

Copyrighted — DO NOT DISTRIBUTE



ALFRED STIEGLITZ (1864–1946), *Georgia O'Keeffe (hand)*, 1918. Gelatin silver print, 10.5 × 8.3 cm. George Eastman House, Rochester, N.Y. Part purchase and part gift of An American Place. Ex-collection Georgia O'Keeffe. 1974:0052:0048.

That Memory or Dream Thing I Do

We may be quite happy to believe that images in primitive cultures are felt to partake of the life of what they represent. . . . But we do not like to think this of ourselves, or of our own society. We refuse . . . to acknowledge the traces of animism in our own perception of and response to images. . . . What is easily forgotten is the role—and the antiquity—of this phenomenon in Western culture.

—DAVID FREEDBERG, *The Power of Images*

There is another kind of study of origins that has nothing to do with romantic inspiration. The artist can be unconscious of forces which he imagines he is commanding but which are commanding him.

—GUY DAVENPORT, *Every Force Evolves a Form*

Going off into Space—In a Way that I Like

She was an acute observer. She was also predisposed to respond and surrender to experiences of the ineffable, the “wholly other,” the “*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*”—“aweful,” august mystery of the universe, uniquely attractive and fascinating.¹ She would have been at least suspicious of such majestic terms, much less inclined to investigate the deeper meanings of her own attraction and fascination. But startling passages in her writings and the greatest among her pictures reveal an absolute receptivity to “aweful” nature in every form.² This receptivity links her imagination to a universal need for the sublime as the glorious and supremely inexplicable unknown.

Awe was a first feeling, the bedrock from which everything in her art followed. It can’t be taught, but it can be affirmed. In 1916 Alfred Stieglitz sent her an English translation of Goethe’s *Faust*. Stieglitz’s written dedication to her described *Faust* as “a Friend,” which “gave me quiet,” and equated the young O’Keeffe’s recent appearance in his life with the text’s ability to heal him.³ She read *Faust*, as she did another important classic at the time, Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, alone, seated in the golden vastness of the Texas plains. Goethe’s tragedy was a tale of obsessive hunger for mastery and knowledge that made Faust, a magician, alchemist, and astrologer, trade his soul for the Devil’s false promises. The torments of Faust couldn’t have been in greater

contrast to the Texas dust. Georgia was deeply affected. She responded to the book in a letter to her friend Anita Pollitzer:

Im [*sic*] sure you have forgotten how fine it is—I *almost lost my mind the day I started it*. . . . it’s funny—I seem to feel that Ive [*sic*] seen or read a lot of it befor [*sic*]—and I don’t know—I was very sick when I was 19—and have such queer—sort of half memories of lots of things—specially of things that happened just around that time—a couple of years befor [*sic*] and after. . . .⁴

This isn’t a literary appreciation, and hardly the realization, like Stieglitz’s, that she’d found a friend. *Faust* made her half-crazy. It took her to places she felt she already knew, but hardly understood. She was impressed, yet so befuddled by its peculiar atmosphere that she could hardly convey her feelings, except by comparing her state, in reading the book, to debilitation from a serious illness.

She would have found clarity in certain lines, and affirmation of her capacity for awe as a quality of soul. More than this, for Goethe, awe produced the alien, the outsider, distinguished from others by a passionate consciousness.

Awe is the best of man: howe’er the world’s
Misprizing of the feeling would prevent us,
Deeply we feel, once gripped, the weird Portentous.⁵

Faust verified what she knew: She’d always been in the grip of nature’s weird marvels. It had been her secret, this passionate difference, and may have frightened her to the point of shame. Mostly she kept quiet about it, though to her friend Sherwood Anderson she declared, “Making your unknown known is the important thing—and keeping the unknown always beyond you—catching—crystallizing your simpler clearer vision of life—only to see it turn stale compared to what you vaguely feel ahead—that you must always keep working to grasp.”⁶ This has seemed to some like advice defining the formal difficulties of the creative process. It also amounts to a lamentation. The discrepancy between an ineffable vision and its degradation through materials of craft or one’s human limitations is the classic grievance of a visionary.

She had the visionary’s habit of silence and waited for revelation from the beyond. She received it often, in the endlessly shifting light of sun, moon, stars, and in the earth’s empty places. The vast spaces of her family’s Wisconsin farm had been her first

paradise, the primer that schooled her feeling and sight and her aspirations for the sublimity of the Void, which expanded in the Texas panhandle and the New Mexico badlands. She felt the earth breathing in myriad colors, through scores of floral specimens—poppy, thistle, jimson weed, and jack-in-the-pulpit, to which she gave the “jack,” isolated from the flower in one image, the unearthly, incandescent glow of a magic wand.⁷

Thomas De Quincey, a penetrating student of the unconscious mind in dreams, decades before Freud, observed that childhood experiences with the concrete world became mysteriously linked and formed symbolic mental patterns that crystallized and remained permanent:

There is no such thing as forgetting possible to the mind; a thousand accidents may, and will interpose a veil between our present consciousness and the secret inscriptions on the mind; accidents of the same sort will also rend away this veil; but alike, whether veiled or unveiled, the inscription remains for ever; just as the stars seem to withdraw before the common light of day, whereas, in fact, we all know that it is the light which is drawn over them as a veil—and that they are waiting to be revealed, when the obscuring daylight shall have withdrawn.⁸

Georgia's desire for communion was deeply enmeshed in memory. It surpassed her voracious curiosity and need to look. Painting nature's incalculable mutability, she contacted her own veiled inscriptions, equivalents of which she found in *Faust*. As an agent filled with awe, however “misprized” by the world, she was destined, as she sensed from childhood, to reconfigure these mysterious changes in line and pigment. America might have seemed source enough for her seeking. But her search was beyond time or place. As an older woman in Europe visiting Chartres Cathedral, she stood in gorgeous pools of colored light pouring into the nave through the stained glass windows and was stunned by the feeling of spiritual power surrounding her.⁹

She was susceptible. Born to a Catholic father and an Episcopalian mother, she had, as a child in Wisconsin, accompanied her uncle Bernard O'Keeffe to mass at Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary Church in Sun Prairie and developed “a childhood crush” on Catholicism.¹⁰ Trained in early adolescence by nuns at Sacred Heart Academy in Madison, she went on to the Chatham Episcopal Institute in Virginia. Even after this hefty exposure to formal religion seemed to have dissipated, when she was in her early twenties and unhappy working as an illustrator in Chicago, she would stop at a Catholic church “to kneel silently in prayer.”¹¹

“The mysterious way leads inwards.”¹² And formal religion is only one kind of spiritual attention. Surrendering to mysterious winds, trees, water, mountains, and clouds, her rapture and exaltation were more emphatic and compelling. If observing was her gift, sense impressions were merely the stimulus, the key to her uncharted inner life and the stupendous knowledge it contained. She responded to uncanny, inexplicable animism resid-

ing in all natural things, revealed after a long time spent gazing and listening to their peculiar music.

