Review Essay

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# EXPERIENCING ART AS DISCOVERY: A REVIEW ESSAY

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## ABSTRACT

*This essay reviews the pioneering anthology,* American Aesthetics: Theory and Practice (2020)*, conceived, introduced, and edited by Walter Gulick—an active member of the Polanyi Society—with co-editor Gary Slater. With contributions by twenty highly qualified scholars and writers, the book takes its origin from a conference on aesthetics and American thought organized by Gulick and Slater. At the conference, the insight emerged that there is a pattern of significant relationships between the arts in America and aesthetic reflections by classic American philosophers. These include Alfred North Whitehead, William James, Charles Sanders Peirce, and John Dewey. In the course of reviewing the book, I argue that there is another aspect to the pattern of connections between the disciplines of art and philosophy described by Gulick and colleagues. The American philosophers brought out a revolutionary concept of "experience" recognized by the authors but not central to the book's thesis. This concept—called by such terms as "integral experience" and "pure experience"—reveals that experience at its core involves more than the sense data and reflection of modern empiricism. For the Americans, it involves creative agency, experiment, and discovery in its ongoing work of building coherence in the contexts of experience. The concept of integral experience—departing from the dualistic framework of modern philosophy and traditional empiricism—forms a center around which philosophic texts and works of art in the American scene revolve. The idea of experience as inherently creative, made explicit in American philosophy, is also a central principle found implicitly in American art. The innovative nature of this idea may be more clearly understood when viewed through the lens of Michael Polanyi's account of the process of discovery, including the principles of indwelling, breaking out, and the tacit dimension of experience.*

 

## Introduction: Overview of the Book and My Approach to Its Contents

In this impressive collection of scholarly and personal writings, the editors open with an intriguing disclaimer—that their volume "attempts the impossible." Their intent: "to chart…a pattern in aesthetic thought and practice that is distinctively American and…relevant not only to all the arts but also to many aspects of daily living" (*AA*, xi).[1] A tall order. But while "impossible" might not be an exaggeration, to me as a reader there is a generative logic following from the proposition that the "pattern" described in the book is a reality. The editors and other contributors give many examples of affinities between the arts and philosophy in the American scene. Do these affinities add up to a pattern that connects them meaningfully?

This review essay will examine some of the evidence in answer to that question and in support of the book's thesis. As an extension of Gulick's logic, I will also offer a rationale of my own for the pattern's existence. This rationale depends to a degree on Michael Polanyi's idea of a conceptual or interpretative "framework" to which, I would say, different expressions of culture tend to adhere, tacitly or explicitly. But at times artists and thinkers are known to rebel against intellectual or other constraints imposed by a dominant culture. A set of basic assumptions or a cultural framework—often unarticulated but initially taking form as attitudes in pre-cognitive levels of experience—may find expression in theory and visible forms of art. Embedded as an underlying structure in a culture like our own, a framework may have a focal center, operating as a "logical matrix" (*PK*, 301) from which both art and philosophy may arise. One reason the arts are found to correspond with abstract philosophical ideas in our culture is arguably because they are generated from the same logical matrix. As many eminent interpreters of American philosophy have argued, one fundamental principle of the American philosophical tradition is the revolutionary idea of "experience," particularly in its "integral" form.[2] This idea as I see it, in various mutations from Edwards to James, Dewey, Whitehead, and others, may be understood as a matrix or structural center around which the arts and the writings of American philosophers revolve in an intricate pattern. My argument takes the kinds of affinities between the arts and philosophy unveiled in the book as clues to a pattern centered in the concept of *experience*. Seeing how intricacies of the pattern take form in these diverse disciplines, exploring the conditions of experience, is a process that promises to enhance the meaning and qualitative coherence of individual and collective life in our own day.

In his introduction, laying out the book's ambitious agenda, editor Walter Gulick—a prominent member of the Polanyi Society and prolific Polanyi scholar—argues that principles of American aesthetic theory, relevant to many artistic practices, are to be found originally in the writings of "the classic American philosophers, especially John Dewey" (*AA*, 3). Dewey's 1934 treatise, *Art as Experience*—according to Gulick "the first groundbreaking comprehensive work on aesthetics by an American" (*AA*, 10)—is the fountainhead of ideas that led to the publication of *American Aesthetics: Theory and Practice in 2020*. Conceived by Gulick and co-editor Gary Slater and composed of twenty essays, all of them by highly qualified authors, the book is likely to hold great interest for anyone concerned with the conceptual backgrounds of the arts in America, and as I hope to show, it may also be of specific interest to students of Michael Polanyi.

