

Novelty, Ritual, and Redemption: Toward a Whiteheadian Aesthetic

JEREMY RICHARD HOFFART

With its intricate submergence into the crevices of process, creativity, and the extensive continuum, Whitehead's metaphysical speculation is most useful in its microcosmic implications. Conversely, some of these broader applications may further transpose significance on their initial structure, not only derivative of process, but informing it. Such is the parallel of aesthetic emergence, drawing from a speculation of a more conventional "creativity" than Whitehead usually refers to, but nonetheless unveiling metaphysical peculiarities that call for clarification. Specifically, I aim to tie in Whitehead's aesthetic implications and theological conjectures as converging factors in what Whitehead recognizes as "the ultimate evil [ellipses] that the past fades, that time is a 'perpetual perishing'" (*Process and Reality* 216, hereafter cited as PR). For aesthetics, this perishing is one of content, a postmodern glut amid a limitless structure; for theology, the issue resides in the tension between God's primordial and consequent nature, an upward spiral of luring, con-creeping, and perishing (Whiteheadian terms for coming into being and passing on). Our reaction to this primal flux varies from mellow nostalgia to nihilistic angst, and the nature of this angst often shares the role as either a justification of that nihilism or a call for religious redemption. The latter, we would hope, seems to be the prevalent conviction. Yet, apart from theological speculation, where do we find that redemption? It seems, on whatever terms of God, love, beauty and faith we appeal to, even from a secular standpoint, the emergence of redemption finds its public voice in the expression of aesthetics.

Artistic expression, the nexus of narrative, imagery, sound, and movement, is one of the strongest social bonds in human nature, providing a canopy of meaning over the details of experience. Part of its appeal is not only in its indication of significance, but in its discovery, invention, and

potential for progress. Aesthetic emergence, in general, offers a vivid answer to Hume's cited phenomenon, "for ideas to go beyond their correspondent impressions" (qtd. in PR 86). While Hume limits this phenomenon to a rare "instance," Whitehead allows a broader, more pervasive potentiality, maintaining that "there is an origination of conceptual feeling, admitting or rejecting whatever is apt for feeling by reason of its germaneness to the basic data" (PR 87). This, in application, lends aesthetic creativity its inspirational character.

Though all creation is informed—and thus, limited—by past concrescence, the moment when content is inspired beyond canalization is when aesthetic emergence truly takes flight. One theory of balancing form and content calls for a paradox of this emergence, that it must be at once *surprising* and *inevitable*. In aesthetic emergence, there is a certain momentum forming a nexus beyond the artist. "Feelings are 'vectors,'" says Whitehead, "for they feel what is *there* and transform it into what is *here*" (PR 87). Balance between the artist's initial conception and subsequent lure of discovery strives to attain a mutual vector in this respect, a synergy that fuses the dissonant approximations into a beautiful orchestration at its highest achievement, or else crumbles into an incoherent jumble, at its lowest.

This heightened sense of collaborative emergence may share its characteristics most with Whitehead's "hybrid" prehension, which he describes as "the prehension by one subject of a conceptual prehension, or of an 'impure' prehension, belonging to the mentality of another subject" (PR 107). For illustration, I cite a seldom considered art form, improvisational theater. Two actors step onto the stage with little or no knowledge of the content about to evolve between them, and through established guidelines, give-and-take, and quick wits to adapt action to unexpected prehensions, they create a coherent, unified scene. Though imperfect, this process creates unity in the resulting emergence through conceptual objectification of shared feeling, of established values, and perhaps on some level, of the hybrid physical prehension of God. This mystic self-effacement pools the combined conscious prehensions into a process both including the artist and operating quite beyond her.

As the expression evolves, the conceptual prehensions emerge as actualities determine an explicit concrescence that forms a narrative "society" of the artwork, in the sense that every element framed within the work shares a "defining characteristic" by virtue of "the environment provided by the society itself" (PR 89). That is, assuming there is unity of significance within the narrative, the shared characteristic emerges in that purpose. Aesthetic emergence in this light fits into Whitehead's description of "life," as "the coordination of the mental spontaneities throughout

the occasions of a society” which are “directed to a common objective amid varying circumstances” (*Adventures of Ideas* 207). This common objective demands a give and take among the artist’s conception and discovery, potentially sacrificing millions of conceptual prehensions with every decision.

