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DEAN
STUDENTS PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON THE AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

by

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ABSTRACT

During the nearly thirty years that I have been teaching English, I have had frequent discussions about the aesthetic experience, especially as it arises from reading poetry. Through conversations with my students I have formulated a theory about how people can be brought to an aesthetic experience with poetry, and for that matter, with any of the domains of art. Further, I had come to the conclusion that while analysis of poetry was clearly a cognitive function, the aesthetic experience was intensely emotional involving as it does, powerful feelings and sensations. The problem was to determine what students really experienced when they told me they had had an aesthetic experience. I wanted a more exact description of the feelings and the sensations associated with the aesthetic experience. Was the aesthetic experience similar for all the students? Or was each experience unique?

I conducted two interviews with each of five of my former pupils. The first interview took place immediately after they graduated from school, the second two years later. With two years between interviews the students had time to reflect on the aesthetic experience and to distance themselves from any

influence that I might have had during the first interview. Each pair of interviews was transcribed and examined for consistency; I looked at the phraseology, the expression of strong emotions and the ability of the students to articulate these.

I concluded that a strong similarity in how my students described the aesthetic experience was apparent. They described the aesthetic experience as "transformative", as one of the most powerful emotional experiences of their young lives. Even Michelle, who had not had an aesthetic experience for over two years was in no doubt either as to its nature, or of its importance in her life; she described it as " a pinnacle of experience."

I have theorized that as a result of having analyzed intensely a work of art an individual comes to know the complexity and harmony of that work. Out of this ever deepening knowing comes the aesthetic experience which itself is characterized by intense emotions and sensations. The words of my students confirm this experience.

Examiners:



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title Page	i
Abstract	ii
Table of Contents	v
Acknowledgements	vi
Chapter 1	1
Background	2
Focus	6
Literature Search	9
Research Question	14
Chapter 2	15
Methodology	16
Proceedure	19
Another Step in the Process	23
Chapter 3	29
Ryan	30
Melissa	39
Michelle	46
Camilla	56
Doug	64
Chapter 4	73
Conclusion	74
Implications for Pedagogy	81
Bibliography	88

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CHAPTER 1

Background

After five years at the University of British Columbia, including one year of graduate studies in English Literature, I decided to become a high school teacher. After the one year teacher training program for graduates, I found myself, in 1961, teaching a variety of subjects at Masset School in the Queen Charlotte Islands.

One of my subjects was English 11. I taught the short story, the novel, essay writing, Shakespeare -- everything except poetry, which I was reluctant to teach. For three years I had been immersed in the intensive analysis of poetry at the University of British Columbia, and I had loved it. However, at some point I had become afraid to look at poetry. I do not know if it was because poetry had meant so much to me, or because I was afraid that as a teacher I would not be able to make poetry come alive for my students. Still, I felt troubled that I was denying my students something of value, an exposure to poetry. Eventually I knew I could put off teaching poetry no longer, so I opened my books and began to reread poems I had not looked at for nearly two years.

What happened quite stunned me. It was like an epiphany as James Joyce would have it; the way I looked at poetry and all art was transformed. No longer was I only reacting to poetry in the intellectual and abstract way I had learned at university. I was

experiencing it as an intense, emotional moment --feeling things that moved me profoundly. Here were poems that I had analyzed very thoroughly, some I had spent months on. And here was I seeing them as if for the first time, in the throes of emotions and sensations so strong that I still find it hard to describe them. I did teach poetry to my Queen Charlotte Island students, but I don't know if anything happened for them in the way of an aesthetic experience.

Two years later I was teaching Literature 12 at Carson Graham Secondary School in North Vancouver. Because this was a government exam course, I had to teach poetry in earnest, and since I had learned about poetry by analyzing the style, imagery, structure and meaning, I did that, hoping that through this approach the poems would come to life for my students as they had for me. In my first years of teaching the approach seemed to be successful. However, by the late 1960's, eight years into my teaching career, my confidence was shaken. Many teachers, myself included, wanted to make curriculum more immediate and relevant for students. The vague idea that if students persisted long enough in the analysis of poetry they would have an aesthetic experience did not seem to be either relevant or useful. A few students complained about this lack of relevance in my teaching toward an aesthetic experience. However, I believed I was doing something of value, and I persisted. Besides, I had

seen some students come to delight in the beauty of poetry.

In the early 1970's, I moved to Victoria, and, in 1976, I began to teach at Esquimalt Secondary School, where I am today. In 1978, I developed a program for the intellectually gifted. Literature 12 was made a compulsory part of this program. Nearly twenty years had passed since I had begun teaching, and I had become clearer about what I wanted to achieve. My aim was to make it possible for students to experience poetry not only intellectually and analytically, but emotionally as well. My confidence in the value of what I was doing and my ability to explain that to my students was I believed, enabling me to lead many more students to the aesthetic experience.

One of these was Jenny. Jenny was an attractive, bright young lady who was what I would call a friendly complainer. Each day she would ask me plaintively if we were going to analyze poetry, and each day I would tell her yes, today and every day. Eventually I begged her to stop balking and trust me, to follow along patiently before she made a final judgement on the value of what we were doing. In early April, I read aloud Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind*. I paused to let the meaning and beauty of the poem sink in. Then Jenny said, "This is a beautiful poem." Her voice seemed filled with awe. "How do you know this?" I asked her. Jenny smiled; she turned to the class and said, "He's right, we do know." For me that was a turning point.

I believed I had been right in my approach to poetry. Some students I felt were experiencing the poetry aesthetically, although just what this experience was like for them I did not know.

And then there was Kevin. Kevin was an interesting boy who raced formula junior cars and planned to become an engineer. He never wavered from the conviction that the aesthetic experience would not happen for him, nor did he really believe it happened at all. He thought me well meaning but deluded, and he continued to think this even after he graduated. I heard little of Kevin over the next five years until I had coffee with one of his former classmates. I asked her to say hello to Kevin. We had coffee again a few weeks later and she told me she had a message from Kevin. "Tell Mr. Bowker he was right," he had said. Here was another triumph. Kevin too it seemed had come to know something of the aesthetic experience.

Focus

Five years ago I decided to begin a Masters Degree. One of the first courses was with Antoinette Oberg. Quite soon we were reading Greene, Grumet, Aoki, Novak, van Manen and others on autobiography and story. We began journal writing. In my first journal I quickly trotted out my metaphor for teaching. I was the conductor of the orchestra and the students were the players. Under my direction we made beautiful music together. "A man does not 'invent' his own story out of whole cloth. In part he 'discovers' it" (Novak, 1971 p. 60), and I had discovered the conductor metaphor years earlier; it seemed most appropriate. However, as the course and my reading progressed, I began to see how "the abstractions of primary experience presented in these autobiographical reflections are vulnerable to critical scrutiny. The writer can turn back upon [his] own texts and see there [his] own processes and biases of selection at work" (Grumet, 1981, p. 141).

I became uneasy with the power I had as a teacher. My metaphor of the conductor no longer seemed right. I was beginning to seriously question the values with which I had so long been comfortable and successful. What was it that I was doing to my students? Did I have their consent, or was I coercing them into following me? "As we analyze the narrative, we reveal interests and biases we rarely see because they are

threaded through the thick fabric of our daily lives" (Grumet, p. 142). I began to talk to my students about my uneasiness. As Maxine Greene says, "the great climactic moments in teaching come when we find ourselves thinking in front of the class, with the end open, unresolved" (1987, p. 12). And in another paper she writes:

So I reveal all of that to them. I reveal my own consciousness of contradiction, my ambivalence with regard to their freedom, my ambivalence with regard to my own. After all, I realize that learning happens only when persons choose to pose the questions, choose to gain the understanding that will empower them to see and say and hear and feel. (1987, p. 13)

Through dialogue with my students and through reflexive analysis, I gradually changed my metaphor. I no longer saw myself as the conductor but as one of the players, the first violinist. This new metaphor seemed more respectful, less manipulative. I might set the tone for the orchestra, but I was still one of the players, not the leader.

As part of this new metaphor I could no longer blithely accept that what had happened to me in Masset all those years ago was also happening for my students. Just because I had been transported by a powerful and repeatable experience did not mean that my students were similarly moved even if their words to me implied that they were. I knew I needed to look more deeply into the nature of what I called the aesthetic experience, to discover what that experience was really like for my students and how they

valued it. That meant that my comfortable conviction that all was well and that things had been moving along nicely in the classroom had to be challenged by a close examination of the nature of the experiences that a number of my graduates described. This desire to challenge my practice, and to seek more fully for the truth, the reality as the students knew and felt it, must inform my methodology. However, another necessary step intervened. What did other writers, philosophers, teachers have to say about aesthetics and the aesthetic experience?