She painted this “music”¹³ and through her love of inventive play, found she could manufacture nature's music whenever she wanted. “By running against the wind with a bunch of pine branches in your hand you could have the pine trees singing right in your ears,” she announced to Anita.¹⁴ She was able to relate the act of seeing to all the bodily senses, which made her an unforgettable art teacher. She taught her Texas students to see by making them listen—to the sound of rustling grass, to prairie wind blowing through the leaves of locust trees.¹⁵ Artists' games, mere exercises, perhaps. But, from her earliest years, these were her ways of penetrating the mystery of the real.

“Georgia O'Keeffe steadfastly denied all religious and metaphysical interpretations....and insisted she painted what she saw.”¹⁶ Doris Bry knew her well yet accepted O'Keeffe's disavowal as unassailable fact. Compare it with the artist's declaration to Bry while painting cottonwoods: “When I paint I *am* trees.”¹⁷ Egoist? Or mystic? O'Keeffe loved simplicity in all things. She was anything but simple, as an artist, or as a person.

Besides, an attraction to the metaphysical wasn't something many American women painters were secure enough to discuss in the early years of the twentieth century, especially given the American avant-garde's progressive attachment to pure form. In the 1940s, the modernist critic Clement Greenberg saw O'Keeffe's paintings and showed no mercy. Art? Hardly. This was “private worship and the embellishment of private fetishes with secret or arbitrary meanings.”¹⁸ It was a slam, but Greenberg didn't know how right he was. O'Keeffe didn't explain. She donned her armor and saved face by throwing others off the track. There was another important matter, especially for artists—superstition: If she spoke of her inner sources, perhaps they would fail her. The conviction is reflected in the ancient wisdom of the sutras: “Then only will you see it, when you cannot speak of it; for the knowledge of it is deep silence....”¹⁹

Slits in Nothingness

For a long time, O'Keeffe didn't consciously include herself in the modernist program. She was involved in the strangeness of her discoveries. Writing to Anita in 1916, she mentioned “slits in nothingness” that she was trying, with difficulty, to paint, and the strange presence of crickets in the slits of that Texas nothingness. Sensing that this might sound goofy to someone back in New York, Georgia ended with a feeble disclaimer, “Imagination makes you see all sorts of things.”²⁰

Possibly under Stieglitz's direction, after 1918, she titled (or retitled) many of her works *Abstractions*, which has also led to great misunderstanding. *Abstraction*, conventionally understood, relates to a modernist style with historical antecedents and outcomes, even when it served clear spiritual intentions, as

in the early work of Kandinsky. Ananda Coomaraswamy, the peerless Indian art historian and metaphysician, whom O’Keeffe came to know through Stieglitz, regarded abstract art as equal to spiritual bankruptcy. “Our endeavor to subtract meaning from representation, our ‘subtract’ rather than ‘abstract’ art, may be less than human, and even devilish, implying as it does a will to live by bread alone.”²¹

O’Keeffe never lived by bread alone. Her abstractions only superficially resemble modernism. Actually, she “made no distinctions between her abstract and representational works,”²² which suggests that both approaches served the same ends. Observation and the rigors of reductive, simplifying abstraction were visual tools in a process that transformed her experiences into vivid and transcendent symbols. This shouldn’t be seen as a stylistic development within the “frantic modern Western quest for the perpetually advancing avant-garde.” It is, more accurately, a spiritual evolution.²³

For her, abstraction stood for a world of inner meanings. It took form, gradually at first, in the midst of great internal conflict. Take her frustration and immobility in 1915. She was tormented by what “Mr. Martin, or Mr. Dow, or Mr. Bement... would say.... It is curious how one works for flattery.” The disease is common enough, especially among artists who find themselves in a state of creative paralysis, having accepted for too long the influences of teachers and art schools. “During the summer—I didn’t work for anyone—I just sort of went mad usually—I wanted to say ‘Let them all be damned—I’ll do as I please.’”²⁴

Her rage sprang from disgust “with it all.” “And I’m glad I’m disgusted,” she wrote. “I’m starting all over new.”²⁵ This state of mind led to psychic visitations that produced the charcoal drawings she called, not abstractions, but *Specials* (1915, O’Keeffe 45–56). She started the *Specials* in isolation at night, drawing them on paper, on the floor of her room, crawling around in pain. *No. 9 Special* (O’Keeffe 54; plate 1) quite literally depicts “a headache... a very bad headache.”²⁶ She felt like “a raving lunatic” but didn’t care.²⁷ What she was discovering was too important.

Forms in the *Specials* conjure playing fountains or fiddle-head ferns lured into sunlight and about to uncoil. They evoke secretly moving water, ocean waves, rivers, thunderstorms. The artist’s bombastic gestures yield to lighter, flamelike tremolos of air or clouds, stirred, shredded, combed by the wind. Accumulations of transformative memory, they appear on paper as responses to hidden directives from a deep and silent place.²⁸ With the *Specials*, she purged herself of influences. She worked as she wanted to, “accepted as true, my own thinking.”²⁹ The exceptional appearance and meaning of these works wouldn’t be penetrated by a reasoning mind. Still, she worried about what others might think; at the same time, she was totally convinced of the rightness of what she was doing. “I feel bothered about that stuff I sent Dorothy. I wish I hadn’t sent it—I always have a curious sort

of feeling about some of my things—I hate to show them—I am perfectly inconsistent about it—I am afraid people won’t understand—and I hope they won’t [sic]—and am afraid they will.”³⁰

From the *Specials*, over decades, came a vocabulary of visual equivalents to natural forces, seen and felt. In geometries, gestures, and arbitrary colorings she conveyed endless natural moods—fierce scarring energy, beckoning stillness of watery concentrics, Faustian geographies, anything but benign. The English visionary painter and poet William Blake confessed, “I can look at the knot in a piece of wood until it frightens me.”³¹ In 1942, staring at the cross-section of a piece of wood, she painted it as three fearful physiognomies (O’Keeffe 1030–1032). Each resembles an icon that always points to something beyond itself.³² We have no alternative but to confront wood that exceeds the boundaries of format to appear terrifyingly alive. An ancient, fibrous mouth—*natura devorans*—waits to consume us; a demonic vortex is ready to suck us into oblivion.

Many of O’Keeffe’s subjects exist uncomfortably within the limits of their formats. They’re either squeezed into extremely narrow confines, or veer beyond them, as in the paintings of wood. The formal squeezing may relate to her early training with the Japanese-inspired Arthur Wesley Dow. It also expressed her process of receiving and transforming inspirations that initially appeared to her to be boundless. Concretizing explosions of corn, cannas, birch and pine trees, clamshells (to name only a few) onto rectangular canvas or paper, she necessarily boxed them in. But some appear caged, like wild beasts in a zoo. The oddity actually underscores the origin of these subjects as sources of awe. Making them seem to escape the confines of the frame, of course, conveys the same feeling. Hundreds of examples, using each of these devices, suggest that this form of expression was not occasional. It was a relatively constant way of transposing the real into transcendent symbols.³³

The impulses behind such pictures were integral to her prodigious intuitive gifts. They lay beyond artistic preconceptions, ideas, or the litany of artistic influences that writers about her have catalogued and described. Settling in New York in 1918, she joined the circle of Stieglitz with his endless “ribbon of talk... strong as a cable,”³⁴ and his fawning minions. She had trouble conveying her sublime communions, even though she tried, fecklessly, at times, to enter into Stieglitz’s art-think conversations. “I was an outsider. My color and form were not acceptable. It had nothing to do with Cézanne or anyone else.”³⁵

Mine

What *did* it have to do with? Agnes Martin, another American visionary, twenty-five years O’Keeffe’s junior, explained.

