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Tocatta and Fugue: The Hegemony of the Eye/I and the
Wisdom of the Ear

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Introduction

The words 'Tocatta' and 'Fugue' are generally associated with music. There is, however, a secondary meaning which I feel is appropriate with regard to this article. The toccata, from the verb 'toccare,' was developed in the seventeenth century, particularly for keyboard instruments; it was a technique used to demonstrate a virtuoso's brilliance on the keyboard and his ability to 'touch' or contact the keys in such a manner that seemed to defy reality. The virtuoso's brilliance today lies on another keyboard and the speed at which it operates virtually renders obsolete overnight yesterday's information and knowledge. Our computer wizardry that defies reality has cocooned us from the phenomenal world that surrounds us; we stand apart and view it with a skepticism and arrogance—we are out of touch and out of tune.

A fugue in music is the foremost type of contrapuntal composition and is a dialogue between the parts or voices' which together weave the tapestry of the whole. But there is an interesting other meaning to the word fugue, and that is the loss of awareness of one's identity often coupled with flight from one's usual environment. It is arguable that we have lost our identity simply as one of a myriad of species who together weave the fabric of life. Is it possible to think that one day humanity will again touch the earth in a gentler way and build once more on a dialogue between the voices?

The movement for a new awareness toward the earth, which has its roots in the late nineteenth century, is conceived as a paradigm shift and expresses a way of living on the planet in a holistic fashion which is less violent and destructive; it echoes what Aldo Leopold would have called an "intelligent blending of ecology and ethics," and reflects the thinking of Martin Heidegger who spoke of our need to "dwell" on Earth "sparing and preserving" beings by letting beings be. Now at the end of the twentieth century we are living in a world in which overpopulation and the downward spiral of poverty, galloping desertification, misguided and mismanaged food production practices, disappearing forest cover, ozone depletion, species extinction and the proliferation of horrendous 'ecological disasters', all point to the problems that lie at the very heart of the modern political economy and our basic philosophical and cultural outlook. We

“are [obviously] not convinced that a real change in thinking requires a fundamental change in our very existence, a change that would not be comprehensible to the ways in which we currently think.”¹ Western people, and particularly North Americans, have consistently given every appearance of indifference to the non-human environment; the public maintains a cavalier acceptance at the loss of flora and fauna and views it as an inevitable and unavoidable but necessary in the context of the advancement of human progress.²

Science and technology, the twins of ‘progress,’ have shaped the ethos of the West and while there is much talk about a new way of thinking—paradigm shift which would lead to socio-economic behavior that was more compatible with the biosphere, we are still wedded to the idea that the only way to a rosy and prosperous future for all will be realized through more of the same—continued economic and industrial growth and development, in other words ‘progress.’ The idea that the way to a future of clear air, clean water and livable places can be realized through the harmonious balance of all living things, and allowing “beings to be,” is viewed as naive. The technocrat, the industrialist and organized labor continue to argue that not-so-clear air or not-so-clear water, and ‘some’ environmental degradation are but a small price to pay for ‘jobs,’ so essential economics.

Thus while the scientists and technologists continue to tinker and ‘manage’ and placate the public, “the cries of pain of the flora and fauna around us, the suffering of our fellow human beings in our urban deserts, in parts of the globe we have subjected to war, to famine and flood, through greed and selfishness, [have] become inaudible.”³ Blinded by reason rather than being guided by common sense, we continue to flounder around in a world devoid of political and environmental ethics. Common sense should tell us when we injure the land in anyway, when we silence the voices of the earth, when we deplete the soils, the forests and the oceans, and poison the waterways and food chains, when we wipe out other living species of flora and fauna, we do so at our own peril. We are not above nature; we are but one part of an interactive global ecosystem. Stubborn persistence in pursuing a single world view with regard to industry and development has meant we have lost touch with our own humanity and we have lost touch with the Earth.

I

In ancient mythologies the spiritual reality linking heaven and Earth is expressed through sound. It is the touchstone between the individual and the gods that permits all human endeavor to make sense of the incomprehensible. And while sound as Creative Energy may have no meaning that can be expressed in human language, its voice is heard in the blowing of the wind or the whisper of spring, and it speaks to the depth of our collective unconscious. This sound for some is understood as the ‘Music of the Spheres’. While no human ear can hear it,

it anchors the individual to the Earth. Sound and music, the life force, the creative energy were in Berry's words thought of as the "dream of the earth," 4 and found in the structure of all things.

