

Natural History of Visions, Aldous Huxley

Natural History of Visions

I shall begin this lecture with a question. It is one of those seemingly innocent but extremely searching and profound questions which inquisitive children pose to their parents and their parents simply don't know how to answer and so just say, Well, now, don't be silly, run along and play. It is a question like, Why is grass green? To answer that question you have to go into botany, biochemistry, physics, astronomy, and even metaphysics or theology. Similarly, this question which I am going to start with, though perhaps not so searching as Why is grass green? is one which takes us very far afield. The question is, Why are precious stones precious? And we shall find that in the course of trying to answer this question we shall go a long way into the whole problem of the structure of the mind and the relation of what I may call the stranger and more remote areas of the mind with all kinds of cultural and religious and philosophical aspects of our life.

Why are precious stones precious? The moment one starts to think about this question, it seems unutterably queer that human beings in the course of history should have spent such an enormous amount of time, energy, and money on collecting transparent or variously coloured pebbles and hoarding them up and cutting them and setting them in the most elaborate forms and fighting battles over them. There is quite obviously no economic justification. Of course, if one does have a lot of precious stones, given the fact that they are by convention precious, it does help one economically. But precious stones in themselves don't help us in any basic way. You can't eat precious stones, you can't till the soil with precious stones; there is nothing they can do for you.

Even from a purely aesthetic point of view, the preciousness of precious stones is very strange. One wonders exactly why they have such great charm. They can't be said to be beautiful in the sense that works of art are beautiful. A work of art is beautiful in the sense that it has parts which are beautifully harmonized. A work of art, whether it is musical art or visual art or poetic art, is always a system, but a precious stone is simply a single object; it is like a single note out of a piece of music. Now, if you play a single note, although it may have a great deal of charm, it is not something that you feel to be intrinsically very beautiful; but in regard to precious stones, people will spend tremendous energies and time and money in trying to get hold of them. So we see that there must be something in the precious stone to which the human mind responds in a very obscure and, on the face of it, rather unaccountable way.

One of the reasons for our interest in precious stones is given, curiously enough, in the *Phaedo*, where Socrates is speaking about the ideal world, a basic metaphysical idea of Plato. Socrates says that there is an ideal world, of which our world is in a sense a rather bad copy, beyond and above the material world.

In this other earth the colours are much purer and more brilliant than they are down here. The mountains and stones have a richer gloss, a livelier transparency and intensity of hue. The precious stones of this lower world, our highly prized cornelians, topazes, emeralds, jaspers and all the rest of them are but tiny fragments of these stones above. In the other earth there is no stone but that is precious and equals in beauty every gem of ours.

Plato adds that the view of this earth is 'a sight to gladden the beholder's eye'. This is a very curious remark because it makes quite clear that when Plato speaks about the ideal world, he isn't speaking merely of a metaphysical idea. This other world has a landscape with stones and mountains in it, and these stones and mountains have the quality precisely of precious stones in our world. More than a mere philosophic abstraction, it is something which exists in the human mind, which is part of our inner world of thought and feeling and insight, and which, in a certain sense, we can actually see. This inner world is what I call the world of visions, and it has something very closely to do with the preciousness of precious stones. But before we get into this, let me talk a little in general about the different regions of man's inner world.

We carry about inside our skulls a large and very variegated universe, with regions in it exceedingly strange, regions which most of us at most times don't penetrate at all, but which are always there. There is the world of memory, of fantasy and imagination, and of dreams closely connected with what the Freudians and the Jungians call the personal unconscious. There is the world of what Jung calls the collective unconscious, with archetypal forms and symbols which seem to be common to all human beings. And there is, finally, the most remote of all our inner worlds, which I call the world of visions. It is literally another world, very different from the personal worlds of our experience.

Now let me elaborate a little on these classifications, first of all on the world of memory. Memory is something unutterably strange, as anybody who has ever thought about it must have discovered, and one of the strangest facts about memory is that it can be clearly divided into two quite distinct and separate types. There is the memory which may be called complete recall, the actual re-living in present time of past experience; and there is what we normally call memory, which is a much vaguer and more concentrated form.

