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Creative and Aesthetic Experience

IN *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*,[1] the late Abraham Maslow provided a detailed acount of creativeness during its primary, or inspirational, moments.[2] During such moments there is a strong tendency to become intensely involved with their intrinsic relationships of the matter-at-hand, one effect of which is the giving up of both the past and the future. Further, while attention is riveted to the phenomena vividly present to consciousness, there occurs a diminution of fear, a lessening of inhibitions, and a loss of ego. There is also manifested a trusting attitude that is notable for its qualities of strength, courage, acceptance, and Taoistic receptivity. Maslow further held that perception during creative experience is not primarily abstract, that is, in the service of building theoretical understanding. Rather perception is aesthetic and serves the propensity to cherish or savor the particularities of things. Such happenings during creative experience, Maslow held, tend to result in the psychological integration of the person, a beneficent spontaneity, and a strong fusion of the person with his world. In the course of his investigations, Maslow further concluded that the conditions and traits of creativeness are also those of the self-actualizing person and of "peak experiences" generally, such that it might be said Maslow took the general goal of education to be the teaching of the creative attitude (or its conditions), the taking up of which provides persons with occasions for peak experiences, which in turn help to produce self-actualizing persons. The need for healthy, self-actualizing persons stemmed from what has now become a commonplace: accelerated social change has generated the obligation to educate a new type of person.

Of interest here, apart from the aesthetic dimension of creativeness mentioned by Maslow, is his belief that creative art education, or education through art as he also called it, might well be a model for instruction in general. "So I am thinking of education through art," he wrote, "not because it turns out pictures but because I think it may be possible that, clearly understood, it may become the paradigm for all other education."[3] Even arithmetic, reading, and writing, he thought, might be taught on this paradigm. Education through art, it seemed to Maslow, is worthwhile because it is good education in potential.

As one interested in aesthetic education, I suppose I should find this suggestion attractive. But before I can do anything with it I find it necessary to examine more closely than did Maslow the similarities and differences between creative and aesthetic experience. A discussion of these two modes of experience will be the principal undertaking of this paper. Rather than delay my conclusions I will say at the outset that: (*a*) there are both important likenesses and differences between creative experience as described by Maslow and aesthetic experience as described by a number of contemporary aesthetic theorists, although it will suit my purposes here to stress at least two important differences; (*b*) that certain aspects of aesthetic education might well, as Maslow suggested, provide clues to general instruction, though not, in my opinion, the kind of art education apparently favored by Maslow; and (*c*) that efforts to develop creativeness through schooling, at least as creativeness is often characterized by creativity theorists, commit the error of unrealistic aspiration.

In a society that must contend with the problems of mass education there is simply not the time, talent, or money to develop creativeness in anything like significant proportions. Aesthetic education, however, which I take to be different from creative education, is another matter. Modestly envisaged, it is reasonable to suppose that schooling, if it took aesthetic education seriously enough and worked hard enough at it, might well shape the disposition to perceive aesthetically, even if the attainment of high degrees of aesthetic sensitivity cannot be promised. These assumptions will have to go unargued here, but they should at least be stated.

Furthermore, it is because of my conception of aesthetic experience and aesthetic education that I also have reservations about extending Maslow's research priority, which would stress the study of the primary phases of creativeness at the

expense of its secondary aspects, to aesthetic education. Aesthetic experience, as I understand this notion, is best thought of as occurring in a situation that involves a percipient who has a special kind of rapport with an object. Aesthetic experience, moreover, usually has greater magnitude when "caused" by a work of fine art and sustained by the apparatus of aesthetic criticism. Neither works of art nor critical activity, however, seem to have interested Maslow as much as flashes of intuition and those moments when persons experience the special kinds of feelings and insights he described as typical of primary creativeness. Because I believe aesthetic education to be different from creative education, the former involving once again both works of art and critical activity, I accordingly do not believe the study of aesthetic experience need be restricted to young children, in whom Maslow believed creativeness is best studied.

