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The Ingression of Beauty

Abstract

An aesthetic for travel experience can be developed from the writings of Alfred North Whitehead and Carl Jung. The thesis is that an aesthetic experience occurs if a traveler is changed by an occurrence of harmony that lures the traveler into new selfhood, which is centered on a more complex recognition of beauty. An interpretation of a short, beautiful prose piece entitled “The Secret of Light” by the American poet James Wright reveals the process of developing an aesthetic experience.

Keywords

Whitehead, Jung, Aesthetic Experience, Traveler, Selfhood

Drawing from Whitehead

According to Alfred North Whitehead, God has two natures. In God’s “primordial nature,” all possibilities are grasped and ordered into a “primordial vision.” God’s other nature, the “consequent nature,” concerns God’s feelings about the world and consists of actual happenings in the world. God seeks to realize the primordial vision in the consequent nature, which is the harmony of all possibility without loss. Because God’s consequent nature is rooted in actual events, the primordial nature of God is subject to change (i.e., what happens can change the possibilities for what might happen). The consequent nature is in process. Since God feels pain and suffers in proportion to the distance our choices move us from the primordial vision, the primordial nature of God is also in process. Whitehead writes, “Neither God, nor the world, reaches static completion. Both are in the grip of the ultimate metaphysical ground, the creative advance into novelty. Either of them, God and

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the world, is the instrument of novelty for the other" (Whitehead 1954, 349). God may be seen as a traveler, advancing into novelty. However, since the quest for "satisfaction" (harmony and beauty) abides in God, in that way God's primordial nature is unchanging. Therefore, God is an eternal traveler whose goal is not a destination but a state of being.

God offers an "initial aim" to each "concrecing" occasion. This aim is an extra-conscious feeling of purpose, which would guide the concrecing occasion toward satisfaction for that occasion as part of the satisfaction of all being. The feeling tone associated with the initial aim is tenderness. However, the occasion is not bound to follow the initial aim and, in fact, often does not, following its own "subjective aim" instead and thereby opting for less than maximum selfhood. Because whatever happens affects God's consequent nature and primordial nature, God and creation are one organism in this theory. Being itself is a process of achieving more sophisticated and complex harmony and beauty. Whitehead writes, "The image—and it is but an image—under which this operative growth of God's nature is best conceived, is that of a tender care that nothing be lost" (Whitehead 1954, 346).

The Concept of a Whiteheadian Aesthetic

In *A Whiteheadian Aesthetic*, Donald Sherburne says that to Whitehead, works of art are "lures for feeling" or, in Whiteheadian terms, lures for prehension. The lure urges "a given prehending subject to integrate one of its physical feelings with a conceptual feeling to prehend positively that proposition as datum" (Sherburne 1970, 105-106). In other words, the proposition serves as a subjective aim (evaluated as purposive in the concrecence), or, one could say, the artwork lures the critic into self-creation in the *elan* of the artwork itself.

Sherburne contends that "an experience is aesthetic when it is experience of an objectified proposition which lures the subjective aim of that occasion of experience into re-creating in its own process of self-creation the proposition objectified in the prehended performance" (*ibidem*, 143). Internalization is the key to an aesthetic experience, and self-creation is the response. Sherburne approaches the idea again in these terms: "The subjective aim of such an aesthetic experience is to re-create in that process of self-creation, in that concrecing experience, the proposition which is objectified in the prehended performance" (*ibidem*, 144). If the critic's self is constituted according to the feeling of the experience of the artwork, then the critic has had an aesthetic experience, which might also be termed "satisfaction" in Whiteheadian terms.

For Whitehead, satisfaction is tied to beauty. Sherburne quotes Whitehead: "Beauty is the harmonious, mutual, adaptation of the several factors in an occasion of experience" (*ibidem*, 155). Beauty is the "eternal object that ingresses into us when there is a harmonious adaptation of elements" (*ibidem*, 155). In terms of aesthetics, creating oneself toward satisfaction is living in a more complex awareness of beauty and harmony.

Self-creation is a consequent requirement in an aesthetic experience. For Sherburne, "if the proposition in a performance is not aesthetically re-created by the contemplator, then his experience is not aesthetic" (*ibidem*, 144). He writes, "aesthetic experience is experience which is aesthetically re-creative" (*ibidem*, 158). The "satisfaction" achieved finally in the concrescence must also be seen as re-creative of the proposition at its beginning.