Literature Search

Although I had studied philosophy and taught courses in it at high school, I had done little reading in aesthetics, and what reading I had done convinced me that it was perhaps the most difficult and abstruse of all branches of philosophy. "Aesthetics...is a conceptual philosophical study,...Aesthetics we come to understand better by thinking about the arts and other aesthetic objects and the language and concepts relevant to them" (Reid, 1973, p. 166). Further, Reid says, "philosophy (and aesthetics) is obstinate and persistent questioning: there is no final full stop" (p. 167). However, the purpose of this review is to look at the language used to discuss the aesthetic experience and aesthetic encounters with art.

There are certain terms used to describe interaction with art. In order to make more clear what it is that I am looking for in my conversations with students I will review some of the different viewpoints held with respect to the terms aesthetic experience, aesthetic encounter, aesthetic pleasure and connoisseur. These are terms to which I will add my own definitions.

Aesthetic experience is one of the most frequently used expressions in talk about art. It may be used to describe the encounter or interaction with art. It is frequently used to describe either a cognitive or an affective experience with art.

The main emphasis in describing the aesthetic experience has been on the cognitive dimension.

Western philosophy only sporadically investigated humans' relationship to beautiful objects until about two and a half centuries ago. It is fair to say that the main area of inquiry in Western philosophy has been the development of the cognitive dimensions of human consciousness--the study and the justification of the rational processes of the mind. (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990, p. 5)

Two other prominent writers, Harold Osborne and Ruth Saw, explain that "the view that appreciation is primarily a cognitive act rather than an emotional response seems to be true" (19, p. 31).

In The Art of Seeing, Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson, in the most comprehensive research to date on aesthetic experience, interviewed a number of museum professionals about that experience. They reported that "95 percent of the museum professionals made references to the intellectual or cognitive dimensions of the experience. Just over half saw the intellectual aspect as primary" (1990, p. 41). One of the subjects they interviewed observed that even among such sophisticated viewers "there are many art historians who don't have aesthetic experiences. They respond to objects intellectually, but they often aren't moved by the beauty of a work of art" (1990, p. 151). The cognitive dimension of aesthetic encounter represents one pole of the aesthetic experience.

The opposite pole is the feeling or emotional dimension of the aesthetic experience. This pole contains within it everything from simple pleasure to emotional experiences approaching the intensity of a mystical moment. L. A. Reid (1973) describes aesthetic pleasure. "It is only through intensely active attention to the aesthetically meaningful forms of art that aesthetic 'pleasure' arises" (Reid, 1973, p. 176).

Susan Langer comments that "the aesthetic experience is different from any other, the attitude toward works of art is a highly special one, the characteristic response is an entirely separate emotion, something more than common enjoyment" (1953, p. 36).

Ralph Smith, one of the foremost commentators on aesthetic education holds that "Aesthetic experience is both euphoric and exhilarating, serene and contemplative" (1989, p. 200). In Smith's view, both the cognitive and emotional aspects of aesthetic experience are combined in art. "Aesthetic experience...stimulates the senses and provides insight which is to say that it is both affective and cognitive" (1989, p. 201). I think this recognition of the importance of both cognition and emotion in the interaction with works of art is important; a fuller discussion of this point will be made in the conclusion of this thesis.

There is another, more extreme position with respect to the aesthetic experience. It is beautifully expressed by that gentle and reclusive poet Emily Dickinson.

If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head was taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. (Bianchi, 1930, p. 276)

Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson provide two transcript descriptions that illustrate this type of aesthetic experience.

When I see works that come close to my heart, that I think are really fine, I have the strangest reaction which is not always exhilaration, it is sort of like being hit in the stomach. Feeling a little nauseous. It's just this completely overwhelming feeling. (1990, p. 35)

Another of the individuals interviewed talks about a transcendent experience that:

takes you out of the realm of everyday life. You lose the sense of where you are and become absorbed in the object....It's not common experience, it doesn't happen that often. (1990, p. 69).

This moment, that for me is completely overwhelming, I intend to describe as the aesthetic experience. Some of my students and a number of adults who are quite deeply involved in the arts have described the aesthetic experience as something nearly sublime. Often sophisticated people confess that words fail them when they attempt to describe the intensity of emotions and sensations that they associate with the aesthetic experience.

Gentler expressions of feeling associated when people experience works of art I am going to describe as aesthetic pleasure. This is not to denigrate aesthetic pleasure. It is by far the most common result of encounters with art and is very gratifying. "Aesthetic experiences are intrinsically valuable in that

they are liked, or enjoyed or desired" (Beardsley, 1958, p. 540). Csikszentmihalyi describes aesthetic pleasure as an autotelic experience "that is, one that contains its goal in itself..."(1990, p. 7). Therefore aesthetic pleasure is generally viewed by writers and by me as in itself a worthwhile part of aesthetic encounter.

Aesthetic encounter is the last of the terms using the word aesthetic that I wish to clarify.

In contrast to how we acquire knowledge in the other domains, in the domain of art we require *both* encounter with art itself (the art statements themselves) and encounter with the language of art criticism: the critical language about art. (Chambers, 1989, p. 12)

An encounter with a work of art may result in aesthetic pleasure; it may stimulate the intellect, and on rare occasions it may lead to an aesthetic experience.

The final definition, that again will be emphasised at the conclusion of this thesis, is that of the connoisseur or of "connoisseurship" as Elliot Eisner (1976, p. 335) calls it. "The expert critic is one who can sense this amplitude and fineness of value more quickly and surely than the ordinary man" (Broudy, 1960, p. 317). James Zigerell talks of the connoisseur as one who is interested "in mastering a method of close reading that opens the door on the aesthetic experience" (1969, p. 487). Other writers use synonyms for connoisseur, but the idea is the same. (Parsons, 1984; Greene, 1978; Smith, 1968).

Research Question

My research question is, what is the aesthetic experience like for my students? To answer this question I want to know, how does the experience feel? What are the sensations experienced? Do these high school students have trouble articulating the aesthetic experience? And finally, how important is readiness in enabling students to experience aesthetically?

CHAPTER 2

Methodology

As I thought more about my research question I decided to do what Max Van Manen calls a phenomenological, hermeneutic study because pedagogy requires "a phenomenological sensitivity to lived experience (Children's realities and life worlds)," and "a hermeneutic ability to make interpretive sense of the phenomena of the lifeworld in order to see the pedagogic significance of situations and relations living with children" (1990, p. 2). The interview with each student is phenomenological in so far as it is "attentive to how things appear, it wants to let things speak for themselves." It is hermeneutic because there is "no such thing as uninterpreted phenomena" (1990, p. 180). Using the students' words, which I attempted to let flow unimpeded, I as researcher endeavoured to interpret them in light of the aesthetic experience. The manner in which the students' words were elicited was in the form of a conversation.

To conduct a conversation requires first of all that the partners to it do not talk at cross purposes. Hence its necessary structure is that of question and answer. (Gadamer, 1975, p. 330)

So we, my students and I, have a conversation in which I as the questioner try to bring into the open the idea of aesthetic experience as the students understand it, and as I am able to interpret and understand their experience.

A conversation is a process of two people understanding each other. Thus it is characteristic of every true conversation that each opens himself to the other

person, truly accepts his point of view as worthy of consideration and gets inside the other to such an extent that he understands not a particular individual, but what he says. The thing that has to be grasped is the objective rightness or otherwise of his opinion, so that they can agree with each other on the subject. (Gadamer, 1975 p. 347)

Terry Carson describes what he calls a "hermeneutic conversation" which "has been particularly attractive, both because of its richness and because it is a friendly and natural form of intercourse which allows for an easy exchange of experience" (1986, p. 81). By the simple act of "asking someone to participate in an interview, we are thus in a sense extending an invitation to conversation" (Weber, 1986, p. 65).

In a conversation I taped with Doug who writes poetry I was able to begin to understand what the aesthetic experience meant to him.

D: I think the first time I really said, "wow this is incredible, this is beautiful," was when I was fourteen, and I was just walking along the promenade along West Bay. I just looked out over the water and there was the ocean, the rocks and the seagulls and the way the light hit the water and the arbutus tree behind me and all this was just beautiful for some reason. And when I began to think about it, that's when I felt the spear through the heart. I thought I was having a heart attack. You know what's happening to me, and that's when I started becoming really religious, not religious in the sense that I started going to church or started believing in a god who rewards and punishes and has lightning bolts and things like that, but just my thoughts about pantheism, began to emerge.

