19 Seeing with sunbeams

Imagine that you are out with Gibson on a dark night. Up above, stars twinkle in a cloudless sky, while at ground level electric lamps shine through the windows of nearby houses. You see starlight and lamplight, or so you declare. Gibson, however, responds that you do not. 'A single point of light in an otherwise dark field', he says, 'is not "light"; it specifies either a very distant source of light or a very small source, a luminous object.'[1] But how can light not be 'light', you ask? To be sure, the stars are very distant, and the lamps very small. We know that because of what astronomers have told us about stars, and because of what everyday life has taught us about lamps. We know, too, that stars do not land on the ground, and that houses do not take off into the sky. For all these reasons, we are unlikely to confuse lamps with stars. Nevertheless, we might be forgiven for confusing both lamps and stars with light. In the world according to Gibson, it transpires, the stars you witness in the heavens are but specks, 'specified' by the light you do not see. And the lamps you see in the houses are likewise mere bulbs which indicate – among other things – that people are at home to switch them on. In this world, stars hang in the sky but do not shine; lamps hang from ceilings but do not glow. The light is like a messenger that delivers stars and lamps to the doors of your perception, but magically vanishes at the moment you let them in.

In the year 1889, in the month of June, the painter Vincent van Gogh found himself in a situation much like the one I have just described, and he painted what he saw (Figure 19.1). The painting appeals to us precisely because it both chimes with our experience of what it *feels like* to be under the stars and affords us the means to dwell upon it – perhaps to discover depths in this experience of which we would otherwise remain unaware. Two things are immediately apparent. First, the night sky is not homogeneous, nor is it empty save for stars. It swirls with currents that resonate with the contours of the landscape which we can dimly make out in the light of a crescent moon. And secondly, the stars themselves are not inert specks in the firmament. On the contrary, they *pulse*. That is to say, their light is not merely received as a messenger – a vector of projection – that yields them up as objects of our awareness. Rather, we feel it from within, as an

Figure 19.1 *The Starry Night* (*De sterrennacht*), painted by Vincent van Gogh in June 1889.
Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Oil on canvas, 29 × 36″ (73.7 × 92.1 cm). Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest. Accession no.: 472.1941 © 2014. Digital image, The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence.

affect. Immersed in the swirling expanse, it is as though our minds and bodies are swept up in the flow, even as we remain rooted to one spot. Van Gogh, then, is not just painting stars. He is a star-struck painter: he sees, and paints, *with* their light. This is why the stars can be at once infinitely distant and yet touch the soul.

It is not that vision puts the stars within reach so that we might snatch them from the sky like apples from a tree. Nor do we throw out a line to rope them in. Rather, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, vision 'is the means given me for being absent from myself'. To stand in place and open one's eyes upon the night sky is not to extend one's being along a continuum, from near at hand to far away, but to find it split between two poles, one emplaced with the body, the other at large in the heavens, mingling with the stars and flitting like an agile spirit from one to another as the focus of attention shifts. And yet these two poles are really one, for at the termination of their fission, continues Merleau-Ponty, 'I come back to myself.'[2] We discover, perhaps to our astonishment, that the twinkling stars are our own eyes: that we don't just see them but see *with* them. For what van Gogh

paints is not the panorama of the sky in its totality, as it might be exhibited in a planetarium. His painting makes no claim to *represent* what he sees. It rather enacts, in line and colour, the birth of his vision, which, as it opens upon the cosmos, seems to explode like a shower of fireworks.

Wherever sensing meets the sensible, as Merleau-Ponty writes, or wherever our attention is let loose into the world, there is ignited a kind of spark.[3] The night sky glitters with a thousand such sparks, which will burn for as long as they glow in our own eyes. Some burn bright, others fade, and in the painting you can follow the unfolding of the painter's attention as it wanders from star to star. A moment ago, it was with the stars near the top of the canvas, but now it has lowered to one nearer the horizon which, at this instant, appears incandescent. This light, glowing white in the picture, is not the radiant energy of the physical universe, whether conceived as waves or photons, nor is it some disturbance or agitation of a consciousness imprisoned in that cavernous endocranial space behind the eyeballs. It does not travel in straight lines that connect a point source with a recipient. It is no more emitted from a source than it enters the eye. Rather, like a spark, it bursts from the fusion of the two poles of vision, respectively corporeal and celestial, in directions orthogonal to the line of their connection.