The mythic imagination gave ancient civilizations a means of grasping the significance of what they saw and heard around them. "The language of myths—memorable, dramatic, emotional, full of imagination, designed to enchant the mind as well as the stars—preserved a way of talking, singing and thinking that expressively connected the sky, the earth and human life." 5 And it was the ear, which has no parallel in the eye, that was the gateway to knowledge and understanding of cosmic significance. Many 'archaic' societies and non-literate peoples living in tribal communities today still sense themselves as being at the centre of a sounding universe—a universe that is alive, dynamic with energy. The sounds of nature have an enlarged meaning and each day they build their reality on a dialogue between the 'voices.'

If we were able to travel back in memory time before birth, to the dark interior where we floated freely, firmly attached, would not our first awareness have been sound; not only of the watery world in which we existed, but too of the rhythmic sound of the heart that beat in synchrony with our own? Since the mid 1960s Dr. Tomatis, a French physician and specialist in Otolaryngology, has demonstrated conclusively that even in utero, the sounds heard and felt by the unborn child have significant implications in his/her future neurophysiological development. It is the ability to 'focus on' sound signals, which are immediately implicated in the process of listening, learning and ultimately communicating. 6

With the Renaissance and the discovery of perspective painting in particular, which recognized the need to separate the subject and the object (that which is 'observing—and that which is being 'observed'), people became entranced with vision which led them to believe the world was as they saw it. Ihde notes that whether it was an historical accident, or a long-held "and traditional preoccupation with vision, the new scientific view of the world, began with equally new instrumental contexts made possible by the emerging technologies of lens grinding and a concern for optics." 7 With increasingly "passionate excitement as humankind moved away from their orally enveloped position in the cosmos" 8 they became more entranced with this extension of vision. Subtly, however, the extension of vision not only transformed but reduced humankind's experience of its newly found domains. The picture of the world which began to unfold through new instrumentation was an 'optical illusion.' The 'optical illusion' is not so much to suggest that what was being seen was an 'illusion' in the sense of a mirage, but rather the way in which 'things' were considered was an illusion; the illusion that the universe beyond our reach, as well as our own tangible, chaotic and tumultuous planet were the ultimate expression of silence and stillness. No sound could be heard from the endless expanses of the cosmos and no perceptible sound emanated from the depths of the oceans teeming with vibran-

t life; growth and change could not be heard. The 'reality' was of a material world—silent, inert, mute.

Shepherd claims that literacy “emphasizes the visual at the expense of the auditory. Whereas sound underlines the dynamic immediacy of the environment, visual stimuli underline the distancing and separateness of events and objects from each other and individual people.”⁹ Further, Shepherd suggests, “since literacy facilitates the safe and permanent storage of information apart from people’s consciousness, it also induces a psychic distancing” which in turn is related to the physical distancing from the world around. While vision is selective in that more than one object or event may occupy the gaze at one time, it does not provide the encompassing awareness of the world in the way that sound does. A gaze can be controlled more easily than can hearing, and in this sense the world of vision becomes more safe and permanent than the world of sound. Vision encourages projection into the world, occupation and control of the source of experience.

The words permanent, occupation, control are visual words. They suggest a world that is fixed and predictable, unlike the aural world which changes from moment to moment. Sound is evanescent, going out of existence at the very moment that it comes into existence. Sound and silence come upon one from beyond” observes Hull, and “sound is experienced internally.”¹⁰ Sound—unlike vision which is assimilated exclusively and silently within the head—is the only major medium of communication that actively vibrates inside the body...the sound of the human voice could not be amplified and projected were it not for chambers or resonators of air inside the human body...the human experience of sound involves, in addition to the sympathetic vibration of the eardrums, the sympathetic vibration of resonators of the body. Sound, therefore is felt as well as heard. Because sound has no fixed point of reference and comes from all directions it reminds people that there is a world of depth external to them. Sound is never static; it is symptomatic of energy and evokes a sense of space different from that evoked by other phenomena; it informs us about the environment in a way that is both intimate and immediate.¹¹

Sound as well as touch, taste and smell remind us of our relatedness to the world for they are visceral and kinetic, symptomatic of the rhythm of life, the continuum of birth and death, of growth and decay. Sound which comes at us, as much from behind as the side as the front, does not submit to the same control as visual phenomena—it comes and goes in time, and is not fixed in space.

