



This page: Nathaniel Dorsky, *Threnody*, 2004, still from a color film in 16 mm, 20 minutes.  
Opposite page: Nathaniel Dorsky, *Alaya*, 1987, still from a color film in 16 mm, 28 minutes.



# Tone Poems

P. ADAMS SITNEY ON THE FILMS OF NATHANIEL DORSKY

**NATHANIEL DORSKY** is now at the pinnacle of his powers and reputation as a filmmaker. But he took a long route to his current prominence in the American avant-garde cinema. He had an early start making films, as did most of his strongest peers from the generation who came to cinema in the 1960s. The first works he exhibited, *Ingreen* (1964), *A Fall Trip Home* (1964), and *Summerwind* (1965), established him as a creditable filmmaker at a time when many young aspirants were trying to launch careers. Most of them disappeared quickly and, by the late '60s, that seemed to have been Dorsky's fate as well.

Within the large, unruly flock of filmmakers shepherded by Jonas Mekas in those years there were several coteries. Andy Warhol's was the most famous, of course, and the one that branded its adherents most indelibly. Another was led by Gregory Markopoulos, who generously championed the early work of Warren Sonbert, George Landow, and Robert Beavers (with whom Markopoulos lived in Europe from the late '60s until his death in 1992). Dorsky and Jerome Hiler, another filmmaker as well as an artisan of stained glass, who has been Dorsky's partner for more than forty years, were mentored by Markopoulos. In 1966 they moved from New York to rural Lake Owassa in New Jersey, where they stayed until relocating to San Francisco in 1971. From the time Dorsky left New York until 1982, he ceased to complete and release films, although he continued to shoot and to show his footage to gatherings of friends. This has always been Hiler's practice. He has rarely exhibited any of his work in public. Within the avant-garde film community, the private evenings of film appreciation hosted by Dorsky and Hiler attained cult status.



This page: Nathaniel Dorsky, *Variations*, 1998, stills from a color film in 16 mm, 24 minutes.  
Opposite page: Nathaniel Dorsky, *Hours for Jerome*, 1982, still from a color film in 16 mm, 55 minutes.

Warren Sonbert was a major beneficiary of those screenings. When Dorsky finally edited, from 1980 to 1982, the material he had shot between 1966 and 1970 into *Hours for Jerome*, Sonbert wrote: “*Hours for Jerome* is simply the most beautifully photographed film that I’ve ever seen; for once the full achievements of what film can do cinematographically is . . . achieved. . . Here cinema enters the realm of the compassionate; capturing the eye and the mind, in ways unlike the predictable arena of the structural film.”<sup>1</sup> By that time Sonbert himself had attained a major reputation within the field. His career parallels Dorsky’s in inverse: After making apprentice films in the late ’60s, he found his mature style and relentlessly sought venues of exhibition just as Dorsky was withdrawing from the public arena. Sonbert’s style incorporated some of the principles Dorsky and Hiler had extolled and exemplified in their private screenings—most notably, an eschewing of the sound track. But unlike Stan Brakhage, who had loudly affirmed the superiority of silent film, Sonbert, Dorsky, and Hiler shared a deep appreciation for several Hollywood auteurs (Sirk, Hitchcock, Ford, and Minnelli) who influenced their compositions, tempi, and montage. In fact, it was this orientation that gave Sonbert, first, and Dorsky, later, sufficient distance to evade the overwhelming influence of Brakhage, for whom their respect and affection grew the more films they produced.

By withdrawing for fifteen years, Dorsky sat out the most contentious period in the history of avant-garde film. Fierce aesthetic battles over the prominence of minimal forms (“structural film”) and the status of video art were supplanted by even more acrimonious political disputes over sexism, imperialism, idealism, the importance of theory (especially French), and canon formation. Brakhage was the biggest and most battered target in these academic skirmishes. When Dorsky reemerged, there was a new audience, wary of the political factionalism, eager for the contemplative beauty and the cultic appreciation of cinematic genius he quietly preached. That audience was small at first, but it grew considerably in the ’90s, at the very time his filmmaking was attaining its full maturity.