Complete recall is something which a few people seem to be capable of all the time. It was said of the great American novelist Thomas Wolfe that he had the capacity for complete recall. As a novelist myself I can see that this would be in some ways a great advantage, but in other ways it must be extremely difficult to deal with because it must be very hard to know when to stop. If one has absolutely complete recall of everything that has happened to one, one can obviously go on writing for just as long as one's life has lasted without ever coming to an end, and this we do see in Wolfe's books. But one can also see in his books an extraordinary vividness in everything that he visualized.

Most of us do not have this capacity at will, but in certain circumstances it can be evoked in a great number of people. It can be evoked, for example, by means of hypnosis. The hypnotized person can bring to the surface all kinds of material which he has consciously forgotten—and in the utmost detail. Something like complete recall can also be evoked in a state of reverie, particularly if the person in reverie is prompted and helped by a capable psychiatrist or psychologist. And there are certain drugs which will help evoke recall. During the Second World War battle fatigue resulting in breakdowns, very often with hysterical blindness or deafness or paralysis, was treated either by hypnosis or, when there was no time to administer hypnosis, by giving such drugs as sodium amytal or ether, which somehow lowered the threshold between the conscious and the unconscious and permitted the recall of the traumatic material which was causing the trouble. The psychiatrists were

then able to produce an abreaction to this material and were able to get these unfortunate soldiers out of their traumatic condition.

There seems to be no doubt at all, from the evidence of hypnosis and of drugs, that all of our experiences are stored in the mind and, under certain favourable circumstances, may be completely recalled. In recent years the eminent Canadian surgeon Wilder Penfield has done some very interesting experiments during his brain operations on people who had epilepsy of a kind which is due to brain damage. As you know, the brain feels no pain at all; consequently the operations are performed under a local anaesthetic just sufficient to permit the skull to be opened.

While the patients were on the table, Penfield would touch certain areas of the temporal lobe with a tiny electrode, and this would evoke a complete recall of incidents which had happened many years before. So there was this very strange phenomenon of the patient existing in two worlds simultaneously, in the operating room and in some place, possibly thousands of miles away and many years earlier, which the touch of the electrode had caused him suddenly to recall in its full intensity and with all the emotions which he had at the time. When a particular spot was touched again, exactly the same recall would be produced, as though a record had been put on and were being replayed. Whether or not this peculiarity of localized recall in the brain is confined to epileptic patients, I don't think anybody knows, and I rather hope nobody will try experiments on normal people, cutting holes in their skulls, to find the answer. Meanwhile, we see that there are these possibilities of physically inducing complete recall.

On the rare occasions when total recall happens, it is obviously of extraordinary interest. A total recall has never happened to me, but people who have had them find them very exciting and also very therapeutic. They can get rid of all kinds of material which is, so to speak, festering in the lower areas of their mind.

Over and against the complete recall of total memory we have to place our ordinary memories, which are of a quite different order (although total recall presumably makes the limited recall of ordinary memory possible). Ordinary memory is a kind of summary or digest of past events which some area of our mind—what some psychologists call the preconscious—prepares for us out of total recall. This digest has a sort of utilitarian value for us—it helps us in our ordinary life and obviously has biological value as well as social value. The selection made by the preconscious mind out of our total memory is made also in the light of our general philosophy of life; it has to conform with our general feeling of what happiness is. Many aspects which in the total recall we should regard as traumatic or as irrelevant are left out in ordinary memory, and only those aspects which are biologically or socially useful to us remain.

Now let us turn to the world of fantasy and imagination. Here we see something which varies over an enormous range among different people and in the same people at different times. We can have fantasies and daydreams and imaginations of the vaguest kind or of the most elaborate and detailed variety. They can run the entire gamut from almost complete incoherence, such as we get in the state of delirium, to the most elaborate and highly organized kind of dramatic or narrative story. In its more elaborate form we have a real story-telling faculty, which exists in all human beings in a rather inchoate and undeveloped form, but which is highly developed in a few.

