THE ELUSIVE IN EXPERIENCE

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A primary assertion of this paper is that elusiveness is an ever-present atmosphere of experience. To offer an initial and rough referent, at every moment there is, whether tacit or posited, a sense of something incomplete, of something beyond reach. A further thesis is that, in part simply because it has a complex structure, we often fail to take up this atmosphere as it is. One purpose of this essay is to describe these distortions of the elusive nature of experience. Certain quests for completeness or perfection and, on the other hand, certain idealizations of former times will be shown to have the structure of such inauthentic "resolutions", to be attempts to "finish" something which experiencing itself gives as inherently unfinished, as incomplete. These modes of being have relevance in a clinical setting as well as for a phenomenology of mundane living.

However, an apparent obstacle to our chief goal, a full-bodied description of elusiveness itself, immediately arises. How can we explicate elusiveness, it being what it is, elusive? At second glance, this is a logician's hold which a phenomenological method readily slips. We seek to describe what has an appearance as it appears. If elusiveness seems particularly shadowy, without substance, a "beyond reach," this is solid grist for us. Further, our phenomenological approach allows us to remain independent of such apparently problematic questions as: evidence for the truth of the elusive atmosphere beyond the
evidence of its appearance to us; demonstration of the actual existence of a particular present elusive object, or concern with any contingent cessation of its being elusive. We seek to explicate an atmosphere with a certain structure. If indeed, as we assert, we are always embedded in its “never quite reached,” what could be more familiar and available to us.

I.

Although elusiveness is generally an horizontal phenomenon that is known by living through it, by realizing it as landscape, we yet cannot begin with a description of it as such. We need to move gradually toward a fuller appreciation of the elusive as a setting by considering, initially, a particular focal object, and by employing the device of tacking, as it were, elusiveness onto it as if our target phenomenon were that object’s attribute rather than its medium.

What, then, is an elusive object? Consider the following situation. I am walking a city street and look ahead to see a person just as he disappears around the corner. What is required for this to be an instance of an elusive object?

When it is a clear day and I have a sufficient view and it is you, my friend, rounding the corner, you are given simply as you. Of course, there is that instant before recognition when my gaze is caught by this figure that finds a response in me. There is no struggle toward recognition necessary, no need to grasp at a word, no mediating moment before I know.

But, again, this time there is an urban haze or more distance. Someone is rounding the corner. Wait a minute, I know that walk, a second now, yes, it is your walk, it is my friend. What is going on here? There is no immediate recognition. Rather there is at first only a style, a kind of aura or physiognomy which surrounds and is of somebody, but is not yet discretely somebody. The style is a vague, indefinite something, an intimation of somebody. Yet it catches me, indefinite as it is, for it is familiar to me. The situation is not that I have no idea who or what it is, as a movement at the periphery of my field toward which I turn to find nothing of consequence, something immediately forgotten; and it is not that I know immediately—oh, there is my friend. There is a vague but familiar style that catches me in a way that carries with it a promise, a prom-