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Additional Keywords

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J.R. Wytenbroek

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Both Canadian fantasist Welwyn Katz and American science-fantasist Madeleine L'Engle have written about cetaceans in recent novels for young people. In Katz's *Whalesinger*, the author presents a vision of reality through the consciousness of a gray whale. In L'Engle's *A Ring of Endless Light*, the author presents a vision of the cosmos through the minds of dolphins. While these two novels are very different in many other particulars, including theme and general plot, there are two areas in which they are strangely similar. The first is the visions of reality that the authors present through the cetaceans, while the second is the type of characters whom they present in communication with the cetaceans.

The first comment that must be made about the presentation of cetacean consciousness in both novels is the inherent mysticism present in the cetacean vision. As Walter Stace defines it, true mystical consciousness

involve[s] the apprehension of an ultimate nonsensuous unity in all things, a oneness or a One to which neither the sense nor the reason can penetrate. In other words, it entirely transcends our sensory-intellectual consciousness.

(Stace, 1960, pp.14-15)

Fisher develops this idea when she says "concentrated on the transcendent moment of spiritual fusion with the deity or the universe, the mystic also 'loses' the self in wordless union with the Logos" (Fisher, 1990, p. 37). Consequently, authors of fantasy who try to write about the mystical experience "must continually make distinctions between what is and what can be described, between essences and their verbal approximations" (Fisher, 1990, p. 41). These statements can be applied to both L'Engle's and Katz's novels. In *A Ring of Endless Light*, the dolphins communicate the nature of the

universal unity and of time to Vicky in a series of pictorial images, a device L'Engle uses for the mystic revelations in many of her novels. In *Whalesinger*, Katz's gray whale uses song and memory, also communicated through visual images, to explain her vision of a world unified into a coherent whole. Readers of these fantasies may be reminded of the writings of medieval mystics, particularly Hildegard of Bingen, who communicated her experiences of mystical union with God through verbal images, paintings and music. Teresa of Avila, a much less "visual" person, gives far vaguer descriptions through words of her experiences with God than does Hildegard, and frequently states that her experiences are inexpressible in language.

The visions of the universe communicated by the cetaceans in both books have very similar components, despite the different directions their authors are coming from. L'Engle, a somewhat theologically unorthodox Episcopalian, draws from a history of Christian mysticism, as well as from personal experience, to create the mystical passages that permeate her science fantasies for young people. In fact, she has said "[t]he fantasies are my theology" (L'Engle, 1979, p. 18). Katz has no particular religious affiliation. She says of herself that she is:

not . . . a Churchy Christian. I love the ritual and the church building itself, because it is so laden with age and historical importance and myth. I do not, however, like the way the Church has used its power over the centuries, and I am not convinced in the least that it has a special pipeline to the divine.

(Katz, pers. comm., p. 2)

This diversity of approach yielding similar perceptions of the mystical experience is not, however, unusual:

There are several grounds for insisting that

intrinsically and in itself mystical experience is not a religious phenomenon at all and that its connection with religions is subsequent and even adventitious . . . [I]t is certainly the case that there can exist . . . a mystical experience naked and not clothed in any religious garb. (Stace, 1960, pp. 23-24)

The visions of reality presented in both novels revolve around two similar concerns. The first is the harmony or unity of all creatures, while the second is the non-linear nature of time. Both of these features are intrinsic to the true mystical experience (Stace, 1960, pp. 15ff, 25). In *Whalesinger*, the unity of all creatures on earth, from the beginning of time until the present, is part of the concept of the Song:

In the beginning, the Song sings, bright as the flashes of water-breathers in the deeps where few but we can see. We of the People listen to the Song and understand; we sing with the melody; we know what is and what is not. In this, we are alone. Listen now, Calfling. Hear the Song change. See what I see, the coming of the air-breathers that move about on two legs and have no wings. See them gather food in the shallows with their not-flippers-not-paws. Listen to them! They do not hear us; perhaps they cannot, but their minds can sing like ours. And we of the People, we listen to their singing, and almost we understand. But oh! Their songs are dark! Deep from the layers of the People's memory the mother sang these songs. The calf listened as the unadorned, easy melody of the Song thickened, losing itself in counterpoint and odd, dark tonalities. It was like the muddying of clear water by feeding. Confused, the calf moved closer to its mother. But there was more: later harmonies winding about the first, the Song growing stranger still, and darker. (Katz, 1990, pp. 18-19)

The Song here is something which lies outside, beyond the whales. It is something which they alone can hear, of which they are a part. But all other things are a part of this Song too, even if they contribute only "dark" harmonies. In other passages within the novel, Katz refers to the singing of other creatures, either sky or sea creatures, and it is clear that such singing is all part of the great Song. "Harmony, Marty thought. A seamless, perfect join. The one Song played for once and for all the way it had been written" (Katz, 1990, p. 200). All things are part of the song, even the humans whose minds also sing as the whales' do but who do not hear the Song, and whose singing has "muddied" the song, causing the "odd, dark tonalities" that have appeared in the song. However, Katz's Song seems to be earthbound. There is not the same sense of cosmic harmony or unity here that permeates L'Engle's books. Instead, there is a strong sense that all things on Earth are part of a whole, a unity that goes beyond each but extends no further than the boundaries of our planet.

L'Engle's vision is very cosmic. Through her various science-fantasies, she has explored the unity of and within both the macrocosmic universe and the microcosmic. In her article "Subject to Change Without Notice," L'Engle

identifies herself with astronomer Fred Hoyle when he says that he believes "in a total interrelation of all aspects of the universe, large or small" (L'Engle, 1982b, p. 334). In *A Ring of Endless Light*, she is more concerned with the macrocosmic, which she presents primarily through the dolphins' perception of the universe:

I rolled over onto my back and floated and Norberta moved her great body toward me until we were touching, and I was pressed against the beautiful resiliency of dolphin skin. And a whole series of pictures came flashing across the back of my eyes, in the dream part of my head.

The ocean.

Rain.

A rainbow, glittering with rain.

Snow, falling in great white blossoms to disappear as it touched the sea. And then the snow turned to stars, stars in the daytime, drenched in sunlight, becoming sunlight, and the sunlight was the swirling movement of a galaxy and the ocean caught the light and was part of the galaxy and the stars of the galaxies lifted butterfly wings and flew together, dancing.

(L'Engle, 1980, p. 276)

This description of unity begins with the earthbound but quickly moves into the universe at large and then flows back and forth from the Earth to the universe. It is as much in this pattern of verbal weaving as through the images that L'Engle communicates her sense of cosmic unity, a unity of which the dolphins are consciously and constantly aware, as Katz's gray whale is. As Vicky, the human character in communication with the dolphins in *A Ring of Endless Light* says, "Norberta was right. There was much she understood that was beyond anything I'd ever dreamed of" (L'Engle, 1980, p. 277).

The second aspect of mystic consciousness communicated through both novels is non-linear time. "The subconscious mind is uninhibited by linear time" (L'Engle, 1982a, p. 108). The mother whale in *Whalesinger* can tap into a subconscious, "racial" memory that goes back to the beginning of the existence of her species. (Gray whales are supposed to be "one of (if not the) oldest species of whale" in existence today.) (Katz, pers. comm., p. 2.) The simplicity of the Song at that point suggests a very early time, indeed. Therefore although she is aware of living in the present time, the whale has an unfettered access to all past times. Later, when she decides to stay in the bay to sing the repeating pattern of the Song that she sees shaping itself, she actively participates in the past revealed to her through memory, both repeating and shaping the Song herself. This ability to move within memory and to consciously recreate patterns of the Song long past suggests a non-linear concept of time. She does have a concept of the past, for she is aware that the previous pattern is a part of memory whereas her experience of the same pattern is part of her present life. However, the sense of pattern reaches beyond linear time into a much more circular concept of time – an inexpressible concept which is captured as elusively through Katz's whale as the concept remains elusive to ordinary human perception.