Through such conversations as the one I had with Doug, I

tried to answer my research question, and to do it as a cooperative venture in which I as researcher and my students deepened our understanding. Carson says that "conversational research does offer the possibility of developing a community of cooperative investigation into significant educational questions" (1986, p. 83). Mishler talks about interviewer and participant as being "research collaborators" (1986, p. 126). I think that has happened through my research interviews. From the conversations I have deepened my understanding of what the aesthetic experience was like for my students. That deepening in turn will affect my practice. For my former students I hope the conversations have helped to focus and enlarge their understanding and appreciation of the aesthetic experience.

Procedure

From this point on I will talk about interviews although in the context of this thesis, interview and conversation are interchangeable. Initially, I interviewed eight students who had graduated just two or three months before. I selected these eight because I thought, based on earlier conversations, that they had an idea of the aesthetic experience. Most of the interviews were conducted at the students' homes, although two were at Esquimalt School, and one was at a restaurant. The interviews averaged around forty minutes. Part of the interview was devoted to chat. I talked with the students informally before the tape recorder was switched on. For both the student and myself the chat renewed our acquaintance and, I hope, eased us into the conversation.

The interview usually started with light conversation and moved into a dialogue about the nature of poetry and aesthetics. At this point I began recording. I wanted the interview to be a conversation about the idea of aesthetics and the student's thoughts about the emotional nature of the experience. During the interview, when I detected myself leading the student to a conclusion or admission that might be designed to please me, I made sure to challenge the response.

The important thing is to be aware of one's own bias, so that the text may present itself in all its newness and thus be able to assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings. (Gadamer, 1975 p. 238)

Gadamer is speaking of texts in the broadest sense and includes in

them conversation. The students know me well since I taught them English 10, English 12 and Literature 12, and have not been surprised by my cautioning. What good would it do me to get the answer I want, at the expense of what the student really thinks and feels? When we both felt we had said all that needed to be said, I shut off the recorder. Then we talked about other things.

After the interviews I listened to the tapes and transcribed those conversations to form the basis of my thesis. I listened for the kind of enthusiasm and phraseology that indicates that a person has had an aesthetic experience. Max van Manen explains the importance of searching idiomatic phrases. "Ordinary language is in some sense a huge reservoir where the incredible variety of richness of human experience is deposited" (1984, p. 54). This richness is shown in the words of Doug who described the aesthetic experience. It was for him as it had been for John Keats, "Like a knife through the heart." Words and phrases that represent strong emotion, these are the things that I believe indicate that a student has a feeling for the aesthetic experience. "The point is not that one blindly collects a multitude of linguistic items associated somehow with the phenomenon, but that one reflectively holds on to the verbal manifestations that appear to possess interpretive significance for the actual phenomenological description" (van Manen, 1984, p. 55). The transcriptions and the student's own words, I think, enabled me to reflect on the

phenomenon of the aesthetic experience. I had too of course, the visual cues and the intonation of the voice to further guide my judgement in understanding the students' talk about the aesthetic experience.

Some of the questions I asked students were: How did you experience aesthetics as a child and what does an aesthetic experience mean to you now? When did you become aware of the aesthetic experience? What are the feelings, emotions and sensations that you associate with the aesthetic experience of poetry? Do you have difficulty talking about it? These questions led me to their stories, their lived experience.

Out of it all I have tried to relate their stories, their view of the phenomenon we call the aesthetic experience and to deepen my understanding of that experience. Carson suggests a "hermeneutic conversation" occurs when the "participants in the conversation seek to deepen their understanding of the topic of conversation itself" (1986, p. 76). I used parts of each conversation to show how each student talks about the aesthetic experience. I examined excerpts from the student's transcripts so that the thoughts and ideas of one student are presented before the next is dealt with. As I quote from the transcripts I will comment on the language, the phraseology and what these show about how students understand the aesthetic experience. Their stories and the talk from our tape recorded sessions form a rich tapestry which helps

to illustrate the question: What is the aesthetic experience like for my students?

Another Step in the Process

Two years after I interviewed my former students I transcribed the tapes. I had listened to them a number of times, and on a few occasions I had talked to those same students often touching on the topic of aesthetics and the aesthetic experience. Of the original eight students interviewed, I selected five for this study. After several reviews of the tapes, I could not be sure that the other three had really had an aesthetic experience. The five remaining students were fairly typical in personality, talent and intellectual ability of graduates from a program for the academically gifted that was located at Esquimalt Secondary School in Victoria. Michelle was working, Melissa, Camilla and Doug were at the University of Victoria, Ryan was studying music at McGill. Camilla and Doug were studying the humanities with a probable major in English; Melissa was planning a career in molecular biology. While these young people may not represent a cross section of high school graduates, they were fairly typical of the kind of students I taught.

After transcribing the tapes in their entirety, complete with umms, ahs, um hums and repetitions I began to search carefully for the kinds of expressions and observations that I felt indicated that the students were talking about an aesthetic experience. They were there, but with the exception of Doug who described his aesthetic experiences as "like a spear through my heart" most

of the talk was hesitant. The students often commented on how hard it was to talk about the feelings or sensations associated with the emotional aspect of their aesthetic experience. As I read and reread, reflected and talked about the transcripts I began to think how difficult it was to make a convincing case that they indeed had had, as they themselves believed, an aesthetic experience of an intense kind. More and more I questioned whether I had in fact conditioned most of them to the point where they believed that something had happened. This concern might be resolved by doing a follow up interview.

After transcribing the last of the tapes and reading them over I made the decision to do that second interview; the students were two years older and had been out of school and away from my influence for all of that time. I reasoned that any conditioning I had done as their teacher should be somewhat mitigated after two years. Also, I was alarmed by how much talking I had done in the first interviews. There were times when I was transcribing that I said aloud to the tape, "for Gods sake shut up and let the students talk. Be patient, give them a chance to be silent while they collect their thoughts." Even though I had considerable experience with interviewing I learned much more about the process by transcribing those tapes. I determined in the coming interviews to remain silent and let the students talk. As soon as I made the decision to do a follow-up

interview, I felt a flood of relief. Now I would have a chance to confirm what the students had said in their first interview.

Ryan was the first student I phoned; he agreed to an interview the following day. He greeted me, looking fit and happy, on the driveway of his parents' house in Gordon Head. We chatted about his studies in music and the direction those studies were taking which was quite different from the focus on jazz studies with which he had started. Before we began the interview, Ryan talked animatedly about his aesthetic experiences of the past two years. I was becoming more and more excited as I listened to the words he used, and I marvelled at how much more articulate and precise he was. At one point Ryan mentioned that I was lucky to get him at home at all. I asked him why. "Well" he said, "I got home last night from Montreal about fifteen minutes before you called and I'm going away tomorrow camping for two weeks." Since I was departing for England within a week for the rest of the summer, I realized he was right. Being able to interview Ryan, who had been the student with whom I had started the interviews, at the only moment when the two of us would be in Victoria, seemed to be a marvellous example of what Jung calls synchronicity--an event that is more important and fortuitous than simple coincidence and that also defies rational explanation. The interview seemed to confirm that the tentative expressions of an aesthetic experience that Ryan had described

two years before were authentic.

Next I interviewed Melissa, the second of my original group. Over the phone Melissa told me that she had done no reading so I thought that perhaps she would not remember or be able to confirm her former aesthetic experiences. I went to see her with some trepidation. When we met, Melissa was apologetic for not having read much literature, but she did describe an aesthetic experience she had while reading Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind* a few months earlier. Toward the end of the interview I asked Melissa if I could read her, or if she would read herself, Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind*. I remembered from our first interview that she described an intense aesthetic experience with this poem, and I thought there was a chance that she might have one again. After I read the poem to her, I looked up to ask her how she felt. Melissa looked surprised and withdrawn, and I could tell that something had happened. Asking her questions seemed like an intrusion into something private so I waited a while. After a few moments Melissa told me that she had experienced the same feelings of two years before, but this time she was able to describe them vividly.

I went home elated. The rightness of my decision to go ahead with that second interview was confirmed. In those two intervening years some real growing had occurred in my former students and they were now able to talk about their aesthetic

experiences with a clarity and vitality that had been lacking in the first interview. It was later while I was explaining to my thesis advisor, Antoinette Oberg, that she said, "it seems as if you've had an aesthetic experience with these second interviews." I reflected on her comment and realized that it was not an aesthetic experience I had had, but aesthetic pleasure. I had thought about my thesis for so long, I had read about it, talked about it, written about it and of course analyzed it, that the relief of seeing it coming together, the enthusiasm of my former students, lead me to that feeling of delight and excitement. This pleasure lasted for quite a long time and still comes back to me as I write this.