“The art of progress,” says Whitehead, “is to preserve order amid change, and to preserve change amid order. Life refuses to be embalmed alive” (PR 339). Aesthetic emergence juggles form and content as mutually informing, and discovery in any art form demands that the novelty be authentic if it is to survive at all. It is surprising. It is inevitable. It punctuates being with the narrative, which is always novel, always becoming, like laughter echoing through a mirrored hall.

II. Poetic Insight as Propositional Evocation

The function of art as both unexpected and inevitable, juggling a paradox of conformity and novelty, is that it replaces expectations with truth. Hovering between past concreteness and emergent possibility, obvious fact and elliptical suggestion, we often incorporate the device of poetic insight as an amplification of understanding. To note, the use of the term “poetic” does not restrict its application to literature or aesthetics. Rather, we apply metaphor, simile, and unusual syntax in common experience to offer fresh insight to our experience. We may say, “That politician is a snake,” or, “That class is hell,” evoking several layers of symbolic reference without giving the statement a second thought. Poetic insight, whether novel or cliché, is ingrained in our intellectual process, as Whitehead recognizes, “to symbolize the sort of physical feelings necessary to indicate the logical subjects of the proposition” (PR 260).

Consider this aching, complex image from Jane Kenyon: “Like a crow who smells hot blood / you came flying to pull me out / of the glowing stream.” (23). From the context of the poem’s title, “Having it Out with Melancholy,” we know she is addressing her personification of depression, sickness, and struggle. She is assigning overlapping objectifications of these emotions with the vivid, concrete portrayal of a crow and a glowing stream of blood. Whether these associations strike the prehending subject as effective depends on “whether or not the possible understanding conforms with the facts of experience,” as Hosinski says (122).

The conformation or lack thereof in the prehending subject’s experience constitutes a visceral reaction, below explication or judgment, and hence is what I term subjective resonance. If conforming—that is, relating—to past experience, this description carries an emotional flood, bursting with the weight of all concreteness that has come before it. “An

intense experience is an aesthetic fact," says Whitehead, "and its categorial conditions are to be generalized from aesthetic laws in particular arts" (PR 279). Whether or not the prehending subject has the conforming experience to call upon, the subject can, at some level, recognize the pattern set by the comparison, and can at least attain a vague absorption of the intended meaning.

In the face of fleeting actuality, perishing worlds, and private emotions, we call upon poetic insight to amplify the nexus of subjective experience to a universal value. "This is the feeling of the objective immortality inherent in the nature of actuality," Whitehead says (PR 278). Beyond mere enjoyment of aesthetic appeal, such an approach to evocation also dominates rhetoric, advertising, and appeals to ethical action and social justice. It is one thing to mention the abstract statistic that 1.2 million Tibetans have died as a result of Chinese occupation. It is another thing to read the Dalai Lama's vivid account of a young boy screaming as a military officer forces him to pull the trigger of a pistol, the blood of his own father splashing across his terrified face. The attention to detail here, while disturbing and not entirely necessary, certainly evokes more emotional momentum than a static figure.

Poetic insight's vivid persuasion also carries some inherent dangers, particularly in coercion and overly emotional rhetoric. While some cases of inauthentic rhetoric are made obvious by investigation of the supporting data, much of "error arises by reason of operations which lie below consciousness, though they emerge into consciousness and lie open for criticism" (PR 272). The critical point arrives between the origination of the physical feelings in the false judgment and the subsequent action based on that judgment. Many "obvious" conclusions arrive from sound logic based on a shaky premise, and unless we prefer the soothing rhetoric of beer ads and political campaigns, only a heightened sense of awareness will filter out such fallacies.

