

Seeing Through Reality unto God

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Abstract

The Imitation of Christ by Thomas a Kempis is one of the most translated and published work among the world literature. Though it is classified under the genus of mystical literature it may be considered a major contribution to classical and modern anthropology because of its psychological insights. Thomas uses 'imitating Christ' as a powerful formula to liberate spiritual aspirants from blindly submitting to various guidelines put into operation by social, cultural, anthropological and psychological ambience they are constantly exposed to. For Thomas, Jesus serves as a model for the person of the spirit, a fully liberated person. While we are by nature focused on self-preservation and our own position, a confrontation with the inner reality of Jesus completely breaks through our perspective and alters it once and forever. He persuades the candidates to muse a paradigm shift that will reorient and enable them to explore and enjoy the uncharted realms of human potential and possibilities.

Introduction

In 1441 Thomas a Kempis (1380-1471) finished a description of the inner journey of each Christian, which is in large part a collection of thoughts and reflections shared by the brothers and sisters of the Common Life or the movement of Modern Devotion. This collection is known by the title of the first chapter of the first book: *The Imitation of Christ*. Apart from the Bible no book is more often published in innumerable languages. It had a profound influence on Christian thought through the ages until recent times. This book belongs to the tradition of mystical literature, but it may be considered a major contribution to classical and modern anthropology because of its psychological insights.

An important field of tension that pervades the whole of *The Imitation*, is that between the external or visible reality that we can observe and hold on to, and the invisible reality of God that pervades this external reality. From the beginning of the first book until the closing of the last, Thomas points out to us that we have to look *through* things and not fixate on the outside of them, however beautiful or impressive they are. As he says in the opening of the first book:

On the Imitation of Christ and Contempt for all the World's Vanities. 'He who follows me does not walk in darkness,' says the Lord. These are the words of Christ by which we are advised to imitate his life and ways, if we desire truly to be enlightened and to be freed from all blindness of the heart. Let it therefore be our chief preoccupation to think upon the life of Jesus Christ (I,1,1).

The reality of Thomas' experience is not that the world is in darkness, but that we are unable to see the light of this world. This light becomes visible in Jesus, but just as the disciples were deaf and blind to the reality that Jesus lived out of – although they could observe it all with their own eyes – we too are unable to see what is real. The reason for this blindness is that we are not truly open to God, but before all else use reality to create security for ourselves. This should not be understood morally. Thomas is not speaking of the distinction between good and bad people here, but about people who in some way or other know themselves to be touched by God and so want to be more profoundly – more devoutly – involved with Him. These are the people whom Thomas addresses and to whom he points out the problem of our blindness. For however dearly we would like to get to know God, we can only know Him by entering into a relationship with Him. The more we enter into the intimacy of this relationship, the more we come to realize that our attachment to our social and material securities (the world) closes our eyes for this hidden reality that pervades everything.

For Thomas, the way to reach a personal relationship with God is the portrayal of Christ (*imitatio Christi*). Although this *imitatio Christi* has a material aspect, it should mainly be understood as a means of interiorizing Christ. Literal imitation can be important in this, but is certainly not sufficient. In order to understand truly Christ from within, we will have to enter into the invisible interior of his existence. We do this by *thinking upon* his life and his words in such a way that we acquire a taste for the God-relationship that pervades his life, but is not demonstrable as such. For Thomas his love for Christ and for God are consequently practically interchangeable. The person who, through the outward signs of Christ's life, manages to contemplate his heart, realizes that God is the invisible center of his existence and that we

have to entrust ourselves to God unconditionally in the same way. As he says at the end of the first chapter:

Be zealous therefore to separate your heart from the love of things which are seen, and to turn it to the things which are not seen, for those who follow their carnal nature defile their conscience, and lose the grace of God (I,1,5).

The tension between visible and invisible things is not that between the natural and the supernatural, but has to do with our self-involvement. Because we, as human beings, are vulnerable creatures, we are to a great extent guided by the logic of our urge for survival. We want to safeguard ourselves and our own position and use our surroundings to bring this about. Although a healthy self-interest is not bad, for Thomas it is empty and vain, because it keeps us trapped in our own perspective. The more we look for something to hold on to in the people and the world around us, the more they can then only be seen in their significance for us and no longer in their own independence. In other words, we are no longer free in our gaze on reality and are afraid of every infringement that can affect our own position. This is why Thomas wants to ease us away from our attachment to the visible and the material. The more we dare to surrender to God's loving dynamic in us – and in this sense become more inward and freer of ourselves – the more we can see reality in its divine mystery.