Before I go into the question of those people in whom the story-telling faculty is very highly developed, let me say that it is possible to induce it by means of hypnosis or reverie (which is, after all, very much like hypnosis) in people who normally don't exhibit it very strongly. Very frequently these elaborate stories are interpreted by those who hear them as accounts of previous lives in Atlantis or Lemuria, but I don't think we have necessarily to believe that this is so, because it is quite clear that we all potentially have the story-telling faculty and that certain people have it most powerfully; they can, so to speak, get at this area of the preconscious mind very easily and bring it up to the surface. I remember when I was a small boy at boarding school and we used to tell stories when lights were out. Most of the stories, needless to say, were pretty dull, but there was one boy I shall never forget. He was not a particularly bright boy, but he had this quite exceptional gift and would go on pouring forth extraordinary adventures without any difficulty night after night in a kind of endless serial which kept us all awake for hours.

We get great story-tellers in the world of novels. Alexandre Dumas had no difficulty in pouring forth the Count of Monte Cristo and The Three Musketeers without even pausing for breath—they just came rushing out. On a higher level of art we have a very interesting example of this story-telling faculty existing definitely on the unconscious or preconscious level in the case of Robert Louis Stevenson, who tells us in his book Across the Plains that all his short stories were provided for him by his unconscious, either in reverie or in actual dreams while he was asleep. He referred to this other part of his mind as 'the brownies'—little fairy people who inhabited his skull and would bring forth material which in his conscious state he simply wrote down and elaborated. He says that when he was a boy the brownies used to produce material in a rather haphazard way, but when he had to make his living as a writer they collaborated with him and produced good saleable material.

We next come to the world of dreams, which is a kind of incoherent form of the story-telling world. There are the ordinary dreams which obviously have to deal with the affairs which preoccupy our personal unconscious, and then there are what Jung calls the great dreams which have to do with what he calls the collective unconscious—the great permanent human symbols which run through the whole of human history and which seem to be common to almost all mankind.

Finally, beyond all these, there is the world of visionary experience, which is in some sense a real other world, profoundly different from the world of the personal unconscious and even that of the collective unconscious. It has something deeply strange about it. Before we go into a description of what goes on in this remote area of the mind, let me say a little about the degree to which this distant region is accessible to the conscious side of human beings. If we look at the biographies of eminent poets and painters and musicians, we find that certain of them were able spontaneously to enter this visionary world. They could pass almost at will from the ordinary world of experience into the world of visionary experience. William Blake was able to go at almost any time into this other world of visions. It is true that for a good many years in the middle of his life he was unable to enter this world, but he recovered the faculty later on and went through to the end of his days going back and forth from the ordinary world of tables and chairs to something quite different, to the world which he describes in his poems and his prophetic books, and which he illustrates less successfully—because he was a much less great painter than he was a poet—in his various prints and paintings.

Over and above these poets—and I can't go into the list of them—we can say without doubt that there are many quite ordinary people—ordinary from the point of view of their powers of expression—who have this power to go from our everyday world into the visionary world and back. They do not have the power, as inspired poets and painters have had, of expressing what they have seen, but they nevertheless do have this capacity for entering a very, very strange world of the mind.

In the past the capacity to have visions was regarded as extremely creditable, and anybody who had them was apt to boast about them. Those who have visions now are apt to keep their mouths shut for fear of being sent to the asylum, but there is nothing intrinsically unhealthy about having visions. It is perfectly true that many insane people do have visions, but many sane people also have visions and know perfectly well that they are having them. A person who has visions reaches the point of insanity only when he doesn't know he is having visions and mixes them up with real life—or is so obsessed by his visions that he can't get back into real life. Those people who have the power to enter the world of visions and to go back enjoy both worlds to the utmost degree.

How do people get into this visionary world? So far we have been talking about those who, for whatever reason, are so constituted that they can go and come between the ordinary world and the visionary world. They don't know how; it just happens to them. But there are methods of transporting into this visionary world people who normally can't get into it. Some of these methods are psychological; others involve making changes in body chemistry which, for some reason that we don't understand, permit these distant areas of the mind to come through into consciousness. We find that under hypnosis certain people can go through not merely into the story-telling world, but far beyond, into the world of visions. This is rather uncommon but it quite definitely happens in some cases.