I don’t believe in influence
unless it’s you, yourself following your own track
Why you’d never get anywhere³⁶

To Mabel Dodge Luhan Georgia confided, “I think I would never have minded Stieglitz being anything he happened to be if he hadn’t kept me so persistently off *my* track.”³⁷

She claimed not to understand what Stieglitz and the others were talking about—why one color was better than another. Or what “plastic,”³⁸ a word formalist writers used to refer to the tangible three-dimensionality of Cézanne’s shapes, could possibly mean. She was sincere. But how could this be? She had a solid education. She’d read plenty of art literature. She’d survived art teachers of all stripes. Successfully, she’d taught art to others, even given public lectures about it. Why couldn’t she understand what they were saying about Cézanne? Piling their words on the painter of Monte Ste-Victoire was throwing her off. She couldn’t see Cézanne on Stieglitz’s terms. “There are people I have loved who make me see nothing,” she wrote.³⁹

Stieglitz may have been the reigning “seer” around the cracker barrel at 291, but the force of her work revealed her superior perceptions, and she knew it. Stieglitz photographed clouds in the early 1920s, “to find out what [he’d] learned in 40 years about photography.”⁴⁰ He called the first pictures *Music—A Sequence of Ten Cloud Photographs*. Subsequent cloud pictures he called *Equivalents* (see pages 218, 219). Slices from a heavenly bolt of cloth, the *Equivalents* ebb and flow, opaque to evanescent. They brood and explode in a mercurial timetable like the tides. Deliberately disorienting, they refer to no horizon. Gorgeous unfurlings of psychic places, buried for too long in Stieglitz, the incorrigible talker, the clouds are the closest he came to visualizing his dream life. Intuitively received rather than captured, they share qualities of O’Keeffe’s *Specials*. No wonder he raved about them.

She did too, in a meaningful fashion. Confiding to Sherwood Anderson, she praised the photographs by declaring her priority in their conception. Also, in a nutshell, she revealed her affinities with the natural sublime:

His prints of this year are all 4 by five inches all of the sky. They are very wonderful—way off the earth but four or five are of barns and snow....*His is the continuation of a long fight—Mine—*... He has done with the sky something similar to what I had done with color before—as he says—proving my case—He has done consciously something that I did mostly unconsciously—.⁴¹

What she did “mostly unconsciously” was rarely understood in terms of its sources, or the manner in which she had received and transformed them. What had arrived to her naturally and often involuntarily, was a private matter, something else entirely. Stieglitz may have yearned for the heavens, but in his avant-garde circle, curiosity for and affirmations concerning the spiritual in art were flagrantly secular.

She endured interpretations of her pictures that appalled her. Reviewers referred to the “hysteria” in her paintings of the Penitentes’ giant crosses that she saw looming in Arizona and around Taos, New Mexico⁴² (1929, O’Keeffe 667–671; see plate 36).

(Even today, the Penitentes’ secret religious societies practice flagellation and encourage crucifixion, in imitation of Christ’s suffering. The practices date from the Spanish Middle Ages.) Writing about the crosses, her friend, the critic Henry McBride, thought she “got religion” in Taos. Little did he know that she was operating from a religion he’d never grasp. It wasn’t Catholicism, *per se*, though from her early affection for, and knowledge of Catholic ritual, she knew that northern New Mexico was incomprehensible, except by observing the local people, some of whom needed to repeat the Christian sacrifice on themselves. The practices exceeded locale. To her they defined a mental geography. “Anyone who doesn’t feel the crosses simply doesn’t get that country,” she said.⁴³

Opening to the Light

Her flowers explored her own mental geography. Held in the hand, they became “your world for a moment,”⁴⁴ by which she seems to acknowledge the active vitalism of flowers beyond our ordinary experience of them. “Your world” suggests an imaginative leap, for her flowers include, even encompass, the viewer, thereby establishing his or her reduced place in the vastness of cosmic design. She explained that making the flowers big was her way of getting people to notice them.⁴⁵ The remark sounds lame, compared with the impact of the paintings. Or was it another disingenuous comment, calculated to silence further questions?

Like most artists, even educated ones, O’Keeffe remained mostly unconscious of the intricacies of her own mental processes. In a misprizing world, artistic intuitives want nothing more than to be left alone, even if, like O’Keeffe, they secretly long to know what others think. Summoned to accountability, many dissemble. O’Keeffe tried to give answers that weren’t readily available to her. Take *No. 9 Special*, based on a headache: “Well I had a headache, why not do something about it? So—here it is.”⁴⁶ Intuitives don’t “do something about it.” Their images arrive, grab hold, and direct. The falsifying of talk after the fact is universal. Matisse acknowledged it with cruel advice: “Do you want to become a painter? Then begin by cutting off your tongue. Henceforth, your expression will be left to your brushes.”⁴⁷

O’Keeffe’s brushes took her beyond flowers as facts. She expressed a grander notion—floral consciousness: Many of her flowers equal or exceed the size of the human head (see *Yellow Cactus*, 1929, O’Keeffe 675; plate 37). Through glorious color and attention to structural complexity, she extolled the *tremendum* of her awe for flowers, and beyond this, her personal identification with them. “Anita, do you feel like flowers sometimes?”⁴⁸ is a question that reveals the depths of her absorption.

By 1916, she’d painted few conventional flower still lifes.⁴⁹ She described to her friend how she’d observed some flowers in her room. Not with both eyes. She deliberately used her left eye, alone, and then the right. The experiment seemed to examine



ALFRED STIEGLITZ (1864–1946), *Georgia O'Keeffe*, 1930. Gelatin silver print, 23.6 × 19.1 cm. George Eastman House, Rochester, N.Y. Part purchase and part gift of An American Place. Ex-collection Georgia O'Keeffe. 1974:0052:0052.

both sides of her brain. It determined how, and to what degree each eye saw separately, compared with what both saw together. It also suggests that, from the beginning, *seeing* wasn't something she took lightly. This is why, when she said, later, that she made her flowers big "so others would see what I see,"⁵⁰ her brevity seems evasive. "What I see," sounds like the I-paint-what-I-see defense of the artistic dauber. On one level, O'Keeffe was sincere; on another, she was concealing something she had no words for, the visionary's expansive universe, directed by sublime intelligence.

