

TSPC Finding Our Way #3

Prayer as paying attention to the knowing of the senses: Evagrius and Nan Shepherd

Correcting our relationship to Egypt means honoring Sacred Ground, surrendering to the 'teaching' of the Land, training the senses to 'read' the text of the world

Evagrius' undistorted sense perception: a goal of practice

“There is a sense, then, in which the spiritual contemplation of the *logoi* of beings commences with the physical observations of the world and the formation of concepts. This establishes strong common ground between undistorted sense perception and spiritual contemplation: while sense perception is surpassed by contemplation, the latter is impossible without the former. On the basis of this connection, and in view of the empirical nature of sense perception, contemplation too is initially dependent on empiric observation.” (Konstantinovsky, p.41-2)

The actual observation of desert, of “nature,” is remarkably relevant to this graded teaching, and yet notably absent in the texts, even as the text of the Great Letter celebrates creation as writing from God to be read by us. Undistorted sense-perception is the way of reading, so that training the senses is like learning to read well. But Evagrius does not teach us how to read nature.

Nan Shepherd: Seeking Essential Knowledge, ‘The Living Mountain’

“Summer on the high plateau can be delectable as honey; it can also be a roaring scourge. To those who love the place, both are good, since both are part of its essential nature. And it is to know essential nature that I am seeking here. To know, that is, with the knowledge that is a process of living. This is not done easily nor in an hour. It is a tale too slow for the impatience of our age, not of immediate enough import for its desperate problems. Yet it has its own rare value. It is, for one thing, a corrective of glib assessment: one never quite knows the mountain, nor oneself in relation to it. However often I walk on them, these hills hold astonishment for me. There is no getting accustomed to them.”

Nan Shepherd was born near Aberdeen, Scotland, in 1893, and dies there in 1981, and during her long life she spent hundreds of days and thousands of miles exploring the Cairngorm mountains on foot. She wrote three modernist novels, but this work of prose has been relatively unknown. It was written in the last years of World War II. "Shepherd was a localist of the best kind: she came to know her chosen place closely, but that closeness served to intensify rather than limit her vision." (From Robert MacFarlane's introduction.)

*The book's chapters begin with the elemental qualities of the mountain, only introducing plant and then bird, and then animal and then human life in the later chapters. Each chapter is carefully wrought, and invites the reader into the progressive perception of a given layer of the mountain; its relationship to other land forms, its temperaments of air and moisture, light and shadow. The book progresses to the final chapters, titled, *Sleep, The Senses, and Being*. Here she starts to emphasize the senses and the body as something to be trained for a more philosophical knowing.*

From 'Sleep,' "I can teach my body many skills by which to learn the nature of the mountain. One of the most compelling is quiescence. No one knows the mountain completely who has not slept on it. As one slips over into sleep, the mind grows limpid; the body melts; perception alone remains. One neither thinks, nor desires, nor remembers, but dwells in pure intimacy with the tangible world." (90)

From 'The Senses,' "Having disciplined mind and body to quiescence, I must discipline them also to activity. The senses must be used." (96)

From 'Being,' "Here then may be lived a life of the senses so pure, so untouched by any mode of apprehension but their own, that the body may be said to think." (105)

She then describes laying on the plateau, acknowledges that there may be other things to perceive for which she lacks the sensory apparatus or training, and asserts that the buildup of this sensory knowledge is slow, day after day, moment after moment accumulated in a timescale we aren't always used to,

“...undistinguished days add their part, and now and then, unpredictable and unforgettable, come the hours when heaven and earth fall away and one sees a new creation. The many details – a stroke here, a stroke there – come for a moment into perfect focus, and one can read at last the word that has been from the beginning.

These moments come unpredictably, yet governed, it would seem, by a law whose working is dimly understood. They come to me most often, as I have indicated, waking out of outdoor sleep, gazing tranced at the running of water and listening to its song, and most of all after hours of steady walking, with the long rhythm of motion sustained until motion is felt, not merely known by the brain, as the ‘still centre’ of being...Walking this, hour after hour, the senses keyed, one walks the flesh transparent. But no metaphor, transparent, or light as air, is adequate. The body is not made negligible, but paramount. Flesh is not annihilated but fulfilled. One is not bodiless, but essential body... I have walked out of the body and into the mountain. I am a manifestation of its total life, as is the starry saxifrage or the white-winged ptarmigan.”

(106)

Other points of intersection

- Nan Shepherd’s Quiescence and training/bodily discipline like Evagrius’ *apatheia* and *praktikē*
- Evagrius, Sleep as important teacher of undistorted sense-perception likened to knowledge of God: “Just as while we are awake, we say various things about sleep, but when we have fallen asleep we learn them by experience, so too all the things that we hear about God while we are outside of him: when we are in him we will receive their demonstration by experience.” (Kephalaia Gnostika (KG,) 1.38)