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The Aesthetic Moment and the Search for Transformation

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For Masud Khan

The aesthetic experience occurs as moment.¹ Eliseo Viva describes it as “rapt, intransitive attention” (quoted in **Krieger, 1976**, p. 11). **Murray Krieger (1976)** writes: “What would characterize the experience as aesthetic rather than either cognitive or moral would be its self sufficiency, its capacity to trap us within itself, to keep us from moving beyond it to further knowledge or to practical efforts” (p. 11). A spell which holds self and other in symmetry and solitude, time crystalizes into space, providing a rendezvous of self and other (text, composition, painting) that actualizes deep rapport between subject and object. The aesthetic moment constitutes this deep rapport between subject and object, and provides the person with a generative illusion of fitting with an object, evoking an existential memory. Existential, as opposed to cognitive, memory is conveyed not through visual or abstract thinking, but through the affects of being. Such moments feel familiar, uncanny, sacred, reverential, and outside cognitive coherence. They are registered through an experience of being, rather than mind, because the epistemology of the aesthetic moment is prior to representational cognition, and speaks that part of us where the experience of rapport

Readers of **Marion Milner's work (1957)** will notice how my work is derivative of her own. I would like to acknowledge this indebtedness and to express my gratitude to her for her patient and creative supervision of my clinical work.

¹ I am primarily concerned with moment as an occasion when time becomes a space for the subject. We are stopped, held, in reverie, to be released, eventually back into time proper. I believe such moments may occur within the reading of a text, or a poem, or during the experience of hearing an entire reading of a text or a symphony.

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with the other was the essence of being. Indeed, the aesthetic induces an existential recollection of the time when communicating took place solely through the illusion of deep rapport of subject and object. Being-with, as dialogue, is the communicating of the infant with the mother, where the mother's task is to provide the infant with an experience of continuity of being. Her handling and the infant's state of being are prior to the infant's processing his existence through mentation.²

The mother's idiom of care and the infant's experience of this handling is the first human aesthetic. It is the most profound occasion where the content of the self is formed and transformed by the environment. The uncanny pleasure of being held by a poem, a composition, a painting, or, for that matter, any object, rests on those moments (they are moment as the infant cannot link them with cognition) when the infant's internal world is given form by the mother. This first human aesthetic informs the development of personal character (the utterance of self through the manner of being rather than the representations of the mind) and will predispose all future aesthetic experiences that place the person in subjective rapport with an object. As I will argue that each aesthetic experience is transformational, the search for what Krieger terms the “aesthetic object” is a quest for what we may call a transformational object. The transformational object promises to the beseeching subject an experience where the unintegrations of self find integrations through the form provided by the transformational object. As the mother is the first transformational object, and her style of mothering the paradigm of transformation for her child, I will explore the terms of this aesthetic before linking it to literary aesthetics, and psychoanalysis.

The self is born into the care of a maternal environment. Depending on whose representation of the person's subjective experience of infancy we read, we either focus on the person's capacities (development of cognition, motility, adaptive defenses, ego capacities), his incapacities (inherent deprivation of being an infant due to psychic conflicts), or both. No doubt the infant has an internal structural tendency at this point of being, as Piaget argues, but without a facilitative mother, as Winnicott stresses, the infant's nascent ego capacities will suffer, perhaps, irreparably. This is objective evidence. My focus is on the infant's subjective experience of the mother, as he is neither objectively aware of his own ego capacities, nor of the mother's logic of care. He experiences

² Mentation is thought processing, whether organized or disorganized, conscious or unconscious.

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distress and the dissolving of distress through the apparitional-like presence of mother. Agony of hunger, moment of emptiness, is transformed by mother's milk into an experience of fullness. This is a primary transformation: emptiness, agony, rage, become fullness, and contentedness. The aesthetics of this experience is the particular way the mother meets the infant's need, the manner in which she transforms his internal and external realities. Alongside of the infant's subjective experience of being transformed is the reality that he is being transformed according to the mother's aesthetic. I believe that he will eventually incorporate both the food, the new experience

(fullness), and the aesthetic of handling. The baby takes in not only the contents of the mother's communications but the form of her utterances, and, since in the beginning of life handling of the infant is the primary mode of communicating, I maintain that the internalization of the mother's form (her aesthetic) is prior to the internalization of her verbal messages. Indeed, I believe Bateson's notion of the double bind, where message is contradicted by mode of delivery or vice versa, is a conflict between the form as utterance and the speech as message. The infant is caught between two mutually contradictory experiences.