In order to give the full effect of each paired interview, I will write about each student separately so that the reader may get to know a little about how that person thinks about the aesthetic experience. To make my thesis question more clear I also talk with the students about the difficulty of articulating the aesthetic experience especially in high school, and what part readiness and maturity play in enabling an individual to have an aesthetic experience. For the sake of clarity, I have omitted most of the umms, and ahs, the hesitations, repetitions and false starts except where they show more clearly the thinking processes of the students. These omissions are not intended to change the meaning of what students say, but they do make understanding simpler.

A final point, Melissa was the second person I interviewed. As with Ryan, I handed her the transcription of the first interview expecting her to glance at it and read it later at her leisure. However, she took twenty minutes and read it over completely. Once we began the taping, I realized that Melissa had quite a complete grasp of the first interview, and that this understanding enhanced the whole conversation. For the final three interviews I had each person read over the transcript completely.

Ryan

Ryan is a good looking young man with an open countenance and a ready smile. His classmates admired him for his extraordinary piano playing. The jazz studies teacher thought Ryan was one of the most talented young musicians he had met in a long career. Ryan had played successfully in national and international jazz festivals; he had recently returned from one in Switzerland. He had a scholarship to McGill to carry on with his jazz studies. The interview took place in his parents' Gordon Head home.

After a brief chat I turned the tape recorder on and said to Ryan, "I'll start off by saying what is aesthetics to you or the aesthetic experience?" Ryan's response took me off guard. He said, "Can you define the word aesthetics for me?" I had not expected after so much classroom discussion such hesitancy on his part. However, I hoped he was being careful so I asked

BB: Do you have a sense of what it means?

Ry: I keep forgetting.

BB: O.K. Well.

Ry: To me , from what I understand the word is your sense of feeling something, such as art work or, something other that gets beyond the analytical part of it. Is that right?

This was more hopeful although I could see that Ryan was hesitant and wanted to let me lead him. We talked about painting, and Ryan admitted that he had no real knowledge or appreciation of painting. But he did recognize that he was

becoming expert in the study of jazz. He talked about Bill Evans whose work he particularly liked.

Ry: Well when I hear the great ones play, I hear not so much the individual notes they're playing--I can sit down and analyze it and say well this guy played this, this, that and the other and then after a couple of playbacks I can play it on the piano, but with the really good ones, I stop thinking about what actual notes they're playing, and I just listen to-- well I consider it their voice coming through their fingers in the keys. And its really interesting; this is a bit of an aside, a piano can have one voice or ten or twelve voices; so I consider it their voice, and I start listening to that, and say whoever it is, Bill Evans, some of his earlier work appeals to me better now. I hear his deep introspection and his almost sadness. Reminds me a lot of a poem called "Dover Beach" and then when I listen to someone like Thelonius Monk, I hear his creativeness and his inventiveness and his humour--there's this one song he recorded called "Just a Gigolo" and that is so funny to listen to--just so funny.

Ryan seemed to be talking about the ideas in the music, the humour but I was not sure he was talking about what I would call the aesthetic experience. I asked, "so Ryan, you're talking about what you hear a lot of the time, and your understanding, but I want to ask you again, what is it you feel, the feeling?" The following conversation occurred.

Ry: The feeling.

BB: Not the sound but the feeling that goes through you when you hear this music as you say played by the great ones.

Ry: Well, when I listen to a ballad, for instance-- there's one that I like by Louise Rose that she recorded, called "My Foolish Heart," when that's over I always stop it before the audience comes in with the clapping because that really

destroys my mood.

BB: Um hum.

Ry: You know after the ballad, and sometimes after I play it, I get the same feeling. Like when I play late at night I play something really slowly, and then I finish and there's no sound because you can't hear the cars with the windows shut. The feeling is well how do you describe feelings? It's really peaceful and warm and do you know, you've heard of the term a loud silence.

BB: An oxymoron.

Ry: Yeah, well that's what it's like, because there's no more sound; I've stopped the tape or I've stopped playing and there's no sound but, there's certainly, how shall we say, inner sound which you can hear.

BB: Um hum.

Ry: And maybe feel's a better word for that.

At last I believed Ryan was talking about the feeling dimension of the aesthetic experience. It seemed to me that "inner sound" was a term that carried a deeper sense of feeling about the music.

A little later Ryan expressed another feeling.

Ry: Well when I hear someone playing and I really enjoy it, an exhilaration that I get.

The use of the word exhilaration was perhaps the strongest language that Ryan had yet used. A little later I asked Ryan if he had any similar experience or feelings about poetry. Ryan mentioned "The Tiger" by William Blake.

Ry: I read that poem in grade eight and I hated it hated it, hated it; I couldn't stand to hear it, and of course everybody recited it. Because it was easy to remember because there was so much repetition. And then when I read it when I was studying, I got the goose bumps and the chills. And I really enjoyed it; and I had never felt that before; that is I guess the first one

that had that happen.

BB: And when it happened did you think to yourself this is weird, this has never happened before?

Ry: Oh yeah, yeah, that had never happened; I don't even think, well that's, that's even rare for a piece of music. It's really strong. Yeah.

BB: Yeah. Do you know why you felt that way about it?

Ry: No. You know, "Tiger tiger burning bright in the forests of the night what immortal hand or eye, dare frame thy fearful symmetry;" I dunno. When I read that "dare frame" there was some power in there.

BB: In the words themselves?

Ry: Yeah. There was, there was power and it almost moved me back physically. And that was really exciting because I thought well hey, now I know what this guy's talking about. You've been standing there all year telling me this is possible, and that was just in June I think.

When Ryan said about the poem that "it almost moved me back physically" I was convinced that he was really talking clearly about the power of the aesthetic experience. The expressions, "goose bumps" and "chills" as physical sensations were to be repeated by all the students I interviewed.

We talked about other poets, Matthew Arnold and John Donne, both of whom moved Ryan. We talked also of maturity and readiness. Ryan mentioned that it was only within the past few months that he had felt the aesthetic experience and when it occurred it happened with music and poetry within a few days. We ended the interview and Ryan played some of his favourite pieces for me.

The Second Interview

Ryan met me at his home in Gordon Head. It was obvious that he had matured both physically and mentally. He seemed so much more poised, relaxed and confident. We sat in the living room and chatted for quite a time. He told me he had gone through a crisis the previous summer when he had decided to drop his jazz studies at McGill and concentrate on computer applications in music. He would then have training in computers and music, especially classical. Before I had a chance to begin the tape, Ryan talked with great energy of his aesthetic experiences with classical music; he used the term "transported" to describe the feelings.

Ry: Well, my attitude has changed significantly since then, because of my forced studies. I was forced to do a paper in history survey class on Mozart and his piano concertos. I learned to really, really enjoy it. Just the overall texture itself and the intellectual parts of the way he writes. You know he does some neat things which are interesting to an analytical mind I would say. But beyond that there are parts of his music, that just move me, move me on the inside rather than tell my mind that oh hey this is neat to listen to. As I was saying to you earlier, the second movement of his slow movement of his last piano concerto was like that. I was sitting in a library and while I was listening to it, even the first time, I was totally oblivious to anything else going on around me. And I couldn't see or hear anybody else even though I had my eyes open, and could still hear things through the head phones. And the work was a peaceful work and it made me feel that way, but it was like being transported somewhere else, but I was still physically there. It wasn't what you call an out of body

experience because I was still there. But it was definitely not what you study in the classroom, and it's not something that you can be told to find.

The use of "oblivious" and "transported" seemed to express more surely the aesthetic experience than anything Ryan had said in the first interview.

Later he described another experience in listening to a piece by Verdi.

Ry: It was at this point that I could feel the chills going up my spine, and lifting my hair on end, and the words at that point were Latin and "free me lord from eternal death and tremendous terror," and it's something that had been repeated thousands of times before in the piece, but that moment, every single time we played it, like clockwork, it made me shudder inside. You know it was so tremendously terrifying that every time there was a physical reaction. The shivering of the spine and the, the pulling of the top of the head which I talked about, and that was very gratifying.

BB: Would you call that an aesthetic experience?

Ry: Oh, absolutely.

BB: Yeah, so would I.

Ry: That's, that's one of the most powerful, and I would say it's more basic because of the real involvement, than say I have at the Mozart

BB: So there are levels of the aesthetic experience, levels of feeling of intensity?

Ry: Oh, yes, and, this is very intense, very powerful and like I said, it was very regular. Every time we did that, even in rehearsal, that would happen, and even if I think about it with a calm state of mind, so I'm not just passing over it, the same thing will happen.