The second book is devoted explicitly to the theme of inwardness. An inward person enters into his heart in order to seek the Kingdom of God there and to prepare a place for Christ. The first chapter, "On Inner Fellowship", begins as follows:

'The Kingdom of God is within you,' says the Lord. Turn with your whole heart to God, and abandon this wretched world, and your soul will find peace (II,1,1).

In this book, too, the inwardness of entrusting oneself entirely to God is at odds with our tendency to hold on to everything that in the externality of concrete and visible reality seems to offer more security. Thomas continues:

Learn to despise that which is without, and give yourself to that which is within, and you will see the kingdom of God come in you (II,1,1).

The third book¹ deals with Holy Communion. This sacrament has great value for Thomas, because in it God's love for human beings

1 We follow recent research respecting the original sequence of the books three and four, although the English translations publish these chapters in reverse order.

is expressed. For this reason this sacrament should be received with profound love:

And surely in the saving presence of your Godhead, no unbecoming thought should arise, nor any created thing lay hold upon me, for it is not an Angel, but the Lord of Angels, whom I am about to receive as my guest. And yet there is a vast difference between the ark of the covenant with its relics, and your most pure Body with its unspeakable virtues, between those sacrifices of the law which showed in symbol that which was to be, and the true sacrifice of your Body, the consummation of all the ancient sacrifices (IV,1,5-6).

For Thomas, Communion is the consummation of all sacrifices. Yet this does not mean that merely receiving it externally is enough. Communion does not take effect of itself, but only insofar as there is a will truly to enter into this encounter with God's reality. Here, too, we see that Thomas places Communion in the field of tension between externality and inwardness. Communion is an external sign of the sacrifice of love that happens unto us, invisible for our eyes. It is thus first and foremost a reality of encounter that aims to lead us to awareness.

Many rush to different places to visit the relics of the Saints, and wonder to hear the deeds they did; they look on the vast buildings of their shrines, and kiss their bones enwrapped in silks and gold. And look, you are here, beside me on the altar, my God, Saint of Saints, Creator of men, and Lord of Angels (IV,1,9).

Much of what we call experience has bearing on experiencing something new. We want to see or visit something because we have not seen it before. We gape at shrines that impress us with silver and gold. For Thomas, however, experience does not have to do with experiencing something extraordinary, but with the experience of the ordinary which, beyond its external appearance, is contemplated in its divine depths. Likewise the sacrament of Communion does not become more extraordinary for being celebrated with much pomp and circumstance, but in our coming to see in the simplicity of this sacrament the here and now of God's loving reality. It is for this reason that Thomas here speaks of the blindness of our heart. We do not see the miracle that is taking place before our very eyes, and so want to exchange the reality that *is*, for something different or more.

Alas, the blindness and hardness of the human heart, not to attend the more to this gift so unutterable, and from daily custom to slide away to carelessness (IV,1,12).

The last book, that deals with inner consolation, is also placed in the same field of tension of inner and outward things. As Thomas writes in the first chapter of this book:

Blessed the soul which hears the Lord speaking within, and receives the word of consolation from his lips. Blessed are the ears which pick up the rills of God's whisper, and pay no attention to the whisperings of this world. Blessed are the ears which listen, not to the voice which sounds abroad, but the one which teaches truth within. Blessed are the eyes closed to things without, but fixed on those within. Blessed are they who go deep within, and work hard to prepare themselves more and more by daily exercises to receive the secrets of heaven. Blessed are they who are eager to have leisure for God, and shake themselves free from every hindrance of the world (III,1,1).

The fields of tension that Thomas describes between external and internal, worldly and heavenly, transitory and eternal, sensual and spiritual, come across as dualistic to us. The question is, however: is this because of Thomas, or because of our own dualistic reading of Thomas? Yes, Thomas speaks in opposites, but these opposites in general serve a mystagogic purpose and are not meant to divide the world in two.