One of the most polarizing elements of objectification rises out of the application of subjective resonance—that visceral echo of the past bleeding into causal efficacy and presentational immediacy to render every experience at once vividly private, and yet, necessarily public. This feeling complies with Whitehead's description of "bodily efficacy," as "the feeling of the sense datum as generally implicated in the whole region" (PR 313). We've all had arguments over whether a film or poem was good; we assume distinct taste is a stamp of our human uniqueness. Yet, given the stratified din of opinions in so many realms of aesthetics, moral judgments, and "common" sense, even among those of equal experience and education, there clearly exists a more subtle influence on our judgment than conscious knowledge.

“The canons of art,” says Whitehead, “are merely the expression, in specialized forms, of the requisites for depth of experience” (PR 317). Whitehead adds that these requisites also appear in the principles of morality; indeed, in nearly every metaphysical ideal—truth, beauty, justice, and so forth—these “requisites for depth” emerge. Yet without awareness of our own methods of appraising these requisites, we are left to subjective irrelevance: “Well, I guess you have your opinion, and I have mine.” This frustration aborts clarification and eschews the proposed solution of figuring where, exactly, the subjective grasp deludes the *sensa* in question.

When I read the novel, *Great Expectations*, I can observe the objective data of its prose, its imagery, and its lyrical wit. I can even appraise these data as structurally and aesthetically well executed. I cannot, however, truthfully say that I like the book. Whether this is due to my physical and temporal distance from Victorian England or my lack of relation to societal hypocrisy is irrelevant. What is undeniable is that I lack the subjective resonance—an initially unconscious prehension—to constitute my involvement and subsequent identity with the aesthetic truths proposed. So far, I am concerned with the primitive stages of this reaction, as Whitehead describes, “a *sensum* is felt physically with emotional enjoyment of its sheer individual essence” (PR 314). But this is not an isolated feeling. The conditioning factors, unfortunately underplayed in Whitehead’s analysis, account for the fact that “a red cloak may often be associated with a feeling of red irritation” (PR 315).

In addition to archetypal associations of certain qualities (red symbolizes anger), this leads into the conscious appraisal of subjective resonance. When I drop *Great Expectations* out of boredom and begin reading *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, I am suddenly galvanized by the lyrical prose, the postmodern enhancement, and the mosaic of swirling influence. Here is another story of Victorian England—albeit with a distinctly transformed style—and since my experience as a critic and philosopher are in sync with the author’s approach, I transpose more significance, more quality on this work of art. Whitehead notes, “It is only by reason of the fortunate dependence of the experient and of these contemporary actualities on a common past, that presentational immediacy is more than a barren aesthetic display (PR 324).

It is the layers and texture of past feeling, concrescence, and judgment that cast flesh on the bones of a given nexus. This trait is part of our function as enduring objects and remains necessary for acclimation and aggregate knowledge. The problem of this application, however, is that it often applies these private feelings to interpretation of public realities. Subsequently, we begin to impose our own tastes and judgments on others, indignant that our focal point isn’t recognized as the template of reason.

This stratification results from what Whitehead recognizes as (Descartes' account of experiencing the external world), "a 'judicium' which calls into play the totality of our experience beyond those prehensions" (PR 325). Ignorance of this totality causes the false transferal of a subjectively resonated past on the presentational immediacy in question and offers one clue among the many stumbling blocks of subjective aim.

III. Subjectivist Dynamics of Aesthetic Prehension

In an effort to move toward a moderate transcendence of the subjectivist delusion of aesthetic appraisal, to cast off "the drab grey of everyday experience," improvisation and education theorist Keith Johnstone describes an exercise that he claims causes students to suddenly experience their surroundings with increased vibrancy, immediacy, and novelty. They simply defy linguistic conventions, running from one object to the next and assigning a label to their prehension that is entirely unrelated. In Whitehead's terms, this alters canalized perception, opening up potentiality of objectification by undermining the casual efficacy of categorization. It endorses the notion that "consciousness is the feeling of negation" (PR 161). In the context of Johnstone's purpose, then, the origin of novel aesthetic emergence gives a vibrant illustration involved in the dynamics of the subjectivist principle.