BB: O.K. let me ask you...when you described your experience with Blake's "The Tiger" you used some of the same phraseology, about chills. Would there be a similarity in that kind of experience with the Blake's Tiger?

Ry: Yes, it was close to the same feeling. The

Blake's "Tiger" was not as fearful. It was not as charged. I mean Verdi's *Requiem* is all about dying and going to hell. And he makes that very, very scary.

Here was as strong a statement of the feeling level in music and poetry as I have heard from anyone.

I asked Ryan why it had been so difficult to articulate this two years earlier.

Ry: Well to start off with, there's an incredible language barrier...about how to express your feelings anyway.

BB: You mean the limitations of language?

Ry: Yes. Aside from that one of the difficulties that I think I had was not knowing what was going on. I think I spoke about in the piece. Before I was mature enough to understand things and to enjoy them then nothing would happen. But when I became mature enough to understand things and to get a feeling from them; quite often in the first times that happened I would not know that anything of interest or of note was going on. Does that make sense?

BB: Does that mean even if you were having an aesthetic experience you weren't sure you were?

Ry: That's correct.

BB: Yeah. So you could, and in fact were having experiences because we talked about them but you weren't very clear about what they were.

Ry: That's correct.

BB: And now you are.

Ry: More so, yes.

BB: Yeah. O.K. and what makes the difference?

Ry: I have no idea. (we both laugh)

BB: That's not what you're supposed to say.

After this amusing interchange Ryan and I talked about the feeling of awe that is often associated with the aesthetic experience.

Ry: What does it feel like? (long pause) Well, you know I've thought about this sort of because,

when it happens I'd like to know hey what's going on here? And the best way I could describe it in the English language that I can think of right now is that it feels to me like I would imagine being moved by a very large mass very slowly. I know that sounds like something someone might say after a drug trip, but that's sort of what it feels like. There's this inner sense of motion, of something that is very, very weighty, and forceful, but not crushing.

BB: That's awe?

Ry: In a sense yes. I can be awed by the skill when last summer I played some of the pieces by Beethoven that I had in some of my anthologies and compared them to some of the pieces that I have by say Scarlatti. I was awed with how skilfully Beethoven worked. Because at that point I had taken a course in basic harmony principles, and I was awed by the skill at which he could move the notes, and how easy he made all this very difficult stuff look. But the awe that I get after an aesthetic experience is not like that. It's something very ethereal and transporting.

Again we talked of the difficulty of explaining a feeling experience. Ryan gave an interesting example.

Ry: Well articulation of it is always very hard. I listened to the Walstein Piano Sonata by Beethoven with one of my friends, and we only listened to the exposition which is the first part of the movement, and we both had the same response which was, wow, and that was very awe inspiring as well.

BB: That you both had it? Or the movement?

Ry: The work itself. The feeling it gave. Once again because of the nature of the piece it's a different feeling than say the Mozart or the Vaughn Williams. After we finished listening to it and were forming our opinions on it, the words don't come easily. It's not something that you can articulate that simply because we were saying things like "wow that was neat" and "gee I like that" and maybe we even got to "oh that moved me a lot." But beyond that it's very hard to say things unless you comment on the mood

of the piece. And that, that gets closer, but it's not the same thing.

BB: But there was something deeper happening that you weren't articulating.

Ry: Oh, that's correct.

BB: Right.

Ry: Absolutely. That's one of the most wonderful works I've ever heard.

We ended the interview after this, but I was confident that Ryan had both described vividly his aesthetic experiences and explained the difficulty that people have in talking about those feelings. The second interview consolidated the ideas of the first and made them much more comprehensible.

Melissa

Melissa is a very bright, attractive and pleasant young lady. Because she is positive, likeable and responsive, she is every teacher's dream of what a student should be. She has an interesting habit of turning up her sentences at the end as though asking a question rather than stating a fact; Melissa seems to be seeking confirmation of her thoughts with this kind of response. The interview took place in her parent's home not far from Spectrum School.

As with Ryan, I began by asking her if she was clear about the meaning of aesthetics and the aesthetic experience. Melissa had been in the senior choir where they had been intensely involved with music; they had competed widely and successfully. Melissa's first words about aesthetics were, "it is very difficult to put into words. Aesthetics to me are things, I don't know. Would you say aesthetics is a feeling about something?" We talked further about music and her experiences with it. I asked her:

BB: What do you feel? What are the sensations, could you describe those for me?

Mel: It's hard to say what I feel. It's sort of a sense. I don't know; almost it's kind of a rush in a way. Like, I don't know I can't think of an example. Like falling in love. It's a really happy feeling. I can't think of the right words.

Here again, Melissa was feeling the frustration of a lack of language, but in the word "rush" I felt was the essence of the

aesthetic experience.

We talked about the difference in the experience of music now and a few years previously.

BB: Would you say the emotional experiences, the rush is quite different now than your experiences of five or six years ago?

Mel: Yes I would say they are, definitely.

BB: Qualitatively different as opposed to...?

Mel: Yeah. Before I don't know if I would have even gotten a rush. In some types of music, I'm not sure...I think it has a lot to do with knowing more about what makes the music; I'm not sure.

BB: I was interested in what you were saying. I was saying is it qualitatively different compared to say four or five years ago, and you just said maybe it has something to do with just knowing what makes the music.

Mel: Yeah, I think it definitely is, different in quality, there's, lets see. Before I would listen to music but I don't think I actually got an aesthetic experience from it; I enjoyed it and I really loved it, but it wasn't something that I would say oh, wow, this is really fantastic, because I didn't know what was really fantastic. I'd think oh, wow, that was really good. I would never be absolutely...it's really hard to say.

Although Melissa was still experiencing difficulty with language, I felt that she had a good grasp of the difference knowledge and a few years make in readying a person for the aesthetic experience.

Next we turned to the subject of poetry.

BB: Now let me talk about poetry. And I'll ask you have you ever had an aesthetic experience with a poem?

Mel: I think so. When I was doing my paper on Percy Shelly, and I was reading a lot of his poetry, and when I read *Ode to the West Wind*, I really loved it. And that was the first time that I had actually felt strongly about a poem. Before it was just something that had to be

done. I really didn't analyze it and whatever. Every once in a while I would read a poem, and I'd think--oh, that's kind of neat--or, I really like that. But never something that I felt really strongly about. But with two of his poems--I can't remember the name of the other one--I really felt strongly about them.

Interestingly, Melissa's aesthetic experience came again while she was cramming for exams.

Mel: Actually when I reread it, it may have been because I was cramming all the information into my brain, and I was just going through and reading everything and after a while I think I almost became immune to the poetry. I wasn't really reading it, I wasn't really interpreting it or thinking about it.

BB: It was mechanical.

Mel: Yeah, so I think I would have probably prevented myself from having any sort of experience, but when I reread Ode I took my time with it. I wanted to read it slowly, and I read it out loud.

BB: Um hum. And how was it?

Mel: Oh, it was the same as before. It was still really beautiful. I still got a rush out of it I guess.

These statements seemed to indicate that indeed Melissa had had an aesthetic experience with poetry. She said that her aesthetic experiences with both music and poetry were quite recent.

Mel: It's probably just been in the last year and a half that I felt really strongly about music. Like it's just some things blow me away I guess.

Expressions like "rush" and "blow me away" in the language of students are indicators of strong feelings. I felt that they showed Melissa clearly understood the aesthetic experience.

had been so immersed in sciences that I had to read some good literature and I ended up buying W.O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind*, which I told you about earlier. And there was one passage in it, the descriptions he used, or the imagery, I don't know, I think you used the word imagery. Well, describing how this little boy felt when he was sitting in the middle of his garden, and he looked at this flower for the first time and just all of a sudden it just came to him; he realized how beautiful this flower was, and he looked down at his puppy with his ears turned inside out, and that passage in the book, it was just one very short paragraph, that was, as I read it I just felt this incredible surge, like just rush of emotions and almost to the point of tears. And I'm not sure if maybe I had a similar experience as a child (laughs) and something in it brought that back to me or if it was an aesthetic experience, cause the hair on the back of my neck rose and everything, it was just a really touching passage.

Here was a much stronger statement of feeling than Melissa's more tentative descriptions of our first interview. Although I have left in all the hesitations and repetitions of her speech listening again to the tape I am struck by the intensity of her description and the absolute clarity that her words conveyed when they were listened to rather than read.

A little later Melissa explained how a rush felt.

Mel: Happiness is a word that comes to mind, also sort of flutter, you know the fluttery feeling in the stomach, like rereading this transcript I said sounds like falling in love. But in a way I guess it is because, just because of that sort of excitement that, maybe not even knowing why you feel that way at that time.