Whitehead writes of "satisfaction" in this way: "Satisfaction is merely the culmination marking the evaporation of all indetermination" (Whitehead 1954, 212). He says, "Thus the satisfaction is the attainment of the private ideal which is the final cause of the concrescence" (*ibidem*, 212). He says that the process leading to satisfaction occurs in two phases. The first is "pure reception of the actual world in its guise of objective datum for aesthetic synthesis" (*ibidem*, 212). The second phase "is governed by the private idea, gradually shaped in the process itself, whereby the many feelings, derivatively felt as alien, are transformed into a unity of aesthetic appreciation immediately felt as private" (*ibidem*, 212).

Sherburne envisions this process in this way: 1) One has to get past the actuality of the proposition, 2) one has to seize the proposition as a datum for the subjective aim, and 3) one has to carry out the aim to re-create the proposition in self-creation (Sherburne 1970, 149). In terms of this essay, viewing a beautiful vista would not in itself constitute an aesthetic experience; however, new selfhood developed from the viewing would be. If the traveler's self is constituted anew according to the ingestion of the beautiful feeling of an experience, then the traveler has had an aesthetic experience. The event would have moved the traveler into more rewarding, complex, and intense satisfaction centered on appreciating beauty and, therefore, new selfhood.

The aesthetic experience can be seen as growth. Ronald Farmer's *Beyond the Impasse: The Promise of a Process Hermeneutic* describes the process notion of growth.

Growth—on the microcosmic or macrocosmic level—is not achieved simply by adding together the various discordant elements in the actual world of a concrecing subject. Discordant elements cannot be untied in a single experience simply by addition.

The easiest way to achieve a new synthesis is by blocking out the discordant elements by means of negative prehensions. The trivial harmony which results lacks intensity of feeling, however. Whitehead labeled this approach ‘anesthesia.’ There is another approach. Although the various discordant elements cannot be brought into harmony as they stand, there may be a larger, more inclusive novel pattern which can contain the discordant elements in such a manner that the contrast between them contributes to the intensity of the whole. This new pattern is not part of the world; rather it comes from God (the initial aim). To the extent that the subject appropriates the new pattern, it experiences creative transformation (Farmer 1997, 115).

From this perspective, growth consists of realizing increasingly complex harmony, bringing seeming discord together in a new, “more inclusive” pattern instead of choosing between the discordant identities. This movement into the novel pattern can be called “creative transformation.”

Addition of Ideas from Jung

Specific ideas from Carl Jung may amplify the idea of the aesthetic deriving from a traveler’s experiences. Jung believes that the unconscious mind expresses itself solely in imagery, never through syntactical logic. In the art of the unconscious, a-logically juxtaposed images carry paradoxical meaning without a logical connection. Because the meanings of images of the unconscious are not logical, they make the conscious mind uneasy.

We are astonished, confused, bewildered, put on our guard, or even repelled; we demand commentaries and explanations. We are reminded of nothing in everyday life, but rather of dreams, night-time fears, and the dark, uncanny recesses of the human mind (Jung 1972, 91).

One might feel crucified by one’s creativity, and the images from the unconscious might indeed destroy the artist and the critic. However, Jung argues that images from the unconscious can not only be accepted but also be curative, and perhaps even salvific, if seen as symbolic.

Jolande Jacobi offers a concise definition of Jung’s idea of symbol in *The Way of Individuation*. Jacobi writes that symbols “represent the fundamental order of the psyche, the union of its polaristic opposites” (Jacobi 1965, 58). She continues:

The criterion for symbols [...] is their numinosity. This is their constant characteristic, for they represent a *coincidentia oppositorum*, a union of opposites, in particular of conscious and unconscious contents, and thus transcend rational understanding.

Through this union they bridge the dissociated portions of the psyche by creating a *tertium*, a “third” thing supraordinate to both sides [...]. All these symbols are the vehicles and at the same time the product of the “transcendent function,” that is, of the psyche’s symbol-making capacity, of its creative power (*ibidem*, 59).

Jung understands the symbol as rooted in the future, not as a representation of the present. Jung writes, “A symbol is the intimation of a meaning beyond the level of our present powers of comprehension” (Jung 1972, 77). What Jung calls the “*tertium*,” or transcendent third thing created by the symbol, does not yet exist but can be identified through its numinosity. Therefore, the symbol could be seen as approaching the ego parallel to the lure of the proposition, the initial aim, except that the symbol calls more attention by being disturbing.