O'Keeffe invites the viewer to travel into, and practically inhabit the flowers' interiors, or to gaze hypnotically down on them, as into the void of a well (O'Keeffe 259 [1918], 306 [1919]). As in holy icons, always pointing to something beyond themselves, the flowers, transformed, are not only beautiful surface designs, any more than icons of Christ or The Virgin are intended as decorative patterns. Like these holy figures, O'Keeffe's flowers exist in a transitional state of heightened consciousness. They refer back to the garden while always pointing to the Idea of Flower. In the traditional lore of symbols, flowers are archetypes of the soul. Their cuplike blossoms, calyxes, like the Chalice (O'Keeffe 560, 561 [1926], and 592 [1929]), are receptacles of heavenly instrumentality.⁵¹ The flowers had to be big. Their size signifies the space of a cosmic dream (O'Keeffe 599 [1927], 650 [1929], 718 [1930]; see plates 34, 42). Called upon to look, we enter their mysterious spiritual centers, and with the artist, come to feel what it might actually be like to be flowers.

Ancient Chinese painters had similar conceptions of the universe. The Void was not arbitrary or vague. It was an interior in which a network of transformations took place. Chinese painting was a system of correspondences, with space-time, collectively experienced or dreamed, in a perpetual state of becoming.⁵² O'Keeffe loved the Chinese achievement and owned many books about Chinese painting and artistic philosophy.⁵³ The precedent affirmed what had been deeply imprinted from direct experience, actual or dreamed.

When the poet Witter Bynner gave her a copy of his translation of *The Way of Life According to Laotzu*, his dedication was telling: "Dear Georgia— / You may not / like Poetry but / I have an idea / that you / *already* like Laotzu."⁵⁴ Like the authors of the Lao-tzu, she understood that "the core and the surface / Are essentially the same." The Lao-tzu asks: "Can you hold the door of your tent / Wide to the firmament?"⁵⁵ She had responded to this question years before in Virginia with several paintings of a tent door at night (1916, O'Keeffe 112, 113, 115). Maybe they were based on a camping trip, but they encapsulate another kind of experience. The brown cloth shelter parts to expose a palpitating bright blue triangle of sky outside. Firmament is fact, its dominance over darkness imminent. Thus, her open tent door crystallized metaphysical surrender—opening oneself to the Light.

Testimonies by Chinese painters expressed an ancient and enduring metaphysical tradition that attracted and fascinated her throughout her life. It is easy to find her individualism reflected in their serene confidence. Mi Yu-jen, Song dynasty: "People admire me for my talent as a painter; few are aware of the interior vision which presides in my work and which differentiates me from a good number of painters of the past and today. Also, without at least possessing on one's forehead, the third eye of wisdom, one cannot penetrate the secret of my art." Shih T'ao, Ming dynasty: "When I painted this work, I *became* the spring flower that I was drawing. The flowers from the river opened at the will of my hands; the waters of the river flowed in the rhythm of my being." Wang Chih-yuan, Qing dynasty: "A painter who does the portrait of a beautiful woman knows that her charm lies chiefly in her eyes. The same goes for the orchid" (1941, O'Keeffe 1017).⁵⁶

The assurance of the Chinese seems to be a paradise lost compared with the crassness with which certain members of O'Keeffe's public reacted to the flowers. Armed with fashionable Freudian sexual theories, they slathered them over her work with a heavy hand, seeing genitalia everywhere. When the owner of one of O'Keeffe's flower pieces rehung it in another room of her apartment, her friend observed, "Oh, I'm so glad you moved that vagina out of the living room."⁵⁷ In this atmosphere of gross miscomprehension, O'Keeffe had no choice. She could disavow everything. She could also fight back.

The Fright of the Day

In the early 1930s, a good friend, the painter William Einstein, encouraged her to write about her painting. Desultorily, she produced a group of vignettes with carefully chosen details from her childhood and later history as a student and mature artist. She abandoned the manuscript, and then, in the 1970s, completed and published it in 1976 as the text for the first important monograph on her work.⁵⁸

She hoped her writing would correct the "odd things" writers had "done about me with words," words that had "amazed" her. (She was too polite.) Art experts had not only patronized her. They were audacious enough to inform her about what she had painted, the assumption being that she hadn't known. Or, had she known, it wasn't their kind of knowing. They also seemed to be instructing her in what she ought to be painting.⁵⁹ People "make me feel like a hobbled horse,"⁶⁰ she wrote in another context. "Hobbled" is exactly what writers had done to her belief in her artistic originality. Her purpose in speaking up was urgent—"No one else can know how my paintings happen."⁶¹

She "amazed" in her own way, by including certain transcendent experiences that had marked her. One account situates the reader in 1916 in Canyon, Texas, south of Amarillo. Georgia was nearly thirty years of age. Her sister Claudia, some twelve

years younger and in her care since their mother's recent death, was staying with her. Georgia described the desolation of the immense Texas wasteland, how, together, the two sisters explored places where only the cattle went. Following cow paths over the edge of dry, lonely Palo Duro Canyon, they descended along the soft banks into its nearly invisible depths (*Special No. 21 [Palo Duro Canyon]*, 1916, O'Keeffe 155; plate 3). The way to the creek at the bottom of the canyon was steep and dangerous.

To the artist, it was also wonderfully frightening. Never had she experienced anything like these death-defying climbs. (It didn't occur to her *not* to undertake them.) At night, the exhilarating "fright of the day" persisted into her dreams, where she saw the foot of her bed tip upward and rise.⁶² An ordinary bed levitated, end up, into a sheer vertical, not unlike the canyon walls. As its occupant, she was turned, quite literally, upside down.

She awoke just before the bed fell. This abrupt ending, without comment, lets us reflect upon the possibility that through her dream something else in the artist may have awakened. Describing feelings of awe and dread, of her own insignificance in relation to the sublime verticals of Palo Duro Canyon, she also needed to convey that these verticals not only entered her bedroom, but also transformed, in her dream state, they became a fearsome container—the very bed that held her in fitful sleep.

She wrote of having returned to Canyon, Texas, in the summer of 1917 after a brief trip to New York. Before sunset, she and Claudia liked to walk beyond the town, again entering the oceanic expanses of the land. Claudia carried a gun. In the lurid orange light, she threw bottles into the air, shooting as many as she could before they fell to the ground. It was an adolescent's game, Texas-style. Claudia may have invested the amusement with a spark of competitive pride. Parading her marksmanship, concentration, coordination of eye and hand before her older sister, the younger one was ecstatic—bullets exploded, smashed glass flew into the light. Georgia recalled the sight and sounds vividly.

She also remembered the solace of being elsewhere. The sharpshooter Claudia had her eye on the bottles; Georgia had her eye on Venus, the evening star, visible even in broad daylight. "High in the sunset sky,"⁶³ the star excited her. She didn't know why she was fascinated. She didn't question the serene clarity of her attraction, or the impulse to follow the star. She trusted perfectly its luminous specter and the importance of its incomprehensible passage.

Sharpshooter Walks into Nowhere

The artist's expressed purpose in relating these stories was to elucidate "what I have done with where I have been."⁶⁴ Again, we are asked to swallow her simplisms. "Where I have been" seems to refer to physical places. But as we have seen, "where" like "seeing," also refers to her expansive mind. She may not have

realized that as a writer she, like all storytellers, selected certain details, refashioned events, repositioned characters, and inevitably shaded overt intentions with hidden ones.