Here we will look selectively at chapters where I see support for the book's thesis about *the pattern*. My limited selection does not imply any lesser judgment of articles not mentioned. The anthology, covering a vast range of subject matter, contains sporadic references or allusions to Polanyi's philosophy, many of them pregnant with further implications about aesthetic experience and the process of discovery. As one example, Robert Innis writes, "…for Dewey, the aesthetic is by no means to be confined to…what we call

 

works of art. It extends to experience as a whole…." And "to allude to a core idea of Michael Polanyi's," we understand aesthetic experience "inasmuch as we 'dwell in' and experience it for its own sake" (*AA*, 113). In my reading of passages like this, and texts of the classic American philosophers, I sense the relevance of Polanyi to the American thinkers, and as I am writing this at the invitation of the Polanyi Society journal, I will take some liberties in calling on Polanyi's ideas where I find they contribute to an understanding or appreciation of Gulick's book.

In a way that could be an explanation of the creative process in art, Polanyi argues that the scientist on a path of discovery is moved "by feelings of a deepening coherence," that is, by "the powers of a dynamic intuition." It is "this dynamic intuition which guides the pursuit of discovery" (Polanyi 1981 [1966], 98). The combination of mental powers of "creative imagination" and "dynamic intuition" produces a kind of "potential energy" that carries one along a "gradient of increasing coherence" that moves the mind toward discovery. In the striking metaphor borrowed from Polanyi by author Robert Innis in the quote above, the searcher starts by an act of "indwelling" a field of inquiry. In the study of art, indwelling involves open-minded receptivity, where words in a literary text, forms and colors in painting, or musical notes may be clues to hidden order in a work of art but whose meanings are felt at first to be indeterminate. That indeterminacy is a feature of what Polanyi calls "the tacit dimension" of consciousness (*TD*, 1–26). With the deliberate act of indwelling the experience of an artwork, the sense of expectancy in the tacit dimension leads to the creative act Polanyi calls "breaking out." This means releasing thought from conventional limits that inhibit the search for novel understanding of a phenomenon like a work of art. With persistence or grace, the searcher arrives spontaneously at discovery. If approached as a process of discovery, the skillful study and experience of art may result in new understanding in which the work of art as well as the "field of experience" that includes the perceiver's lifeworld become more intelligible. The searcher arrives at an omega point we may call discovery.

Engaging with a work of art "as experience," the viewer of a painting, reader of a poetic text, or listener to music makes what I would call a *phenomenological discovery* of form or meaning in the work. Beauty is arguably inherent in the external forms of art, but in Dewey's revolutionary view, it is primarily this increase in the coherence of the viewer's *experience* through interaction with the work that gives art its "aesthetic" quality. The commonsense "gap" between the viewer and the work of art is closed, at least for a moment, in what Dewey calls "integral experience" (*AE*, 41, and *passim*). For Dewey there is nothing mystical about this, but the experience of art as discovery does make it possible to transcend boundaries of ordinary cognition. Discovery in an aesthetic context may also have pragmatic effects in other aspects of one's experience. We stop reading or hearing or seeing the artwork as an object and find an intimacy with it in which the work takes possession of consciousness and reorients our experience in some way. In hearing a phrase in a Brahms symphony or reading a line from Wallace Stevens, a person may no longer view it simply as an object separate from oneself, but he or she becomes a participant in the aesthetic occasion made possible by the work.

It is this integral aesthetic event that Dewey calls "having an experience" (1958 [1934], 35–57). In my view, this constitutes an act of *discovery*, meeting many of the criteria defined by Polanyi. For Dewey, the enhanced coherence of experience attained by the artist is not locked inside the work of art but is transmitted to the viewer, reader, or listener in the form of increased organization of experience. Our act of indwelling the artwork, followed by breaking out of routine thoughts and feelings, makes it possible for us to find qualitative completeness in a moment of experience. Beyond intellectual competence, an able interpreter of

 

a work of art is able not just to analyze or learn external facts *about* the artwork but to learn *from* it. And the content of that learning is the sense of what a higher organization of experience feels like. This can happen in ordinary daily experience, and as often in the folk arts, movies, rock music, jazz, etc. as in the classics. Less by subject matter than by the beauty, symmetry, or coherence of formal elements, the arts induct us into the realization of higher levels of integration in individual and collective life. In Dewey's concept of evolution, art is a spark or creative impetus to shape experience consciously with increasing coherence. Thus, the fulfillment of such aesthetic possibilities of experience, including enhanced coherences of mind and body, and connection to others or to nature, is a positive force in human survival and flourishing in the process of evolution (Dewey 1977 [1909]).

After tracing examples from Gulick's book of *the pattern* of relationships between art and philosophy, in the rest of this essay I will sketch what I take to be the core idea of "experience" in the fabric of American philosophy, which I have treated elsewhere as a philosophical framework for interpreting poetic texts.[3] The classic American philosophers were in my view breaking out of the "conceptual framework" of a dualist ontology, still dominant in much European culture of their time. The Americans found this ontology too limiting to suit the new ways of thinking they discovered in the forms of pragmatism, radical empiricism, and process philosophy. The new conceptual framework they worked to formulate had of course important consequences for aesthetics, and my brief exposition of it will add another layer to *the pattern* described by Gulick and colleagues.