One method of inducing visions by psychological means is the method of complete isolation, which was discovered empirically in many of the religious traditions of the world. The Christian monks of the Thebaide in Egypt in the third and fourth centuries of our era discovered that by going into complete isolation in the desert they were able to induce visions, some of which were of a celestial nature, but very many of which were infernal in quality. Anybody who has frequented picture galleries all over the world will have noticed a great many pictures of the temptations of St Anthony—one of the favourite subjects of medieval and early Renaissance painters—in which one sees the hermit being plagued by the most hideous visions.

The technique of complete isolation has been followed from time immemorial in India. In the old Hindu traditions and in the Tibetan tradition we get accounts of forest dwellers who lived in caves high up in the Himalayas and who, by dint of completely isolating themselves, lay themselves open to this visionary world. The interesting thing is that within recent years these procedures have been exactly imitated and in a sense perfected in various psychological laboratories, especially in the 'limited environment' studies of D. O. Hebb at McGill University and John Lilly at the National Institute of Health. People are put where they can neither see nor hear anything, and in extreme cases they are immersed in a tepid bath so there is virtually no change in any of the feelings on the skin. In a few hours extraordinary visionary experiences will begin.

Evidently the thing which prevents all of us from having continuous visionary experiences is the fact that we are having continuous

experiences of the external world. When the stimuli from the outside are cut off, the brain and the mind, however these two are associated, come up with remarkable visions, some of which are evidently extremely terrifying—many of the experimenters have simply cut short their experiments because the visions were so very unpleasant—but some of which are of a very positive and beautiful character.

These are the two main psychological methods of gaining access to the realm of visions. Then there are the methods which consist in causing changes in body chemistry. These changes are of two kinds: changes produced indirectly and changes produced directly. Indirect changes have been produced in every culture from time immemorial by means of fasting, which, if prolonged for some time, causes profound changes in body chemistry, which in their turn undoubtedly facilitate entry to the visionary world. As the anthropologists have shown, fasting for the specific purpose of obtaining visions was practised all over this continent among the American Indians. And in the great religious traditions of the rest of the world fasting has been practised partly for purposes of mortification—the idea being that if you punish the body in this world you will not be punished in the next—but also because the fasting empirically was found to facilitate entry into the visionary world and even into the mystical world beyond the visionary.

Another method of changing body chemistry, which is extensively practised in India, is breathing exercises, all of which are intended to lead in the long run to prolonged suspensions of breath; when the breath is suspended for a very long period you get a high concentration of carbon dioxide in the blood, and empirically we know that a high concentration of carbon dioxide leads to visionary experiences. The inhalation of a mixture of carbon dioxide and oxygen will rapidly produce very peculiar mental conditions and, in some people, either recall of buried material or visions.

Then there are the direct methods of changing body chemistry which, as the historians of religion have shown, have been used at one time or another in almost all the religious traditions of the world: inducing visionary experiences by means of drugs. In the Middle East and in Greece, alcohol was freely used for this purpose—there are even references to it in the Old Testament. Many of the minor schools of the prophets, who are very much disapproved of by the other schools, were trying to use alcohol for the purpose of entering the visionary world. A great many other drugs have been used—hashish, opium, and what not—most of them extremely harmful but some of them naturally occurring drugs which open up the consciousness to the visionary experience and which appear to be relatively harmless to the physiology and not to be addictive in any way. The best known of the relatively harmless vision-inducers is the sacred mushroom of Mexico, which was described by my friend Gordon Wasson a couple of years ago in *Life*.

The active principle of these mushrooms, which is called psilocybin, was synthesized last year by Doctor Albert Hoffman of Switzerland, who also synthesized the extraordinary drug called lysergic acid (LSD-25). The other naturally occurring vision-inducer which has been used from time immemorial in the Southwest in this country, and whose use has now spread right up into Canada, is the peyote cactus, whose active principle, mescaline, was synthesized about thirty or forty years ago. At the present time, most experimenters in the field of exploring the remoter areas of the mind are using LSD, which can be used in incredibly small doses of as little as 0.0001 grams and will produce extraordinary visionary effects.