If timbre as the 'nature of sound itself' is the very vibratory essence that puts the world of sound in motion, and reminds us that as individuals we are alive, sentient and experiencing, then as the essence of individual sonic events, it can be said to speak to the central nexus of experience that ultimately constitutes us all as individuals. If timbre is the texture, the grain and the tactile quality of sound...and makes

us aware of our existence...symbolically it is our existence. 12 Sound encourages a sense of the world as received, as being revelatory rather than incarnate. 13 (*italics added*)

II

“The deterioration of our sense of hearing” suggests Berendt “has run remarkably parallel to secularization and industrialization.” Certainly since the Industrial Revolution a new soundscape has become firmly lodged in the Western psyche. So much so that two hundred years later, very little thought is given to the necessity of the amount of sound that surrounds us. We do not seem to think it necessary to question the ubiquitous presence of noise and take it as a given that sound/noise is a prerequisite to and ultimately a part of the path to progress. The Western world, which thinks of the phenomenal world as voiceless and mute, recognized mechanized noise as “symbolic of man’s release from his immemorial bondage to the earth.” 14 Thus while the artificial images of the world slide by noisily, the phenomenological substance remains veiled and more silent each year as we snuff out the voices that connect us to a living Earth.

The brutality of ubiquitous noise parallels the brutality of the exploitation and rape of the Earth, and perhaps even contributes to the brutality amongst human beings themselves. Everywhere the heavy hand of humanity is evident; whether it be in another oil spill, which promises a slow, agonizing and suffocating death to marine life contaminated by mankind’s thirst for “black gold”, or whether it be the scream of the chain saw and the roar of fires that fill the night sky, and reduce the Earth’s rain forests to dust, the noise of our intrusion and carelessness is everywhere. Technological wizardry has indeed “severed the immemorial bonds to the earth” and extended the thrust of personal and corporate power into space beyond our tiny planet. But, like the ‘sorcerer’s apprentice,’ we may find that our genius will ultimately sever the cord that binds us to the very fabric of life itself.

The mechanical world view has been applied to all life: “...to reduce life to its quantitative mechanical and chemical components [which] seemed an infallible method of eliminating the ultimate mystery of life itself.” 15 Mechanical devices created to replace life were even given the status of life and their creators the status of gods. 16 The negation of history inherent in the idea of progress is intimately tied to the notion of control and the concept of time. The mechanical world picture sees time as a function of bodies moving in space and has the “...spurious imperative of ‘saving time’ by accelerating motion, and of making such acceleration in every possible department the highest triumph of the power complex.” 17 Instantaneous communication, rapid transportation, the power immanent in the computer, are all consequences of the imperative of time-saving and valuable instruments of control. Notions like ‘time is money,’ ‘history is bunk,’ and ‘knowledge is power,’ lead Mumford to suggest that the

computer, the 'all-seeing eye' (my emphasis) is a portent of the "total destruction of autonomy and indeed the dissolution of the human soul." 18

It is the separation of humanity from the entire natural world that poses the greatest threat to all life; mechanical achievement, advanced technology and development are seen as the avenue to solving the eternal quest for more 'job creation' and a healthy economic future. The dialectic of 'progress,' however, which has the potential to end all suffering and misery in the human and non-human world, may also have the ability to usher in a new stone age on the wings of technology.

III

If in fact we have 'constructed' for ourselves a material world separate and apart from the human world, it might well be worth considering how this predatory and non-participatory image, in its magnificent gorgon-like attire, arrived, so full blown in so short a time. Or had it simply been incubating in the minds of men "for twenty centuries of stony sleep, its hour come at last..." waiting to be born?