I then asked her why we had so much difficulty talking about this in our first interview.

BB: Why is it so hard for us to talk about, why was it hard? I think we had difficulty here. I had difficulty. You did I think.

Mel: Oh, yeah, definitely. I don't know; I think it's probably due to the limitations of the English language maybe. Just because there isn't, I, I find it really difficult to find words to describe that feeling. I don't know. It's almost like, you have a sense, you know exactly what you're trying to say, but you just can't put it into words, and I think that's probably just due to the fact that there aren't the right words maybe.

I thought this was an apt description of the difficulties we have with language when we are trying to talk about aesthetic feelings, sometimes any feelings.

A sudden inspiration took me and I asked Melissa if she would let me read Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind* to her. Or would she like to read it herself? She said she would like me to read it. I turned the tape recorder off and read the poem. Then I switched the recorder on again. I looked at Melissa's face after I had read the poem; she was almost pale and very still. I had hoped that she might react to the poem but the intensity of her facial expression still surprised me. It seemed like an intrusion to ask her questions so I waited; it was a few minutes before she spoke.

Mel: It still affects me in the same way.

BB: It does does it?

Mel: Yeah, especially the last stanza. The line "make me thy lyre even as the forest is", it's a very powerful poem.

BB: So what's the effect?

Mel: Just what we talked about, fluttery stomach, my hands were just shaking (laughs) I don't know it's such a beautiful poem.

BB: And you really, feel, you'd call that the aesthetic experience?

Mel: I would yeah. I feel sort of flushed and

BB: I can see that yeah. It's almost an intrusion it seems to me for me to ask you the questions. It takes away from your experience. I don't experience things when I read them aloud and I'm as conscious of my reading to someone else as I am when I'm by myself. But I felt it, I got a shiver in my palms and up my arms and a contraction.

Mel: Yeah. It's kind of neat that it still affects me in the same way even though I haven't read it for almost two years, probably more than two years.

BB: The rush too?

Mel: Um hum. I think it's mostly due to the beautiful imagery he uses in that poem. I can see as he said, especially in the last stanza. I think it's the imagery that makes it.

Even our confusion and the words tumbling over themselves seemed to emphasize the powerful feelings we had both experienced from my reading of Shelley's poem. As with Ryan, I felt that the second interview validated Melissa's early attempts to explain what the aesthetic experience had been like for her.

in the past. I know the first feeling you get is one of floating, one of just exploring and beginning to understand what the poem is.

A little later Michelle was talking about the experience she had with Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night."

Mic: Yeah, yeah but that feeling is definitely there. And it hits me, almost to the point where I don't think about the poem. Like I just feel with it. And I know what you mean by that welling sensation because it's almost as if....it's like getting lost almost, but, for me anyway, it's like getting lost in the poem. And I'm not cognitive of anything that's going on around me or anything, and I just, I...it's very hard to explain.

BB: It's hard to talk about.

Mic: It's a feeling almost of, I guess maybe I don't know for me maybe emotions are more cognitive; I'm not too sure, but of ultimate just understanding. Like not in a mind sense, but in a heart sense, and just being able to feel many emotions at one time.

In looking back over this tape and the one I did with Ryan, I noticed that both of them talked about a kind of out of body experience. Ryan called it "transported" and Michelle said it was "like leaving yourself". As with the other students, Michelle commented on how hard it was to explain the experience.

One of Michelle's first aesthetic experiences was with Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*. Michelle was particularly moved by an exchange between Petruchio and Katerina.

Mic: She was talking about how unfair it was, and he wasn't listening to her at all, and she started to kind of be tricky with him and say, O.K., well if it's the moon it's the moon, if it's the sun, it's

the sun. And, I don't know why, but it was those phrases, and that was the first time I felt that. It wasn't that I was sensing her frustration or anything, it was just a really deep feeling. And it wasn't any trick of phrase or anything, it was

BB: So it was the beauty of the language.

Mic: Yeah, just the beauty

BB: Would that be right to say?

Mic: Yeah, I think so. It was the beauty of the language and the play between the two people. I was just really moved by it.

BB: Right.

Mic: I couldn't explain it.

We then turned to John Keat's "Ode to a Nightingale".

Mic: That one did it for me; it's really strong, I don't know maybe it's easier to explain music, because that's how I felt with what I was trying to say before about when I really had that experience with poetry. But just the way that he describes the nightingale and how it made him feel and that just blew me. I was silent for I think a good twenty minutes after that poem was read out.

For students of Michelle's age, "blew me" is perhaps the strongest phrase they can use to describe powerful feelings. I had heard many other students use similar phrases when talking about Keat's Odes.

When Michelle was seventeen she went on a school tour to France and I believe what she describes is Chartres Cathedral. Without any previous study of architecture Michelle was still overwhelmed.

Mic: It was when I was in France; I went into a church; it was in the middle of a tiny little city. And this church was just huge. And I knew that these things were built by hand. But this

was just incredible. The stone work on the outside was so intricate, and I didn't really notice it until I walked back out, because when I walked on the floor, all the tiles were little coloured pieces and they made a mosaic on the floor. There was a centre choir chamber, and the stone looked like lace, and it was meant to look like lace, and I knew it had been done by hand. And the front part was all painted on the ceiling. And again it was that spiralling feeling that I got. It just took my breath away, and there wasn't anything, but I could hear chanting.

Michelle was describing herself in the grip of powerful aesthetic feelings and I think clearly awed.

Mic: I knew that they had to do it by hand, and they were talking about how it took three hundred years to build the church. And it just awed me that generations of people were so dedicated to an ideal, to a belief that they would spend their lives building it, and make it so beautiful. Like it was incredible.

Throughout this description Michelle was so animated that her words poured out; it was as if she were reliving the experience. The sense of wonder, of awe that humans could create such monumental beauty was an aspect of the aesthetic experience for Michelle.

We talked about maturity and readiness to experience a thing aesthetically.

BB: The more I think about it, the more I think I couldn't bring a grade 10 kid to an aesthetic experience if I started in grade 8. There's something not yet ready in that grade 10 person. Even if we'd done it for three years.

Mic: Unless they'd done a lot of living. Like some grade 10's have had an extraordinary amount.

BB: So it's interesting. There's analysis that's necessary, but there's also life's experience,

there's also a kind of inner growing and emotional readiness because we know there are subtleties in learning that aren't just the incorporation of information, but the kind of absorption of ways of looking at things. I certainly see that in analysis. Analysis seems to be a contrived process, but finally becomes a natural process.

Mic: Definitely. I think also the process of analysis is necessary to induce almost the interest, in it. Because just taking the grade 8 average student for example, I don't think the interest in the poetry is there because the cognition of what's going on isn't there. So by the time you're in grade 10 with the analysis process you're beginning to understand what's being said in the poem. And then as the life's experience grows, I guess by grade 12, which seems to be the average time, the two come together allowing the aesthetic experience to occur.

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The Second Interview

Michelle was living in a very attractive house in Fairfield which she shared with her sister and another roommate. Her face had matured and she looked as if she was six or seven years older rather than just two. She was poised and relaxed when she greeted me at the door. On the phone she told me somewhat sadly that she had done no real reading of poetry and had put her education on hold. Before I turned the tape recorder on she informed me that she had not had any aesthetic experiences since she left school. After she had read the transcript we began to talk.

Mic: I can really connect with what I was saying from before. I still believe all the things that I said. I can't say that I've had one (aesthetic experience) since then, just because my school process has stopped, and the learning and growing has stopped so I haven't been investigating art or literature lately. It's not something I do every day, which I think you have to be a part of you constantly in order to have these experiences. I can remember very vividly, I think I've only ever had two in my life. The one that I had in the cathedral, sorry three. The one that I had in the cathedral. The one that I believe we all had up at Barklay Sound that night looking at the stars, and the third one, Dylan Thomas's poem.

I had forgotten that Michelle had once described what she felt had been an aesthetic experience with her fellow students camping in Barklay Sound. I was reassured to hear how positively she spoke of her earlier experiences.

I asked Michelle to recall those aesthetic experiences and

describe them for me.

Mic: Well all three had similar characteristics.

BB: O.K. tell me about those.

Mic: I lost feeling of my physical surroundings. It was like going either out of my body, far, far away, or deeply into my body. I guess either one is an unknown realm. Not being able to hear or feel the physical surrounding at all, and that spinning sensation. And then a feeling of floating, and feeling very close to something large, and being very awed by it. Understanding a force that you know works in your world but you never see it. And being in touch with that force, and almost kind of a hippy thing, being one with that force. And you're awed by it, you're a part of it. You're astounded by it. And it's just an incredible feeling. It is, it's a huge blow to your emotional system I think, to my emotional system, and it's many different emotions all in one. It's not a feeling of extreme ecstasy or extreme sorrow; it's both mixed together, and I think those feelings are what makes it seem so incredible. To know that you could feel so many things at once, from one thing.