L'Engle's dolphins seem to exist primarily on an intuitive, almost subconscious plane as well. L'Engle argues in "Subject to Change" that until comparatively recently, we humans did not distinguish between the conscious and subconscious either, and so were more open to other realities.

When Descartes wrote, "I think, therefore I am," he helped start us on a route where we extolled the intellect above the intuition, and thus created a chasm between the conscious and the creative subconscious mind.

(L'Engle, 1982b, p. 333)

Because the dolphins have not divorced the conscious from the subconscious, their perception of time is different from ours. L'Engle is more explicit about the dolphin's perception of non-linear time than Katz. Because she believes that "[c]ontemporary physics is really mystical" (L'Engle, 1979, p. 19), she can use contemporary scientific terminology to express the otherwise inexpressible:

"And then Norberta, with Njord echoing her, began making strange sounds, singing sounds . . . and they did something to my understanding of time so that I saw that it was quite different from the one-way road which was all I knew . . ."

"She was trying to tell you about non-linear time . . . Time is like a river for most of us, flowing in only one direction . . . Physics isn't my strong point. But there's a possibility that time is less like a river than a tree, a tree with large branches from which small branches grow, and where they touch each other it might be possible to get from one branch of time to another."

"Do you mean maybe for dolphins time is less – less restricted and limited than it is for us?"

(L'Engle, 1980, pp. 276-78)

Typically, here L'Engle marries both the mystical perception of time and modern physics' explanation of the concept of time so that the second helps describe the first, at least in theoretical terms. In other books, such as *An Acceptable Time*, L'Engle shows the possibilities, both physical and mystical, that occur when two of those scientifically hypothetical "branches" of time touch each other.

One question arises directly from these authors' expositions of mystical perceptions. Why use cetacean consciousness to present these experiences? Amongst other reasons, both authors quite clearly state in their novels that humankind has chosen dark roads that have kept it unaware of its place in the greater pattern (except for a few notable exceptions). Katz speaks of our "dark tonalities" and dissonances, while L'Engle shows people as often selfish, greedy and corrupt, obviously set apart from an essentially loving universe. These traits effectively exclude most of us from communication with the world or cosmos at large, and other creatures in particular. However, as both writers also show, there are some of us who can still hear and understand other beings, if we listen with our spirits and respond with our intuitions, not our intellects. Essentially, then, even we dissonant humans belong to the unity and can overcome our

dissonances to participate more consciously if we want to. As Gaudior the flying unicorn states in L'Engle's very mystical novel, *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*, "as long as there are even a few who belong to the Old Music, you are still our brothers and sisters" (L'Engle, 1978, p. 47). The two who are able to communicate best with the cetaceans in these novels are both teenaged girls who are strongly intuitive by nature. They react with intuition first, intellect later. They are both linked with teenaged boys who can also communicate with the cetaceans but are much more limited than the girls because their intellects are stronger than their intuition, but their intuition is still present to some degree. Both Vicky, the protagonist of *A Ring of Endless Light*, and Marty, one of the three protagonists of *Whalesinger*, are receptive to realities not strictly limited by intellectual concepts. Marty is particularly open, because she is a failure in school due to an unusual learning disability. In compensation, she has developed her facility for listening and receptivity to others to a point far in excess of the norm. Consequently she is at first the only one who can hear the whale's thoughts, although the whale can always hear the thoughts of human minds in her vicinity. Marty can, in fact, hear the whale from quite a distance away, and is not always sure of what she is hearing. She "hears" the whale's communication of memory to her calfling in her dreams, thus dreaming in images the centuries-old pattern which is being repeated in the bay. Later, as she begins to deliberately search the whales out and swim with them, she becomes aware of what she is hearing and is able to communicate directly to the mother whale, calling her, talking with her telepathically, glimpsing her bigger world and understanding it. "She could hear the one Song and know herself to be a part of it" (Katz, 1990, p. 168). In time Nick, her friend, is also able to hear the mother whale a little, but only when it is speaking directly to him, a rare event. He is also only able to hear the whale when he opens himself up to love, in a particularly deep way, with Marty.