One primary characteristic of conditioned prehension surges from the primal, emotional association of the object, which, over time, carries the danger of deluded perception. That is, the labels, associations, and interaction mingled with the prehension rise in tandem with the emotional tinge, and the former may become stubbornly imposed with each subsequent prehension due to the subconscious associations of the emotion. Yet Whitehead rightly maintains that "emotion . . . is not bare emotion. It is emotion interpreted, integrated, and transformed into higher categories" (PR 163). Emotion is the end product of a filtering process. If that process is ignored, the initial feeling carries through from prehension to reaction unheeded, deluded.

Subsequently, the unaware subject will apply that deluded perception of emotional influence to an appraisal that defines not the aesthetic quality of the prehension, but its auxiliary associations. Emotions characteristically evoke related and detached informants of contemporary experience, thus distracting from the actual occasion, causing a premature objectification. This reaction constitutes what Whitehead recognizes as "an element in the description of the fundamental experiential feeling, but delusive as a metaphysical starting-point" (PR 160).

Another side effect of this physiological indulgence is the lapse in awareness and subsequently corrupted prehension of the actual occasion. Whitehead refers to this as “the chequered history of our own capacity for knowledge” (PR 161). Hence, the appraisal and deconstruction of the aesthetic is not authentically of the given emergence, but of a scattered series of occasions strung together with presumptions and justifications. This may account for Rilke’s statement, that such attempts of criticism “always come down to more or less happy misunderstandings” (17), an extreme statement that may be qualified with copious exceptions, but nonetheless pointing to the dissonance between emergence and judgment.

At a higher, subtler level of premature objectification, there is an ironic conditioning to canalized appraisal, the “conformal feelings” (PR 164) that greet over-saturated salience—i.e., clichés. Emergence that once spurned a galvanizing objectification and conjured sweeping eternal objects may eventually greet reduced effectiveness when over-exposed; consequently, further display of the same emergence causes the subject to greet it with a callous indifference. What once was conceptual is now conformal.

In its satisfaction, one could apply Whitehead’s “two dimensional” characteristic to aesthetic emergence (PR 166). First, narrowness and its associated intensity of the emergence draw depth from the initial novelty of the prehension. But as the continued exposure wears the subject’s interest, the width takes in the recontextualization of evolving standards and new emergence, so the comparison stretches the application, but reduces the intensity.

Clearly, this application applies not only to aesthetics, but also to our everyday, instinctive decisions. We recognize and react to our prehensions with biases and conditioning from objectifications that never had sufficient exposure to the initial datum to make a legitimate decision. This is an inevitable byproduct of the subjectivist principle, even in Whitehead’s revised state. Nonetheless, knowledge of this process gives us a tool with which to hone our awareness, the elusive unconscious gradually surfacing as conscious and within our control.

IV. Aesthetic Evolution from Private Resonance to Communal Ritual

The power of poetic insight hits us most sharply when it conforms to our own, private propositions. Our subjective resonance finds comfort and fortitude in recognition of an expressed proposition of another pre-empting subject, for it insists that we are linked by these loves and pains that anchor meaning to our lives. As Hosinski so eloquently observes,

“Something similar occurs unconsciously throughout the universe, and is the way in which new truth is born” (109). To arrive at this universal resonance, however, we must move beyond the subjective sphere of prehension, moving into Whitehead’s general theory of theology, as outlined in *Religion in the Making*, which implies that the origin of rituals, community, and emotion feed into the very purpose of art. In final evaluation, however, we must also address the same danger of an over-zealous religion, in that the “dogma” of art must never petrify novelty.

For Whitehead, ritual begins with an individual experience. Before any expression or structure can occur, there must be a generated insight in the private, subjective prehension of the world. This brand of solitude often leads to a ravenous inquiry, immersed in mystic lure, stumbling after the origin and meaning amid the myriad flourishes in presentational immediacy. This experience speaks first in feeling, a vector toward significance, weighted with the subjective emotion inherited from the senses. Soon, the subject seeks expression. To transcend the potential barrenness of actualities, to discover a social intimacy in shared experience, and to follow the lure of God’s conceptual prehensions, the individual turns her private prehensions inside out, expressing her feelings through even the crudest beginnings of what we term “art.”