Like many other mystics, Thomas is aware that he lives in a reality pervaded with God. This divine reality is not separate from our reality, but is the Reality of our reality. As the beginning of *The Imitation* indicates, however, we are blind to this reality pervaded with God. For Thomas this blindness is the beginning of the end. For this lack of awareness makes us think that we ourselves are the cause of our existence. We therefore let ourselves become obsessed by the logic of our self-preservation. We do not want to go down unnamed, we want to obtain a position for ourselves and protect ourselves against possible infringements. With this attitude, however, we reduce reality to a means towards our own ends. Trapped in the images of our own projections, we lose the ability to encounter reality as it is in its essence.

For Thomas, the term 'outward' stands for that whole world in which we are trapped in the images of our own projections and desires. It is these images that keep us from savoring the world as it is in its essence. This is why we have to become 'inward'. This does not mean that we are not allowed to concern ourselves with the world in a material sense. The difference between 'inward' and 'outward' is not that between a life inside the monastery and one outside of it. Those who withdraw into a monastery can also do this merely on outward grounds. Even if we enter a monastery because we are inwardly moved, things that are

in themselves good and inward – such as Scripture reading, liturgy and the like – can become ‘outward’. That is, they become ends in and of themselves instead of means of entrusting ourselves to God on an ever deepening level. In this regard inwardness does not stand for something that can be objectified into certain specific conduct. It is not things that are ‘inward’, but we become ‘inward’ when we know ourselves to be related to God in the things that we do.

In order to explore the field of tension between ‘outward’ and ‘inward’ more closely, in the continuation of this article I will go more deeply into the first chapter of book II, which deals with inner fellowship.

Inner fellowship

If we look up the term ‘inward’ in a dictionary, we find definitions such as ‘toward the inside’, ‘situated within’, ‘in the mind or soul’.² These descriptions show that we understand ‘inward’ almost materially as an internal place one could enter into. It is, however, the question whether such an understanding does justice to the way in which Thomas speaks of ‘inwardness’. Because for him, ‘inwardness’ is an attitude that aims not to stake out boundaries, but to open them. A person who is inward, does not close himself off from reality, but rather wants to encounter it beyond the boundaries of his own projections. We can, for instance, encounter Jesus in his words and deeds, but an inward person looks beyond these outward words and actions and sees the intimacy of the God-relationship:

If once you have completely entered into the heart of Jesus, and tasted a little of his burning love, then you will care nothing for your own convenience or inconvenience, but will rejoice rather at the reproach brought on you, because the love of Jesus makes a man despise himself (II,1,6).

Although Thomas here speaks of the heart of Jesus, this does not mean that he is referring to a material place. The heart of Jesus is rather that which truly moved him. This deepest motivation cannot be discovered by means of an objective analysis. It is not the case that if we were to know all the ins and outs of Jesus’ life, we would arrive at the heart of Jesus as a matter of course. In such a case Jesus’ disciples would occupy a privileged position. Yet they, too, were accused of a lack of understanding by Jesus, because in following their own logic they passed over the essence of his life and so remained blind to the divine perspective of this reality.

2 The Oxford Essential Dictionary.

For Thomas, “entering into the heart of Jesus” is an expression of something that takes place in intimacy. Just as we learn to understand the other from within in the intimacy of love, we can also only get to know Jesus by, in the intimacy of the relationship, becoming sensitive to what moved Him from within. This relationship demands of us that we let ourselves be personally touched by the other and not cling to the images that we have of the other. The ancient monks did this by continuously reading or ruminating upon Scripture. In this way they tried to let its words affect them in such a way, that they learned to savor the immediate and intangible reality behind them, in the awareness that this intimate reality of Jesus’ was also their own reality.

“Entering into the heart of Jesus” is not surgery, but a dialogical process, in which the immediacy of the *vis-à-vis* brings us into personal contact with the immediate reality of God himself, who is the source of all things. This reality is shocking and transforms us from within. As Thomas puts it, the confrontation with the inner reality of Jesus completely breaks through the human being’s own perspective. Whereas before we focused on self-preservation and our own position, now – in the mirror of Jesus’ complete and undivided surrender to the Father – we come to see that every form of reverting back to ourselves damages the love we live out of. Jesus thus does not reveal us a doctrine, but a way. Jesus teaches us the way of surrender, in which we can come to realize that it is only in this death that we are born in love. Beyond our anxious concern for ourselves there is a life in which we, in the *self-annihilation* of complete surrender, live immediately out of God’s countenance.