Introducing young "Claudie," shooting a gun at sunset, Georgia situated her sister in direct contrast to herself. Or did she? Claudia, the unreflective, noisy representative of directed, linear action, pointed her weapon. Bullets hit targets. But Georgia, too, was a Texas sharpshooter. She bragged about it to Anita. With an hour to kill, "I got a box of bullets and went out on the plains and threw tin cans into the air & shot at them. It's a great sport—try it if you never have."⁶⁵ Claudia became a disdained aspect of Georgia, herself. Empty-handed, passive, receptive: "I had nothing but to walk into nowhere and the wide sunset space with the star."⁶⁶

O'Keeffe was known for being able to out-walk any man. Here, her words suggest another kind of energy: concentration, inner silence, the hypnotic gaze and involuntary movements of a somnambulist. Propelled by forces beyond her control, she sank into spatial splendor colored by the dying sun. Guided by the pristine light of the beautiful star, her vision surpassed Claudia's gun and bottles, that is, her own earthly concerns. Georgia's footsteps "into nowhere" followed the visible into the eternally invisible.

"Ten watercolors were made from that star."⁶⁷ The statement brings us back to earth. It feels like an afterthought, another urge to be accountable, to show concrete results for the sublime experience. It also invites the reader to enter this experience through her work. Eight evening-star watercolors from 1917 are known (O'Keeffe 199–206; see plate 5). As a series, they evolve in stages, from a simple configuration of pale orange sky and blue horizon into a coiling snakelike aureole of cadmium red. Pulsating with the artist's tremulous brush, the red engulfs, even seems to protect the star. Shifting and reforming with each successive work, the aureole becomes the sky itself and the star a point of light haloed by the sky's roiling waves.

None of these watercolors is a landscape in the traditional sense. Nor is their immediacy the result of direct observation or abstraction for its own sake. Each dissolves and purifies observed reality, transforming it into a mental image, a visionary's psychic ideogram, vibrating with her initial bedazzlement. O'Keeffe's evening star images configure their subject as a force that seems to be released onto the Void of the page of its own accord. If this seems exaggerated, or contradicts the intentionality or artistic ambition that writers about her work seem to assume, we must turn to the wisdom of Agnes Martin. Musing about what real artists do, she wrote: "The error is thinking we have a part to play in the process."⁶⁸

Grounding a Sky-Bound Mind

Experiences of numinous consciousness, especially by artists, are difficult to discuss. They involve inquiry outside the normal

purview of art historical analysis, for they take us into the muddle of the creative process, the artist's capacity for response and wonder, and our own in relation to her works. O'Keeffe's attraction to limitless space, light, and vibrant color wasn't willed attention to facts or "romantic need."⁶⁹ It is better characterized as obedience to the authority of actual or waking dreams. In describing the circumstances around her dream of Palo Duro Canyon and the evening-star watercolors, she tried to show that authoritative-obedient surrender, surpassing comprehension or understanding, had affected the peculiar growth and formation of her mind.

Partly because this occurred in relative secrecy, as visitations of a sort, she mostly avoided sharing them openly. But evidence of visionary consciousness, surpassing artistic stylistics, is everywhere in the work, the artist's vibrant letters, interviews, artist's statements, and other writings, not to mention in her confidences and offhand remarks. Another reason for their obscurity is that around 1918, O'Keeffe made a fatal decision. It assured her worldly success but hobbled her inner life for the next twenty-five years. She moved to New York and eventually married Alfred Stieglitz. Why? She thought she'd found a soul mate in the "seer."

In 1915, the time of the first *Specials*, she wrote to Anita some lines that are famous among Stieglitz fans: "I believe I would rather have Stieglitz like some thing—any thing I had done—than anyone else I know of—I have always thought that—If I make any thing that satisfies me even ever so little—I am going to show it to him to find out if its [*sic*] any good. Don't you often wish you could make something he might like?"⁷⁰ This strange, pandering passage, written in her late twenties, as she began her first artistic breakthrough, exposes the vulnerability of a schoolgirl.

Stieglitz was the famous self-styled art martyr, dedicated to changing American taste by battling for American modern art. When Anita, without permission, took Georgia's charcoal-on-paper *Specials* to 291 in early 1916, Stieglitz discovered an American original. "Finally, a woman on paper!"⁷¹ The fatuous exclamation concealed the limitations of a know-it-all. He covered himself by elevating what he saw into a Victorian concept of archetypal femininity that had always moved him. (They may have been made by a woman, but the drawings were not about being one.) They also seemed to qualify as modernist abstraction, which Stieglitz understood and admired. Working on those two confusions, Stieglitz launched O'Keeffe's artistic career.

It was a dilemma: Stieglitz's responses were preferable to Texas-lowbrow retorts to her work—"Doesn't look like the canyon to me.... You must have had a stomachache when you painted it."⁷² She remained in Texas until 1918, continuing, after the first *Specials*, to risk making other works that were fiercely her own. "The Great Child pouring some more of her Woman

self on paper—purely—truly unspoiled," rhapsodized Stieglitz.⁷³ He, who'd sent her *Faust* and shown her *Specials* to the New York public, seemed like God. She became an important member of his stable of artists and, by association, another arm of his theory. If she objected, she didn't say so directly. Later, she recalled, "It was his game and we all played along or left the game."⁷⁴

Playing along, she became an icon and perpetuated a myth that ultimately bored her. She spoke and wrote about her teachers and art-school experiences, at times, as if she had been any artist. Many writers have followed this lead, even when faced with someone as prodigious as O'Keeffe. They have tried to impart to her creativity a logic she didn't possess: their logic. What she tried to preserve in herself regularly appeared to her in a state of unknowing. Yet much writing about her wants to show how much she knew.

If we are to believe those who write about her with confidence, what O'Keeffe knew was arrived at through a vast context of verifiable art influences. Rigorous scholarship, gaining in momentum since her death in 1986, led to the commendable catalogue raisonné of her work. But in the gross institutionalization of her achievement, art history has assumed the job of codifying it through a mountain of available documentation. This has effectively grounded, with a dull thud, O'Keeffe's sublime, sky-bound mind. It has put an artist who could operate only in complete imaginative freedom into a falsifying straightjacket. As Agnes Martin justly observed, "There is so much written about art that it is mistaken for an intellectual pursuit."⁷⁵

Much is made of O'Keeffe's having read, twice, Wassily Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. She didn't need to read about "the spiritual life to which art belongs."⁷⁶ It was in her bones in Wisconsin. Other children, would-be artists, drew and painted, while she, who "sewed unusually well," made dolls' clothes, a cardboard doll's house, and set doll dramas in a miniature "park."⁷⁷ Through games of imaginative projection, she was a "spiritual revolutionary"⁷⁸ before she picked up a brush.