These are the main methods of getting at the visionary world. Now let us examine the nature of that world and see in what way it has relevance to our original question, Why are precious stones precious? When we examine the visionary world, we discover some very interesting facts. For example, visions are extremely strange, but they are not random; they obey certain laws. Every person's vision is unique, as every person is unique, but all these unique visions seem to belong roughly to one family; they are, so to speak, members of a single species. This is brought home quite clearly by such collections of case histories as those brought together by Heinrich Klüver in his monograph on peyote, published more than twenty years ago, and by the work done by experimenters with LSD and mescaline in more recent years.

The highest common factor in the visionary experience is the experience of subjective light. This occurs in the most transcendent form of vision, the form of vision which seems to modulate, so to speak, in the full-blown mystical experience. In these highest forms of vision, the light is undifferentiated; it is what in Buddhist literature is called the 'pure light of the void'. It is an immense white light of extraordinary power. The example with which we are all most familiar is that of St Paul on the road to Damascus when he suddenly saw this overwhelming light and at the same time heard a voice saying, 'Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?' (Acts 9:4). The effect of this subjective light was so prodigious as to leave him blinded for several days. And St Paul's was by no means a unique case.

The Neoplatonist philosopher Plotinus had several of these profound mystical experiences in the course of his life. He tells us that they were all associated with the same tremendous light, and he uses a phrase which sums up from his own experience much of what Plato had said five hundred years earlier in regard to the ideal world. Plotinus says that everything shines in the world of pure intelligence, and in the world of sense the most beautiful thing is fire. This statement begins to throw some light on why precious stones are precious: the brilliant and luminous quality of the world of visions is somehow reflected in our world in luminous things such as fire.

Another well-known case of the experience of overpowering light is that of Mohammed. The revelation which came to him and which made him a prophet was accompanied by a light so tremendous—he was awakened out of his sleep by it—that he fell down in a faint. Nearer our own times, in the sixteenth century, we have the example of the great Catholic mystic St John of the Cross. He had attempted to reform his Order, but his fellow monks didn't want to be reformed, and he was put in prison. While there, he had several experiences of overpowering light. In one the light was said to have been seen by his jailer, another friar of the Order. When he finally made his escape from his cell, it was by following a light which came to him and showed him the way out. A little later we find the great Protestant mystic Jacob Boehme describing experiences of the same kind, in which he was surrounded by and swallowed up in a tremendous light.

This experience of the pure light of the void is a visionary experience of what may be called the highest, the most mystical, kind. On a rather lower level the lights seem to be broken up and become, so to speak, incorporated in different objects and persons and figures. It is as though this tremendous white light were somehow refracted through a prism and broken up into different coloured lights. In this lower form of vision we have the intensification of light in some way associated with

the story-telling faculty, so that there are visions of great complexity and elaboration in which light plays a tremendous part, but it is not the pure white light of the great theophanies.

As an example of how this coloured light of the lower kind of vision operates, let me cite the case of Weir Mitchell, a well-known psychologist of the end of the last century who described his experiences with peyote. What he described was first of all a vision of coloured, three-dimensional geometric forms, which became concretized in carvings and mosaics and carpets; then an enormous architectural form appeared, a great Gothic tower encrusted with what appeared to be gems of such enormous size that they looked like transparent fruits; then there were immense and magnificent landscapes, also with self-luminous objects like gems in them; and the experience ended with a vision of the ocean with the waves marvellously coloured and sparkling like jewels rolling in.

Many other people have had similar visions—the spontaneous visions of Blake, for example, were essentially of the same nature. One of the interesting facts about these visions is that when figures are seen, as they often are, they are not only extraordinarily majestic—Blake describes them as Seraphim and says they were one hundred and twenty feet high—but, when their faces are seen, they are not the faces of anybody that the subject knows or has ever known; they are presented to him by his own mind as a completely strange form.

This is, from a theological point of view, very interesting, inasmuch as the whole theology of angels is not, as many people now suppose, based on the idea that angels are the souls of the departed. Angels are a totally different species; they don't belong to the human species at all. I think there is a real psychological basis for this theological view of the nature of angels, inasmuch as when figures are seen in visions, they are not people that we know. Whatever it is in our mind which creates these visions, it presents us with something totally novel which appears to have absolutely nothing to do with our private life, nor even with the archetypal life of humanity as a whole. It is literally another world.