Jung’s definition of symbols stresses creativity and the loosening toward wholeness and interrelationship, rather than tightening toward perfection and category. This definition parallels Whitehead’s thinking: “Creativity achieves its supreme task of transforming disjointed multiplicity with its diversities in opposition, into concrecent unity, with its diversities in contrast” (Whitehead 1954, 348). For Jung, the psychiatrist, healing occurs because the symbol implies a wholeness beyond the paradox desired by the Self, which parallels Farmer’s concept of “growth.”

Therefore, in the quest for healing symbols, one searches for intensity, “numinosity.” In literary criticism, this search for numinosity may lead to an epiphanic moment of realization in a character’s story and a moment preceded by recognizing the impossibility of choice when alternatives remain paradoxical. At an impasse in the personal or cultural ego, images from the unconscious fill the ego with awe (those from the unconscious mind that “astonish, confuse, bewilder, and demand explanation,” as Jung says) and draw the ego toward wholeness beyond the previous paradox.

A Reading of “The Secret of Light”

In his *Moments of the Italian Summer* (Wright 1976), a 32-page book of brief prose pieces about his traveling in Italy, the American poet James Wright placed first (pp 1-2), “The Secret of Light.”

He writes that he is sitting on a bench in a park near the Palazzo Scaligere in Verona, watching the “mists of early autumn as they shift and fade” in the pines and city battlements above the river Adige. He writes, “The city has recovered from this morning’s rainfall. It is now restoring, color of faintly cloudy green and pearl.”

Let us assume that Wright is drawn to the play of shadow and light in the mist, river, and battlements in a context analogous to an initial aim, as a lure to grow, which means attaining perspective involving increased complexity with regard to beauty and harmony. For Whitehead, this might be called the lure toward “satisfaction,” and for Jung, toward “wholeness.”

Wright is moved by the play of light in the river Adige in Verona. It seems to him the river’s “secret of light.” If one trusts that we are all called to grow in a more profound appreciation of beauty, one might see Wright’s attraction to the interplay of light as offering a proposition that the secret could be discovered. However, Wright does not have an experience opening him to that discovery in his past.

After writing that the river has restored “its shapely body, its secret light, a color of faintly cloudy green and pearl,” in the following sentence, Wright tells us that he sees a “startling woman” sitting on a bench about thirty yards in front of him. He reaches for a metaphor to make the nature of the light more real (perhaps that is always the poet’s work). He writes, “Her hair is as black as the inmost secret of light in a perfectly cut diamond, a perilous black, a secret light that must have been studied for many years before the anxious and disciplined craftsman could achieve the necessary balance between courage and skill to stroke the strange stone and take the one chance he would ever have to bring that secret to light.” The diamantine light (metaphorized) remains beyond sure grasp and naming in this striking metaphor because even an expert diamond cutter working in the hardest of concrete materials risks losing it. The light remains perhaps too secretive to be understood fully in Wright’s world, even his imagined one. It is possible to interpret Wright’s reliance on metaphor as perceptively beautiful but a failure to see the light as it is. Failure might help in his process of growth. Whitehead writes, “The subject completes itself during the process of concrescence by a self-criticism of its incomplete phases” (Whitehead 1954, 244).

In the sentence, after the reader has been led to consider the risk of losing the light forever (metaphorized by a diamond cutter’s miscut), Wright says that the woman stands and walks away: “While I was trying to compose the preceding sentence, the woman rose from her park bench and walked away.” In this remarkable sentence, Wright has placed the reader inside the immediate moment of the woman’s leaving and his writing about it into the creative moment. A closer relationship than had previously existed between the reader and Wright is now established because the reader is set in the creative moment, in Wright’s creating (and becoming); The reader (or readers plural, the community) is now part of the composition.

When she leaves, he writes, "I am afraid that her secret may never come to light in my lifetime." The secret treasure of light may be gone out of his life and possibly out of the reader's life. However, the following sentence opens a new perspective: "But my lifetime is not the only one." The community (of readers) that may have found its way into his growth process seems now to play a part in his moving toward satisfaction. He adds, "I hope she brings some other man's secret face to the light, as somebody brought mine." The phrasing of that sentence is fascinating; his face has been brought to light, which could mean brought up next to light or brought to light as developed from within himself. The latter possibility opens a novel pathway for Wright to know himself as a light bearer.