Kandinsky was a close friend of the composer Arnold Schoenberg, still regarded as one of the twentieth century's greatest teachers. *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* appeared at the same time (1914) as Schoenberg's *Harmonielehre*, lessons in harmony and composition, also a book of spiritual instruction. Schoenberg made important distinctions about how artists learn. "The genius really learns only from himself, the man of talent mainly from others. The genius learns from nature—his own nature—the man of talent from art." A teacher can pass along artistic methods and aesthetics, but when it comes to the functions of feeling and sensitivity, he is less than lucid. He should turn to his talented pupil and simply tell him "to find out for himself."⁷⁹

Writers bent on defining O'Keeffe's achievement through her influences should consider Schoenberg's caution. The artist

spoke dutifully, and not without affection, about Arthur Wesley Dow and his remarkable workbook *Composition*. Dow's sensitive eye had absorbed artistic principles from all cultures. His is a gentle, moving text, dedicated to students, but his pallid admonitions to "express an emotion,"⁸⁰ or to fill space in a beautiful way, don't account for what O'Keeffe found out for herself. Well before her maturity, she considered Dow an artistic sellout and his work "disgustingly tame."⁸¹ Yet with lamentable shrinkage, a writer will discuss her unprecedented *Specials* as if they'd been made in an art class "as Dow recommended."⁸² Unintentionally, this approach converts the O'Keeffe of exceptional spiritual receptivity to an artist of mere talent. "We must look for his qualities outside the usual order of exercises in which artists are trained," Clarence Cook wrote about the American visionary painter Albert Pinkham Ryder.⁸³ This applies also to O'Keeffe.

Using her question, "Anita, do you feel like flowers sometimes?" to punctuate the artist's floral preferences for the "zinnias, dahlias, and cannas she planted and painted at Lake George,"⁸⁴ is to misread to favor facts. It deprives the confession of its original innocence and all but strips of inner wisdom the flower paintings that were its outcome. Ananda Coomaraswamy used to be accused of subjectively reading into the myths and symbols in his studies. He countered his critics by saying that modern academics, imbued with false ideas of progress, "read out," voiding their material of meaning. He compared them to modern spiritual scholars, who, wishing to come to the so-called real Jesus, removed everything miraculous from the Gospel stories.⁸⁵

How does the art historian deal with an artist's inner life? Not by programs that ensconce her in a context of "the era's preoccupation with spiritualism and the vogue for Theosophy and other alternative creeds, ranging from Swendenborgianism to Buddhism." Did O'Keeffe "draw upon the heritage of the late nineteenth century to craft a decidedly modern idiom, an abstract Symbolism"? Were hers merely "novel expressions"?⁸⁶ This educated thinking ignores "kinds of response that transcend cultural and chronological differences...that precede detachment and rational observation."⁸⁷ We must be careful to preserve the miraculous in her work. It was "of the finer nerves, the more poignant vision, awareness few others even dream of and perceptions that have to remain esoteric to the majority..."⁸⁸

Anchor and Nurse

Light was her first memory of the miraculous: bright "light all around."⁸⁹ She was eight or nine months old. On that Wisconsin summer day in 1888, she also registered the red and white patterns of a quilt on the grass, her mother's dark hair, the golden-haired "Aunt" Winnie. She noticed Winnie's gown with the attention of a couturier: gossamer white cloth, sprinkled with blue and green sprigs. Her mother, pressed to remember Winnie's

frock of that summer, later verified that the infant Georgia's observations were correct.

Her next memory, from the following summer, was of a pleasurable feeling: grassy lawn under her bare baby's feet. Crawling to a dirt road, she felt the warm dust and ridges in it from carriage wheels. She sat in the dirt—"probably eating it." In infancy, we never have knowledge better than this. To eat is to trust and affirm one's existence. Deeper than thought or comprehension, "it was the same feeling I have had later when I've wanted to eat a fine pile of paint just squeezed out of the tube."

The first drawing she remembered making was a strong outline with lead pencil on a brown paper bag. It showed a little man "two inches high." He was supposed to be bending over. She worked on him "intensely—probably as hard as I ever worked at anything in my entire life." His posture wasn't convincing, so she turned the bag, and he appeared to be on his back, feet in the air. With this "surprise," she realized that she could invent. Art wasn't copying. It was the will to risk. She held on to the lesson: "I kept the little drawing for a long time."

Her glory is palpable. With the dream of the levitating bed and communion with the evening star, these memories belong to some of her most powerful writing. As attempts to explain "how my paintings happen," they also chart her sublime secret life, where memory was, as for Wordsworth, "a dwelling place" and, with eyes "made quiet," she saw "into the life of things."⁹⁰

They also describe the perfect laboratory—"nature" as "anchor" and "nurse,"⁹¹ conditions in which she first discovered the will to form, where she sensed life anxious to act through her. O'Keeffe crafted her text as a defense against misunderstanding. Light: an exploding visitation, the first of many epiphanies. Direct observation: inseparable from love. Eating dirt: deep knowledge, prelude to artistic trust. Play: internship that defied instruction. Solitary inventiveness: result of inner necessity. Threaded needle: at first, instrument of the child artist-warrior; later, solace of the private thinker. These were her principal sources of spiritual nourishment, the very foundations of her art. We must pay closer attention to them.

Loving to sew by hand doesn't fit conventional expectations. Few dare to mention the practice, much less explore it. Her frequent sewing fascinated Stieglitz. He venerated the erotic beauty of her sewing hands by framing them as archetypal instruments of the transformer that she was. Once she lamented over a group of landscapes and bone pictures because they remained "in a very objective stage of development." She hadn't worked on the pictures "at all after I brought them in from outdoors." They lacked "*that memory or dream thing I do that for me comes nearer reality...*"⁹²