## *American Aesthetics: Theory and Practice*—Description and Commentary

The book was conceived at a conference at the Institute for American Religious and Philosophical Thought in Colorado in 2016, organized by Slater and Gulick, where many of its key insights originated as live presentations. This fact gives the book some of its spontaneous, experimental tone, in the spirit of classic figures like James, Dewey, and others. The first eleven chapters follow a roughly historical order. The last nine deal with putting theory into practice in the arts and in life. Section I is Gulick's lead introduction, "Toward an American Aesthetics." Section II concerns "Philosophical Contributions to American Aesthetics from the Past," going back as far as Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758); and section III offers insights into "American Aesthetics: Contemporary Theoretical Contributions." These historical and theoretically oriented sections are followed by two concluding sections on artistic practice and the aesthetics of ordinary life: (IV) "Applying American Aesthetic Theory to Practice" and (V) "Aesthetic Aspects of a Flourishing Life."

In an attempt to ground the discussion in acknowledged aesthetic theory, Gulick relies in his introduction on the "third critique" (the *Critique of Judgment*, 1790) of Immanuel Kant. Gulick notes the sharp "contrast" between Kant's masterful theory and classic American theory (*AA*, 11). The latter, in my view, tends toward less formal but, in its own way, rigorous phenomenological description of what actually happens to us in encountering works of art or other experiences having aesthetic value. The latter may include things like the astronomer's fascination with the stars cited by Polanyi, an ordinary person's viewing the sunset, the rush of completing a challenging assignment, successfully participating in an athletic event, or falling in love. The "esthetic" for Dewey is not necessarily the rarefied product of what Kant calls artistic "genius" but is an essential element of experience itself. It is a name for climactic moments when experience reaches completeness or fulfillment. This involves a reorganization (or as Dewey put it "reconstruction") of experience, typically a movement from lesser to greater coherence. The perception of the work of art as a

 

field of organized energies, conveyed in words and sentences, in musical notes, or in lines, forms, and colors in painting, potentially enhances the coherence of a person's experience, which is felt as beauty or pleasure.

Though Dewey is critical in *Art as Experience* of what he calls Kant's "anemic" conception of art (*AE*, 253) and questions the validity of "judicial criticism" that includes Kant's "aesthetic judgment," Gulick treats aesthetic judgment as a priority and maintains that "the Kantian framework" is still relevant—at least as background or by contrast—to an understanding of American aesthetics. But in my opinion the book never really makes a strong case for the relevance of Kant to American aesthetics. Within the Kantian framework, the viewer finds aesthetic value by "disinterestedness" or psychic distance from an object of art or other aesthetic phenomenon. Philosophers and writers from Aristotle to the present have acknowledged the value of aesthetic distance. To some degree the viewer of tragedy holds its characters at such distance, and this paradoxically enhances the complex experience Aristotle calls *catharsis* (purging the viewer's soul of negative emotions like despair). The pleasure of catharsis felt by the viewer is due in part to the paradox of emotional engagement with the plight of a tragic hero combined with disinterestedness, or aesthetic distancing—the ability to engage with art as well as distance oneself from it.

While this traditional view has deep historical roots in literary and aesthetic theory, it differs markedly from the Deweyan (and characteristically "American") view. In the latter, the experience of art is a natural phenomenon involving penetration of the mind by the intricate psychic workings of language, musical notes, and form and color in art, leading to higher levels of integration or coherence in conscious experience. For some readers, Gulick's extended exposition of Kantian theory may be helpful as a way of locating American aesthetics within the historical context of Western reflection. Others like myself may find it a lengthy distraction from the uniqueness of the experiential orientation in American aesthetics, as the American philosophers all tended to differentiate their views strongly from the basic premises of Kant and other theorists of the modern era.

For Gulick, American aesthetics differs from approaches to art and literature that are object-centered or emphasize formalist principles, to the exclusion of the artist's biography, the experience of the viewer, or the social or political conditions in which an artwork is produced. One example he cites is the New Criticism in literary studies. New Criticism tends to treat the literary text as a self-contained, self-referential system of words and meanings and has affinities with European versions of logical positivism and twentieth-century linguistic philosophy. Another type of art criticism, which Gulick calls "high art analysis," similarly treats the painting as a self-contained aesthetic object to be judged by the way it handles internal relationships of forms and colors, and not for anything outside the limits of the canvas. Both New Criticism and analytic art criticism are examples of academic formalism, a movement that finds value only in the formal properties of a work of art and denies the relevance of the social or personal contexts of its production or appreciation.