Dorsky, Hiler, Sonbert, and their friends, among whom were the poets Michael Brownstein, Anne Waldman, and Ted Greenwald, nurtured ideas of films that would have no narrative or thematic organization, none of the Aristotelian unities of time, place, or action beyond the immanent rhythms binding one cinematic image to another. As Dorsky once remarked in an interview with the poet Mary Kite, “We spent our youth speculating on an open form of film. . . . The montage that I am talking about moves from shot to shot outside any other necessities, except of course the accumulation of being. It has no external obligations. It is the place of film.”<sup>2</sup> Encouraged by his poet friends, Dorsky found the inspiration for this concept of cinema in his reading of John Ashbery’s early books and spoke of editing his work in “stanzas.” However, his failure to achieve to his satisfaction the open form he envisioned contributed to his blockage of a decade and a half.

At fifty-five minutes, *Hours for Jerome* remains Dorsky’s longest film. He divided it into two parts and organized it to follow the seasons. It breaks down into a series of spectacular montage fragments, some of them edited in camera. For the first time he abjured a sound track and took advantage of the silence to project the film at eighteen frames per second, giving its movements a slight retardation. He never returned



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to sound tracks or sound speed (24 fps). This two-part lyric was his first serious effort to create “a place where film itself can be, can dream.”<sup>3</sup> But Sonbert stunned him by pointing out that the editing was “too descriptive.” He meant, apparently, that the filmmaker was too loyal to his memories of life in New York and on Lake Owassa, at the expense of the organic form of the film itself. According to Dorsky, “When you go into polyvalent editing, as Warren usually did, . . . the *place* is the *film*.”<sup>4</sup> By polyvalent editing, Dorsky means organizing the shots and rhythms of a film so that associations will “resonate” (his word) several shots later. It was important to him not to overstate such associations; thus he eschewed

parallel editing, classically practiced by D. W. Griffith and the masters of silent Soviet cinema. Yet, like Eisenstein, he found a model for his film form in classical Japanese poetry and, in Dorsky’s case, Chinese poetry as well.

Before assembling *Hours for Jerome*, the filmmaker continued to photograph fragments of his daily life in San Francisco and attempted to make a film by severely restricting his image material to grasses. During this period he also began a film built exclusively on gradations of blackness, but he admits he lacked the courage to complete and exhibit it. Although Dorsky abandoned these projects, the aesthetic satisfaction of editing *Hours for Jerome* and the consequent feeling of rejuvenation encouraged him to complete a series of ostensibly simpler films displaying his love of the basic cinematic material: color, grain, texture, the flickering light of the screen. It was as if he dedicated himself for another decade to a new and rigorous apprenticeship to his art. In *Pneuma* (1983), he used a wide variety of outdated film stock to assemble unphotographed bits of color and light flares, while *Ariel* (1983) achieves similar but bolder effects through home processing of unexposed rolls of defunct Anscochrome. In temporarily renouncing the photographic talent that made *Hours for Jerome* a gorgeous but unwieldy chain of spectacular epiphanies—nearly a catalogue of effects—he forced himself to shape the most elemental visual magma into films that might sustain attention and orchestrate the inherent music of cinematic movement for twenty to thirty minutes, which was to become roughly the timescale of his works until now. Then he slowly reintegrated photography into his art, under severe restraint. *Alaya* (1987) concentrates on patterns of sand as hyperboles of film grain. In *17 Reasons Why* (1987), Dorsky made a 16-mm film from unslit 8-mm rolls, which produce four small frames for each image in two pairs of sequential frames. The side-by-side sets of doubled images deflect attention from the free camera movements and frequent superimpositions within those frames to the generalized impression of filmic representation—that is, to sets of nearly identical rectangles—an impression that Dorsky enhances by sometimes sweeping etched scratches and the marks of chemical processing across all four frames at once. These techniques and similar constrictions had played a prominent role in the structural film phenomenon of the ’70s. But Dorsky had no interest in the aggressive use of duration or epistemological parables; instead,

he emphasized the sensuality immanent in such minimal imagery. His reductive films proclaim the sheer beauty of filmic light, an approach particularly effective for the small cult of aficionados for whom he projected the edited originals in his home.