Notes

1. See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), for a thorough analysis of the numinous as “a living factor of singular power” (p. 94) in the universal discourse on the suprarational. I am using “aweful,” Otto’s spelling (*ibid.*, 13–19), throughout, instead of “awful,” which can be confusing in common English usage.
2. Barbara Buhler Lynes, *Georgia O’Keeffe: Catalogue Raisonné*, 2 vols. (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1999), lists and illustrates in color nearly two thousand works by the artist in chronological order, offering the most complete view of her work to date and will, it is hoped, inhibit, and perhaps prevent, distortions about O’Keeffe that arise from partial knowledge, which, until now, has permitted the promulgation of scholarly tastes, preferences, and pet theories. Bringing unfamiliar, disdained, and ignored works into a relation with the whole as new and incontrovertible evidence, this contribution to O’Keeffe scholarship will allow us to know her better than ever before, and in the only way that ultimately matters—through the tremendous power and scope of her work.
3. See Ruth E. Fine, Elizabeth Glassman, and Juan Hamilton (*The Book Room: Georgia O’Keeffe’s Library in Abiquiu*, exh. cat. Grollier Club, New York [Abiquiu, N.M.: Georgia O’Keeffe Foundation, 1997], 34, 36) for an explanation of Stieglitz’s intentions in sending the book. It does not indicate O’Keeffe’s response to or interest in the substance of the text, as documented by her letters, nor suggest her reasons for keeping *Faust* among her cherished books for the rest of her life.
4. Georgia O’Keeffe, to Anita Pollitzer, Canyon, Texas, 30 October 1916; in Clive Giboire, ed., *Lovingly Georgia: The Complete Correspondence of Georgia O’Keeffe and Anita Pollitzer* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 209; emphasis mine. Her letter also equated the book with fairy-tale aspects of her Texas daily life. After reading, she caught a ride home on a hay wagon from a “funny old man” who “noticed my book—‘Faust’ and asked me to get up beside him” (*ibid.*).
5. “Das Schaudern ist der Menschheit bestes Teil. / Wie auch die Welt ihm das Gefühl verteuere, / Ergriffen fühlt er tief das Ungeheure” (Goethe, *Faust*, pt. 2, 1.5; cited and trans. in Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, 40).
6. O’Keeffe, to Anderson, September 1923 (letter 29); cited in Jack Cowart and Juan Hamilton, *Georgia O’Keeffe: Art and Letters*, exh. cat. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (Boston: New York Graphic Society Books, 1987), 173.
7. *Jack-in-the-Pulpit No VI*, the last in this series (1930); other examples are O’Keeffe 715–720; see plates 41, 42.
8. Thomas de Quincey, *Confessions of an Opium Eater*, ed. Alethea Hayter (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1971), 104. Besides eloquently reporting the artificial paradises of opium addiction, De Quincey’s *Confessions* also may be relied upon “as a pioneering study of the operation of the subconscious mind....” (Hayter, Introduction, *ibid.*, 18).
9. Lisle, *Portrait of an Artist*, 310.
10. *Ibid.*, 11.
11. *Ibid.*, 40.
12. Novalis [Friedrich von Hardenberg]: “Nach innen geht der geheimnisvolle Weg.” Quoted and trans. Hugh Honour, *Romanticism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), 316.
13. Other examples are *No. 20—From Music—Special* (1915; O’Keeffe 53); *Music—Pink and Blue No. 1* (1918, O’Keeffe 257); *Music—Pink and Blue No. 2* (1918, O’Keeffe 258; plate 9); and *Blue and Green Music* (1921, O’Keeffe 344).
14. O’Keeffe, to Pollitzer, 5 October 1916; in Anita Pollitzer, *A Woman on Paper: Georgia O’Keeffe, The Letters and Memoir of a Legendary Friendship* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 151.
15. *Ibid.*; Pollitzer’s own recollections.
16. Doris Bry, “O’Keeffe Country,” in *Georgia O’Keeffe: In the West*, ed. Doris Bry and Nicholas Callaway (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), unpaginated.
17. *Ibid.*; in the 1950s.
18. Clement Greenberg, *The Nation*, 15 June 1946. I am indebted to Sharyn R. Udall (“Beholding the Epiphanies: Mysticism and the Art of Georgia O’Keeffe,” in *From the Faraway Nearby Georgia O’Keeffe as Icon* [Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998], 90), for this magnificent example of modernist phobia.
19. Quoted from Sankara on the Brahma Sutra, in Ananda Coomaraswamy, *The Door in the Sky: Coomaraswamy on Myth and Meaning*, ed. Rama P. Coomaraswamy (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 149 n.6.
20. Pollitzer, *Woman on Paper*, 147, 149.
21. Coomaraswamy, *Door in the Sky*, 24.
22. Barbara Rose, “Georgia O’Keeffe’s Originality,” in Peter Hassrick, ed., *The Georgia O’Keeffe Museum* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1997), 110.
23. *Ibid.*, 108. Rose is bold in asserting that O’Keeffe’s spirituality probably makes her ineligible for the conventional stylistic treatment that art historians would normally apply to other artists.
24. Pollitzer, *Woman on Paper*, 24; emphasis mine.
25. *Ibid.*, 29.
26. Georgia O’Keeffe, *Some Memories of Drawings*, ed. Doris Bry (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988), text accompanying plate 5.
27. Giboire, ed., *Lovingly, Georgia*, 103.
28. O’Keeffe 45–56 (see plate 1) and 59–61. *Second, Out of My Head* (1915) is no. 56.
29. [Georgia O’Keeffe], *Georgia O’Keeffe* (New York: Viking Press, 1976), unpaginated, opposite plates 12 and 1.
30. O’Keeffe, to Pollitzer, October 1915; in Pollitzer, *Woman on Paper*, 28. This often-quoted passage is not always cited with its early date, but used to indicate the artist’s general reticence toward the responses of others. It is important as a commentary on the *Specials*, which would not be shown until early 1916, after Stieglitz discovered them.
31. Blake’s own woodcuts never explored this source of terror. The photographer Joel-Peter Witkin quotes Blake’s statement without a source in Joel-Peter Witkin, with the collaboration of Eugenia Parry, *Joel-Peter Witkin: Disciple and Master* (New York: Fotofolio, 2000), 13. Sarah L. Burt, the projects manager for the Georgia O’Keeffe Foundation, kindly informed me that the inventory of nearly three thousand books in O’Keeffe’s library in Abiquiu includes sixty-two relating to religion or spiritual matters. There are also two or three books on Blake’s painting (which she may have bought or they may have been given to her). There are none containing Blake’s poetry or other writings.
32. Linette Martin, *Sacred Doorways: A Beginner’s Guide to Icons* (Brewster, Mass.: Paraclete Press, 2002), 2.
33. O’Keeffe 455, 477, 503, and 507 for squeezed images; 557, 595, 603, 604, and 713 for exploding ones.
34. The critic Edmund Wilson, quoted in James R. Mellow, *Walker Evans* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 89. For a critical examination of Stieglitz’s character and the nature of his peculiar influence over O’Keeffe and others, see Eugenia Parry, *The Photography of Alfred Stieglitz: Georgia O’Keeffe’s Enduring Legacy* (Rochester, N.Y.: George Eastman House, 2000), 17–43.
35. [O’Keeffe], *Georgia O’Keeffe*, opp. pl. 31.
36. Agnes Martin, “The Untroubled Mind,” from “Selected Writings,” in Barbara Haskell, *Agnes Martin*, exh. cat. Whitney Museum of Art, New York, 1992, 14. Martin and O’Keeffe apparently knew each other. It is rumored that neither liked the other much though they had a lot in common. I have inserted Martin’s written convictions throughout this piece to convey a standard of purity of artistic purpose. I believe that the intuitive side of O’Keeffe would have recognized this purity.
37. Lisle, *Portrait of an Artist*, 187.
38. [O’Keeffe], *Georgia O’Keeffe*, opp. pl. 31.
39. *Ibid.*, opp. pl. 55.
40. Alfred Stieglitz, “How I Came to Photograph Clouds,” *Amateur Photographer and Photography*, 19 September 1923; from Sarah Greenough and Juan Hamilton, *Alfred Stieglitz: Photographs and Writings*, exh. cat. National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., 1999), 207.
41. O’Keeffe, to Sherwood Anderson, 11 February 1924 (letter 30); in Cowart and Hamilton, *Georgia O’Keeffe: Art and Letters*, 176; emphasis mine.
42. Lisle, *Portrait of an Artist*, 191.
43. *Ibid.*; in reference to McBride’s article “The Sign of the Cross,” *New York Sun*, 8 February 1930.
44. *Ibid.*, 126.
45. [O’Keeffe], *Georgia O’Keeffe*, opp. pl. 23.
46. O’Keeffe, *Memories of Drawings*, text accompanying pl. 5. It’s not surprising that writers, reading these explanatory statements and trying to be faithful to what they mistakenly regard as O’Keeffe’s intentions, follow her lead in diminishing the spiritual dimensions in her work.