I was startled by the intensity of her description so I said about these feelings.

BB: It seems to me you've described them with perfect clarity, as if you remember them vividly.

Mic: Oh, it's, I could never forget it. I think back on them and wish that all my experiences could be so intense. It's something that I will never forget. It's like a large event in my life. It's a pinnacle of experience.

Michelle expressed confidence that the aesthetic experiences would be repeated sometime in the future when she again embarked on what she called "learning and growing."

I wanted to know why she was able to talk so much more forcefully and clearly about the aesthetic experience when at the

time she was much less precise and articulate.

Mic: It's awful to say, but I think it's because I'm older. I am further away from the experience. I'm sure that any person couldn't describe the feelings that they had at being married two days after they were married, but ten or fifteen years after they've been married they can look back on that experience and describe it with clarity, about how they were feeling, and what they were thinking. I would assume that that's a feeling close to one of these experiences. I don't know for sure.

This seemed to me to be a remarkably astute observation. Life's experience which she had mentioned in our first interview and maturity had certainly enabled Michelle to explain herself simply and clearly. She had a further explanation about being able to talk about the aesthetic experience.

BB: So you're older, and you say you hate to say it, but that makes a difference. What is it about being older? What has happened? Is it just distance?

Mic: No, I think for me as I grow older, I know that it's not wrong to look within yourself and examine how you actually felt. I don't think that when you're younger you take time to look into yourself and find the words to describe how you are feeling and you are thinking that day. So an experience like this which is so incredible, it just is, and trying to explain it is very difficult because you don't, or I didn't have the tools back then to be able to do that.

BB: What do you mean by tools?

Mic: I'd never really stopped to ponder how I felt, so I didn't know how to explain it beyond "I feel happy today, I feel sad today." But now getting older there's just things that you have to do to figure out how you're feeling and what you want to do. You know there's been some major life decisions that I have had to make, and in order to make those life decisions I've had to look inside myself and describe to myself what I'm

thinking or feeling. Which makes describing an experience like this much easier because now the feelings that I have I can shape into words I guess is the best way to describe it.

BB: So language is there. Your life's experience, your knowledge, your language it's all come together, because I've noticed that with Ryan, and with Melissa and with you, each of you is so much more articulate about this subtle thing than you were two years ago. It's a different, it's like you've grown many, many years in a very short time.

Mic: Yeah, I think, well I know that I have definitely, yeah. I don't think age is a limitation for an aesthetic experience. I think maturity to describe that aesthetic experience or realize it as one is needed.

Michelle was very clear about this point, that maturity, life's experience and the closer examination of one's feelings made talking about the subtleties of the aesthetic experience much easier.

Michelle's made a final statement about the aesthetic experience.

Mic: You know an aesthetic experience kind of feels like all the parts that you appreciate in life come together and just find a way inside of you, and all of those parts carry you away. So it's just an overwhelming experience of all the things that you treasure or that you work hard to see, to understand come together as one and form that experience.

This unity of things coming together to form the aesthetic experience was a theme that the other students talked about. The unity was in itself transforming.

I was particularly pleased with my interview with Michelle because she of all the students had become most distant from

school and my influence. In my earlier interview with Michelle, I was still the teacher and she was my student. I said to her, "You're not a former student now, you're another person, an adult who has had experience in life and a point of view that has been shaped quite separate from my interaction with you." This distance made me realize that if in fact I had conditioned Michelle to think and speak about the aesthetic experience as she just had, then these thoughts had become part of her. She believed them and expressed them with the fervour of conviction.

Camilla

Camilla is a very striking young person. She dresses unusually but in a way that complements her appearance; she is very poised and her carriage and bearing are elegant. She distinguished herself in my literature class in two ways. First she got the top mark in Literature 12 in the province on the Government and Scholarship exams--100%. Second she has published some poetry, one poem that I consider to be quite brilliant and which moved me aesthetically. The first time I started the interview the radio nearby broadcast the start of the war in Kuwait and Iraq. We were both so depressed by this news that we decided to do the interview at a later time. This interview I conducted at Clover Point in a camping van.

We began our conversation by talking about Camilla's honours English program at the University of Victoria. Camilla is unusual in taking English as a major. Many students contemplate taking English but choose something else as Melissa did for practical and career reasons. We also talked about the role analysis plays in preparing a young person for an aesthetic experience. Then I asked:

BB: When did you start feeling poetry as opposed to just thinking about it in an abstract or intellectual kind of way? Or just saying gee isn't that pretty or I like that?

Cam: I'm trying to remember. I have a feeling that there was a specific poem that I once read that wasn't beautiful in the way I thought of poetry as normally being beautiful, but I still had the

same feelings as if it was. I think it might have been a Dylan Thomas. I'm not sure, it was probably in about Grade 9 or 10.

BB: But it struck you. How did that feel? What did you feel?

Cam: It was sort of stirring I guess. It had this kind of impact on me that was as if I was suddenly aware in a way that I hadn't been before. Even if I hadn't read it before, but if I had read it say three years earlier I wouldn't have had the same understanding exactly as I had.

The word stirring did not seem to me to be a strong statement of feeling, but Camilla was not given to extravagant statements either in her spoken or written work.

Next we talked about her own poem, "Golden Boy."

BB: And so now, making a big leap, when you do write poetry and you read it, I'm assuming that there are times when you just feel something quite profound for a poem.

Cam: Yeah.

BB: Could you describe that? That's something I really want to know about.

Cam: Sure. O.K. It happened when I was writing the "Golden Boy" and also when I reread it about two months later, after it had been published. It was just the most amazing feeling actually; it almost made me shiver. It was just really stirring I guess is still the word. Kind of electric. It made me feel a bit more alive and also a bit amazed when I reread it, that that was what I had written. Because it seemed, it wasn't just a part of me. Almost it seemed it was a separate thing.

I found this an intriguing idea, that an artist could have an aesthetic experience with her work. Camilla explained.

Cam: I think there's a point at which it sort of becomes really separate from the writer. You know, it's a whole work in itself.

During this interview Camilla would pause, sometimes for a

minute or more as though collecting her thoughts. She later explained that she hadn't really thought about most of these ideas for a long time. After much talk about writers, poets and technique, I asked Camilla about readiness and maturity as factors in experiencing aesthetically. We also talked about Parson's stage theory in developing the aesthetic and my own stage theory.

Cam: I haven't really thought about that much. I mean I know it was around Grade 10, for me that I started to experience things more profoundly than I had before. But I don't remember, I didn't feel as if I passed through stages of understanding things more and more until I reached this point.

BB: Looking back on it now though, does it look like you've reached stages? Do you think you could have been ready for that kind of experience when you were in grade 8 for example?

Cam: Oh I don't think I was just because I didn't have the experience then although maybe if I had been reading poetry from a very early age I would have. But I think personal experience maybe has something to do with it and maybe before grade 10 you just haven't lived enough life partly to be able to identify with what you're reading, and I mean words can be beautiful, but it's what they mean that's most important I think. So even if you could appreciate how beautiful the words were and how they sounded, how they fit together, if you didn't have much of an idea of the experience the poem was talking about, you wouldn't appreciate the entire poem.

We talked about the difficulty of understanding without experience. We had discussed that same idea in grade 12 when we studied Margaret Laurence's *A Bird in the House*. While Camilla was very hesitant about many of her responses, she spoke more confidently when we talked about the part that awe played in the aesthetic experience.

Cam: Well I think people have a similar experience when they look at say a view that's beautiful. Yeah I guess say a view--something beautiful in nature, but it's not quite as profound because there's something that has to do with the mystery of how it was created by a human being that really makes you aware of the beauty in a poem or a piece of art. Whereas nature is just sort of more spontaneous and any idea of how it might have been created is so far beyond us, I mean it's just....

She trailed off as though lost in the magnitude of this thought. However, I thought she had put it very well. The awe of the aesthetic experience has to do with the sense of mystery of how a human could create something so beautiful, complex and unified as a poem, a painting or a piece of architecture. In her careful, hesitant way, I thought Camilla had expressed herself quite clearly about the nature of the aesthetic experience.

The Second Interview

This interview took place in Camilla's home in Fairfield. We sat in a very comfortable kitchen nook surrounded by three charming little dogs. Camilla seemed unchanged. Whereas some of my other student's faces had changed Camilla looked as she did in Grade 12, but then in grade 12 she could have been 17 or 25. We talked with enthusiasm of our trips to England; we had both just returned from a month abroad although on separate vacations. Apparently we had even been in London on the same day.