some preliminary observations

A few preliminary observations are in order about Maslow's style. His writing often contains a highly persuasive element and enthusiasm for a topic occasionally results in rhetoric bordering on the extravagant. This can sometimes be irritating, especially when the description of a trait seems rather arbitrarily strung out with a large number of synonyms. And everything which Maslow says happens during creative experience is not, strictly speaking, a characteristic of creativeness. Some of his items are conditions or prerequisites of creativeness, and at least one notion, "inhibiting form of consciousness (of self)," is a tendency that must be overcome and thus is neither a characteristic nor a condition. There is also a great deal of overlap and repetition in his descriptions. For example, giving up the past and the future, or getting lost in the present, would seem to be the same thing as standing innocent or naked in the situation with no *a priori* expectations; just as a state of innocence seems to involve a narrowing of consciousness or a state in which one is less distracted by external duties, obligations, and fears. Having said that the narrowing of consciousness involves diminished fear, it then seems superfluous to further discuss the loss of fear in a separate place. Doubtless Maslow would have acknowledged the use of repetition and reiteration for he often remarked on the difficulty of finding language to describe the phenomena discovered in his inquiries. Talking about the same thing in

different terms was one way of trying to communicate with his readers. This tendency may also help explain what might otherwise seem a mania for naming things (peak experiences, plateau experiences, nadir experiences, etc., etc.). Still these observations about his style are worth making. Indeed a careful analysis of Maslow's language would, I'm sure, turn up quite a few questionable terms and usages. But helpful as such an analysis might be, to do merely that would be to miss the import of Maslow's work — an import that derives from an ambitious project to discover the full range of human potentiality, particularly its "farther reaches."

simple peak experiences

One additional observation: I have been using the expressions "creativeness" and "creative experience," but it is actually in terms of "simple peak experiences" that Maslow discusses the creative attitude. In his essay "The Creative Attitude," he noted that the characteristics of peak experiences — becoming lost in the present, feeling timeless, selfless, outside of space, society, or history — are also marks of mystical experience, a type of experience generally thought to be so special that it is usually regarded as something supernatural or beyond human comprehension. But Maslow's investigations and those of Marghanita Laski on ecstasies convinced him that so-called mystical experiences are much more down to earth, or secular, than commonly assumed. The marks of mystical experience turn out to be the marks of peak experiences in general and are felt by anyone whenever there is intense absorption in something, say a symphonic performance, a gripping detective story, or even one's own work. Once again, then, it is in terms of simple peak experiences that Maslow's account of creativeness is to be understood. He believed that such experiences lend themselves to being described in more ordinary language than do "ultimate" mystical experiences. Now what, more specifically, happens during peak experiences? According to Maslow, simple peak experiences involve or have to do with:

1. Giving up the past
2. Giving up the future
3. Innocence
4. Narrowing of consciousness
5. Loss of ego; self-forgetfulness, loss of self-consciousness
6. Inhibiting force of consciousness (of self)
7. Fears disappear
8. Lessening of defenses and inhibitions
9. Strength and courage

10. Acceptance: the positive attitude
11. Trust vs. trying, controlling, striving
12. Taoistic receptivity
13. Integration of the B-cognizer (vs. dissociation)
14. Permission to dip into primary processes
15. Aesthetic perceiving rather than abstracting
16. Fullest spontaneity
17. Fullest expressiveness (of uniqueness)
18. Fusion of the person with the world[4]

This is quite a list and I've no intention to discuss each item serially. Rather I will set forth an account of aesthetic experience, its conditions and characteristics, and then indicate to what extent there are similarities and differences between peak experiences and aesthetic experiences.

peak and aesthetic experiences compared

Recent accounts of aesthetic experience can be instructively summarized if we try to imagine what might be involved if a person, say upon entering the Baltimore Museum of Art, were to have his gaze arrested by "Quarry and Mont Sainte-Victoire," a landscape scene painted by the Frenchman Paul Cézanne between 1896 and 1900, a work belonging to his late style.[5]

The viewer's initial impressions of the painting might well be varied and diffuse, but doubtless perception would soon take note of those features which present themselves conspicuously to vision — the vivid orange area which is seen as the quarry, the imposing mountain peak, and perhaps the trees and foliage which function to soften the materiality of the central rock masses and the mountain above. Perhaps the brilliant blue sky would be seen next as an important contrasting area, in striking opposition, that is, to the color of the quarry. Further scrutiny of the painting's surface might turn up not only these major divisions but also the intricate ways in which surface design and design in depth are organically and dramatically unified. For example, contrary to traditional uses of perspective, or of ways of rendering things in depth, the elements deepest in the picture space loom large and so command our attention. In addition to heightening the symbolic significance of the mountain peak, this special treatment of elements in depth enhances the overall drama of the picture. Every shape, every area, every patch of paint seems carefully calculated to give significance to the entire surface, instead of merely parts of it. One cannot imagine the drama

of the mountain without its attendant sky, which helps to shape it, or the quarry beneath which, as Meyer Schapiro has suggested, supports the mountain as a strong pedestal supports a heroic sculpture. Indeed when one sees the landscape with this latter image in mind, the perceptual task may well become one of seeing the web of relationships that integrates the "figure" to its "base" and surrounding area. This case of "seeing as," that is seeing the mountain as a heroic sculpture presented for our admiration, also encourages a sculptural reading of the painting, and certainly the constructive mentality of the sculptor seems manifest in the work, both with regard to subject matter (quarry masses and mountain formation) and the painting's formal qualities of strength and solidity.

