape long before we arrived. As Isidore of Seville said, the entire world is a giant book written by the finger of God.[7]

All places are mental places, and, we eventually come to understand, linguistic topoi. Which is not to say that they are mere commonplaces, although Wordsworth, democratic as he once was, would attempt to re-enact their commonality for our species. We will deal with Wordsworth later, great master of the humanizing deictics "here," and "there," "then," and "now." For now we treat Henry Vaughan's unforgettable exclamation, delivered to his readers with an abruptness that seems a higher form of rudeness.

They are all gone into the world of light!
  And I alone sit lingring here;
Their very memory is fair and bright,
  And my sad thoughts doth clear.

It glows and glitters in my cloudy brest
  Like stars upon some gloomy grove,
Or those faint beams in which this hill is drest,
  After the Sun's remove.

I see them walking in an Air of glory,
  Whose light doth trample on my days:
My days, which are at best but dull and hoary,
  Meer glimering and decays.

O holy hope! and high humility,
  High as the Heavens above!
These are your walks, and you have shew'd them me
  To kindle my cold love,

Dear, beauteous death! the Jewel of the Just,
  Shining nowhere, but in the dark;
What mysteries do lie beyond thy dust;
  Could man outlook that mark!

He that hath found some fledg'd birds nest, may know
  At first sight, if the bird be flown;
But what fair Well, or Grove he sings in now,
  That is to him unknown.

And yet, as Angels in some brighter dreams
  Call to the soul, when man doth sleep:
So some strange thoughts transcend our wonted theams,
  And into glory peep.

If a star were confin'd into a Tomb,
  Her captive flames must needs burn there;
But when the hand that lockt her up, gives room,
  She'l shine through all the sphaere.

O Father of eternal life, and all
  Created glories under thee!
Resume thy spirit from this world of thrall
  Into true liberty.

Either disperse these mists, which blot and fill
  My perspective (still) as they pass,
Or else remove me hence unto that hill,
  Where I shall need no glass.[8]

Once again, we encounter a place of origin and destination, alpha and omega, seen through a glass, in this case the glass of poetic vision that is heartbreakingly dark. Although this is the original linguistic place, a spiritual place traditionally rendered in terms of flowing light, we can hardly fail to notice an equally strong tradition in which its prerequisite is darkness, sin, and death. The world of light glows and glitters, i.e. shines and sparkles, in an air of glory that is a rebuke to the speaker, and by extension, the reader, whose light glimmers and decays into mists of sadness and of visionlessness, the everyday least common denominator

of fallen perception. Although they have shifted referents more than once in the course of the English language (and no doubt the German), for Vaughan, if *glimmering* is intermittent and evanescent, always threatened by the approaching darkness, *glittering*, by contrast, is hardly, or barely, intermittent—barely interrupted by borders of nothingness, suggesting only bountiful light with a regular oscillation—at any rate, the opposite of a threatening darkness, a promise of redounding, refulgent light and energy, Being as perpetual Becoming. To know it is to love it, and to see it is to know it, even despite one's self.

Now this place is already revisited the first time we arrive there, although its impression upon us is only strong enough to allow us to recognize an inexpressible ineffability, a divine aphasia that occasionally bursts out in poetic language. Dust, mist, tombs, slavery, darkness, bondage are the human lot for Vaughan, even the poetic lot: were it not for moments of transcendent vision which seem to release us from slavery, one feels that for Vaughan this lot would be well nigh unendurable.

3. It seemed that way to Wordsworth, too. I draw attention to his *Immortality Ode*,[9] which I parse for our own curious purposes. Once, all was "apparelled in celestial light." No more. The curiously disturbing verb "apparelled," which suggests clothing as Adamic curse, as deception, secrecy, obfuscation, leads to the rhetorical question, "Whither is fled the visionary gleam?" Etymologically, this is Vaughan's "glimmering."[10] Apropos of "apparelled," I observe only that a visionary gleam might be merely self-induced, self-referential, that is, lacking in any real-world referent, or even reliable imaginative validity.

> Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
> The soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
> Hath had elsewhere its setting,
> And cometh from afar:
> Not in entire forgetfulness,
> And not in utter nakedness,
> But trailing clouds of glory do we come
> From God, who is our home:
> Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
> Shades of the prison-house begin to close
> Upon the growing Boy

> But he beholds the light, and whence it flows,
> He sees it in his joy;
> The Youth, who daily farther from the east
> Must travel, still is Nature's Priest,
> And by the vision splendid
> Is on his way attended;
> At length the Man perceives it die away,
> And fade into the light of common day.

This vision is not visionary in the dangerous, i.e., deceptive sense. Despite all our fallen facticity, something in our embers is not entirely blighted by everyday mechanical ratios and least common denominators. We barely glimpse, as with Vaughan, "shadowy recollections" (in Vaughan's lexicon, glimmerings, in Wordsworth's gleams, not glitterings) of the original world of entirely loveable, superhuman, light.

> Which, be they what they may,
> Are yet the fountain light of all our day.

Notice that, as with Vaughan, the imagery of powerful vision occurs in the form of a fountainhead or spring, *Grund* or *Ursprung*. (And here I draw your attention to the ideal medieval location of the fountain at the very center of the monastic grid.)[11] As a result of this return to a source anticipated by our alienation, all our seeing begins to take on a connection to the original sight, taking the form of a memory of light remembered. If the young Keats is like Cortez, the middle-aged Wordsworth is more like Vaughan, able to seize the day only in terms of glimmerings found in a vanished fountain of light. And just as a fountain depends upon air, a fountain of light, a glimmering or a glittering, depends upon darkness, figured in Vaughan and Wordsworth as death.

In Wordsworth's maieutic method, all significant earthly perception is based on a recollection of a previous life in a world of light, a memory of a memory, a fountain of light by which phenomenal reality begins to take on a noumenal existence—only here the noumenon is not the *Ding-an-sich*, but is located in the supplementary vision which constitutes the full meaning of a world of defective signs, signs that require death and loss in order for us to work to reconstitute their original effulgence. Before the Fall into darkness, doubt, meaninglessness, we must locate Paradise remembered.

4. I have long preferred earthly light of the Southern variety. I have lived in Alabama for the last quarter century, interrupted by summers in Aix, in the chateau of the de Welles, beside the famed dolphin fountain. When I go to church, for heavenly light, it is to St. John of Malta, where a group of Dominicans have reimagined a Gregorian chant that has become world-renowned for its purity. While there I focus on the stained glass, some original, much a nineteenth-century recreation of a Middle Ages destroyed by fanaticism and war. The Middle Ages, of course, was an invention of the Romantic period, a deictic "this," "that," or "there" meant to indicate how very like the denizens of the classical period of light, and how unlike those of the ages of Papist and monastic darkness, we moderns are. Or should we say "were." (I pause here to note that the word "modern" dates from the fifth century A. D., and refers to those who wore their hair shaved, as opposed to the older logicians, who wore leonine manes.[12] Modernity always requires, and constructs, an inimical past.)

I have brought up the Church of St. John of Malta and its magnificent stained glass in order to pose a speculative question: what were medievals trying to accomplish with this technology? What were they trying to represent with stained glass? One more speculation, even through a glass darkly, if you will allow yourselves: if they had possessed modern technology, say lasers and three-dimensional holographic transmitting screens, what would medievals have constructed in the way of colored light breaking up the light of common day into myriad significant patterns? I give thanks to the semiotician errant Umberto Eco for raising this strange possibility.

5. These hypothetical questions are likely only to interest a few historicists and theorists. But I bring up these fantastic speculations, barely reined in by reason or evidence, because I believe they have already been answered in the history of art from the Impressionists through the Abstractionists. In Kandinsky, that quintessentially modern painter, I believe we can find a thread to lead us through this revisiting of the originary place of light that constitutes all significant landscape or townscape, if only by its demonic contrary.

