

## VISIONARIES

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### Summary

The status and the role of a visionary, like those of a creative person or a magician, represent one of the oldest forms of creative behavior.

### 1. Introduction

The artist's awareness of himself as a visionary and the acknowledgement of his function by his recipients (i.e., the public, the readers, the critics) may be traced back to ancient forms of religion as well as to archaic art, which was of a syncretic nature and combined ritual, magic and prophecy. One of the most common symbols of clairvoyance was a mysterious light that could be seen or felt only by the initiates. An example of such afflatus is the Eskimoan 'kaumanek' ('a gleam', 'aha reaction'), a mysterious light felt suddenly by the angekok inside his body and making him capable of seeing in darkness and predicting future events and realities hidden from ordinary mortals. The ability to see from a very long distance, to go up to the sky and foresee spiritual truths, produced the belief that the magician has evaded the powers of the profanes' universe and shares the predestination of a higher race. Mystic afflatus played an extremely important role in old Hindu religions and was associated with the idea of Athman as the Sun and as the light of every little thing. In the Old Testament God appears before Mosaic out of a burning bush and is related to other natural phenomena of photic character (a flash of a lightning, etc.).

### 2. The Behaviour of the Visionary

A prophetic, visionary afflatus is a necessary precondition for this kind of creative work. It emphasizes the preeminence and solitary nature of a visionary, his separateness from the environment. This mark of God (or of Art) is also characteristic of the everyday life of a visionary artist. In the history of art the artist's behavior has always

been somewhat theatrical - he played the role of a prophet, of a clairvoyant. This fact dates back to ancient times and is rooted in old religions. Along with true clairvoyants there are the false ones. It is not possible to verify a mystic state or an act of communication with ultramundane forces. This state is experienced individually, and only one man in a crowd may hear the voice of the Other World. An artist's contemporaries usually recognize a prophetic gift in him by his demeanor, his conduct. The theatricality of his behavior is expressed through mystification and mummery when he tries on various guises. The visionary's theatricality usually takes the form of either of the two varieties: the 'frantic' theatricality (when he acts as a god's fool or a demoniac) and the anchoretic one (presenting him as a solitary, a hermit).

These two forms of a visionary's behavior manifest themselves in a set of definite material and verbal attributes that vary with cultural epochs. Demoniac theatricality is characterized by the utmost publicity, 'the exposure of the trick' and by the prophet's audacity; he appears before the eyes of an amazed crowd in a mesmerized state, at the moment of his contact with 'the other world' when he hears "the voices" and is imitating them. This kind of manifestation of the prophetic nature of creativity is adopted by some performing arts which are being created "right here and now" - such as the art of the orchestra conductor and the musician as well as of every artist who hides the artisan constituent of his mastership (that is, the long and painstaking preliminary work) behind an openly ecstatic action. In the theater this is exhibited in the so-called prestidigitation when an imaginative performer acts out the visions which he is dreaming right on stage and which are related to a certain theme specified by the audience. The publicity of the visionary's diabolism has as its cultural source a ritualistic and prophetic action with the stripping off clothes. A curious example of such prophetic behavior which is not recognized as sinful is given in 'The Flowers' by Francis of Assisi when the author, together with his brother Rufian, wishing 'to divine and not only foretell the future, but also disclose the mysteries of the soul and the conscience', deliver their sermon from the chair in Assisi stark naked. Jean-Arthur Rimbaud, who deliberately posed as a clairvoyant, once in a fit of creative energy tore off his clothes and threw them out of the window. However, frantic and demoniac features of a visionary are mostly revealed in his daily life and behavior. (One of the common examples is a bohemian attitude). Reflections of the afflatus inspired in a visionary in his creative solitude are fixed at both the objective and verbal levels. The artist appears before the audience like an empty shell or a vessel that has been filled with the divine afflatus and is to 'pour it out' into a work of art. The clairvoyant model of the artist's behavior more clearly reveals his psychic anomaly as an immanent part of a genius. This peculiarity of the artist defines his discord with conventional forms and laws of social conduct and his discrepancy with the approved superficial image of a 'normal' citizen. The artist is dominated by his subjective perception and experiences an utmost exertion of all his feelings at the moment of his "clairvoyance" and an extreme emptiness of his "shell" after "the voices" he has heard have subsided. As the Russian poet Marina Tsvetayeva noted, "What a void there in the heart after the harvest is reaped!"

A clairvoyant views his self as a vessel, a repository of the divine afflatus. A visionary artist realizes his urge to transcend the limits of his own personality, to leave temporarily (for the moment of absolute inspiration, at least) the province of the rational

mind. Ortega y Gasset wrote in this connection: "To live means to transcend one's own bounds."

The other of the two basic types of visionary attitude is related to the bent for reticence and secrecy: the oracle preparing himself for the contact with God is performing most secretive action in absolute solitude, far from the eyes of the mob. In cases when God addresses the chosen one in a public place, the latter hides his face in his clothes. Thus, Islamic prophets when in trance wrapped themselves in a cloak; the same custom may be observed in most of goetic rituals. This wrapping in clothes was evidently a sign of the critical psychic condition and of growing homiletic entrancement. The necessity for the visionary at the moment of his contact with a Higher Force to be hidden in a sanctuary, in darkness or in his clothes is also explained by the unattainability of this clairvoyant state for prophanes and by its glare which is dangerous for their eyes. In art, hieratic reclusion of a poet or an artist at the moment of 'the vision' takes various forms of stylization.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**Dr. Alexandr W. Belobratow** is a lecturer in the history of literature at the University of St. Petersburg and responsible for the Austria library at that university. His doctoral thesis was on the work of Robert Musil. (Robert Musil. *Methode und Roman*. Leningrad 1990.) He has published on German Enlightenment and Romantics, the literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the theory of the novel, Austrian and German novelists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Musil; Broch; L. Renn; Doderer; Kafka; J.Roth, Bernhard, Aichinger u.a.); on the reception of German literature in Russia, intercultural German studies, and cultural studies.

He is a member of the IVG, ÖGG, Internationale Robert Musil-Gesellschaft, Jura Soyfer-Gesellschaft, Internationale Alexander Lernet-Holenia-Gesellschaft, Wissenschaftlicher Beirat der Zeitschrift "Weimarer Beiträge". He was awarded the 2002 Übersetzerpreis des Bundeskanzleramtes der österreichischen Republik and the Goldenes Ehrenzeichen für Verdienste um die Republik Österreich. He has translated into Russian: Georg Trakl (Briefe); Karl Kraus (Aphorismen); Jura Soyfer („Astoria“);

Robert Musil (Essays); Joseph Roth („Die Flucht ohne Ende“); Elfriede Jelinek („Die Liebhaberinnen“; „Die Klavierspielerin“); Marianne Gruber („Zwischenstation“); Robert Menasse („Das Land ohne Eigenschaften“); Tilmann Spengler („Lenins Kopf“); Walter Benjamin (Essays).

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