One who loves Jesus and truth, a true man of the spirit, free from undisciplined affections, can freely turn to God, lift himself above himself in spirit, and fruitfully rest (II,1,6).

For Thomas, Jesus serves as a model for the person of the spirit, the inward person. This person is free from all externality or – as he phrases it here – “free from undisciplined affections”. Undisciplined affections – in other parts of *The Imitation* also called self-love – are those affections which, by keeping us trapped in our concern for ourselves and our own position, impede our losing ourselves completely in God’s love. In this way he indicates that for him inwardness first of all has to do with inner freedom. A person is inwardly free, when he no longer lets himself be ruled by his own needs and desires and so can look at reality freely as it is in itself. With this Thomas’ conception of inner freedom forms a contrast with our modern conception of freedom of choice. We think that we are free when we can do whatever we want, but for Thomas this conception of freedom solves nothing and rather binds us to our

needs and desires than that it frees us from them. True freedom can only be found when we so lose ourselves in the eyes of the Other, and consequently in love, that we forget our concern for ourselves.

Although Jesus serves as a model for the inward person, this does not mean that Jesus is also presented as an absolute in his externality. The only norm is the absolute surrender to God which comes to light in Jesus. Thomas consequently puts loving Jesus on a par with loving truth. Someone who, with Jesus, has become inward and so is no longer hampered by the images of his own desires, loves truth. This truth cannot be objectified into something we can grasp or comprehend, but entails seeing through reality unto God. In this immediacy all reversion to ourselves falls away and we can only live out of the divine love, which has us in its grasp beyond ourselves. Accordingly we will, as true imitators of Jesus, ultimately also have to let go of Jesus himself, in order to be seized by truth in his footsteps.

He who tastes all things as they are, and not as they are reputed and reckoned to be, this man is wise and instructed more by God than men (II,1,7).

Mysticism is not a flight from reality, but a form of entering into reality as it is in its essence. A mystic is aware that we – driven by fear – cut reality down to our own size. We hear what we want to hear and see what we want to see and so build ourselves a world in which we imagine ourselves to be safe and can orient ourselves. Convention plays a large part in this context. By reaching an agreement with each other that the world works in such and such way and not differently, we know where we stand. But before we know what is happening, we have boarded up our reality and those agreements gain such an absoluteness that we can no longer see beyond them. Through the encounter with God, the mystic is aware of the relativeness of the convention that has incarnated itself in culture. For this reason he wants to jolt us awake in the realization that we are locking ourselves up in an illusory reality that we ourselves created.

We do not become good Christians by learning a set of rules by rote and living by them. This may be useful for a well-ordered society, but it keeps us far from the undivided surrender to the love of God that characterized Jesus' life. We consequently have to travel the path of inwardness and in this way, beyond the images of convention, enter into a personal relationship with God. Religious traditions can play a part in this, but can never give the definitive answer. This answer is only formed in the silence of the exposure, in which we are naked before God.

For Thomas the way of inwardness is the way of successive exposure of our self as an illusory reality that is maintained out of fear. For the more deeply we come to realize that we live out of God's countenance, the more we recognize that we are not the center of our existence. All that we are, we are because of God, and there is nothing that we can call our own. We consequently have nothing to pride ourselves on, and all our attempts to give consequence to ourselves are ultimately nothing but attempts to flee this naked reality. This lesson cannot be learned, but only experienced, and for those who have experienced it, it is a way of liberation that leads us beyond ourselves into the space of God.

Next, Thomas lists a number of characteristics of an inward person. This provides us with a framework for better understanding inwardness.

He who knows how to walk from within and give small weight to things without, does not wait for places or times, for devout exercises of devotion (II,1,7).

The way of inwardness is in the first place a way of detachment. This does not mean that attachment to people or things is morally reprehensible, but that it hinders us in travelling a spiritual way. This is because our tendency to appropriate people or things proceeds from fear. Afraid of the confrontation with the fundamental nakedness of our existence, we seek to attain a good social position and status. For Thomas it is essential that we enter into this confrontation, because it is only there that our liberation from the oppressive bonds of self-love, which keeps us from truly losing ourselves in God, is to be found. As long as we need something or someone for ourselves, we are not free to love the other as other, and the other also does not feel free truly to become himself in our presence. The latter makes clear that detachment is not so much a purely material affair, but should always be seen in the light of love. In love itself – that is, in our focus on the other – the desire is born³ to encounter the other as other and not only in his significance for us. For this reason love demands detachment, for only in this freedom can the other be received as he is.