Another movement that Gulick contrasts with American aesthetics he calls *postmodernism*. The branch of postmodernist thought that usually goes by this name takes its origin from French thinkers like Jacques Derrida and Jean-François Lyotard. As I see it, Gulick is referring to what David Ray Griffin and other process philosophers call "deconstructive postmodern philosophy" (Griffin 1993, 1–42). The deconstructive version of postmodernism, in Griffin's account, makes a point of being radically *antifoundational*, primarily interested in undercutting (deconstructing) the basic principles (foundations) of modern philosophy. In some forms it challenges even the validity of fundamentals like traditional concepts of mind and matter, reason, meaning, and language, including especially abstract terms like *spirit*, *truth*, or *beauty*, which it treats as "transcendental signifiers," empty of meaning.

 

But apart from Gulick's account, as I see it, there is another, "constructive" version of postmodern thought whose founders include the classic American pragmatists and process philosophers. This movement, as described by Griffin, differs markedly from its deconstructive counterpart. Though modestly skeptical of "absolute" foundations (as William James once famously said, "Damn the Absolute!"), and moving as Dewey put it "from absolutism to experimentalism" (Dewey 1960 [1930]), constructive postmodernism is largely generated by a pragmatist ethos in its own progressive search for fundamentals. For the pragmatists and process philosophers, ideas that represent fundamental principles—categories applicable to all reality—include organism and environment (or context), creative intelligence (but not "substances" like the Cartesian mind and matter), and, above all, "experience." The latter is typically defined as intelligent agency, acting to reconstruct the qualitative aspects of situations in accord, e.g., with its own aesthetic values and ethical purposes, and to successfully adapt the human organism to its environments. The constructive postmodernism found in the works of James, Peirce, Dewey, Whitehead, Hartshorne, and others (according to Griffin) makes a priority of activating the creative process of inquiry and using pragmatic reasoning to resolve problematic situations. Chief among its purposes is using what Dewey called "the method of intelligence," alternately "the method of experience," to achieve constructive results in biological and cultural evolution. According to Dewey in *Art as Experience*, by activating creative imagination, the arts play a powerful and indispensable role in bringing about success in the complex evolutionary process. References in Gulick's book to "American philosophy" often point implicitly (in my mind) to the American versions of Griffin's "constructive postmodern philosophy," though Griffin is not mentioned in the book. Though practiced on American soil, movements like New Criticism or deconstructive postmodernism tend to fall outside *the pattern* of American aesthetic thought and practice as defined by Gulick, as they show little evidence of being "influenced by the classic American philosophers" (*AA*, 25).

To further illustrate the distinctiveness of American aesthetics, Gulick and co-author Leanne Gilbertson in their essay "An Exemplary Critic" explain the contrasting views of New York art critics Harold Rosenberg and Clement Greenberg. Rosenberg took a critical stance that arguably adopts an experiential perspective traceable to Dewey, with overtones of Whiteheadian process thought.[4] On the other hand, Rosenberg's contemporary Clement Greenberg, influenced more explicitly by Kant, developed a strongly formalist approach to contemporary painting (Costello 2007). In his most influential article, "The American Action Painters," Rosenberg argued that in abstract expressionist paintings (like, e.g., those of Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Jackson Pollock, and others) "what was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event" (1977 [1952]). The tacit philosophical premise behind this progressive idea of art is captured in one line I recently found in Dewey's writings: "Every existence is an event" (1958 [1925], 71). In this view, a work of art is not like what common sense calls an object, external to the viewer. It is a trace or aspect of an event in experience with aesthetic overtones in which the viewer is invited to become an active participant. This revolutionary aesthetic takes its origin from Dewey's conception of "experience," especially in major works like *Art as Experience* and the earlier *Experience and Nature* (1925). Unlike Greenberg, concerned mainly with analysis of the formal aspects of paintings and making strong claims for "the autonomy of the art object" (Gulick and Gilbertson, *AA*, 263), Rosenberg argued that "The work itself is an artifact of secondary importance—a trace perhaps best regarded as a clue to the creative event" (in Gulick and Gilbertson's words, *AA*, 260). I would add that action painting, like other abstract art, does not represent recognizable objects in the world outside the painting. The modern history of representing the human body or other natural objects in art is a phenomenon, as I see it, reflecting an underlying cultural framework in which the mind is

 

categorically separate from the world. From Rosenberg's point of view, consistent with Dewey's experiential aesthetics, abstract expressionism involves "a profoundly different and more libertarian concept of painting" (Gulick and Gilbertson, *AA*, 261). Since its inception this movement has been regarded by many artists and critics as "the first truly American achievement in the history of art" (Buettner 1975, 383–391). Since the movement first appeared in New York City in the 1940s, it has had the unusually strong effect of inviting viewers to experience a painting the way other artists commonly do. That is, to perceive it not simply as an object of pleasure or critique but as a guide to participation in a creative event, like the one that produced the original work—receiving from it an organized stream of energy and insight, with notable effects in one's own life and work.