Kandinsky was the most retrospective of painters, out of dire necessity. He was quite interested in the medieval romance world, as in *Verses Without Words* (1904). In so doing, he followed the lead of the Russian Symbolists, who looked for the chaotic present back to a past which seemed harmonious and unified. They were confronted with a contemporary fin-de-siècle culture which, they asserted, lacked the childlike wholeness and harmony Wordsworth and the New Testament so often depend upon.[13] Before the Fall into darkness, despair—or modern industrial alienation from the medieval family, farm, and craft that constitute a glimpse of heaven in Marx, Messianic Jew that he was—there was a time of harmony, integrity, oneness. It was of the utmost urgency that a saving vision be constructed if the modern world were to be endurable, that is to say, comprehensible, in terms of its exile and return from the world of harmonious light. While ill with fever as a child, Kandinsky experienced visions of what, throughout his life, he asserted to be the ultimate truth—these visions were, thank God, non-representational. Although light moved through them, no objects of the sort that surround us were evident; patterned light ruled these child dream-vision domains, a patterned light that took its force from its objectlessness, to translate the Russian *bespredmetnosht*.

Kandinsky later equated pictorial representation of the external world with materialism; only a painterly or writerly construction of pure forms, as Roland Barthes would have us say,[14] could render, or enable, spiritual vision and, thus, serve as an antidote to a world lost in the inessentials of matter, i.e., in the inessentials of the constructed linguistic and cultural code which enabled Ivan Ilych to understand the precise nature of the brocaded curtains he purchased when he thought he had finally hit the bigtime in society:

> "Our epoch is a time of tragic collision between matter and spirit," Kandinsky wrote, "and of the downfall of the purely material world view; for many, many people it is a time of terrible, inescapable vacuum, a time of enormous questions; but for a few people it is a time of presentiment or of precognition of the path to Truth."[15]

What his paintings would do, said Kandinsky, was to reconstruct "the new spiritual realm . . . the epoch of great spirituality."[16] His painting could refine the human soul, and the artist could function as Moses in pointing the way to a Promised Land they would never be allowed to dwell in. He compared himself and his fellow Symbolists to the early Christians who were trying to raise "the weakest to spiritual battle" (Ephesians 6: 11-16). Kandinsky took the right-wing Hegelian view that Christianity had incorporated the wisdom of all previous religions, cults, and philosophies. Russia herself would become the Third Rome. And the vehicle for traditio, the new traditio of the latest, and final, Rome, would be shapes of light, two dimensional evocations of three-dimensional patterns which would cause sympathetic vibrations in the soul, but which would bypass the rational, representational of intellect. Kandinsky's thinking here is strikingly like that of Walter Benjamin, who allowed himself to envision a mechanical, technological reproduction and production of works of art which would enact social revolution at a subconscious level.[17] This subconscious level would not be that of the modern advertiser, who is said to insert subliminal messages urging us to drink Pepsi, or vote for the Greens, but a purely formal rendering of the familiar world in a way which might unlock the saving power of the Messianic moment, the straight gate through which the Messiah would finally pass, the Messiah, in this instance, being a risen humanity alerted by art to the folly of its fallen perceptions, constructions, representations. The creation of art was the creation of a new world, and this struggle was reflected in Kandinsky's imagery of hurricanes, battles, floods, wars and other apocalyptic scenes, as his paintings from 1910-13 attest. Alternatively, he painted such titles as *Paradise* or *Garden of Love*, in an attempt to remove the "great dead black spot," i.e., the dark power that threatened to exile mankind from its birthright of a world of spirit into the fallen state of materialistic vision. For the seventeenth century, as for Blake, this was the great dragon that blotted out genuine perception by means of the awakened, visionary senses.

Kandinsky's painting *Black Spot I* (1912), features oppressive forms, highly abstract but vaguely insectlike, almost like the most monstrous of the denizens at the bottom of the sea, including one ravenous jawbone

or crustacean-like leg with a hideous protruding eye. Instead of the dragon imagery and hideous biomorphs of Breughel's *Fall of the Rebel Angels* and Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*, he constructed abstract shapes which conveyed the essence of those visionary topoi. On the other hand, in paintings like *Paradise* or *Garden of Love*, we see a harmonious motion to the abstract still life, which is filled with electric, palpitating, and palpable protozoa-like forms, in which the spawning quality of Being as continual, unquenchable, infinite Becoming is made manifest. A freshness deep down things,[18] a subterranean current that constitutes an unalienable human wellspring or *Ursprung*, human and animal shapes dancing in the two-dimensional space of the painting, but with a color technology painstakingly developed by Kandinsky in order to allow the three-dimensional to be perceived through painterly alternations of reds, yellows, blues, greens, blacks which alternately recede and advance from the plane of the painting. Not stained glass, which Kandinsky consciously adapted in his early paintings and illustrations, and not three-dimensional holographs, which our young compatriots at the Vienna Biennale are working on, but formal signs, nonetheless, of a world of light that transcends and enables all artistic perception.