This page: Nathaniel Dorsky, *Triste*, 1996, still from a color film in 16 mm, 18 minutes 30 seconds.  
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By the mid-'90s he was ready to make another attempt at the open-form, or polyvalent, film of which he had dreamed. He turned to the material he had gathered from random shooting and aborted projects since 1974 to compose *Triste* (1996), thereby initiating his mature style. After thirty years, he finally achieved the mode of lyric he had theorized. Later, Dorsky would quote the acknowledgment of fellow filmmaker Phil Solomon, who told him, "You found a way around [Brakhage]." However, Brakhage had made his own version of a purely polyvalent film in 1972 when he edited his extraordinary *Riddle of Lumen*, also from scraps of film he had saved from earlier projects, in polemical response to Hollis Frampton's *Zorns Lemma* (1970). The riddle of the title refers to the question of what holds the shots together, i.e., what they have to do with one another; and the answer too is in the title: light (*lumen*). Within Brakhage's vast corpus of films, *Riddle* represents one of many attempts to still the power of the "egotistical sublime"; that is, to transcend the intense subjectivity at the core of his art. Dorsky, in his major phase, did not so much find a way around Brakhage as find a way to make the most serene of Brakhage's protean lyric modes wholly his own.

*Triste* established the model for Dorsky's version of the polyvalent lyric: The shots are leisurely paced, usually between ten and thirty seconds long, without superimposition or rapid camera movement (when there is camera movement, it usually follows a figure in the image). There is no intercutting; very rarely does a camera setup or even an image recur. Consequently, the rare repetitions or recurrences acquire particular emphasis. For instance, two sequential shots of a snake in *Triste* link them to two earlier shots of a horse. A brief sequence near the end, of Hiler in his kitchen, in which the only genuine repetition in the film is a shot of his face, makes him the central presence of the work and associates his image with a brief set of variations on a stone votive angel, in positive and negative.

The prevailing autonomy of the shots in Dorsky's later films evokes monadic worlds, while the montage teases out the preestablished harmony among them (if I may impose unintended Leibnizian concepts here). This is a remarkably delicate process entailing subtle shifts of mood through which an overall psychological tone tentatively emerges and "evaporates" (Dorsky's term). Framing, chiaroscuro, and proxemics inscribe the filmmaker's presence in the worlds he reveals. In *Triste* he is a dejected wanderer, barely able to enter a crowded baseball arena but drawn close to an isolated cigarette butt, a submerged shoe, or a slithering snake. But in the next film Dorsky made—*Variations* (1998), using freshly photographed images for the first time in decades—image after image absorbs the rapturous filmmaker, as if the long-awaited achievement of *Triste* renewed the glory of the world for him. In his brilliant short book *Devotional Cinema* (2003), Dorsky wrote:

When cinema can make the internalized medieval and externalized Renaissance ways of seeing unite and transcend themselves, it can achieve a transcendental balance. This balance point unveils the transparency of our earthly experience. We are afloat. It is a balance that is neither our vision nor the belief in exterior objectivity; it belongs to no one and, strangely enough, exists nowhere. It is within this balance that the potential for profound cinema takes place.<sup>5</sup>