In another article in the anthology, author Michael Raposa, basing his argument on Charles Peirce's theory of signs, sees in American philosopher/theologian Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) an ability to perceive "nature as embodying the symbols of a divine presence" (*AA*, 60). For both Edwards and Peirce, according to Raposa, encounters with "nature" are "to be understood as divine semiosis." And "an accurate reading of the signs embedded in the 'book of nature' is possible only for one who is endowed with the appropriate sense of beauty" (*AA*, 60).

To this perceptive comment I would add that for Edwards the sense of beauty arises from the "gracious affections of the heart," a quality of the inner life gifted by divine grace. By connecting the soul with outer creation, the act of sensing the beauty in nature gives one a sense of completeness, which in my view resembles the event Dewey calls "having an experience." For Peirce the sense of beauty comes from a state of deep concentration he calls "musing," a kind of serious play that (in Peirce's words) entails "a lively exercise of one's powers" where there are "no rules, except the very law of liberty." This state is one of the requisites for scientific inquiry and the discovery that comes about by a process Peirce calls "the logic of abduction." Leaving behind "linear" modes of logic like deduction and induction, at a certain point, according to Peirce, the thinker is "abducted" into new and unfamiliar territory, where things are understood from an alternate frame of conceptual or experiential reference. The logic of abduction (to my understanding) is like leaping the "logical gap" from one conceptual framework to a new or emerging framework, an essential step in Polanyi's account of the discovery process. Peirce's logic of abduction (to my understanding) is comparable to what Polanyi calls "the logic of tacit inference," both having the potential to lead to discovery (see Polanyi 1969 [1964], Fennell 2015–2016, and Mullins 2002). Both the logic of abduction and tacit inference, in my reading, bear a structural resemblance to Dewey's account of "having" aesthetic experience, in which the viewer of art is moved along a nonlinear path toward completeness of experience, a kind of existential discovery. Though this point is not included in Raposa's argument, such existential discovery contributes to human success in the evolutionary process as conceived by Peirce as well as Dewey, revealing that the goal of evolution is not survival only but also completeness or coherence of experience.[5]

For both Edwards and Peirce, according to Raposa, "what is perceived in nature" is not "evidence of God's *existence*" but "a sign of God's *presence*" (*AA*, 68, my italics). The distinction between the two terms is a subtle one, but as I see it, "existence" here implies something known mentally or conceived metaphysically, while "presence" implies a momentary coalescence of the mind with the object in a unity of experience. This as we will see below is expressed by William James in his concept of *pure experience*. The Peircean conception of nature as a sign implies, I would argue, a "tacit dimension" in the fabric of experience, a zone of awareness typically unarticulated, as in Polanyi's concept of tacit knowing. By enjoying or contemplating nature as a visible or audible sign, we enter the tacit dimension on the way to interpreting (discovering) the

 

sign's meaning. Applying a principle like the logic of abduction or Polanyi's logic of tacit inference to the sign process, in a theological context like Raposa's, suggests to me that the *theos*—the creative power and organizing principle that tradition calls "God"—is not to be known in conventional empiricist terms as an object of sensory experience or as a being among other beings. But by the logic of abduction, *theos* can be apprehended (realized) in the direct encounter with nature. When viewing natural objects as Peircean signs, the tacit dimension of experience, as I understand it, operates as a vital stage in the process of discovery. In this stage of conscious awareness, the searcher finds herself breaking out of a conventional perspective, letting the scales fall from her eyes, and, as in the gestalt-switch, seeing (discovering) a new dimension and new configuration of the same phenomena.[6] As Raposa concludes, for one "predisposed to see, the world will appear (in Peirce's words) as God's 'great poem'" (*AA*, 60). In other words, by entering fully into the meaning of nature as sign, we discover a perspective whereby nature appears as a transcendent work of art, its beauty and "presence" in our experience becoming concrete signs of divine presence.