47. Quoted by François Cheng in *Chu Ta, 1626-1705: Le Génie du trait* (Paris: Editions Phébus, 1986), 42; my translation from the French.
48. Pollitzer, *Woman on Paper*, 28. Tentative, it is among her earliest acknowledgments of complete self-identification with her subjects. Cf. her later, more confident statement from the 1950s, cited above: “When I paint, I am trees.”
49. Only seven between 1903 and 1908; see O’Keeffe 5, 6, 7, 17, 18, 19, and 37.
50. Artist’s statement, *Fifty Recent Paintings by Georgia O’Keeffe*, exh. cat., Intimate Gallery, New York, 11 February–3 April 1926; see Lynes, *Catalogue Raisonné*, 2:1098.
51. See entry for “Flower,” in Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*, trans. John Buchanan-Brown (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 394–96.
52. François Cheng, *Souffle-Esprit: Textes théoriques chinois sur l’art pictural* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1989), 10.
53. O’Keeffe’s library in Abiquiu included Laurence Binyon’s *Flight of the Dragon: An Essay on the Theory and Practice of Art in China and Japan. Based on Original Sources* (1911; reprint, London: John Murray, 1943). In the book, one of a few among her many volumes that the artist marked and underlined, a marked-up passage explains the power of empty space, “no longer something left over, but something exerting an attractive power to the eye” (Fine, Glassman, and Hamilton, *Book Room*, 21).
54. *Ibid.*, 22; emphasis mine.
55. Witter Bynner, *The Way of Life According to Laotzu: An American Version* (New York: John Day, 1944). no. 1, p. 25; no. 10, p. 30. Georgia O’Keeffe, like many Lao-tzu fans, including Agnes Martin, probably regarded him as the single author of the works bearing his name. *Lao-tzu* means Old Master or Master Lao. Almost nothing is known about him. Once he was thought to be a contemporary of Confucius and active in the sixth century B.C. Recent scholarship (see Lao-tzu, *Tao Te Ching: Translation of the Ma Wang Tui Manuscripts by D. C. Lau*, ed. Sarah Allen [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994]) argues that he was probably not the single person who wrote the works traditionally attributed to him. Nor is there evidence that he was even a historical figure. In the fifth to third centuries B.C., the golden age of Chinese philosophy, from which the texts seem to come, there was a fashion for giving a collection of texts by several participants this type of mysterious and anonymous authorship. Lau suggests that ancient Chinese works are generally “best looked upon as anthologies,” and that the *Lao-tzu* is most likely a “collection of passages by many with only a common tendency of thought” (p. 107). For Agnes Martin, who “leaned to the Chinese,” Bynner’s translation was her bible: “It’s all you need to know. It will take you out of all confusion” (from my own copy of a lecture given by Martin in the 1980s and recorded by a student).
56. Cheng, *Souffle Esprit*, 27, 120, 91, in succession; emphasis mine. I cannot claim that O’Keeffe read these particular texts, but they represent an attitude so fundamental to Chinese painting that she would have found it in whatever she read on the subject. Besides, the painters seem to be speaking of her work as they speak of their own.
57. Lisle, *Portrait of an Artist*, 128, cited without source.
58. [O’Keeffe], *Georgia O’Keeffe*, untitled acknowledgments.
59. *Ibid.*, opening text of book proper.
60. O’Keeffe, to Sherwood Anderson, 11 June 1924 (letter 31), in Cowart and Hamilton, *Georgia O’Keeffe: Art and Letters*, 178.
61. [O’Keeffe], *Georgia O’Keeffe*, opening paragraph of book proper.
62. *Ibid.*, opp. pl. 5.
63. *Ibid.*, opp. pl. 6.
64. *Ibid.*, opening paragraph of book proper.
65. O’Keeffe, to Pollitzer, 19 February 1917; in Pollitzer, *Woman on Paper*, 151.
66. [O’Keeffe], *Georgia O’Keeffe*, opp. pl. 6.
67. *Ibid.*
68. Martin, “Untroubled Mind,” in Haskell, *Agnes Martin*, 21.
69. See Marjorie P. Balge-Crozier, “Still Life Redefined,” in Elizabeth Hutton Turner, *Georgia O’Keeffe: The Poetry of Things*, exh. cat. Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press 1999), 56.
70. Giboire, ed., *Lovingly, Georgia*, 40.
71. *Ibid.*, 48.
72. Lisle, *Portrait of an Artist*, 77; 1917? exact date and painting unspecified.
73. Stieglitz, to O’Keeffe, 31 March 1918; in Pollitzer, *Woman on Paper*, 159.
74. Georgia O’Keeffe, “Stieglitz: His Pictures Collected Him,” *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, 11 December 1949, p. 24. Doris Bry graciously alerted me to this important, lesser-known source of O’Keeffe’s opinions.
75. Martin, “Beauty is the Mystery of Life,” in Haskell, *Agnes Martin*, 10.
76. Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans. M. T. H. Sadler (1914; reprint, New York: Dover, 1977), 4.
77. O’Keeffe discussed her games in detail in [O’Keeffe] *Georgia O’Keeffe*. As fundamental sources of her creativity, they have not received the attention they deserve.
78. Kandinsky praises the imagination of the writer Maeterlinck, “who did as children, the greatest imaginers of all time, always do in their games; for they use a stick for a horse or create entire regiments of cavalry out of chalks” (*Concerning the Spiritual*, 14 n.6).
79. Arnold Schoenberg, “Problems in Teaching Art” (1911), in *Style and Idea, Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*, ed. Leonard Stein, trans. Leo Black (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 365.
80. Arthur Wesley Dow, *Composition: A Series of Exercises in Art Structure of the Use of Students and Teachers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 110.
81. Writing to Anita Pollitzer about Dow’s Grand Canyon paintings of 1912–1913: “Pa Dow painting his pretty colored canyons—it must have been a temptation—no wonder he fell” (11 September 1916, letter 14); in Cowart and Hamilton, *Georgia O’Keeffe: Art and Letters*, 156.
82. Turner, *Georgia O’Keeffe: Poetry of Things*, 10.
83. Cited in Charles C. Eldredge, “Nature Symbolized: American Painting from Ryder to Hartley,” in *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, exh. cat. Los Angeles County Museum, Los Angeles, 1986, 114.
84. Turner, *Georgia O’Keeffe: Poetry of Things*, 10.
85. Rama P. Coomaraswamy, preface to *The Door in the Sky: Coomaraswamy on Myth and Meaning* by Ananda Coomaraswamy (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), xv.
86. Eldredge, “Nature Symbolized,” 116–17.
87. David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 32.
88. Lisle, *Portrait of an Artist*, 184, quoting Mabel Dodge Luhan.
89. In this last section, all quoted statements by O’Keeffe are taken from [O’Keeffe] *Georgia O’Keeffe*, opening pages of text proper, and are not cited separately.
90. William Wordsworth, “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798,” *The Essential Wordsworth*, ed. Seamus Heaney (New York: Ecco Press, 1988), 48, 45.
91. *Ibid.*, 47.
92. O’Keeffe, to Dorothy Brett, 15? February 1932 (letter 60); in Cowart and Hamilton, *Georgia O’Keeffe: Art and Letters*, 206.