One might then begin to make new sense of the trees and foliage. They not only provide contrasting colors and shapes but help pull the overall structure together. The green and blue of the lower front trees and ground, for example, are repeated in the central area of the quarry and, more faintly, in the mountain mass above. The lower foreground trees also function as a sturdy frieze of verticals which find echoes in other undrawn verticals in the picture, extending in one instance from the top of the mountain peak (farthest in the distance) through a centrally situated tree whose trunk touches the base of the painting (closest to the viewer). Similarly, the upper branches and foliage of the extreme right tree clearly belong, in a formal, pictorial sense, to the space occupied by the mountain and sky, yet these elements of foliage are pulled into the foreground by virtue of an inference that the tree's trunk must rest in the picture's foreground space. Such dynamic tensions between elements in depth and elements in the foreground are central to the painting and to miss them is to miss what is crucial in aesthetic experience of fine art, especially of the kind in question since such tensions were carefully contrived by the painter. In brief, Cézanne has masterfully orchestrated a remarkable array of sensuous and formal elements for our aesthetic contemplation.

Much more than I've indicated can of course be seen in this particular Cézanne painting, yet these are the sorts of things which must be seen for aesthetic experience to have happened. Merely being told that a painting may be seen in such a manner is not sufficient. But if the above character-

ization suggests what can be seen in Cézanne's painting, or what is relevant to experiencing it aesthetically, what can we abstract from what happened? What were the conditions and characteristics of seeing the peculiar form and qualities of "Quarry and Mont Sainte-Victoire"? To what extent are Maslow's conditions and characteristics of peak experiences present or absent in aesthetic experiences?

To take the aesthetic situation first: It is convenient to distinguish two aspects of the aesthetic situation, what Monroe C. Beardsley has called the phenomenally objective and the phenomenally subjective,[6] a useful distinction often overlooked. In the case at hand, this would be the work of art with its properties and qualities (objective) and the percipient and the structure of his felt experience (subjective). It is a matter of introspection whether a quality seems to belong to the object or to the subject's experience. What counts of course in the aesthetic experience is the full perception and exploration of a work's distinctive aesthetic value, what may be called, again following Beardsley, the work's peculiar unity (subsuming both completeness and coherence), complexity, and human regional intensity (which refers to such emergent qualities as irony, wit, elegance, sadness, grace, or serenity).[7] Good or great works of art are rich in aesthetic value (in unity, complexity, intensity) and owing to this are responsible for "causing," or are instrumental to, experience which also feels highly organized, complex, and intense, so that as the work of art goes (with respect to unity, complexity, intensity), so too does the felt experience. This may appear to be too neat a parallelism, but it nonetheless makes sense to hold that the felt experience of art takes on new dimensions and qualities as a work's particularities are attended to and gradually discovered. Paying strict attention then is an important condition and characteristic of aesthetic experience. Only thus can aesthetic perception be fully rewarded. The work of art may also be said to function as a control over perception, first gripping and then directing attention, though to be sure with the willing cooperation of the percipient who must know what to look for (or listen and read for in the cases of music and poetry).

Once again, the state of being aware in a special way, the aesthetic way, is extremely important in aesthetic experience; otherwise there is the possibility of falling into illusion or mere subjectivity. In such instances as these latter, contact

is lost with the structure of the work of art. This implies that aesthetic experience is not so much an inward dwelling on moods as it is an outward absorption in an object (though again without losing awareness or distance).[8] For this reason some aesthetic theorists have downgraded the role of the emotions in aesthetic experience.[9] Others have thought that while a work of art itself may manifest a variety of qualities, aesthetic experience itself tends to have the feelings that accompany a state of detached involvement. Furthermore, because of the peculiar way a work of art controls our perception and experience, and because we must be open to a work's uniqueness and particularity, aesthetic experience tends to bracket out intellectual and moral attitudes, at least during the time that attempts are being made to gain a full view. Or, in slightly different terms, distinctively discursive operations, if not put out of gear entirely, at least get dampened or are less pressing in their logical and inferential demands. Having bracketed out irrelevant concerns the percipient must then remain open to the unique context of aesthetic significance embodied in each work of art.[10] This condition implies appropriate mental sets in the viewer, especially a flexible disposition capable of tolerating novelty and a willingness to admit the possibility of finding new value in places not ordinarily visited. Aesthetic experience, it might be said, demands an understanding of two meanings of context: the unique context of aesthetic significance that is the work of art itself; and the context of the aesthetic situation with its special ground rules. The latter is instrumental to a perception of the former, just as the former will give to the latter a special structural and dramatic cast.