What Shepherd refers to as the 'absurd dualism', which separates literate people from the environment, has actually dominated the Western way of thinking about reality from the classic period of Greek philosophical thought. At the peak of Greek philosophy Aristotle stated: "Above all we value sight...because sight is the principal source of knowledge and reveals many differences between one object and another." 19 Much of this discourse as well, Northrop Frye argues is rooted in the structure of the Greek language which separates subject and object. What was new by the end of the seventeenth century, however, was the development of a new dialectic which structured "a world of thought separate from, and in some respects superior to, the physical world of nature." 20

According to Frye, each age produces its own kind of language. Carl Friedrich von Weizsacher speaks of the language dependency of the thought systems of the great cultures, and points out that philosophies are closely related to the grammatical structures of their language. The straight line subject-predicate scheme of Aristotelian logic corresponds to the grammatical structure of the Greek declarative sentence. 21 By way of contrast, the thinking behind the Chinese and Japanese languages, does not move in a straight line from the subject to the object with the aid of the verb. It circles around its object and envelops it until it is specified as precisely as the objects in our Western languages (which presupposes an inner predicate); in fact specialists feel that these Asian languages are even more precise since they do not simply 'objectivate' but rather let subject and object become one' so that the active and the passive mode fall together. 22

The development of language that accompanied certain tendencies in the Renaissance and Reformation attained cultural ascendancy in the eighteenth century. In English literature it begins theoretically with Francis Bacon and effectively with Locke. Here a clear separation of subject and object is realized; the subject exposes itself, in the sense experience to the impact of the objective world. The objective world is the order of nature; thinking or reflection follows the suggestion of sense experience and words are the servomechanisms of reflection. 23 Language is used primarily to describe an objective natural order. The ideal to be achieved by words, “is framed on the model of truth by correspondence.” A verbal structure is set up beside what it describes, and is called ‘true’ if it seems to provide a satisfactory correspondence to it.” 24

What is critical therefore, to the understanding of the Western world’s I-it perspective, is, as Frye argues that, “Truth is related to the external source of the description rather than to the inner consistency of the argument. Its controlling figure, then is a kind of simile: a true verbal structure is one that is like what it describes.” 25

IV

The anthropocentric and intellectual ‘construct’ of Aristotle’s “man-dominated ladder of perfection,” expressed in the Judeo-Christian dogma of St. Thomas Aquinas and later elaborated by Bacon and Rene Descartes, established a superior position of humanity in the cosmos and set in motion a chain of philosophic inquiry that has profoundly shaped global consciousness. If we must select one philosopher as the hero of the revolution in scientific method “beyond all doubt Francis Bacon occupies the place of honour.” 26 While Bacon cannot be held responsible for the subsequent use to which his philosophy was put, his social position, his language, nuance and metaphor mirror the predominate perspective of the seventeenth century middle-class entrepreneur. Although Bacon associated learning with enlightenment, he assumed it all to be part of the rational, logical scientific method. His idea that nature could be ‘discovered’ or made to act according to the demands of men through the scientific method, failed to grasp the ancient wisdom that lies in imagination and intuition—which has nothing to do with reason; it is felt rather than seen and does not submit to examination in an abstract scientific fashion. But Bacon and those who subsequently followed the path of Reason were convinced about the ‘absolutes’ of science and knowledge as they saw its manifested practical value for the immediate now and for the future. Science and technology, and the vocabulary that goes with it, separated man and nature. The arrogance of thinking in the Age of Reason made, and continues to make mankind’s primary world.

The culture-nature dualism which was key to Bacon’s vision of the world unfolding as it should, operated at the expense of both women and the natural environment. Because women’s physiological functions of reproduction, nurtur-

ing and child-rearing are viewed as closer to nature, they assumed a position on the social scale that was lower than culture,' that had traditionally, symbolically and historically been associated with men. 27

At the root "of the identification of women and animality with a lower form of human life lies the distinction between nature and culture which was fundamental to humanistic disciplines such as history, literature and anthropology, all of which accept the distinction as an unquestioned assumption." 28 The nature-culture dualism is a key factor in the advance of Western civilization, at the expense of nature. Thus as the bonds of the ancient mystic and hierarchical cosmology fell away, European culture increasingly set itself above and apart from all that was symbolized by nature. The fact that this new cosmology was skewed in favor of one element of society, the white, middle class male, did not seem to present itself as either a moral or ethical dilemma.