The problem with detachment, however, is that we can deceive ourselves in this very easily. We think we are letting go of something, when in fact we are exchanging one thing for another. We think we are leaving the world behind by entering a monastery, but in fact the monastery becomes our world. We think we are following Christ by selling all our possessions, but in fact poverty becomes our possession.

3 Cf. J. Huls, *The Minne-Journey. Beatrice of Nazareth's "Seven Ways of Minne". Mystical Process and Mystagogical Implications*, Fiery Arrow 9, Leuven 2013, 94-113.

We think we are devoting ourselves to working for the poor, but in fact we are using the poor to brush up our sense of self-worth. In the preceding text, Thomas makes this clear by means of spiritual or devout exercises. In themselves these exercises are meritorious, but if they become objectives in themselves that have to be performed at a certain place and time, they lose their factual worth. The devout exercises are, after all, a means to attain inwardness and for the person who is inward, life as a whole is one great devout exercise, because he has nothing for himself and in everything looks upon the face of God.

The spiritual man quickly gathers himself together, because he never squanders himself wholly on external things (II,1,7).

For Thomas, the distinction between inward and outward matters is not that between spiritual and material aspects. As we saw in the previous verse, spiritual matters can also become external, because in our attachment they are experienced as objectives in themselves and not as means to attain encounter with God. Inwardness can in no way be materialized into something that we ourselves can do. We do not become inward by extensive prayer or meditation, but in this prayer or meditation we can be broken open for reality as a mystery, permeated with God, that speaks to us immediately. In this way inwardness is linked to dialogue.⁴ We become inward, when reality becomes dialogical for us; and we are outward, when, in our self-involvement, we place ourselves outside of this relationship.

Someone who turns his gaze inward, does not withdraw from the world, but is rather so involved with the world that he lets himself be seized – beyond its externalities – by its divine depths. For the inward person this form of contemplation has developed into a fundamental attitude, which makes him realize that every form of grasping or appropriating injures the immediacy of the God-relationship. For this reason he can never lose himself wholly in people or things as isolated objects of his love. For him, everything is the face of God and we are to seek his face in everything.

No outward labour, or occupation, at the moment needful, stands in his way, but as events turn out, so he adapts to them (II,1,7).

A danger of the inward way is that we believe that we first have to create an ideal situation, before we can travel this way. Often it seems as if the commotion of our existence hinders us in entering into our own depths. Accordingly we look for places of peace and quiet and of prayer in order to be able to turn to reflection and contemplation. Without

4 Cf. K. Waaijman, *Spirituality. Forms, Foundations, Methods*, Leuven 2002, 68-71.

wanting to deprecate these moments or set them aside as unimportant – for they can truly lead to reflection about and a reorientation of our life – they also harbor the danger that we make ourselves dependent on these moments. We then believe that God can only be found there, and that circumstances force us to live in a desert of absence. This is a way of using the situation we are in as an excuse for evading the true confrontation, and once on this track we will always find reasons to keep ourselves out of range.

For Thomas the defining characteristic of the inward person is that he takes life as it is. He does not go in search of something that, from his own perspective, suits him better. “As events turn out, so he adapts to them.” For him there is no better school than life itself, that with all its conveniences and inconveniences always places him before God’s countenance. The inward person does not seek the God of his desire, but the God who, beyond the images of his desire, wants to be encountered in everything as the Other. As long as we do not accept our own situation as it is, it remains for us a closed space that cannot be encountered because of the images of our desire.

He who is rightly organised and ordered within, is not concerned over the wondrous and perverse doings of men (II,1,7).

As a psychologist of the inner life, Thomas realizes that the human mind keeps looking for escape routes in order not to be confronted with the nakedness of its own existence. If it is not the situation we find ourselves in, then it is the people around us who bind us to the illusion of externality. Because by occupying ourselves with others and either admiring or condemning them on the basis of their qualities, we are busy applying standards by which we can measure ourselves and others. From the perspective of creation, however, we are all equal as children of God and have nothing to pride ourselves on. The inward person knows that he has nothing that was not given to him. For this reason he is not interested in what the qualities of this or that person are. His only interest is his own being-surrendered to God, which makes him seek God in everything and everyone or, in other words, gives him the ability to see reality in its own independence and not in its significance for him.

