

INTERLUDE

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THE ARCHES OF EXPERIENCE

Maxine Greene

Teachers College, Columbia University, U.S.A.

My memory is studded with moments of wonder, of efforts to understand art-making and the meanings of what were called works of art. Stories and pictures enchanted me. I remember collecting words like “carnelian,” “porcelain,” and “roundelay,” and puzzling how they could summon up images in my head. I looked at photographs of country places and could not figure out why paintings of the same places (Winslow Homer’s, Andrew Wyeth’s, “realistic” as they were supposed to be) never looked the same. I read about a girl who connected what Virginia Woolf called “shocks of awareness” with some particular experiences of her own – her grandfather’s sudden death; her first look at a blue stained glass window; the sight of a speeding train; reading a Keats poem and coming upon a drawing of his face. Then I read that Virginia Woolf said she thought her shock-receiving capacity made her a writer; and I tried to invent situations that would shock me enough to make me see more and feel more and, perhaps, write more like a real writer.

More than that: I tried to figure out how to shape language in such a way as to cause a jolt, a coming awake, a deep noticing on the part of a reader. There was Gwendolyn Brooks (in her *Maud Martha*) writing about a young woman’s longing to go to New York:

What she wanted to dream and dreamed, was her affair. It pleased her to dwell upon color and soft bready textures and light, on a complex beauty, on gemlike surfaces. What was the matter with that? Besides that, who could surely swear that she would never be able to make her dream come true for herself? Not altogether, then, but – slightly? – in some part? She was eighteen years old, and the world waited. To caress her. (1997, p. 1615)

Why and how did Brooks choose those words and arrange them as she did? How did she manage the change in tone? And why those fragmented sentences at the end? What was it that stirred me so strangely? Was it a recognition of that longing, that hope, that uncertainty? Or was it the images or the color or the tone of voice?

These, for me, are the kinds of questions that accompany initial explorations of a medium; and, in my case, language has been my chosen medium, even before I thought in those terms. And it appears that becoming conscious of medium, or the materials out of which a work of art is made, has much to do with one's future engagement. We know how many newcomers to the arts find it hard to distinguish between a cry of despair, let us say, and a deliberately created ode to dejection. They overlook the fact that emotions find expression through and by means of language, or clay, or paint, or movements of the body. Aesthetic experiences take place through reflective encounters with Shelley's poems, Henry Moore's sculpted stone women, a Martha Graham dancer's performance – not through face-to-face meetings; and it is in recognition of this that aesthetic education begins.

Equally important is the acknowledgment of the imagination. Imagination has been described as a "passion for the possible," meaning that it is the capacity to bring into being realities alternative to common sense or taken-for-granted reality. If it is indeed the case that ours is an "image culture," our perceiving consciousness may be so crowded with images (from television, films, video, and cartoons) that it is becoming hard to distinguish what we have seen in actual experience from what we have seen on screens. Italo Calvino has warned of the danger of losing the power of "bringing visions into focus with our eyes shut, of bringing forth forms and colors from the lines of black letters and in fact thinking in terms of images" (1988, p. 92). He had in mind a "pedagogy of the imagination" that each of us would control. It might keep us from stifling our imaginations or "letting it fall into ephemeral forms." That might mean a kind of crystallization of an image like Maud Martha's textures and gemlike surfaces, giving it form, perhaps giving birth to a metaphor, generating a play of imagination.

What of the visual images presented by paintings? In what was called "art appreciation" in my youth, we sat through countless slide shows, jotting down titles and dates and the "explanations" by teachers who never asked us what we saw in what was shown to us. There was a clear separation between subjects and objects – between the presumed innocent and uninformed and the expert who could penetrate the codes and point out what was objectively "given." The idea that there is no such thing as an innocent eye had not yet occurred to the experts. For them a student's history of perceiving, of finding meanings, of living in a culture, had no bearing on appreciation.

When I first ventured into art museums on my own, my first response was to turn the paintings into stories. The stories were about Jesus, Mars in full armor with a naked Venus, girls with tranquil faces being tortured, men on horses seizing helpless women and strewing babies on the ground, café dancers, executions, shipwrecks: I only later realized I did not know how to look at paintings even though I had worked now and then on sketches and watercolors. I did not grasp the importance of perspectives nor of the transformation of what was viewed as if through the eyes of a detached spectator into a painting of an interpreted reality, interpreted through distinctive renderings of pictorial space, changing uses of color, breaks with harmony and equilibrium, the disruption of traditional forms. Traditional Western notions were challenged and expanded by the opening to what some called "primitive" images – Iberian, African, pre-Columbian, Aztec, more, and more.

It was not so much that the pictures and their styles changed; nor that we could no longer expect artists like De Kooning, Rearden, Pollock, Picasso, Hopper to present accurate versions of a stable, objective world “out there.” More crucial in a sense than the artists’ altered perceptions of the appearances of things was the changed perception required of those who chose to enter into the painters’ invented worlds. What to some was a threatening relativism was to others (art students as well as spectators) the opening of whole new spaces of possibility. As in the case of modern works of literature – by Joyce, Woolf, Ellison, Morrison, and others – we were expected to enter into the work of art – imaginatively, emotionally, sensually, even physically.