Nicholas Gaskill's "Experience and Signs" resonates with Raposa's thesis in highlighting the Peircean sign process. Here Gaskill is introducing the concept of a "pragmatist literary criticism." This form of criticism would understand "literary meaning in terms of the effects literary texts produce" (*AA*, 157). Gaskill claims that a pragmatist approach to literature will ask not "What does a text *mean*?" but rather "What does a text *do*?" (*AA*, 157). This line of reasoning about literary texts follows a path comparable to Rosenberg's Deweyan account of action painting, as discussed above. Without anthropomorphizing a physical thing like a text, we could still say in a Deweyan vein that in reading a great literary work, its language presents itself as a kind of performative utterance. That is, the text not only portrays or describes things like characters and events but performs, typically in concrete metaphors, an idea or frame of mind in which we are invited to participate as a partner in dialogue with the work. Reflecting Peirce's semiotic view, Gaskill writes that "signs create and register *effects*." The effects of literary discourse are not the same as those of descriptive or representational language. The literary sign creates an effect that invites imaginative reenactment by the engaged reader in the process of interpretation. As such, with the reader's cooperation, a poetic text that arises from dynamic intuition and creative imagination potentially changes the form of the readers' experience by activating their own powers of intuition and imagination and starting them on a path to existential discovery. These effects are not exclusively either subjective or objective, for in Peirce's metaphor, cited by Gaskill, "just as a rainbow is at once a manifestation both of the sun and of the rain," the effects of signs combine at once both objective and subjective elements in a unified event of experience.

In her beautiful essay "Experiential Immersions in Beauty," Vaughan Durkee McTernan offers an application of Alfred North Whitehead's "process aesthetics" to the "light-based installations created by the renowned artist James Turrell" (*AA*, 274). As a professor of religion and an Episcopal priest, McTernan's main interest is in how our immersion in an artist's work enables us to touch the sacred. The subject of her essay, James Turrell, was raised in a Quaker household and is a practicing Quaker. When he was a boy, his grandmother, speaking of the silent Quaker meeting, once told him to "go inside and greet the light." The word "inside" may refer either to a physical space like a church or Friends meeting house or to the metaphoric interior "space" of consciousness where we go to greet the "Light." McTernan explains, "The Quaker concept of Inner Light, of divine light within each person, led directly to [Turrell's] work with light. He understands this practice of greeting the light in both an inner sense, and as physical space in which to *discover* light as a facet of the sacred" (*AA*, 279, my emphasis).

Here McTernan shows a unique recognition that *discovery* is an essential aspect of the experience of art. Turrell's art, difficult to summarize, involves massive installations, sometimes in the form of architectural structures, into which viewers enter and literally immerse themselves. In those structures he uses physical light rays as a medium of sculpture, comparable to wood or stone in other sculptors' works. In Turrell's case the work is a matter of affording the viewer an opportunity for physical immersion that leads to immersion of the whole person—body, mind, and spirit—in the interior of the light space. This experience, like Polanyi's indwelling, enables the viewer not just to observe but to join and make an individual contribution to the artwork in what Whitehead calls an "occasion of experience." Such an occasion, raised by the artist to higher-than-normal levels of intensity in the harmony of its elements, leads for Whitehead to an "occasion of Beauty." McTernan's essay adds evidence for my general point about American artists' and philosophers' concern with the central issue of experience, and how the viewer's agency becomes central to the experience of art *as discovery*.

In "The Pragmatist Aesthetics of William James," Richard Shusterman argues that "a key theme of pragmatist aesthetics is the continuity and combination of the aesthetic with the practical" (*AA*, 101). Shusterman's highlighting of the *practical* implicitly suggests another aspect of the Americanness of James's aesthetic vision. This point is made in contrast to Kant's aesthetics standing in "opposition to the practical" (Shusterman, *AA*, 101). As Shusterman frames it, James's aesthetics involves "the integration of art and life, …[an] appreciation of the functionality of art" and "aesthetic experience." In Gulick's view, Kant's *Critique of Judgment* should be treated as "a reference point for illuminating how American Aesthetics forms a distinctive tradition in contrast to the traditional dominance of Kantian aesthetics" (*AA*, 11). To support this point, Shusterman claims that "Jamesian pragmatism would have to reject a strict Kantian compartmentalization of the aesthetic as opposed to the practical" (*AA*, 103).

Shusterman further argues, "Dewey followed James in placing *experience* at the core of his entire philosophical project, since this rich notion can unify many of the divisive dualisms that thwart our thinking and our lives" (*AA*, 105, my emphasis). In my view, however vague the concept of experience may be, this sentence identifies the center of *the pattern* that connects American philosophy and the arts. For Dewey, encountering art as experience is a creative act comparable in the life of the viewer to that of the artist in producing the work of art. This act involves entering "integrally" (to use Dewey's word) with the art object "into the formation of an experience moving to completeness" (*AE*, 51). The heart of aesthetic experience for Dewey is, in Shusterman's words, "a unifying nameless quality that resists conceptual description… because it instead forms the necessary unifying background [i.e., framework] for…what can be explicitly noticed, distinguished, and named in experience. This unifying quality is what integrates the vastly different elements that combine to form one coherent experience in our consciousness." Arguing "that this qualitative core of aesthetic experience must be present and necessary to all coherent experience…[Dewey] essentially borrowed from James's arguments for the unity of consciousness" (*AA*, 104–105).