There is good reason to suppose that many children have this kind of visionary experience and that they not only see visions with their eyes closed but also see the preternatural luminosity of the visionary world in the external world. This is another common feature of those who have had visionary experiences. It is as though some of the brightness of what Plato calls the ideal world spills over into the normal world so that it is seen as being in some way transfigured and of an incredible beauty. I think that probably quite a number of children do perceive the world in this way and then in course of time they lose the capacity. This loss has been described very vividly in Wordsworth's ode on the 'Intimations of Immortality', which begins,

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,

The earth, and every common sight,

To me did seem

Apparelled in celestial light,

The glory and the freshness of a dream.

And then this gradually disappeared. As time went on, what Wordsworth calls 'shades of the prison-house' closed around him, and the world, far from being transfigured, came to seem as we ordinarily see it, rather dull and dreary.

I would also like to read an extremely beautiful passage from the Centuries of Meditations of Thomas Traherne, who lived one hundred and fifty years before Wordsworth, and who describes in prose his own experiences of childhood.

The dust and stones of the street were as precious as gold ... The green trees when I saw them first through one of the gates transported and ravished me, their sweetness and unusual beauty made my heart to leap and almost mad with ecstasy, they were such strange and wonderful things. The Men! O what venerable and reverend creatures did the aged seem! Immortal Cherubims! And young men glittering and sparkling Angels, and maids strange seraphic pieces of life and beauty! Boys and girls tumbling in the streets, and playing, were moving jewels ... Eternity was manifest in the Light of the Day, and something infinite behind everything appeared ... with much ado I was corrupted, and made to learn the dirty devices of this world. Which now I unlearn, and become, as it were, a little child again that I may enter into the Kingdom of God.

In another passage he speaks of the Kingdom of God as being the external world seen in this visionary way.

The world is a mirror of infinite beauty, yet no man sees it. It is a Temple of Majesty, yet no man regards it. It is a region of Light and Peace, did not men disquiet it. It is the Paradise of God ... It is the place of Angels and the Gate of Heaven.

This is the world transfigured by the visionary experience, a world which many poets, and many people who are not poets, have seen. It is an experience which people have after convalescence, when they are, as it were, reborn into the world and suddenly, with this kind of visionary sight, they perceive its miraculous beauty.

There are certain aspects of ordinary sunlight which can produce this visionary view of the world. I would like to read another very beautiful poem by Wordsworth, where he describes the effect of sunset:

No sound is uttered, but a deep
And solemn harmony pervades
The hollow vale from steep to steep,
And penetrates the glades.
Far-distant images draw nigh,
Called forth by wondrous potency
Of beamy radiance, that imbues
Whate'er it strikes, with gem-like hues!
In vision exquisitely clear,
Herds range along the mountain-side;

And glistening antlers are descried;
And gilded flocks appear.
Thine is the tranquil hour, purpleal Eve!
But long as god-like wish, or hope divine,
Informs my spirit, ne'er can I believe
That this magnificence is wholly thine!
From worlds not quickened by the sun
A portion of the gift is won;
An intermingling of Heaven's pomp is spread
On ground which British shepherds tread!

This is very beautiful and indicates the spontaneous way in which the poet interprets the natural phenomenon of sunset in supernatural terms. It seems to be profoundly inevitable.

Now, finally, we can begin to see why precious stones are precious. I think they are precious because they are the objects in the external world which most nearly resemble the things which people see in the visionary world. The ruby or the emerald is like the transparent fruit which the Mystic sees encrusting the rocks and the architecture of the visionary world. They have this gem-like quality which can be perceived in certain circumstances in the external world by an eye which has lost its natural dimness. Not only are gems valuable to us because they remind us of what goes on in the visionary world, they also, by themselves, induce a kind of vision.

Most of us rather seldom have visionary experiences, but we all potentially have them, and I think that objects such as gems somehow remind us of what is going on in the back of our head and take us a certain way towards this other world. There is a phrase which is constantly used in older literature: it is said that a vision is 'transporting'—we are transported by visionary objects in the external world towards the visionary world which lies within us and of which a part of our mind is somehow always conscious. It is precisely this double function which makes the precious stone precious: it reminds us of what is going on in the visionary world and it transports us towards that world.