The mother conveys her aesthetic by her style of being with the infant through inactive presence, feeding, diaper changing, soothing, and playing, and it is that which constitutes the phenomenology of her transformation of the infant's being. With a "good-enough mother," as **Winnicott (1965, p. 145)** puts it, a tradition of generative transformations of internal and external realities is established. Continuity of being is maintained. Winnicott, a psychoanalyst, writes that this experience takes place in what he terms a "facilitating environment" (p. 223), the mother's system of care that protects the infant from either internal or external impingement. The infant is primarily protected against impingements that lead him to substitute being taken care of with precocious mental processes that interrupt and dissolve being with mentation and vigilance. **Murray Krieger (1976)**, a literary critic, frames a similar space when he describes the aesthetic experience. "I have tried to establish, then, that to the degree that an experience is functioning in the aesthetic mode, we find ourselves locked within it, freely and yet in a controlled way playing among its surfaces and its depths" (p. 12). Like Winnicott's facilitating environment, Krieger's "aesthetic mode" holds the self within an experience, of reverie or rapport, that does not stimulate the self into thought. Naturally, thinking does not disappear, but the subjective experience is that thinking is *out there*, in the mother; it is the aesthetic object, which is

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responsible for processing existence through thought and activity. Writes Krieger: "Would not such an object have, as a major objective, the need to keep us locked within it—to keep us, that is, from escaping into the world of cognitive or practical concerns?" (p. 12). I agree with Krieger, but he avoids asking an obvious question. Where are the origins of this experience? For the aesthetic experience is not something learned by the adult, but is an existential recollection of an experience where being handled by the maternal aesthetic made thinking irrelevant to survival.

This facilitating environment or aesthetic mode places the subject before an object where the disunities of the former are given generative forms by the latter. Content and discontent of the subject as infant are externalized, mimetically, before the mother, who gives new form to the infant's experience through her aesthetic of handling.³ Eventually, the aesthetic of handling yields to the aesthetic of language, and it is at this point that the experience of being yields and is integrated with the experience of thinking. The mother's facilitation of the word-forming experience, alongside of the infant's grasp of grammatical structure, is the most significant transformation of the infant's encoded utterance. Until the grasp of the Word, the infant's meaning resides only within the mother's psyche-soma. With the Word, the infant has found a new transformational object, which facilitates the transition from deep enigmatic privacy toward the culture of the human village.⁴

When the transformational object passes from the mother to the mother's tongue, (the Word) the first human aesthetic, self to mother, passes toward the second human aesthetic: the finding of the Word to speak the self. As it was mother's style of transforming the infant's being that constituted the first human aesthetic, so, too, I believe, it will be the forming of Words to handle and transform the moods of the self that will frame the terms of that individual's personal aesthetic.

The first human aesthetic passes into the idiom of formal aesthetics, as the mother's aesthetic of care passes through her tongue, from cooing, mirror-uttering, singing, story telling, and wording into the Word. As we are a part of this extraordinary transition, we take the structure of the maternal aesthetic with us in several ways. Embedded in

³ Though the maternal aesthetic originates, quite obviously, from the mother, it becomes a mutual experience as infant and mother find new modes of fitting with one another.

⁴ The Word is both transformational (as it gives form to content) and transitional, in Winnicott's sense, as it facilitates the infant's departure from the secret culture of mother-child to the social world where there are new symbolic equations to print the experience of living.