The emphasis on the visual, straight-line, cause and effect, deterministic rationality and control, which were eminently successful as tools of organization and as a means for manipulating the physical environment, seduced 'educated' men into the entirely mythical position of being separate from the world. 29

The premise of the 'absurd dualism,' therefore, that grew from the Eye/I and It, subject/object idea, and manifested itself in a singly focused vision of the world, rested on a completely arbitrarily constructed hierarchy and not only separated 'men' from the environment, but separated 'men' from women.

Finn argues that since masculinity—"the ontological condition of viewing—requires the objectification of the world which it imagines is 'external' to its seeing eye/I, we should not be surprised [therefore], at the violence which is perpetrated in its name (in the name of God, Reason, Freedom, Progress, History, Humanity, Science, Art...in the name of Sex)." Further she argues, you can objectify an object by taking away its life; by killing it either in fact or fantasy. It is through fantasy that our "conviction of the worth of reality is established." 30 We see the world the way we want to see it, and we act according to that perceived reality. Therefore by seeing the world as a collection of objects, we sanction the use of those 'things' as objects, and encourage behaviour that fragments, separates, manipulates, mutilates, consumes and exploits. The seventeenth century argument, therefore, that woman stood in the way of Progress, Science, God and Man and represented all that was dark, evil and base, encouraged the inquisition of witches, (who were naturally enough mostly women), and relegated women to a status as lowly as beasts of burden; but most dramatically, Nature, traditionally viewed as the Mother of all things and the Source of Life, was seen merely as a commodity to be plundered for economic gain. "Male hegemony is visual hegemony and the desire of men to control women parallels their desire to control the world." 31

The death of the world soul and the removal of nature's spirits helped to support increasing environmental destruction by removing any scruples that might be associated with the view that nature was a living organism. "The imagery, iconography, literary metaphor and mythology associated with machines became symbolic of life itself. Social values and the realities of life were guided by the power of the machine." 32 The removal of animistic and organic assumptions about the cosmos was the most far reaching effect of the Scientific Revolution and still reverberates today.

The vital and living earth once populated with gods and spirits, had no protection against the machines which began methodically to tear apart the fabric of life. The organism which had sustained life in balance for millions of years was viewed with cool scientific detachment as an object for dissection.

This is the way we see the Ecosphere, as fragmentary and made up of all sorts of separate things. Sights, appearances, pried away from their meaning are silent. Dead objects are mute. In the world of the voyeur, therefore, there is no dialogue, no relationship, no speech and no response and therefore no understanding of the self nor of the objects known. 33

From the seventeenth century forward, the twin poles of rationalism and empiricism have formed the legacy of scientific epistemology in the West. The mechanomorphic 'reality' that does not require participation is an idea that has engaged and informed scientific consciousness since that time. It duly separates the self from nature, and confirms a position of alienation and separateness of the individual from the Earth. And while science has made enormous strides forward in the direction of human betterment, there has been a corresponding slide backward into an abyss of ignorance with regard to the ability of the living earth to sustain all life.

V

Rigid insistence on the separation of subject and object, the observer and the observed, has increasingly encouraged a drift toward entropy, which as Berman suggests fosters "economic and technological chaos, ecological disaster, and ultimately, psychic dismemberment and disintegration." 34 What we are witnessing in the disintegration of topistic unity. 35 The mind has been expunged from the phenomenal world. Disenchanted—we look out as opposed to looking within; we cannot hear the voice of the Earth and cannot participate in its being. Like Dante, it would appear that we are "in a dark wood, for the straight way has been lost." 36 And we will only be restored to the Centre, when the voice of the phenomenal world is allowed to enter and to travel on a downward spiraling journey into the labyrinth of the inner ear. 37 Living at the centre of an aural

world, non-literate peoples define spatial measurement by the sounds of the environments they inhabit. In the Western world we tend to live at the edge of visual space looking into it with the eye. In this regard visual awareness and aural awareness are quite different, “the former is unidirectionally forward, while the latter is omnidirectionally centered.”³⁸ Rather than being at the centre of auditory space listening out with the ear, modern societies have encouraged a separation of self from the external environment forgetful of the fact that they are part of the cosmos and share a consciousness with it which includes the cry of the loon and the silence of falling snow; the whisper of the wind and the thunder of waterfalls; the voices of the Earth and the music of the stars.