Vicky is also able to communicate directly with the dolphins. She calls them, talks with them telepathically, glimpses their universe as Marty does with the whale. Both girls are aware throughout the novels of knowing certain things beyond knowledge, especially when they are in contact with the cetaceans. As Vicky tries to explain to her friend Adam when she knows something about the dolphins that she could not possibly know, "[i]t just came to me. As though Basil [the dolphin] had told me, in the language of knowing, not the language of words" (L'Engle, 1980, p. 175). This transcendental knowledge is often typical of mystical experiences. "The writers of mystical fantasy explore the acquisition of mystical knowledge" (Fisher, 1990, p. 46), which is exactly what both Marty and Vicky experience. This ability indicates their peculiar receptivity to the mystical experiences conveyed to them through their cetacean friends.

Further, both girls experience the "'melting away' into the Infinite of one's own individuality" (Stace, 1960, p. 24) so typical of mystics in their experiences of union with the One, or God, or the Infinite. When Marty swims with the whales

she is completely in union with them. She is able to set herself aside completely, also, when she is with other people, and it is her intense concentrated listening that draws the needy Nick to her. "She made it happen by listening, listening with all of her being" (Katz, 1990, p. 164). Marty connects immediately and naturally with the whales because she already has a still and silent centre, open to hearing things beyond herself, beyond the immediate, beyond the expected. Her setting aside of self, an emptying of herself, in a way, makes her a natural candidate for the greater mystical experience of the dissolution of self that, in the long run, actually strengthens and develops the true being of the individual. The sense of melting is even more strongly described for Vicky, who is able to reach through to the other side of herself in an essentially mystical identification with nature:

"And it's being part of everything, part of the rock and the sky and the sea and the wind and the rain and the sun and the stars . . ."

"And you, Vicky? Are you still there?"

"I'm there – but it's as though I'm out on the other side of myself – I'm not in the way."

(L'Engle, 1980, p. 210)

Further, Vicky also gains a sense of herself through her mystical experiences with the dolphins. "I don't have a strong sense of my own centre, but when I'm with the dolphins, I do" (L'Engle, 1980, p. 202). She develops in her centredness and thus becomes more able to communicate with the dolphins, more open to mystical experiences. Thus

by connecting with cetacean consciousness, both girls participate in mystical consciousness themselves, becoming connected with the universe in ways they were not before. For both of them, the cetaceans open up a universe of new possibilities of knowing, so that they are able to stretch and grow spiritually and as individuals. At the end of *Whalesinger*, the mother whale tells Marty

[t]here are boundaries between us, little calf, but our songs meet. Whenever we listen we will hear each other, the soft harmony of two different singers looking at each other through clear water.

(Katz, 1990, p. 200)

For a non-religious mystical approach, this statement becomes a promise of a deep communion with something greater than herself and humanity in general: the Song, which "is deep, it sings all things. All things add to it, though not all harmonically" (Katz, 1990, p. 200). This Song is essentially the same cosmic vision of unity that Vicky experiences through the dolphins, and which she is embraced by, at the end of *A Ring of Endless Light*: "we were both caught and lifted in the light" (L'Engle, 1980, p. 332), the same transcendental light that the dolphins have shown her, the same light her dying but spiritually powerful grandfather has called her to. Thus Song, dance, light all become part of the great mystic reality that the cetaceans are shown to be conscious participants in through both these novels, a reality that is available to those humans who will listen in silence and stillness, and who will respond to the universe, as the cetaceans do, with intuition and openness.

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