Every star, then, is not so much a hub from which rays of light fan out in all directions, as a pivot *around and between* which (and other stars) the light seems to swirl, in concert with the swivelling eyes. This swirling corresponds to the temporal movement of our attentiveness. So long as attention is focused on a particular star, the light revolves tightly around it, but as attention wanders so does the light. Here and there, the star-sparks have already faded, leaving only flaccid and decaying swirls. And that is exactly how van Gogh has painted them! The thought of the painting had long been on his mind, for, over a year before committing *The Starry Night* to canvas, in April 1888, van Gogh had written to his friend Émile Bernard that his aim was to realise, in his imagination and through his art, 'a more exalting and consoling nature than the single brief glance at reality – which in our sight is ever changing, passing like a flash of lightning – can let us perceive. A starry sky for instance – look that is something I should like to try to do.'[4] He could not have been clearer that his ambition was not to produce a quasi-photographic snapshot, as though one were looking *at* the cosmos from a fixed perspective, but rather to capture the temporal unfolding of a visual awareness that unites us *with* the cosmos in the very moment that it divides us from ourselves. Light, for van Gogh, was the outcome of this fission/fusion reaction. And so it is, too, for us.

Of course there could be no experience of light without the incidence of radiant energy, or without the excitation of photoreceptors in the retina, but as an *affectation of being* – as the experience of inhabiting an illuminated world – light is reducible to neither. Nevertheless this experience is entirely real. We cannot afford to dismiss it as an illusion, any more than we can write off the history of painting as an aberration caused by the

overstimulation of excessively susceptible minds.[5] Nor, on the other hand, can we deny the reality of blindness for the visually impaired. Light is real for the sighted, precisely because it is none other than the spark of vision itself – the birth of visual awareness as it opens up to the cosmos. Thus the painter stands forever at that sliding moment – rather like riding the crest of a wave – at which the world is on the point of revealing itself, such that the perpetual birth of his awareness is, concurrently, the perpetual birth of the world. It is as though, at every moment, his eyes were opening upon the world for the first time. And in this opening, the visual field – that is, the night sky in its entirety – is merged with the field of his attention. That is why the star, in our perception, sheds its light at once from the core of our being and from the furthest reaches of the cosmos. It simultaneously beams and beckons. It is in just this sense of both beaming and beckoning, or of uniting the affective with the cosmic, that light may be regarded as a phenomenon of atmosphere. In this specific sense, light is neither physical nor psychic. It is atmospheric. And in his painting, van Gogh has given us the atmosphere of the night sky. I know no better rendering of it.

Following your contemplation of the night in the company of Gibson, and a well-earned rest, you rise to discover that the sun is already up, and is shining brightly in an azure sky. Should you attempt to look at it, or at a glossy surface that reflects it, you risk being dazzled or even blinded by its brilliance. Gibson, determined to show that light is the one thing we do not see, acknowledges that this presents something of a challenge to his thinking. The glare and shine of the sun – 'are these not sensations of light as such?' he asks, only to answer his own question in the negative. No: what we perceive is a state akin to pain, arising from excessive stimulation of the eyes. This is a fact about the body, not about the world.[6] The fact about the world is that the sun is a round object suspended in the sky. As such, the sun is delivered to us by its light, but does not actually shine. We see the form and not the light. But Gibson's conclusion does not accord with your experience. For you, the sun doesn't just hang in the sky. It, too, both beams and beckons.

To witness the sun is to see by its own light, or, in the poetic language of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 'if the eye were not sun-like, it could not see the sun'.[7] By 'sun-like', Goethe did not mean to imply a relation of formal resemblance, as if to highlight the spherical form common to both suns and eyeballs. His point was rather that the same sun that shines in the sky (the beacon) also shines from our eyes (the beam). It is what we see *with*. Seeing with sunbeams is like feeling the wind: it is an affective mingling of our own awareness with the turbulence and pulsations of the medium in which we are immersed. For the wind, too, twists and turns, forming swirls and eddies. It may come from this or that direction, but the direction is not a point of origin, nor do I register its arrival as a tap on the cheek. Rather, it brushes by my skin on its way to nowhere, and I feel it as I do my own body in its posture and movement. I take it in and breathe it out again, creating an eddy in its flow. So it is, too, with beams of light (Figure 19.2).