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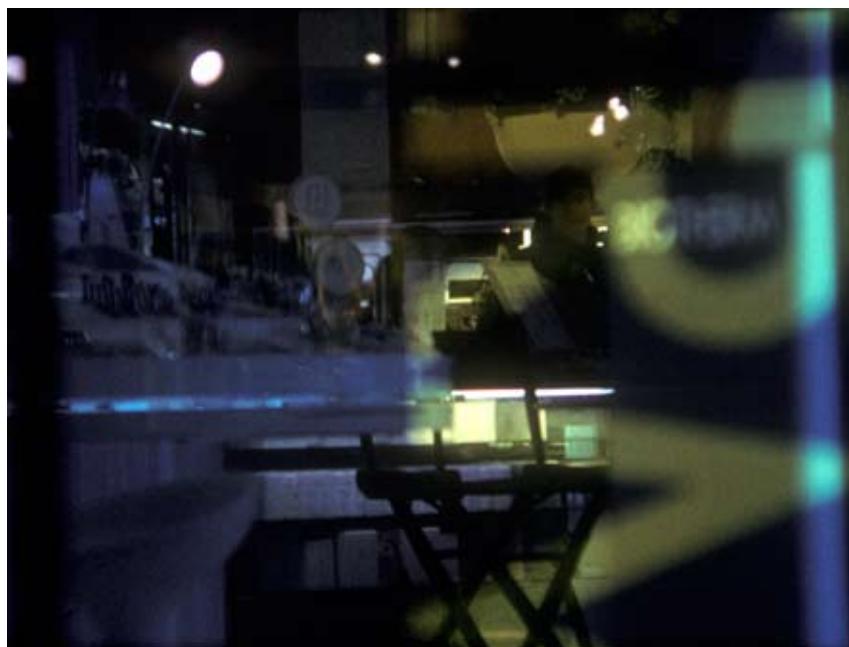
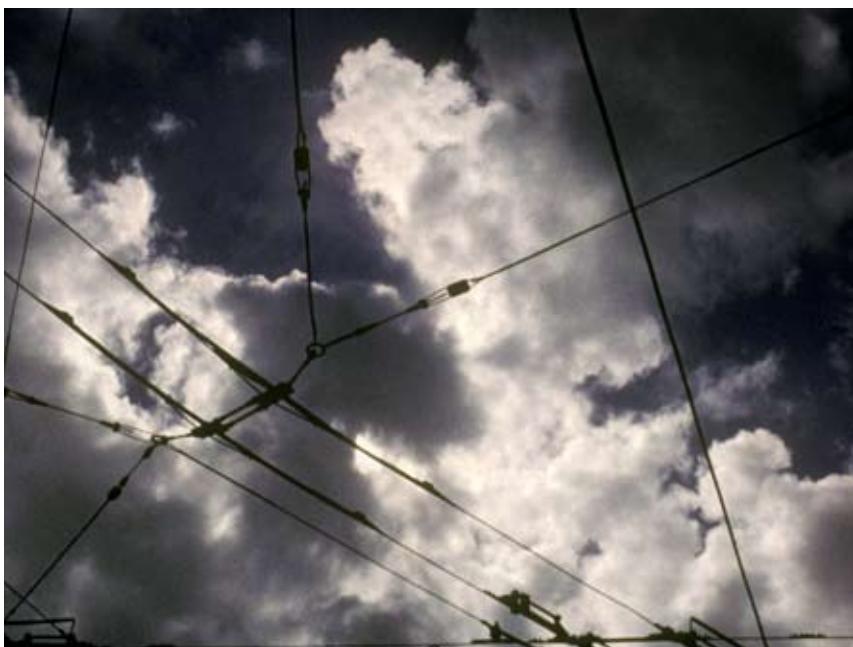


tery of seeing and being."<sup>6</sup> *Triste* and *Variations*, along with the subsequent *Arbor Vitae* (2000) and *Love's Refrain* (2001), constitute a set of "Four Cinematic Songs," while he calls *The Visitation* (2002) and *Threnody* (2004) "Two Devotional Songs." His latest film, *Song and Solitude* (2006), seems to form a triad with the previous two.

Not since Bruce Baillie made his strongest films in the '60s has a filmmaker crammed beauty upon beauty into his work with such Keatsian lushness. *Arbor Vitae*, Dorsky's envoi to the millennium, pushes the banality of natural beauty—butterflies, flowers, birds—to extremes. More than ever before his characteristic urban landscape borders on architectural promotion, but he ultimately overcomes the decorative elegance pervading the film by evoking intimations of the power of gravity that circumscribes the flight of birds and butterflies and holds the skyscrapers rooted to the earth like crystalline excrescences. More powerfully, *Love's Refrain* accumulates images of veils, subtle foreground-background discriminations, reflections and layered shadows, as if to manifest the capability of cinema to "unveil the transparency of our earthly experience." The very tacitly of the imagery dialectically suggests its evanescence, until the culminating portrait of the poet Philip Whalen on his deathbed anchors the lyric just this side of the threshold of eternity.