At this point, his fear is gone. He writes, "I am startled to discover that I am not afraid" and feels he is "free to give a blessing" out of his "silence" into the woman's hair. The reader notes that he first described her as "a startling woman," Here, he is "startled to discover" that he is not afraid of her being gone. He was "startled" to find the light, "afraid" that he might lose it, and "startled" that he had not lost it. Intensity characterized every consequential moment of his relationship with the light, with the possibility of losing significance in terms of his growth. In *Process and Reality*, Whitehead writes, "God's purpose in the creative advance is the evocation of intensities" (Whitehead 1954, 105), the intensity carrying a sense of polarity: "The subjective aim is seeking width with its contrasts, within the unity of a general design (*ibidem*, 279).

Wright now "trusts" that the woman will continue to live and others will find the light. He writes, "I believe in her black hair, her diamond that is still asleep. I would close my eyes to daydream about her. However, those silent companions who watch over me from the insides of my eyelids are too brilliant for me to meet face to face." Silent companions inside one's eyelids too bright to look at seem a dream image, perhaps something from the unconscious, something symbolic in a Jungian sense. The transcendent third thing here, the *tertium*, transcending his ego's predicament of how to live with having (as experience) the light and yet losing it (as fact) before he can know its meaning as if a pang of hunger were introduced for which there is no nourishment—the transcendent new perspective connects him to the larger community of men. The companions inside him, too brilliant to look at, suggest that he has moved from a single ego-consciousness to participation in a wider psychic community. The dreamlike image works as a symbol in a Jungian sense, both disturbing the ego and opening it to growth.

He now knows the treasure of light is not gone from the world, and he imagines another man will know it even more intimately by touching the woman's hair sometime in the future. He imagines that moment: "A wind off the river Adige will flutter past her. She will turn around, smile a welcome, and place a flawless and fully formed Italian daybreak into the hands."

The larger context of the secret light in the mist and from the river that moved into the intense focus of the woman's black hair now moves back out into a larger context, another man, others perhaps, but also back into the river then into Wright himself. He now feels that light is in him. He imagines others in Verona who "are waiting patiently until they know what they alone can ever know; that time when her life will pause in mid-flight for a split second. The hands will touch her black hair very gently." In addition to the light moving from outside him to inside him and his seeing it as present in a larger context, in terms of sharing it, Wright has given us the story, a manifestation of the light. His artistic creation and his self-creation combine.

In the story's closing words, Wright says that he is happy to sit alone in the park now and look at the river Adige. The last two paragraphs are:

It is all right with me to know that my life is only one life. I feel like the light of the river Adige.

By this time, we are both an open secret.

Wright has now "re-created the proposition in self-creation" to use Sherburne's idea of the third and final step of the aesthetic experience. The suggestion here is that Wright has been creatively transformed through a process of ingressation into himself of beauty from experience in his travels and feels the change in himself. In an aesthetic travel experience, a beautiful moment creatively transforms one into new selfhood and wholeness.

Conclusion

We are all involved in the process of becoming. Since the process involves more intense sophistication concerning beauty, it can be considered growth in aesthetics. Whitehead suggests that God offers initial aims urging deeper resonance with beauty and harmony in the process of becoming. Although we may follow different, subjective aims, we are at least partially lured toward deeper selfhood concerning a more complex understanding of beauty. Sherburne believes that aesthetic experience occurs with self-creation, the moment of having become if that moment is concordant with beauty en-

countered at the outset of the process and opening up as the process proceeds. The idea of conscious realization of the moment of having become does not follow Whitehead since the process of concrescence is ongoing, complex, moment by moment, simultaneously completing and renewing, and resulting in a nexus identity.

Nevertheless, in this essay, I have imagined an ego consciously realizing a moment of aesthetic experience in order to present the idea that a traveler who experiences a profoundly moving moment of beauty so decisive that it places the traveler in a state of awe (concurrent attraction and fear), can grow by transcending the fear into a more complex understanding of beauty. The transcendence involves the ingestion of beauty. The contrastive elements of the traveler's previous outlook have melded into a more complex sense of harmony and more intense and satisfying selfhood. That is the aesthetic experience.

There is danger in the experience. If the interpretation of beauty in terms of oneself becomes radically challenged and shifts into interpreting oneself in terms of beauty beyond understanding, then a disturbance in the ego, even fear, may result. However, guided by an initial aim that places beauty as elemental in Being and by urgings of a-logical symbolic imagery calling for transcendence of previous perspectives, an aesthetic experience of creative transformation is possible and joyfully so. In this sequence, an aesthetic experience is a process of growth, opening into new selfhood and bringing one into oneself in alignment with the beauty that moved us out of ourselves. We can find in ourselves and become constituted by a beautiful landscape of selfhood previously uncharted.

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