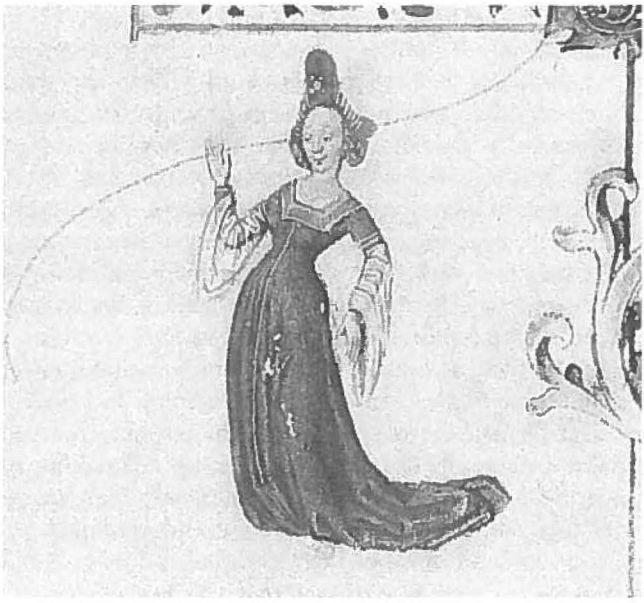

Figure 19.2 The beam of light.
Detail from *The Hours of Mary of Burgundy* (Folio 132, verso), attributed to either Nicolaes Spierinc or Lieven van Lathem, and dating from c.1477. Note how the beam of light passes *through* the eye, in a swirling trajectory that has no point of origin or destination. Here, the beam is depicted as a thread, as is evident from the gesture of the lady's right hand, which pinches the thread between thumb and forefinger exactly as is done when spinning from a distaff with a drop spindle.

For this reason, beams are to be distinguished categorically from rays. Rays are emitted from a source and are conventionally depicted as straight lines. But beams curl around and within things; they are never straight. As the atmosphere to which they belong, beams inhabit the realms of the in-between. And like the wind, sunbeams get inside and saturate our consciousness to the extent that they are constitutive of our own capacity to see, just as the wind is constitutive of our capacity to feel. In this vein, Merleau-Ponty described the relation of sunlight to vision as a kind of symbiosis – a way 'the outside has of invading us', and our way 'of meeting this invasion'.[8] Where Merleau-Ponty wrote of symbiosis, however, I prefer the term *correspondence*. To see the sun, as Goethe had insisted, the eyes must already respond to its light. But conversely, the sun can only shine in a world with eyes capable of so responding. Eyes and sun thus co-respond.

In his *Bedeutungslehre* or 'Theory of meaning' of 1940, the Estonian-born biologist and founder of biosemiotics, Jakob von Uexküll, argued on these grounds that Goethe's insight was but half-formed. To complete it one should add the corollary: 'If the sun were not eye-like, it could not shine in any sky.'[9] Von Uexküll's contention was that the sky, and the sun as a

celestial light that illuminates the sky, can only exist in the phenomenal world of creatures with eyes. To be sure, were the sun to be conceived in a strictly physical sense, as an astronomical body rent by nuclear reactions, then it could perhaps be said to exist even if there were no creatures to see it, or in its light. This, indeed, was Gibson's ecological argument: namely, that light needs no eyes to exist; it only needs eyes to establish its *relevance*.[10] For von Uexküll, however, the sun in its shining was to be understood not as a physical entity but as a manifest presence in the world of phenomena. And in this sense, just as the eye, as Goethe had observed, can see only by virtue of its correspondence with the sun, so the sun we perceive in the sky, and that lights the world of our experience, can exist only through its essential correspondence with the eye.

With this, we can return to what I have called the *fission/fusion reaction* that drives all perception. Contrary to the Cartesian position – according to which the interior subject, at one with itself but divided from the cosmos, projects its meanings upon the data of sense – our conclusion, following Merleau-Ponty, is that the seer is inwardly at one with the cosmos but divided from himself. This conclusion can be readily verified by means of a simple experiment. Place one finger between your eyes and touch the hard surface of your forehead. Yes, you are definitely still there, and have not yet melted into the ether. But on second thoughts you are not so sure, for you are perplexed to find that in the visual field that finger strikes no surface but rather looms as a ghostly, intruding presence that casts its shadow in the void. How, you wonder, can you be here, in place and at home in your body, and at the same time inhabit an atmospheric world that returns the body to you as a spectre? In that existential doubt lies the engine of perception.

We have found that as the atmospheric product of a fission/fusion reaction, light obeys very different rules from those to which we are accustomed in the science of optics. For one thing, it does not travel in straight lines, as rays, but curls like the sparks of a fire or its wreaths of smoke. For another, it is neither emitted from a celestial source nor registered by receptors in the eye, but follows the temporal correspondence of the seer's attention as it roams the heavens. It is like the wind. As wind is in the body of the walker as he leans into it, thrusting with his stick, or as the thunder that announces an impending storm reverberates in his ears, or as stone – to revert to an earlier example – is in the archaeologist's hands, in fusion, the star or the sun is *with* me, in my eyes. If stone touches through hands that have become stone-like, and if thunder listens through thunderstruck ears, then so, too, the sun and the stars – coiling over – look through sun-like and starstruck eyes. But in fission, I have escaped from myself and am abroad in the cosmos, in among the elements. I am *with* them – with the sun and the stars, with wind and storm, with stone – while my body has become a ghost. The next step in my argument is to assimilate this alternation between fusion and fission, or breathing in and out, to one between colour and line.