If we could attend with enough care and reflectiveness to the shapes of pain in the *Guernica* and the light bulb and the desperate mother, if we could participate against the background of our own lived and lacerated lives, new visions, our own visions might crystallize for us. Shocked (perhaps) by the *Guernica*, impelled to new modes of thinking and feeling about violence and war and our relation to them, about the meaning of that bulb and the extended arm, we might be aroused to heightened consciousness, to a refusal of mere passivity and indifference. I cannot but move to *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, as much a break with the traditional as Picasso’s work, but often treated from a strictly formalist point of view.

Teachers may offer it as an exquisite symbolic piece, perfect in its own terms, referring mainly to itself. Students, even student writers, may be asked to treat it almost in Jesuit terms, as if created by “an indifferent God paring his nails.” Moved to participate in it, however, to lend it their lives (whether Catholic or Jewish or Muslim, whether Irish or French or American), they are bound to construct it as meaningful in a variety of ways. Yes, the form of the text, the “plot” will remain the same; but there are multiple ways of experiencing boarding school life in a city, of venturing into dark places, of confronting authorities bent on imposing a Truth. Engaging in aesthetic education, working for full attentiveness to the aesthetic elements in the book – and to the transmutation of a lived life into art – teaching artists and their students may attempt similar transformations of their own memories into fiction. Reading each other’s work, dramatizing it, for example, they may return to Joyce’s work, not simply to talk about what happened, but to probe what is revealed through internalizing different, sometimes contradictory points of view.

Most of us are aware that meanings emerge as connections are made and new patterns form in experience. We are aware as well that, as Dewey suggested, mere facts are mean and repellent things until imagination opens the way to intellectual possibility. If it is indeed the case that imagination is most clearly released by encounters with art works, it becomes all the more important to make those encounters reflective and infused with an understanding of what it signifies to create and engage with a created world.

This is the task and responsibility of aesthetic education as some of us pursue it today. Even as we ground it in a specific view of the artistic-aesthetic, we do not in any degree think of it as instrumental, means to the end of mastering other disciplines. Nor, for all my searches through the literature of philosophical aesthetics, do I believe that “art” can be defined in any definite or absolute way. With many others, I believe that most theories of art have something to say about some dimensions of art-making and works of art, even as particular theories of literature, painting, music, drama, and other art forms

illuminate their distinctive provinces of meaning. Even listing the forms of art and thinking how the domain has expanded to include phenomena such as video art, photo flicks, unexpected parodies in literature, interweavings of the comic, the tragic, and even the mythic, suggest the appearance of innovations escaping accustomed definitions.

My long association as “philosopher-in-residence” with the Lincoln Center Institute for the Arts in Education, the opportunities to lecture during summer sessions for more than twenty-five years, the collaboration with teaching artists, the contacts with other kindred institutions across the country: all have acquainted me with the changing landscapes of the arts in American education. At a moment marked by conservatism, unpredictable interferences by government agencies into local schools, and an increasing dependence on “measurement,” it seems necessary for those of us who speak in any fashion as spokespersons for the arts in education to make clear the sources of our points of view, as well as our autobiographical beginnings (as I have tried to do). With a doctorate from NYU (New York University) in philosophy of education, I have focused on philosophy of education, history, literature, and aesthetics in 25 years of teaching at Teachers College, Columbia University, which co-sponsored our Institute for a decade or so. My acquaintance with educational research stems largely from what I learned during my presidency of AERA (American Educational Research Association) and my years of participating, listening, and arguing for more serious attention to the arts.

The sources of my views on aesthetic education are to be found in John Dewey’s *Art as Experience* (1934), *How we Think* (1933), and *Experience and Nature* (1958); but that is not all. I was drawn to Existential writers – Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Heidegger, Sartre, Camus, Merleau-Ponty – to Rilke and Kafka, in large part because of their concern for freedom in its ambiguities and anguish, because of the centrality of the arts and aesthetics in their writings, (in Merleau-Ponty’s work especially) because of their calling attention to the focal importance of perception in art-making and in the appreciation of the arts. Also, I have been interested in the silences, “the muteness of the spheres” when we pose our most heartfelt questions, the unutterable, and (always) the imagination.

And there is the notion of consciousness, our way of thrusting into the world, of grasping its appearances. Acts of believing, perceiving, thinking, wondering, imagining: all are among the acts of consciousness; all exist in complex relationship. It is the hope of those engaged in aesthetic education to free others – teachers, students, creative artists themselves – to reach towards a reciprocity of perspectives. Diverse perspectives are opened by acts of consciousness. Of all human creations, works of art are most likely to resist fixed boundaries, even as they resist one-dimensionality. There are no fixed boundaries between illusion and reality, between the visible and the invisible: illusion awakens us to aspects of the taken-for-granted we never were aware of before; art, many have said, makes visible what was never visible before. Most significant for me is the capacity of an art form (when attentively perceived, when authentically imagined) to overcome passivity, to awaken us to a world in need of transformation, forever incomplete. Beyond the experiences of consummation and integration, beyond the disruptions and the contradictions, there is always a receding horizon, always some unrealized

possibility. The end-in-view for aesthetic education may be best expressed even now by Tennyson:

Experience is an arch wherethro'
Gleams that untravell'd world, whose margin fades
Forever and forever when I move.

Ulysses (1962, p. 1464)

There is always, always, more.

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