A man is hindered and distracted, as he draws things to himself (II,1,7).

The inward person is completely surrendered to God and no longer lets anything knock him out of this immediacy. Consequently nothing can affect him or cling to him such that he is bound to himself. Although this is an idealized image, it does indicate the perspective the inward way

is placed in. The inward person is no longer concerned with himself, but hidden from himself lives out of God's strength. This makes clear that every form of reverting back to ourselves proceeds from a lack of faith, understood as nakedly entrusting ourselves. Because we do not dare to believe that we live entirely out of God's hand – and so are nothing in ourselves – we also do not dare to surrender ourselves. Thomas here indicates that – although we want to let ourselves and others believe that outward circumstances keep us from truly entrusting ourselves to God – the root cause lies in ourselves. We draw things to ourselves, because we do not dare to expose ourselves completely to this naked reality. If we *were* to do that, we would be neither hindered nor distracted by outward circumstances.

If it were well with you, and you were truly cleansed, all things would work together for your good and profit (II,1,8).

In this verse Thomas turns the perspective around completely. If we thought that circumstances kept us from truly losing ourselves in God and becoming inward in this sense, he now indicates that if we were truly cleansed of ourselves, we would recognize that all things are to our profit, whatever the situation is that we find ourselves in. In other words, for Thomas every moment is sacred and we are kept from seeing this by our self-involvement. He wants to open our eyes for reality as God's reality, in which nothing happens without his involvement. As long as we are trapped in the projections of our own desire, we are blind to this divine perspective and can only see reality as an instrument for realizing our own desires.

That is why many things displease you and often disturb you, because you are not yet truly dead to yourself and separated from all earthly things (II,1,8).

Losing ourselves in God and dying to ourselves are two interwoven dynamics. We die to ourselves when we so lose ourselves in the countenance of God that we forget ourselves. In this dialogical structure we do not get to know God as an object outside of us, but as the love of our existence. In our self-forgetfulness we are raised above ourselves and come to life in God. Although there are such ecstatic moments in every human life, as an inward way it is a slow process of successive exposure. We keep encountering ourselves on a different level and prove to be not quite so surrendered as we initially thought. For Thomas all these moments that disturb our inner peace are signs that point us not to the other, but to ourselves. In this way he leaves us no escape. Whatever situation we are in, it is up to us to understand it from within as the space where God is waiting to be encountered.

Nothing so soils and entangles the heart of man as an impure love for created things (II,1,8).

Love is pure, when the other is loved for his own sake. If our love is in some way still tainted by self-interest, we can no longer meet the other freely. For Thomas, this is the perspective of the inward or spiritual way. Someone who has become truly inward, loves God for God's sake and in no way is focused on himself in this. Although Thomas knows that this presupposes a lengthy process of transformation and no one is capable of loving purely from one day to the next, he indicates in this text the danger of compromise. Someone who tries to get the best of both worlds and seeks himself in everything, entangles his heart, because this makes him lose sight of the ultimate perspective of the inward way. We cannot run with the hare and hunt with the hounds, because the person who keeps following the logic of his self-interest will never enter the kingdom of God. Only the way of exposure, in which we die to ourselves and our own logic, opens the perspective of divine love for us.

If you renounce outward consolation, you will be able to contemplate heavenly things and frequently rejoice within (II,1,8).

Thomas distinguishes between outward and inward consolation. We are comforted outwardly, when our pain of loss or privation is alleviated. A loser is given a consolation prize in order to make the hardness of the loss more bearable. However necessary such consolation is for us human beings, it does not spare us the confrontation with our finiteness, for example in the case of the death of a loved one. Inward consolation, however, is not gained by easing the pain, but by enduring it.

Inward consolation thus has to do with a process of purification, which precisely in the lack of an answer opens perspectives that would otherwise have remained outside of our field of view. Enduring pain is therefore essential for the inward way. The person who, out of love of the truth, does not want to be consoled by things that cannot satisfy his soul's desire anyway, will be so consumed by this fire itself, that it will open his eyes to the wordless reality of God, which lies beyond his own desire.