## "An Immense Release"—Aesthetic Experience as Discovery

Late in his career, James had written, "The instant field of the present is at all times what I call the 'pure' experience. It is only virtually or potentially either object or subject" (1971 [1912], 15). By naming his new conception of experience "radical empiricism," James did not intend an extremist form of traditional empiricism, with sensory input the only basis of knowing. The word "radical" implied a search for the *roots* or fundamental principles of experience. This is also the implication of "pure experience," the consummation

 

of what Shusterman calls James's "argument for the unity of consciousness." In radical empiricism, James signals what Whitehead recognized as a historical shift in "fundamental assumptions" about the reality of experience (see Whitehead 1969 [1925], 139–156). To the founders of modern empiricism, Locke and Hume, atomistic sensations (called "simple ideas" or "impressions") were the fundamental building blocks of experience. Radical empiricism presented one fundamental only, the instant field of the present. The one fundamental behind which we cannot go is not sensation but the partially organized *field of experience*—its primal form present to be reshaped by our conscious decisions. This basic conception of experience arguably stands at the center of the American philosophic tradition, including aesthetic reflection, and much artistic practice in America. In radical empiricist terms, aesthetic experience is a name for peak moments of pure experience, discovery and rediscovery of the unity of the diverse elements within the experiential field.

In his autobiographical essay "From Absolutism to Experimentalism" (1930)—its title a clue to a "distinctively American" trend in philosophy—Dewey relates a turning point early in his life when "Hegel's synthesis of subject and object, matter and spirit, the divine and the human was to me no mere intellectual formula; it operated as an immense release, a liberation" (Dewey 1960 [1930], 16). While many philosophers and others have welcomed the conceptual clarity of Descartes's sharp separation of subject from object, mind from matter, others (including Dewey) have found the separation to be a troublesome dilemma. From a philosophical perspective based partly on neuroscience, David Chalmers raises the question as to how matter and organic life can produce subjective consciousness, which is self-evidently immaterial. This he calls "the hard problem" of philosophy (Chalmers 1995). That problem appears to some as the type of "anomaly" that in Thomas Kuhn's historical analysis could only be resolved by switching fundamental assumptions or paradigms (Kuhn 1970, 52–65). Prior to Dewey's *Art as Experience*, Western aesthetics was largely bound to the same dualistic paradigm as the related fields of modern epistemology and metaphysics. Dewey's "release" from the anomaly of dualism led him to discover his own dynamic and holistic conception of experience, brought out notably in *Art as Experience*.

American aesthetics, in my view, represents a new paradigm in the understanding and experience of art. It offers thinking persons a potential shift of frameworks, from a modern perspective to a constructive postmodern or (in Polanyi's vocabulary) postcritical framework of understanding. Dewey's book, I would argue, is an invitation to the viewer, reader, or listener to find, by indwelling the experience of art, a liberation similar to Dewey's. The viewer, no longer limited to external observation, becomes an engaged participant, co-creating with the artist new integral forms of experience. The release in an aesthetic setting may require an *experimentalist* attitude, which may include interpreting the work of art by "dwelling in" it, understanding its meaning "from within" in Polanyi's words (*PK*, 195), and so discovering something new in it. From this perspective, art invites us not just to look at it or read it or listen to it but, in treating its elements as clues, to discover a new experiential field, organized more coherently than what we have previously known. In the creative act of synthesis, the interaction with the work of art potentially forms a new orientation to experience, "moving" (as Dewey says) to "consummation," revealing what experience can be in its unity or completeness.

In a section of *Personal Knowledge* called "Dwelling in and Breaking Out" (195f), Polanyi argues that we often stand apart from our own experience "without experiencing it *in itself*. The conceptual framework by which we observe and manipulate things, being present as a screen between ourselves and these things, their sights and sounds, and the smell and touch of them transpire but tenuously through the screen, which keeps us aloof from them. Contemplation dissolves the screen, stops our movement through experience

and pours us straight into experience" (*PK*, 197). The "release" described by Dewey is his version of being poured straight into experience, a moment of "breaking out" (*PK*, 195) of the framework of modern culture that he found inhibiting. A great work of art similarly invites the viewer, listener, or reader into a state of "contemplation" like that described by Polanyi. In so doing, it helps to "dissolve the screen" of prejudices and unworkable frameworks, potentially "pouring" us "straight into experience." Polanyi's account of discovering direct experience points to the therapeutic potential of contemplative states to liberate and resolve inner conflicts like the ones described by Dewey.

In the project he called "reconstruction in philosophy" (2019 [1919]), Dewey attempts to replace Descartes's critical method with "the method of experience," the purpose of which is to reconstruct the situations of raw experience to move toward ethically or aesthetically satisfying ends. This is one mark of the transition, distinctively American in orientation, from modernism to constructive postmodernism. Further research and creative scholarship may show that the American brand of constructive postmodern philosophy and Polanyi's post-critical philosophy are different names for the same shift in conceptual frameworks, from modernity to an emerging postmodern worldview.