That is, not all aesthetic expression presents itself in the hallowed form of tradition or the amplified voice of display. Those extensions may come later, but the first reflection of reverence flashes in the moments of a brief exchange or hushed observation. In the necessity of language, we all communicate through symbols; we are saturated in our thirst for meaning. A handshake, billboard, or a traffic signal have long fallen under assumption for their indication, yet they testify—remedially, at least—of the anthropological evolution of our culture found in symbolic reference. So prevalent is this symbolic and potentially artistic coloring to presentational immediacy, we often take it for granted; so rather than question, advance, and revere our aesthetic nature, we trudge along, head down, world muted, meaning astray.

Nevertheless, the world has not witnessed a single civilization that has failed to find the ritual of art. Once individuals discover expression, they form synchronous vectors toward a common end—they form a community. This is Whitehead’s second step for an evolving religion, as it exemplifies a nexus of higher-ordered unities searching for the source of their shared characteristics. Religion also infuses dissonant qualities within the nexus with a common volition, and perhaps more importantly, it answers the problem of perishing with a resonance of the eternal. At this point, art and worship blur their distinctions, and aesthetic lure appears as the voice of an untapped divinity.

Naturally, once Whitehead has exhausted nearly every logical abstraction, he defines God's presence in terms of artwork. In *Process and Reality*, he speaks of "Michelangelo's masterpieces of statuary" as if he were addressing the signature of God: "it implants timelessness on what is passing," he says; "it becomes the 'moving image of eternity'" (338). Moreover, the reverence of art does more than redeem the "evil" of perishing; it infuses it with purpose. Time flows out of necessity, emerges out of novelty, evolves out of an unquenchable desire for self-actualization, from the fleeting vision of a single artist to the communal celebration of a cultured society. The perishing that Whitehead speaks of is only evil in part, in that the receding tide pulls away every temporal actuality defining our experience. But just as being perishes, it fuels a perennial birth, cleanses regret with a resurrected opportunity, a promise that "this too shall pass."

The mutually illuminated flux of art testifies to God's conceptual prehension—immanent in inspiration—and his consequent nature, reflected in our aesthetic ritual. Of this sacred interplay, David Gates says, "[It] is the spirit plunked down in the material world—a brief sample of the eternal popped into the mechanical drum track of time" (93). We find in this "drum track" a postmodern aesthetic, one that churns within the sprawl of media and deconstruction, and so it necessarily demands the novelty of recontextualization.

So understood, the postmodern aesthetic seems manifest in three levels of novelty. First, there is the pulp quality of conformal aesthetics, which gleans its expression from hackneyed conventions, caught up in the momentum of canalized order. Yet "order is not sufficient," says Whitehead. "What is required . . . is order entering upon novelty . . . so that the massiveness of order does not degenerate into mere repetition" (PR 339). Indeed, if novelty redeems meaning, then repetition echoes absurdity. Sisyphus will fill no void, will carry no redemption, if he is to simply roll the aesthetic boulder across our collective palates ad infinitum. "Life," Whitehead reminds us, "refuses to be embalmed alive" (PR 339).

To counter this repetition, the next level of aesthetic emergence is also partly conformal, yet with a patterned limitation of the subject's novel actualities thrown into the formula. Rather than the pre-chewed propositions of base conformity, patterned aesthetic actualities borrow the shape of established concrescence and fill in the concrete emergence with novel content. This is the nature of most popular art. Like the canon of a fundamental religion, a patterned aesthetic actuality is pleasing for its ritual and tradition. Though these patterns can be as diluting and stale as an inflexible dogma, to a point, art has great success in this realm, and at its best may present a postmodern context of a common symbolic reference, reaching closer to the third and final expression of aesthetics.