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Heinz Lichtenstein's (1961)⁵ notion of the identity theme is not only a thematics⁶ but an aesthetics. Our internal world is transformed by the mother's unconscious desire into a primary theme of being with mother, that will print all future ways of being with the other. In an earlier paper (**Bollas, 1974**) I argued that a person's character is a subjective recollection of the person's past, printed through the person's way of being with himself and others. I would amend this point now, to argue that character is an aesthetic of being, as we have internalized, into the structure of our existence, the phenomenological reality of the maternal aesthetic. We have internalized a forming and transforming idiom as well as the thematics of mother's discourse and the fantasy world of our own making. Whenever we desired, despaired, reached toward, played, or were in rage, love, pain, or need, we were met by mother and handled according to her aesthetic. Whatever our existential critique of her aesthetic, be it generative integration into our own being, compliance followed by dissociated splitting of our true self, or defensive handling of the aesthetic (denial, splitting, repression), we mingled with this aesthetic. Indeed, the way mother handled us (either as accepting and facilitating or refusing and rigid or a mixture of both) will influence our way of handling our self. In a sense, we learn the grammar of our being before we grasp the rules of our language.

If the fate of being with a transformational other becomes an aesthetic of being, it does not preclude us from search for a new

transformation. For the ego has internalized not simply an object (the mother) but a process (her aesthetic of transformation),⁷ and this process is a paradigm of subject relating to an object that transforms the subject's being. In a "good-enough" situation the mother as transformational object manipulates the environment to make it symmetrical to human need. As this experience is internalized into the structure of the ego, the self seeks transformational objects to reach relative symmetry with the environment. A person wants to express to a

⁵ Heinz Lichtenstein argues that each person's mother imprints on the infant a theme of identity, inevitably reflecting the mother's unconscious use of her infant.

⁶ The thematic prints the subject's experience of the aesthetic and, as such, contains the subject's projections. We could find, as **Holland (1973)** does, an identity theme within the thematic of the text, but, unfortunately, that is only one of the hundreds of ideas uttered as thematic. Though a writer may alter his style, each work is managed by its aesthetic frame: the phenomenology of its transformation of the thematic.

⁷ **W. R. Bion (1961)** stresses the function of the analyst as a transformer of the patient's psychic content. Because of his fidelity to Kantian object-relation theory, and its implementation in the theories of Melanie Klein, Bion precludes himself from linking the function of transformation to the mother, as her actual existence cannot be taken into consideration.

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quizzical friend why he appears to be depressed. "Are you angry about something?," asks the friend. "No," he replies, "I'm not angry. I'm bewildered by a letter I've received." The word "anger" is not an adequate transformation of the mood to the word; it will not make the external expression generatively symmetrical with the internal impression. The word "bewildered" does, and the subject feels relieved and may be understood.

If failure occurs, let us say, at the point of acquiring the Word, the Word may become a meaningless expression of the child's internal world. Words may feel useless, or, if the rules of the family prohibit words which speak the mood of the self, they may feel dangerous. This foreclosure of the infant's internal life into language may facilitate the schizoid character position, where language is dissociated from feeling, and where the moods of the internal world are almost exclusively registered in the subject's way of being. True self states are manifested through the "language" of character, held within the self, whereas compliant or abstract thought representations are placed into the Word. As such, the subject's internal, or private, self is continually dissociated from his executive self. An aesthetic moment for such an individual may occur when he faces a formidable and confusing external object that establishes an internal confusion in the subject, providing him with an uncanny feeling of the aweful and the familiar, an experience where this aesthetic object seems to demand resolution into clarity but threatens the self with annihilation if the subject seeks a Word to speak it. An example of this aesthetic experience occurs in Herman Melville's novel *Moby Dick*, when Ishmael is captured by the confused portrait of a whale in the Spouter Inn. It is Ishmael's captivity by the awesome representation of a large hovering mass about to impale itself on a ship that constitutes his aesthetic moment. He cannot define what he sees, though he tries to throw the experience into thought, because the experience of his captivity is outside cognitive apprehension. When he does transform this experience into a word, "whale," he can leave the painting and is released from his captivity. Because Ishmael can experience aesthetic moments—he is captured by paintings, sermons, books on whales, the whale itself, and idiomatic presences of others (Queequeg)—he dwells in the aesthetic moment with a transformational other: the object that captures and places him in a deep spell of the uncanny. As such, Ishmael reflects the creative alternative to Ahab, who scans the seas for a concrete transformational object (*Moby Dick*), because Ishmael occupies Melville's position—the domicile of the artist who is in the unique position to create his own aesthetic moments, and

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find symbolic equations for psychohistorical experiences that henceforth (as text, painting) become a new reality.