When Dorsky titled *The Visitation*, he had in mind medieval illuminated books of the "hours of the Virgin Mary," in which the Visitation of the pregnant Mary to her cousin Elizabeth, herself pregnant with John the Baptist, illustrates Lauds, the ritual service for dawn. The emergence of light and its subsequent sweep over the surface of the world is the true subject of the film, which seems to have nothing to do with the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth. It opens with the only instance of reverse-angle cutting I have found in Dorsky's mature films: We see Hiler from behind, wiping a large sheet of glass (which he will use for a stained-glass work), followed by a shot, through the glass, of his face mottled by the filtered light, as he inspects the pane. This unique opening reminds us that the film camera is a chamber with a glass screen constructed to preserve the moving stains of light that pass through it. Hiler has been the central influence on his partner's films since the two men met at the first New York screening of *Ingreen* at the Washington Square

Gallery in 1964. *The Visitation* reflects Hiler's conceit of stained glass as the cinema of the Middle Ages, the one subject on which he has lectured in public. Many of the monadic shots that follow the introductory motif show light penetrating fog, the edges of clouds, display windows, and water. Numerous grids, including shots of chain-link fences, extend the permeable barrier of glass into the realm of other objects. As the film builds to its climax, the lyric seems to be proposing, or testing, a series of culminating images: the sun moving behind and out of a cloud formation shaped like a heart or angel wings; an androgynous young woman fresh from an outdoor pool; the half-moon gliding in the night sky; a bright yellow fish



This page: Nathaniel Dorsky, *Song and Solitude*, 2006, stills from a color film in 16 mm, 21 minutes.  
Opposite page: Nathaniel Dorsky, *The Visitation*, 2002, still from a color film in 16 mm, 18 minutes.

circulating in a tank in a store window; and, finally, layers of flat waves in a dazzlingly reflective sea sweeping vertically over the screen.

As Brakhage intuited, the polyvalent lyric is a riddle in light. Whereas in most lyric cinema the accumulation of images narrows and defines its subject, establishing a thematic and sometimes dramatic field in which the viewer's anticipation can be confirmed or frustrated, the polyvalent lyric constitutionally resists the definition of its subject and abolishes the expectation of a thematic development. This results in the suppression of a future tense within the film. Each image founds a new present moment. With Dorsky's cultivation of the monadic shot, the feeling of an amassing present, reverberating with echoes

of the earlier image-worlds, is particularly strong. As the film unpredictably proceeds, each new shot sets in play a minor, or sometimes even major, revision of the fragile interior relations of the images and rhythms that preceded it. The revision is naturally most intense at the very instant of the shot change, but it is by no means limited to that transition. Dorsky has compared "the energy at the moment of the cut" to the "kabbalistic tradition of the Spark of Goodness or sparks of openness" that Jewish theologians have argued constitute the holiness imprisoned in corporeal nature. Thus each cut would draw one of the tiny sparks toward the fire associated with divinity and which the filmmaker, I believe, thinks of in terms of the ineffable coherence of a polyvalent film. For it is essential to him that the coherence remain mysterious. Although Dorsky, who is a consistently helpful and good-natured guide to his work, can easily be led to offer ad hoc accounts of how shot combinations work for him, he is very wary of his own "reductive analysis," lest a film be misread as "a slightly difficult map of a symbolic road that could be understood, or an obscuration of a symbolism that might be defined."

By the time he made *The Visitation*, Dorsky felt he had sufficient mastery of the open-ended lyric form to inflect his photography with intimations of the pervading tone of the film while he was shooting it. That was the case in the two elegies that are his most recent films. From the start he knew he was making *Threnody* as "an offering" to the recently dead Stan Brakhage.<sup>7</sup> In fact, he filmed his shots as if Brakhage were gathering his last glimpses of "the fleeting phenomena of life" as he ascended into the Empyrean.<sup>8</sup> Of course, Dorsky didn't actually signal a mediation of the images as if through a Brakhage persona: The cinematography and editing are manifestly Dorsky's; in fact, there is nothing within the film to associate it explicitly with Brakhage or his works. Within Brakhage's montage, the shot has an atomic function. The incessant fluxions of the handheld camera and the intricate plays of light bind often very short shots together in complex molecular units so that the autonomy of individual shots disappears. Even in *The Riddle of Lumen*, where Brakhage seems to be examining the polyvalent power of the shots, the units never have the monadic self-sufficiency of Dorsky's, and the rhythm Brakhage orchestrates is not immanent.

