

**E. H. Gombrich, A Passage from a Chinese Poet, Kent Kleinman and Leslie van Duzer, eds., Rudolph Arnheim: Revealing Vision, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1997, pp.96-7 [Trapp no.1997G.1]**

Rudolf Arnheim and I have many interests in common and also, I am happy to say, many values. Where we differ is in our allegiance to certain schools of perceptual psychology. We have both explained these differences in several of our publications, and I would not find it appropriate to dwell on them once more in a volume of celebration. Rather, I thought of making him a present by drawing his attention to a passage I came across in Arthur Waley's biography of Po Chü-i. I hope it will please him as much as it pleases and intrigues me. We read that early in 817 A.D. the poet

found a point under the Incense Burner Peak and near to the Forest Temples which struck him as the most beautiful in all the mountain, and he built himself a cottage there. Before settling in he sacrificed . . . to the spirits of the mountain, asking for permission to "dwell within their domain." . . .

The cottage was quite small; the woodwork unpainted and the walls not whitewashed. The furniture consisted of four wooden couches and two plain screens. He kept a few books there (Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist), and a lacquered lute (ch'in). On the day that he came to take possession he sat in rapturous contemplation of the mountains, torrents, bamboo-thickets and cloudy rocks from the hour of the Dragon to the hour of the Cock (7 a.m. to 5 p.m.), and already found his spirit settling into a great "outward contentment and inner peace." After the third night he found himself in a state of utter mental and physical relaxation, for which at first he was at a loss to account. On reflection he saw that one reason for the, as we should say, hypnotic effect of the place was its proportions. In front of the cottage was a stretch of level ground about 100 feet in diameter and in the middle of this space was a terrace just half as great in extent as the level ground on which it stood. To the south lay a square pool just twice as large as the terrace.<sup>1</sup>

I do not know a parallel to the apparent echo of Pythagorean theories that are more familiar from the architectural practice of the Italian Renaissance. Admittedly it is possible that Arthur Waley read this text through his Western eyes. Thanks to the kindness of Professor Glen Dudbridge of Oxford University I am able to quote his translation, from the most recent edition of Po Chü-i's work, of the passage, which reads as follows:

PO CHÜ-I: ON MY COUNTRY RETREAT

Now that I had come here as owner I could raise my head to gaze at mountains, lower it to listen to streams: sideways I turned my glance to bamboos, trees and cloud-girt rocks. From morning to evening<sup>2</sup> I was more than fully occupied with these things. And presently, as my inner energies responded to the attraction of these natural objects, I had harmony both without and within. After one night here my body was at peace, after two nights my heart was calm, after three nights I felt utterly tranquil and subdued – all without realizing how. I ask myself why, and return the following answer.

At this dwelling there is level ground in front, a hundred feet around; in its midst is a level terrace half the size of the level ground; south of the terrace is a square pool twice the size of the level terrace. Encircling this pool are many mountain bamboos and much wild vegetation; in

the pool grow white lotus and white fish. Further south you reach a rocky stream, running between ancient pines and firs, just ten spans in girth and unknown hundreds of feet in height; their tall boughs touch the clouds, their lower branches skim the pools; upright as standards, outspread like a canopy, moving like dragons and serpents. Beneath the pines are many clumps of growth, clematis<sup>3</sup> with its entwining leaves braided into a dense cover. The light of sun and moon cannot reach the ground: in high summer it feels like eighth or ninth month. Below are spread white stones, forming a path to go in and out.

It will be seen that the proportions are certainly mentioned, but they alone do not constitute the explanation of the psychological state in which the poet found himself, which is due to the harmony of the man-made and the natural environments. Even so, that beautiful account should give pleasure to Rudolf Arnheim.