A young man in psychotherapy, whom I will call Anthony, was born into a wealthy family dominated by a warm but very ambitious mother who refused to give up her active social life for the care of her new infant. She hired a nanny, and the infant was passed from one figure to another, from mother to nanny, from nanny to mother, during the first five years of his life. He is very fond of his mother, who is associated with warmth, smell, soft clothing, and tranquillity. He has no memory of his nanny. As he says: "Just a blank. I remember nothing." Now, this youth has what I believe to be an aesthetic experience that utters the terms of the first human aesthetic. As he wanders through the city, every so often he will see a young man, always in a bus or car, who is going in the opposite direction (a momentary presence) who evokes a sudden feeling that this is the person who can "transform" him. He considers such moments to be the most glorious moments of his life, because they fill him with a "transcendental" sense of "exquisite harmony," even though these moments are followed by a sense of blankness and despair. This transformational object appears and disappears; it promises deliverance but yields absence and blankness. As Anthony has discovered in the psychotherapy, the search for this transformational object, and the phenomenology of his aesthetic experience, is an existential memory (the past called into the subject's being) of his experience of the maternal aesthetic. When he was with mother he was filled with a sense of joy; when she left him to the nanny, he felt blank and deserted.

Transformational-object seeking is an endless memorial search for something in the future that rests in the past. I believe that if we investigate many types of object relating we will discover that the subject is seeking the transformational object and aspiring to be matched in symbiotic harmony within an aesthetic frame that promises to metamorphose the self. On a transcendental plane, we believe in God, or we fall in love; on an empirical plane, we look for that ideal home, or job, or car because we hope to achieve reunion with an object that will transform our internal and external realities.

I cannot do justice to the many literary scholars who have concerned themselves with the aesthetics of literature and the location of transformation. In his early work, *The Dynamics of Literary Response*, **Norman Holland (1968)** found that the text formed and transformed itself, and, subsequently, the reader. In *Poems in Persons* (**Holland, 1973**) and *5 Readers Reading* (**Holland, 1975**), he finds the transformation

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of the content of the story to lie in the reader's transformation of the text, as the reader edits the work according to the identity theme bequeathed by the reader's mother, and in harmony with his own idiom of defense and adaptation. **Murray Schwartz (1975)** claims that the literary experience actually lies somewhere in the "potential space" between the text and the reader. No doubt both Holland and Schwartz have struggled with the philosophical controversies of the nineteenth century over the place of the object, vis-à-vis the subject. Kant acknowledged that the object existed as a thing-in-itself, but it was outside human apprehension, as we know only the object that we create through the idiom of our own mind. Hegel's reply to Kant, however unsystematic it is, seems pertinent to my argument that the aesthetic moment is grounded in an actual experience of deep rapport of subject and object. Hegel agrees with Kant that it may be impossible to prove the existence of the object, but, he argues, it is undeniable that we have had an experience of the object and that the experience with the object has restructured our subjectivity. One of the differences between them is that Kant focuses on cognitive knowing of the object and Hegel speaks to what I term "existential knowing." Kant's thing-in-itself can never be known cognitively as it is in-itself, but only according to its recreation in the mind. Hegel's object-in-itself may be outside cognition, but the experience of being-with an object, the dialectic of relating, imprints the object into the subject, registering the object in the subject's history.