In summary, aesthetic experience involves (*a*) an object that is abstracted in attention from the environmental system (our imaginary museum visitor being arrested by Cézanne's painting which framed itself for attention); (*b*) nondiscursive thinking (the unpredictable way, not subject to rule, in which our viewer perceived the qualities of the painting); (*c*) perception of a stratified design, that is, the perception of elements both as form and subject matter and the interrelationships between medium, form, and content (our viewer, e.g., getting the relationships between surface design and design in depth as these affect symbolic import, i.e., the mountain as a kind of heroic sculpture); (*d*) the emotions of detachment and serenity (probably appropriate in the case of viewing the Cézanne, although aesthetic experience need not

be restricted to these sensations); (*e*) an outward directed activity leading to absorption in the object (certainly this must have occurred to our viewer in order for him to have seen what is important to see in the Cézanne painting); (*f*) rapt attention upon an object in a process of increasing awareness of the object's properties and qualities, the effect of which is to exclude meditative musings and plays of the imagination (presumably also the case with our viewer); (*g*) concern primarily with appearance and not with the physical substrata of works (our viewer, e.g., as an aesthetic percipient, had no interest in the molecular structure of the painting's canvas or in the chemical composition of the pigments); (*h*) the retention of ego consciousness which allows the object to assume heightened reality and vividness (our viewer did not fall into illusion or mere subjectivity). This list could be lengthened, but it suffices, I think, to provide a sense of what aesthetic experience is like as understood by some prominent contemporary writers.[11] Now to what extent are peak experiences similar or different?

First of all, there are basic similarities between items 1-4, 6-12, and 13-17 in Maslow's account of creative experience and the conditions and characteristics of aesthetic experience as I have described it. About items 5 and 18 in Maslow's list I am less certain, if Maslow means literally what he says. These items notwithstanding, the large number of points of similarity would seem to imply a basic likeness between creative and aesthetic experience. However, 5 and 18 in Maslow's account, i.e., "loss of ego, self-forgetfulness, loss of self-consciousness" (5) and "fusion of the person with the world" (18), are alien to aesthetic experience because of the importance of distance in the aesthetic situation and of the need to be aware of being aware in a special (aesthetic) way. Again, in aesthetic experience there cannot occur a complete loss of ego or a complete fusion of the person with his world, as this would risk falling into illusion and encourage getting out of aesthetic gear. If 5 and 18 are merely a bit of Maslowian overstatement, then the differences between creative and aesthetic experience are less remarkable, but all we have to go on is what Maslow actually wrote. Thus 5 and 18 seem rather decisive distinguishing items.

Regarding similarities, it is important to note that all of Maslow's conditions and characteristics of simple peak experiences pertain almost exclusively to what was earlier called

the phenomenally subjective, notwithstanding the fact that some of his items seem to imply an object of some sort. Nonetheless, the emphasis is clearly on the subject undergoing the experience, not on an object inducing experiences in a subject. Again, this emphasis is consistent with Maslow's interest in the primary phases of creativeness. With this in mind we may note that such notions as being lost in the present (which entails giving up the past and future), being open and innocent, as well as the narrowing of consciousness, are all assumed by aesthetic theorists when they say that aesthetic experience has a quality of presentness about it such that perception is not pre-occupied with ulterior aims and objectives. Rather, as Maslow remarked about creative experience, concern is with the intrinsic relationships of the matter-at-hand, with the unique particularities of the object held in view. So far as the narrowing of consciousness is concerned, this is assumed by aesthetic theorists when it is said that aesthetic perception distances, brackets out, or puts out of gear cognitive and moral concerns in favor of a distinctively aesthetic taking of things. It may further be agreed that while, as noted earlier, complete loss of ego does not occur during aesthetic experience, there is something like a diminution of self-consciousness insofar as the self's fears and anxieties are not prominent. It is also permissible to say (metaphorically) that the aesthetic percipient "loses" himself in the object, or lets himself "dwell" in its form, but once again never to the point where consciousness of self disappears. It follows from this way of conceiving aesthetic rapport with works of art that fears recede and that defenses and inhibitions figure less strongly as barriers to effective functioning. That persons during aesthetic experiences are a bit more courageous and exhibit strength may also be admitted, especially when it is realized that aesthetic experience may often involve overcoming temperamental preferences in order to discover new significances. A person who, despite his inclination to like only certain kinds of art, can nonetheless face up to things "not his cup of tea" may be said to exhibit a sort of courage; he admits the possibility of being wrong in his preferences. Or we may say that it requires a certain strength of character to cope with the unfamiliar in art. Thus aesthetic experience implies a positive, accepting attitude and a kind of Taoistic receptivity. The aesthetic attitude may also be characterized as a trusting one, in Maslow's sense that the intrinsic nature of the matter-at-hand makes demands to which the