While Ecclesiastes insisted there is “nothing new under the sun” (to lower ourselves to conformal aesthetics), the hybrid aesthetic of past actualities and novel form has continually emerged to redefine our perspectives of meaning, beauty, and ritual. In that, however, we do not find profundity in completely eschewing conformity, and indeed we cannot escape the ontological demand of basing new expression on past concrecence. To attempt at such leads to selfishly safeguarded prehensions wrapped in a private emotion. But an art that is so self-involved that it absorbs no light is a refusal of its own ritual; the most satisfying novelty recontextualizes the past rather than escapes from it—e.g., Fowles casting a postmodern view of the Victorian era in tandem with the 1960’s. At its highest expression, art risks endowing the profane with a sacred banner, sweeps up the mundane with a divine glimmer. It eschews the pattern of the obvious. It reveres the astonishment of novelty. It raises a channeling rod to the primordial lure of God’s ideal, manifesting the nontemporal in distorted portions of humanity—a breath of worship, a brush whispering across a canvas, a ritual crackling with the energy of the eternal.

V. Aesthetic Redemption

Aesthetic redemption is the prime exemplification of that hybrid feeling we term “bittersweet,” an irony of loss and reassurance. This experience reflects a vivid illustration of Whitehead’s philosophy of God. As Whitehead speaks of “the tender elements of the world, which slowly and in quietness operate by love” (PR 342–43), compare this to Wordsworth’s “wise passivity,” to Rumi’s “community of spirit,” to Mozart’s very compositions, the *Amadeus* transcending expectations, whose divine aesthetic insight prompted Peter Shaffer to venture, “I bet you that’s how God hears the world” (57).

Suffering, in contrast, makes God seem deaf to our pleas. Angst is deconstructive, sprawling, without reason. But the real tragedy of angst, wallowing over its loss, “the present under abstraction,” is that we are responsible for its cause (PR 340). Through God’s primordial valuation, we have been offered potentialities. Through our choice, we have perpetually accepted or rejected those potentialities, judging our valuations based on a human—and therefore, flawed—appetition. Not all of our appetitions are corrupt or impulsive, but distinguishing between these misjudged potentialities and the pure lure of divine guidance requires that lifetimes, histories, and extinctions of eras wash away the culmination of our limited ambitions. Our only redemption of these cycles appears in the promise of

something more eternal, ultimately reconciling “the limitations of finitude inherent in temporal actuality” (Hosinski 215).

As Whitehead says, “these are the human terms in which we can glimpse the origin of the drive toward the limited ideals of perfection which haunts the Universe” (PR 265). On a more immediate level, these are also the terms which define aesthetic parameters. To the dipolar balance between good and evil, joy and sorrow, permanence and flux, we can add the distinctions of form and content. In every art, we witness a contrast of these distinctions, and subsequently, we find an inexhaustible template for novelty. The poet, the musician, the painter, the dancer—all seize from the fluency of life a certain pattern and order, perhaps recording that pattern and rendering it permanent, static, and eternal, but ultimately redeeming the original insight by recreating the art with a heightened order, an improvised embodiment of God’s “primordial appetite” (PR 347).

“The world is felt in a unison of immediacy,” says Whitehead. He may as well be giving witness to one of Rumi’s poems or Mozart’s symphonies. One will hardly find an artist who lacks a certain mysticism, even if it surfaces as a secular reverence for the wonder of creation. Even Ayn Rand, a novelist adamant in her atheism, endows her characters with a nearly transcendent intuition. No matter how empirical or disillusioned we are, we cannot ignore the need for redemption, and in addressing this need, artists especially seem to buckle under the humility of their own limitations.

The cycle of flux, the patterned flashpoints of recognition, consistency, and order among chaos, cradles the sprawling pressure of angst with a glimpse of the eternal. Such an inherent dynamism is what offers the endless wellspring of artistic inspiration—a nudge of insight that often transcends the artists it flows through. No wonder Whitehead describes God as “the poet of the world, with tender patience leading it by his vision of truth beauty, and goodness” (PR 346). In this sense, God’s consequent nature makes him not only a fellow sufferer of our angst, but a sounding board for our aesthetic reverence, which is nothing less than a resurrected faith.

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