Holland's interest lies primarily with the domain of literary response, and I would think he would agree that he is not articulating the terms of the aesthetic experience. Although I believe that response to a situation or a text may reveal the thematics of self that **Holland (1975)** finds through his "Delphic Seminars,"⁸ my focus is on *that unique moment* of deep subjective rapport between reader and text, or author and text. Whatever the reader's response to the content conveyed by the text, his arrest in the aesthetic is not a reflection of the content, but the way the content has been held and transformed by the poetics of the text. This may occur only occasionally. One poem out of many, perhaps; only a few moments, if any, during a novel; or possibly an entire work of literature, a symphony, a painting, a landscape. But when found, these are the "texts" we bring with us into our life. We mark them, and we return to dwell "within" them. Where I believe I converge with Holland is in the belief that the paradigm of the aesthetic experience emerges in the earliest moments of one's existence. Such an experience does not

⁸ Seminars in which readers share their reactions to the text and their re-creations of one another's re-creations of the text, yielding the identity themes of the participants.

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correspond, however, to the privacy of an individual's recreation of the text, but to the moment when reader and text are arrested from the movement of their independent thematic, when the reader is captured by and held within a moment of wonder, reverie, or rapport with the text.

When the aesthetic moment captures us, as Krieger puts it, we are suddenly brought back from our idiomatic recreation of the text's thematic into a direct experience of reverie with the form of the text. We are enraptured by a literary arrest, and we may dwell for some time with this moment. In this space, reader, text, and author are held by the poetic. After this experience, we are both released—the reader to continue to re-create the text in his own thematic image, the text to pursue its intended course.

Not surprisingly, the search for generative transformation brings many people to psychoanalysis. Because it is one of the tasks of the psychoanalyst to listen to a patient in a very special manner, and to respond, with a sense of the right moment, and through the use of the simplest words, the technique of psychoanalysis is primarily an aesthetics of care. Psychoanalysts create a poetics of interpretation (timing, spacing, wording, intoning) that delivers the content of the analyst's interpretation or silence to the patient in a manner that is symmetrical to the patient's ego capacities. The aesthetic of psychoanalysis strives to place the patient and the analyst in deep subjective rapport with one another, and this aesthetic evokes a state of being which re-enacts the infant's relation to mother. So whether the material of a session is oedipal, for example, with the analyst functioning thematically as the father, or the oedipal mother, the aesthetics of psychoanalysis, induced by the analytic technique, places the analyst in the position of the transformational object. Underlying the thematics of transference is the formal paradigm of infant-patient, emptying himself of his internal world before the mother-analyst. Indeed, I feel clinicians often confuse the thematics of the transference with the aesthetics of the transformational-object situation. Though the transference may bring forth the thematics of the infant and match the transformational relationship, this is not always the case. Clinicians speak of oedipal content with pre-oedipal origins or precursors when they are often describing the voice of the thematic transference (in this example oedipal) and simultaneously witnessing the utterance of the transformational-object situation (always mother to infant and infant to mother).

Creativity includes the aesthetic and the thematic. The thematic will print the subject's fantasies, reflecting his own use of the aesthetic frame that contains the thematic. Although the thematic reflects the subject's

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inheritance of the aesthetic frame, it becomes the idiomatic discourse of the internal world. In literature, the aesthetic frame establishes the way the writer forms and transforms the content of his text. In life, the aesthetic frame constitutes the subject's manner of holding and transforming internal and external realities. In literature, the aesthetic frame is the poetic of the text; in life, it is the aesthetics of being.

In summary, I have argued that the infant's being with mother is the first human aesthetic, as the mother forms, and hence transforms, the internal and external realities of her infant. The maternal aesthetic will be as idiomatic as the style of mothering. The first human aesthetic, characterized by deep rapport of subject and object, underlies all aesthetic experiences where the subject feels captured in a reverential moment with an aesthetic object. I have suggested that such moments constitute recollections through states of being rather than cognitive memories, and are embedded in a person's character. The communion with mother provides the infant with a subjective feeling that the mother is a transformational object, the one who generates the aesthetic of being by forming and transforming internal and external realities. It seems to me that the adult's search for transformation often finds its way into literature where he may experience an intense moment of rapport with a text that evokes a character memory (printed through a sense of the uncanny, mystical, reverential, or sacred) of being with the transformational object.

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