percipient must submit. "Integration of the B-cognizer" is somewhat problematic. I have indicated Beardsley's belief that the felt character of aesthetic response has a certain structure, but all Maslow says about integration is that it is the act of the whole person. If this means that integration involves moments of cognition and affect, and that these different moments of consciousness are more unified than dissociated, then the same could be said of certain conceptions of aesthetic experience. "Dipping into primary processes" is explained by Maslow as having access to nonrational aspects of experience, especially poetic, metaphoric, primitive, or childlike processes. This seems to follow from his notion of the integrative character of creative experience and the same can be said of aesthetic experience. Indeed aesthetic proficiency can be characterized as a special kind of metaphorical effectiveness. And that there is a world, or aspects of reality, of which the discursive intelligence knows little is the basis of all distinctions between the understanding and the imagination, or between the claims of the cosmos of culture and the cosmos of nature.

some final remarks

I have been concerned to compare aesthetic and creative experience to discover essential similarities and differences. Both similarities and differences were noted, with at least two differences being sufficiently important to caution against confusing creative with aesthetic education. Nonetheless, aesthetic education, interpreted as the development of the capacity to perceive aesthetically works of fine art,[12] was held to be a suitable vehicle for achieving some of the outcomes valued by Maslow. In contrast to Maslow's views of creative art education, however, which stresses processes over products, I have held that both objects and critical activity are central to aesthetic education. Critical activity would be analogous to what Maslow called secondary creativeness. Finally, the discussion in this paper suggests that the locus of creativeness might well be reconsidered. At least I think I now appreciate better what Monroe C. Beardsley meant when he wrote that "the true locus of creativity is not the genetic process prior to the work but the work itself as it lives in the experience of the beholder."[13]

notes

1. Abraham Maslow, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*, New York: Viking Press, 1971.

2. "The Creative Attitude," *Ibid.*, pp. 47-71.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 57-58.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 63-71.

5. A good reproduction and description may be found in Meyer Schapiro's *Paul Cézanne,* New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1952, pp. 110-111. I have drawn freely on Schapiro's description.

6. Monroe C. Beardsley, "Aesthetic Theory and Educational Theory," in R. A. Smith, ed., *Aesthetic Concepts and Education,* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970, p. 12 *passim.*

7. *Ibid.*, esp. pp. 9-10.

8. In discussing aesthetic experience I have also drawn on Harold Osborne's account of percipience in *The Art of Appreciation,* New York: Oxford University Press, 1970, esp. chap. 2, "Appreciation as Percipience"; reprinted in R. A. Smith, ed., *Aesthetics and Problems of Education,* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971, pp. 445-72.

9. See Pepita Haezrahi, *The Contemplative Activity,* London: Allen and Unwin, 1954, pp. 25-36.

10. This point is emphasized by E. F. Kaelin in *Art and Existence: A Phenomenological Aesthetics,* Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1970, pp. 74-88. Cf. his "Aesthetic Education: A Role for Aesthetics Proper," *Journal of Aesthetic Education,* Vol. 2, No. 2 (April 1968), p. 60 *passim.*

11. The belief that felt experience has a unified character has been questioned by George Dickie in "Beardsley's Phantom Aesthetic Experience," *Journal of Philosophy,* Vol. 62 (1965), pp. 129-36. For Beardsley's response see "Aesthetic Experience Regained," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* Vol. 27 (Fall 1969), pp. 3-11, and "Aesthetic Theory and Educational Theory," *op cit.*, pp. 11-13.

12. Some ways to think about justifying this interpretation may be found in R. A. Smith and C. M. Smith, "Justifying Aesthetic Education," *Journal of Aesthetic Education,* Vol. 4, No. 3 (April 1970), pp. 37-51.

13. "On the Creation of Art," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* Vol. 23, No. 3 (Spring 1965), p. 168.