

The Better to See You

TEN MINUTES INTO A PSYCHOLOGY CLASS, the door bangs open and a disheveled college student storms into the classroom, tells the teacher what he thinks of a difficult assignment, throws his overdue paper on the teacher's desk, and charges out. The instructor tells the shocked audience to not speak but record in detail what has just happened. He collects the students' eyewitness accounts and begins to read them to the class. Not one report agrees on the details. Was the enraged student wearing a blue sweater; was that a red kerchief around his neck; what was it he said? The incident had been staged, but the lesson is clear: how we perceive things is determined by our peculiar lens, our personal, distinctive filter. So much for factual reporting, and in the murky waters of internal perception of feelings and motives, determining where the truth lies is even less clear. William Blake, an early reader of the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, illustrated the point:

The sun's light when he unfolds it
depends on the organ that beholds it.

In 1759, en route from London to Stockholm, Emanuel Swedenborg—renowned scientist-philosopher and esteemed member of Sweden's House of Lords—had an extraordinary experience. Dining in Gothenburg at the home of an acquaintance, he suddenly left the party of fifteen guests and went out of the room. He returned, pale and alarmed, and explained that a fire had just broken out in Stockholm (405 kilometers away) near his neighborhood and that it was spreading very fast. He was restless and left the table several times to monitor the situation, reporting the fire's progress upon his re-

Opposite:
William Blake
(English, 1757–1827).
Frontispiece, Plate I, from
*For the Children: The
Gates of Paradise*, 1793.
Blake etched in intaglio
18 plates for this work.
The engravings have in-
scriptions of single words
or brief aphorisms. He
illustrated the course of
human life from birth to
death from a psychologi-
cal perspective. Lessing
J. Rosenwald Collection,
1813, Library of
Congress.

turn. At eight o'clock he announced with joy and relief, "Thank God! The fire is extinguished, the third door from my house."

Three days later, official reports of the fire came in, corroborating every detail of Swedenborg's account. The visiting scientist-statesman was quickly the talk of Gothenburg. But the truth is, the cat was merely out of the bag. Swedenborg had been having telepathic or clairvoyant experiences for years. If asked, he would calmly add that he could converse with the dead. Now, however, he was under the lens of his fellow countrymen. Was he a madman, a crank, or was it possible that what he reported from "the other side" was true?

Swedenborg said that we are on earth for a purpose—to exercise our free will to grow into our own unique angel-hood. He would suggest that the lens is truth and helps us on our evolution to angel-hood. Truth is what enables us to see what is good in others; and he would undoubtedly complete the equation by saying that truth and good combined are the whole lens—the binoculars that bring into focus our spiritual wisdom and wholeness, giving depth to our spiritual field. In a series of paired pieces, the stories, essays, and poetry of *Kaleidoscope: Lenses on Reality* explore this phenomenon of individualized perception.

This collection's preface sets the stage, identifying two ways of using a camera lens: one by a photographer, stepping out of a building into late afternoon sunlight, intent on using a newly acquired lens to capture the city's beauty; the other by a photographer in his studio who is making a family portrait through the controlled use of light and shadow.

The writers in *Kaleidoscope* remind us again and again of reality's deceptive nature. What, on first glance, may appear to be ordinary, on closer examination—or in some cases, when seen from afar—becomes extraordinary.

- In the first pair of stories (Secret Message), the mysterious inscriptions in a Knights' Templar chapel become clear when explained in the context of the knights' spiritual journeys. In the other story, a cryptic prophecy from nature takes on different meaning after being internalized by a shepherd.
- In the fourth pair of stories (Boxing Day), we discover the resourcefulness of individuals transitioning out of a way of life, of moving from the familiar and letting go of years of well-loved objects.
- In the Mirror, Mirror on the Wall pairing, unique angles of vision become transformative agents and radically set individuals apart from family and community. In one lens, we see up close the microscopic response of family members to a woman who is spiritually awakened. The other lens is fo-

cused on a mystic, centuries after his life, through the telescopic view of his countrymen, and like starlight, his reputation and wisdom remain a vibrant point of reference.

After university graduation, in 1709, Swedenborg had made the traditional first European tour. He spent time in Leiden, where he studied science and scientific equipment at the university. In exchange for his help, the young student was taught by his landlord the craft of grinding lenses. With this knowledge and a newly acquired skill in brass-instrument making, Swedenborg built his own microscope. Modeled after a 20-power version he had seen in the famous scientist Antonie van Leeuwenhoek's lab, and not to be outdone, youthful Swedenborg's microscope was 42-power.

Swedenborg's original focus on unlocking the secrets of nature was eventually turned inward as he explored the secrets of spiritual realms. To do this work, he learned to discern the truth through a divine lens—a lens Swedenborg would certainly concede has the ultimate, higher power. He explained the distinctive way that people see into the spiritual world as follows:

People today have no idea what perception is. It is an inner feeling for whether a thing is true and good . . . The sensation is so clear for angels that it gives them awareness and recognition of what is true and what is good, of what comes from the Divine and what comes from themselves. In addition, perception enables them to detect the character of anyone they meet simply from the person's manner of approach or from a single one of his or her ideas. (*Secrets of Heaven*, paragraph 104)

Swedenborg, if alive today, might suggest that we experience life in a hologram, in a convergence of earthly and spiritual worlds with an ever-changing focal point, depending on our receptive state to the light of truth. He was speaking of our sensitivity to what is happening around us. Depending on our levels of energy and awareness, we can shift our view of the spiritual landscape from lower to higher perspectives. And as described by the authors in *Kaleidoscope*, we understand and perceive the world around us in our own distinctive way. We have the freedom to move into our own angel-hood by means of the lenses of divinity with a multiplicity of interesting directions before us, and— with the potential of ever-improving vision—the sky's the limit.

DANIEL POLIKOFF

Water Lilies

1914–1917

They look like a raft
of roses—red

heads sticking out of the blue-green
pond as if afraid

of drowning, of
drinking too deeply with their painted
lips.
I know

Monet didn't mean any such thing—they're
not ladies, after all, not

roses, even, but
lilies with tough stethoscope stems

reaching down and feeling
the beat of what's below the shimmering

surface he half-
pretended to paint.

DANIEL POLIKOFF has published two collections of poetry, *Dragon Ship* (Tebot Bach Press, 2007), and *The Hands of Stars* (Conflux Press, 2008), as well as a translation of a dramatic version of the Grail myth (*Parzival/Gawain: Two Plays*). His poetry and translations have appeared in over sixty literary journals, including *Nimrod*, *Gulf Coast*, and *The Literary Review*. Daniel teaches literature in the Bay Area, and is presently completing a book on Rilke and archetypal psychology titled *In the Image of Orpheus: Rilke—A Soul History*.