The "devotional" mode which links *Threnody* to its predecessor elicits an engrossment in the individual shot that would draw the viewer "to participate in its presence" so that the subsequent cut might induce a "visceral" shift in the most "tender" manner. Mystery, suggestiveness, intriguing indiscernibility, or even sheer beauty might be marshaled to invest the monadic image with



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sufficient "presence," to give a delicate "poignancy" (Dorsky's terms) to the instant in which the image changes through montage. So, a shot of Hiler's hand as he writes meticulously in a journal, or of a shop window in which we can make out a metallic hand and a pseudo-Hellenic bust scattered willy-nilly among other curios (while passing cars are reflected in the window), engages us for several seconds until the encapsulated world of the writing hand gives way to another realm—say, one in which the camera slowly pans down vertical cords with signage in the background, or the foliage of a fir tree replaces the disordered window display. The viewer would not know that Hiler is copying out notes he took

at a seminar on the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, or that the shop is that of a palm reader in transition, or that a striking shot of trees weighted down with snow late in the film was photographed when a blizzard coincided with the memorial service for Brakhage in Boulder, Colorado; yet such metaphysical associations seem to have influenced Dorsky's absorption so that he could use these images effectively as nodal points in the film. The poignancy the filmmaker sought may be a function of the timing of the editing; again and again he turns from a shot, almost sacrificing it, just an instant before we can be satisfied with our scrutiny.

In contrast to *Threnody*, a prevailing darkness at the center of most of its images marks the mourning of *Song and Solitude*. Dorsky made the film during the year his friend Susan Vigil was dying of ovarian cancer. A beloved pillar of the San Francisco avant-garde film community, she had housed, fed, and befriended local and visiting filmmakers for more than thirty years. Her acceptance of her imminent death was heartbreakingly heroic. During her last year she visited Dorsky weekly to look at the unedited rolls of the film as they came directly from the laboratory. Yet she is not the overt subject of the film. The only image of her in it is a close-up of her hands as she reads a poem (T. S. Eliot's "Ash Wednesday"). As in *Threnody*, the elegiac tone emerges from nuances. For instance, early in the film there is a wondrously timed shot of a figure in an orange sweater in a restaurant. The fluctuations of offscreen sunlight bring into prominence and then nearly erase two thin metal shade cords in the center of the composition. Such rhythmic coming and going of light, oscillating through the whole film, regularly puts the central darkness on the verge of illumination. If the delirious beauty typical of Dorsky's cinema is muted in *Song and Solitude*, it is because, one feels, the filmmaker has exercised an extraordinary effort of will not to be distracted from the intensity of sharing his friend's last days.

Dorsky's three most recent films have so subtly refined the balance of timing and shot placement, to address the ephemerality of the monadic worlds of his shots as they supersede one another in montage, that he seems to have taken the emotional range of the film without thematic guidelines to its limits. Yet, as he now awaits the work print of a new film, which he may title *Winter*, Dorsky remains confident that the matrix of the polyvalent open form as he theorized it and put it into practice

can continue to sustain major films of the intensity and originality he has given us since the 1990s. □

*For notes see page 400*

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## NOTES

1. Sonbert penned these words for Dorsky to use in promoting his film. His brief remarks were later published in Canyon Cinema's catalogue, in substantially altered form.
2. Dorsky, in Mary Kite, "A Conversation with Nathaniel Dorsky," *Poetry Project Newsletter* 183 (February/March 2001): 7.
3. All quotations are from conversations with the author, unless otherwise noted.
4. Scott MacDonald, "Nathaniel Dorsky (and Jerome Hiler)," in *A Critical Cinema 5* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 87.
5. *Devotional Cinema* (Berkeley: Tuumba Press, 2003), 25–26.
6. In a lecture given at Princeton University in 2001, later to be revised and published as *Devotional Cinema*.
7. From "To Sing Like a Mockingbird: A Conversation with Nathaniel Dorsky," an interview with Michelle Silva (of Canyon Cinema), published December 6, 2006, on the *San Francisco Bay Guardian* Arts and Culture Blog ([http://www.sfbg.com/blogs/pixel\\_vision/2006/12/to\\_sing\\_like\\_a\\_mockingbird\\_a\\_c\\_1.html](http://www.sfbg.com/blogs/pixel_vision/2006/12/to_sing_like_a_mockingbird_a_c_1.html)).
8. Quotation of Dorsky from *ibid.*