In Dewey's view, "experience in its vital form is experimental, an effort to change the given; it is characterized by projection, by reaching forward into the unknown" (*ENF*, 23). Recognizing and elaborating this "vital form" of experience became a central feature of American pragmatism, radical empiricism, and process philosophy in the twentieth century, which are treated at some length in Gulick's anthology and which in their original forms emphasized creative agency, experiment, and discovery as means of attaining the always-potential reality of integral experience. This vision of experience became a vital part of the intellectual landscape for many artists and writers in mid-twentieth century America and exerted a tacit influence on abstract expressionists, many of whom were affiliated with Black Mountain College, a premier art center and liberal arts college in operation from 1933 to 1957, based on Dewey's platform of progressive education and experiential aesthetics. Poet Charles Olson, rector of Black Mountain College and influenced by Alfred North Whitehead, may also have borrowed Dewey's idea of "projection" (as in the quote above) in his influential manifesto "Projective Verse" (1950). And Dewey's experiential aesthetic was explicitly operative in works by Olson's more famous forebear, William Carlos Williams. Both show in their work documented affinities with Dewey and other pragmatists who articulated the experiential orientation to art they embraced in their poetry (Fredman 2010, 1–12; and Scott 1994, 108–142).

We discover the "logical structure" of a complex phenomenon (whether a work of art, a scientific field like ecology or astronomy, or a complex culture like our own) by "deliberately merging…awareness of certain particulars into a focal awareness of a whole" (*PK*, 57). The *pattern* that Gulick and colleagues have discerned and unveil to their readers is just such a "logical structure," making connection between multiple particulars of American culture and seeing them in focal awareness as a whole—a living tradition Gulick calls "American Aesthetics." After "indwelling" the contents of the book for a while, one comes away if not with proof then at least with a strong sense that *the pattern* is real and its parts do indeed connect, intuitively and logically. We also realize that understanding *the pattern* makes both the arts and American philosophy more intelligible and relevant to life than either discipline may be in isolation, before we have seen *the pattern*. The anthology *American Aesthetics* is (among other things) a remarkable window into the arts and aesthetic experience, implicitly envisioning our indigenous philosophic tradition as an interpretive framework for making greater sense of the "entangled jungle of artistic expression" in America (Gulick, *AA*, 3). By implication, the book asks the question, what does *the pattern* mean? Its twenty essays, each with

 

its own perspective, like this review essay, all offer evidence from which to explore answers for oneself. To probing and curious readers, I recommend it highly.

## ENDNOTES

[1]The abbreviation *AA*, cited in the text, refers to *American Aesthetics: Theory and Practice*, 2020, ed. Gulick and Slater.

[2]See in References section: Wild (1970), McDermott (1976), and Grimstad (2013).

[3]See my *Frontiers of Consciousness: Interdisciplinary Studies in American Philosophy and Poetry* (1991), a series of studies not unlike those in *AA* but all my own, showing affinities between American philosophers (Peirce, Royce, James, and Dewey) and poets (T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and William Carlos Williams). The book argues that the philosophers and poets participated in a common crossing of the historical boundary that William Ernest Hocking (1956) called "passage beyond modernity." In this historical threshold, I argue, poets and philosophers in their respective domains and modes of articulation moved beyond the modern paradigm of Cartesian dualism, finding a new unity of consciousness in a nondual framework. This move by philosophers beyond the modern paradigm was later identified from another perspective by David Ray Griffin (1993) as "constructive postmodern philosophy"—an interpretation of postmodernism that includes the major developments in American philosophy: radical empiricism, pragmatism, and process philosophy. As I suggest in this essay, unlike "deconstructive postmodern philosophy"—still operating within the "critical" paradigm founded by Descartes—Griffin's "constructive postmodern philosophy" bears significant resemblances to Polanyi's "post-critical philosophy." See also Scott 2019 and Bocharova 2019.

[4]In support of this point of view, see Buettner 1975.

[5]See Peirce 1956 [1893] and Dewey 1977 [1909].

[6]In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Kuhn writes of "the scientist who embraces a new paradigm": "Confronting the same constellation of objects as before and knowing that he does so, he nevertheless finds them transformed through and through in many of their details…. Given a paradigm, interpretation of data is central to the enterprise that explores it." But when anomalies occur in the process of interpretation, "these are terminated, not by deliberation and [more] interpretation, but by a relatively sudden and unstructured event like the gestalt switch. Scientists then often speak of the 'scales falling from the eyes' or of the 'lightning flash' that 'inundates' a previously obscure puzzle, enabling its components to be seen in a new way that for the first time permits its solution" (1970, 122).

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