There are many aspects of art which are really understandable only when we take into account this strange aspect of our mind which is capable of visionary experience. There are various ways of producing visionary works of art, the most obvious of which is to make the work of art out of materials which are themselves intrinsically vision-inducing, such as gems and precious metals. We find that the furniture of the altar in virtually every religion concentrates on these vision-inducing materials. These chalices set with gems and these shining surfaces have a double influence upon us: they remind us of the extraordinary world we carry about with us and they transport us at least part of the way towards it.

There are numerous other ways of producing visionary works of art which I cannot go into in detail, but I will end up by pointing out the very curious and interesting fact that most of the popular arts of history have had a great deal to do with visionary experience. Take an art which was profoundly popular during the Middle Ages—the art of stained glass, which is one of the most magnificent of all the arts.

Because gems were not particularly common in Western Europe there are frequent references to glass in accounts of visionary experiences. In the Welsh tradition, the islands of the blessed were called Ynisvitrin, the Isles of Glass; similarly, there was a glass fair in the Teutonic tradition, a mountain of glass where the souls of the departed lived. In the Apocalypse the author speaks of the sea of glass and the gold of the streets of Jerusalem, which was transparent like glass. We find this in Hindu literature, in Japanese literature, in Chinese literature. It is always this same picture, almost word for word the kind of vision which Weir Mitchell had under the influence of peyote.

The popularity of stained glass as an art form is very clearly indicated by the fact that in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when the great stained glasses of Western Europe were being made, collection boxes were placed in all the churches for money contributions for setting up stained glass windows, and we are told by contemporaries that these boxes were always full. People evidently had a passion for these extraordinary works which could convert an entire cathedral into a single huge gem. Anyone who has visited Chartres or the Sainte Chapelle in Paris knows what it is like to enter a building which is one vast jewel. The experience is profoundly vision-inducing.

There are other popular arts which have lasted from time immemorial and which are specifically vision-inducing. Fireworks were immensely popular in the days of the Roman Empire—they were almost as popular as gladiatorial games—and they were of an extraordinary elaboration. With the advances in the technology of chemistry they reached a kind of apogee in the nineteenth century, when great fireworks displays on the Fourth of July here and on the Fourteenth of July in France, and at coronations and canonizations and so on, played a great part in popular entertainment and were highly valued by the masses of the people.

Another popular art is the art of pageantry, which has been used by kings and ecclesiastics to increase their own prestige. The immensely elaborate fancy dress of ecclesiastical and royal personages does greatly enhance the prestige of the person who wears it, but at the same time there is no question at all that it has given immense pleasure to great masses of people, who will travel for miles to see great state or religious pageanties. The most remarkable of these in recent times was one which, unlike the great pageants of the past, has actually been preserved for posterity. I refer to the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, which, thanks to floodlights and movie cameras and colour films, has been preserved in its fantastically rich and beautiful elaboration and will go down as a remarkable example to posterity.

Closely associated with pageantry is theatrical spectacle. This has always gone hand in hand with the drama. The drama is human life in action, and spectacle is the visionary world shown upon the stage. The highest manifestations of this were seen in the Elizabethan and Jacobean masques of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Spectacle has become much more visionary in recent years as a result of advances in technology. Thanks to the invention in the late eighteenth century of the

parabolic mirror, which permits the projection of a narrow beam of light, the invention of limelight, which came in 1824, and the discovery of electricity in the 1880s, we are now able to cast a light such as never was on land or sea upon figures on the stage and to produce the visionary effect of an intense preternatural colour and light. The apotheosis of this comes in the great coloured movies, the big spectaculars and the big coloured documentaries, which really do produce a visionary effect.

On a humbler scale, we can see this now as we walk out on the streets with their Christmas decorations—which are essentially a kind of popular visionary art. These little twinkling lights do remind us of this other world; they seem in some way magical. We give them names like fairy lamps, as we have given the name of magic lantern to the projector of luminous images. So we see that there has been always in the popular mind a curious awareness of the visionary world and a response to even the crudest kind of visionary art. There is something I find extremely touching about these Christmas decorations. They are slightly commercialized, unfortunately, and slightly absurd, but nonetheless they are a symptom of the strange fact that all of us carry around at the back of our head this mysterious other world which I have called the world of visions.

The end