If sound shapes and structures our perception of, and attitude toward the environment, it is worth considering how the intensity of sound in the industrialized world, parallels the intensity of the aggressive stand that modern society takes in its relationship to the Earth. The cacophony of the modern mechanized and technological world has ruthlessly and systematically contributed to silencing the voices of the phenomenal world. In fact there is no real criticism or meaningful dialogue given either to the amount or the quality of man-made sound and noise in our environments, and this finds expression in the form of the cultural landscape which is a mirror of a society’s image of itself. When we chase silence from the land and reduce it to plastic sameness, the mythless world we create tells us a great deal about ourselves and our inner and outer worlds.

In that the world no longer ‘speaks to us’, and the polyphony of its sounds have little meaning how can we expect to resonate with the rhythms of all life, to be one with it? In our fugue from the sounding world we have concretized the epistemological split between human and non-human, subject and object, inner and outer. Is it possible that there might be a connection between the imbalance of the eye and the ear as informants about the phenomenal world and what we have labeled the environmental crisis? Is the ‘environmental crisis’ in fact a crisis of the human spirit? In Genesis it says that “the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man...” Are we still in that sleeping state—a state which represents the dissolution of reality into illusion? If our sleeping/wakeful, blind/sighted conscience is out of touch with the universe will our progeny inherit a world of our making— a world effectively silenced by myopia?

No longer orally enveloped in the cosmos we tend to reify the phenomenal world, encouraging an objective position which observes the material world in a removed and detached sort of way as a conglomerate of things’ put here for our use, rather than for our caring and careful stewardship. Should it come as a surprise that we seem to have lost our sense of ‘place’ on Earth? The ontology of the sense of place implies a macro and a microcosmic dimension, a transcendental or mythical significance, rooted in the perceivable and perceived unity of the material and the spiritual or the tangible and the intangible.³⁹ The ‘ontological being’ encompassing the ‘sense place’ begins with attentive listening, when sound crosses that line into hearing the voice of silence, and feeling the

unity and oneness of all things. The pragmatic and logical thinking that typifies the Western perspective has led us into the trap of believing that as light is to darkness, silence is to sound. Eastern wisdom would tell us differently; that silence is an intensification of sound; it is not “the silence of negative vacuum, but the positive silence of perfection and fulfillment.” 40

Until we return from the exile of the dictatorship of reason and the tyranny of the eye, and we begin to seek new ways to unlock, and let the world speak to us in a thousand places, until we consciously choose to return to the Centre of Being, the paradox will remain: the paradox between reality and illusion; between the material and the spiritual; between silence and sound; between outer and inner worlds; between the individual and the rest of life. Further, we will remain aliens in this world until we accept the paradox of dynamic balance—the interrelationship and interdependence of all living things. Perhaps when we come to understand what Buddha meant by ahimsa—non violence, and the notion of the existence of a state of harmony—with others, with the environment and with oneself—we will be able to understand what Heidegger meant by ‘Being’ in the world. And only when we comprehend the meaning of ‘Being’ will we come close to the central core of the universe and retune ourselves to the voice of the Earth which speaks with a wisdom far greater than our own.

Notes

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15. Mumford, Lewis. (1970). *The Myth of the Machine: The Pentagon of Power* (Vol. 2) (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), p. 38.
16. It is interesting to note how we take out our anger, both in verbal and physical abuse, when our mechanical 'slaves', for whatever reason, fail to perform.
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29. Shepherd, John. (1991a), p. 158.
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35. Walter defines Topistics as "a holistic mode of inquiry designed to make the identity, character and experience of a place intelligible." Thus topistic unity is understanding the oneness of all things. It is the idea of oneness that seems to pose such an enormous hurdle to the Western way of 'being' in the world.
36. Thorpe, Douglas (1992) "Poetry, Madness and the Inner Ear," *Parabola* (Vol. XVII, No. 2) pp. 44-49.
37. It is important to remember that the return to the Centre for Plato, Petrarch, Dante, Blake and others seems always to be through the ear. It is the power of sound shaped in the transformative metaphorical word that threads us like sound itself from outside to inside, on a spiraling journey to discover the inner self. And so the word journeys. Sound waves uttered by the living voice travel through the air and enter the open central court of the ear...the word loses itself in the passages, canals and labyrinth of the ear and is metamorphosed into a form of energy.
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