6. I anticipate the end of my commentary with Dante's mystic rose, composed of those who have reached salvation—one petal is St. Thomas Aquinas, one St. Bernard, another, grace willing, you or I—a glowing, flowering, emblematic hymn of praise which is Dante's version of the *fons et origo*, the original pulsations of meaningful light that anchor poetic and prophetic perception in the sphere of the awakened soul. The end of this journey, however, is his complementary image of the river of light found in *Paradiso* 30:[19]

> E vidi lume in forma di rivera
> fluvido di fulgore, intra due rive
> dipinte di mirabil primavera.
>
> Di tal fiumana usc̀ian faville vive,
> e d'ogni parte si mettìen ne' fiori,
> quasi rubin che oro circunscrive. (61-66)

And I saw light in the form of a river
between two banks,
painted with miraculous springtime flowers

From this river emerged living angelic sparks
which settled all over the flowers,
like rubies set in gold.

Here we find a version of the remembered Paradise that, like the mystic rose, is eternal through its very vibrancy, and through continual change, like a river of light giving off the glitterings or glimmerings that our jewelers try to capture, if only for an instant. And here we come to an end which, I hope, is also a beginning.

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NOTES

[1]*John Keats*, ed. Elizabeth Cook (Oxford: OUP, 1990) 32.

[2]20.3.1787: "Man habe auch tausendmal von einem Gegenstande gehört, das Eigentümliche desselben spricht nur zu uns aus dem unmittelbaren Anschauen." *Goethes Werke*, Hamburger Ausgabe, ed. Erich Trunz, 3rd. ed., vol. 11 (Hamburg: Wegner, 1957) 215.

[3]Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: New Left Books, 1971) 127-86.

[4]Herman Melville, "Hawthorne and His Mosses," *New York Literary World* (August 24, 1850), rpt. in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 5th ed. (2269).

[5]Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (London: Peter Owen, 1964) 113.

[6]Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967) 307.

[7]Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiarum Libri XX* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1911) 13.

[8]*The Works of Henry Vaughan*, ed. L. C. Martin, 2nd. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1957) 483-84.

[9]*Wordsworth: Poetry and Prose*, ed. W. M. Merchant (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1967) 576-581.

[10]*OED* s. v. "gleam".

[11]On the development of technology concomitant with this ideal, see J. C. Dickinson, *Monastic Life in Medieval England* (London: Black, 1961) 5-10.

[12]See A. Souter, *A Glossary of Later Latin to 600 A. D.* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1949) s. v. "modernus".

[13]See *The Life of Vasili Kandinsky in Russian Art: A Study of "On the Spiritual in Art,"* ed. J. Bowlt and R. Long (Newtonville, MA: Oriental Research Partners, 1984) 44-48 and *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, vol. 1, ed. K. Lindsay and P. Vergo (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1982) 96-104 and 355-91.

[14]On the notion of the writerly, see Roland Barthes *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (London: Jonathan Cape, 1975).

[15]"The Death of Ivan Ilych," *The Raid and Other Stories*, trans. Louise and Aylmer Maude (Oxford: OUP, 1982) 245.

[16]On Christian aspects of Kandinsky's argument, see "Whither the New Art" and "Reminiscences / Three Pictures," *Kandinsky: Complete Writings*, 96-104; 378-79; quotation from 99.

[17]Walter Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit," *Gesammelte Schriften* I.2 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974) 471-508.

[18]The phrase is from Gerard Manley Hopkins's "God's Grandeur".

[19]Dante Alighieri, *La divina commedia*, ed. Giuseppe Vandelli, 21st ed. (Milano: Ulrico Hoepli, 1988). The English translation is my own. On the petals of the mystic rose, see cantos 31-32.