Camilla read over the transcript of our first interview carefully. I asked her if there was anything she wanted to comment on from the tape.

Cam: Mostly I thought it was interesting that I had articulated things that I don't remember having thought about, you know, as conscious thoughts then, but have thought about quite a few times since talking to you.

BB: Oh really?

Cam: Yeah, talking about let's see, just some of the things I said about aesthetic experience and structure. Well actually I think it was technique, but I meant structure. Structure of poetry and the way things are constructed as being a way to understand aesthetic experience. I was just thinking about that the other day, but I didn't remember how I felt about it before; I thought it was a new thought.

BB: That's interesting how often this happens. So do you feel during that interview that was the first time you articulated some of those things?

Cam: I think so, yeah. And also when I actually said some of these things I felt kind of unclear as if I wasn't really quite sure that what I was saying would make sense once it was said, but it seems clearer on paper than it did when I was saying it.

Then I asked her "How would you describe the aesthetic

so much trouble explaining and talking about the aesthetic experience?

Cam: I think it's partly that you need a wealth of other experiences to compare it with. Because, I mean I said like falling in love, like this thing that I had that I call the spiritual experience, those are things that you maybe haven't felt by grade 12. So I think it's partly that. It has a lot to do with finding vocabulary and knowing, really knowing what the words mean, not just because you know what they mean as they are defined in the dictionary, but having experienced what they mean.

BB: Particularly in terms of words with emotional connotation.

Cam: Yeah. So it's. What was the question again you asked?

BB: Why is it so hard.

Cam: That's right, particularly when you're in grade 12, and I think also just having read more poetry after grade 12. I'm not quite sure why, perhaps because there's so much poetry that's available for you to read and you don't maybe realize that till you start. And it's the same kind of awe that you might feel reading one poem, and then just this sense of this creation that occurs, I mean over so many years and with so many different voices. And all so beautiful and of course all the great poets have such unique voices.

It seemed that in the two intervening years all these young people had a wealth of life experience. They certainly talked as though they had, and felt that they had.

Camilla and I talked once again about her aesthetic experience with her poem "Golden Boy".

BB: Did you say when you were writing "Golden Boy" you had an aesthetic experience with it itself?

Cam: I talked about something about that. It's not quite the same experience when you're writing. I did feel I guess inspired when I wrote it,

because I had this whole picture of what the poem should be like almost as if it was already existent in my head in some form, and wrote down quite a bit of it, and then kind of lost that feeling. It wasn't really the same though as reading a poem, a different experience I think. But after a while, quite a while after writing it, I wrote it over November, December January, and I wrote it again when it was time to do the book in probably April or May and I had an aesthetic experience almost as if, well, I think almost as I would from a poem which I had not written, and it was partly the feeling of just being amazed that I had created that, the same way that I feel when some other poet has created something because it was, I don't know how to say why I had the experience, but I definitely did start to have that feeling.

We talked for a time about her writing for she was doing quite a lot, and then ended the interview.

Camilla still spoke with frequent long pauses, and took her time before responding to a question or a statement of mine. However, I thought she was much less tentative and much more assertive in expressing her thoughts on the aesthetic experience. Her comparison of the experience to falling in love and to a spiritual awakening gave a lot of force to her talk about the feeling level of the aesthetic experience.

Doug

Of all the students in his class, Doug was the most intellectually energetic. He seized upon every idea; he couldn't bear to miss anything. On one particular occasion, when someone had made an observation that he hadn't heard properly, he demanded that it be repeated. He was so frustrated that he lost his temper completely. Later, in his typically open handed style he apologized for his outburst, but he admitted he just couldn't stand to miss anything. As a writer Camilla was Doug's only equal; the two of them are the most talented young writers and poets I have yet taught. Doug writes much poetry that is excellent; he, as Camilla, has published a number of his poems. The interview took place in my home.

After conversation on a number of topics we turned to the subject of aesthetics.

BB: What does the aesthetic experience mean to you? What does that term mean to you? That may be sort of a bit sudden; do you want to go more slowly?

D: Sure. Well my first impression of that question is what meaning does it have, in my life?

BB: Yeah, what meaning, and I guess I should specify what feeling as well when you have an aesthetic experience?

D: Well the most intense aesthetic experiences came like as John Keats said, like a spear through my chest or something like that and you have the burning sensation.

BB: Um hum.

D: Or at least I do, through my chest. And, when its less intense I think you recognize it more cognitively. You might not agree with this, maybe I'm mixing up intensity with suddenness

kind of? The more sudden it is for me the greater that burning sensation. The more cognitive it is the greater the kind of mentalization--wow, this is beautiful and I begin to cry or something like that right.

This "spear through the chest" was I think, the strongest statement of feeling from anyone I interviewed. Doug expressed this with great energy; he made many gestures with his hands and arms, his voice rose and fell. There were pauses as if he was again caught in the feelings and passions he was describing.

Doug described his first aesthetic experience which was with nature. I quote it here because it is clearly out of our ordinary response to the beauty of a natural scene.

D: I think the first time I really said wow this is incredible, this is beautiful, was when I was fourteen, and I was just walking along the promenade along West Bay. I just looked out over the water and there was the ocean, the rocks and the seagulls and the way the light hit the water and the arbutus tree behind me and all this was just beautiful for some reason. And when I began to think about it, that's when I felt the spear through the heart. I thought I was having a heart attack. You know what's happening to me, and that's when I started becoming really religious, not religious in the sense that I started going to church or started believing in a god who rewards and punishes and has lightning bolts and things like that, but just my thoughts about pantheism, began to emerge.

A few minutes later Doug compared this intense experience to Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind."

D: About six months ago, or maybe even last summer when me and Chandra were out in the field and we were reading Ode to the West Wind by Shelley.

BB: Um hum.

D: And just the rhythm of it and the idea it was talking about--the kind of rebirth and the cyclical part of it. It really, it brought me back to that feeling that I felt when I was on the seashore, and also looking around the meadow. I don't know--I think with the elements that were in the poem and the beauty of the poem--it was beautiful for the same reason that I found the ocean and trees beautiful.

I was not surprised that Shelley's "Ode" was the poem with which Doug had his first aesthetic experience. Quite a number of my students have had their first intense reaction to that poem.

I then asked Doug if "as your knowledge and your understanding and sensitivity increases does you experience intensify or occur more frequently?"

D: Yeah. I think it occurs more frequently, that's for sure. Because, I'm seeing the aesthetic, at least the cognitive aesthetic in a lot of things lately. For instance I read over *Fern Hill* a while ago. And I was just blown away--the complexity, richness and how it was so present and real. You know, you still feel it, it's still present. It's not past, there's a presence to it that hasn't faded, and that's what great art of course is; it just stays there, it still endures, it's strong.

Doug believed that complexity and the understanding of complexity lent itself to the aesthetic experience.

D: I think the cognitive component helps us understand the complexity of the work of art. Because of the complexity of the thing, and that the cognitive mind could understand this, and it came into a rapture because it was so complex and could not be imitated in a way. And I think the cognitive experience of a work of art, when we come to this stage is to figure out more the complexity, and we're just awed and mystified by the way things work together; it's kind of when

we see a great work of art, it's kind of like with the cognitive mind, it's kind of like the physicist looking at the universe in a way, and knowing the complexity, the living universe, and that complexity is mirrored in the great work of art.

In both nature and a great work of art Doug was awed by its complexity. For me also, the complexity is what makes the feeling of awe, of wonder. The phrase "I was just blown away" was Doug's way of describing awe.

I asked Doug:

BB: So what would be different about the adult's experience and the child's experience?

D: I for one, recognize more those periods of intense happiness which are the experiences of beauty or the aesthetic experience. Perhaps I felt those experiences more when I was a child, but I was less aware of them, and so I guess the difference is that my mind is in play now.

I asked Doug if he thought "the child's experience is limited by the lack of cognitive understanding."

D: That's right, he may see, I think the more we know the more we perceive perhaps, because we can connect more things. A child looking at say a tree would see the green, and some twigs or something like that, but when you point out the kind of bark to him, then point out the kind of leaves and how it's different from others, and that's how it gets its nutrients, you start to see more of the tree. And once you see more you see how complex it is. So the child won't see how complex it is necessarily.

BB: Yeah, so.

D: And so when we see more, learn more about the tree we perceive more, and we see how complex it is. Then I think that feeling of awe can set in.

I thought Doug had clear insight into the aesthetic process and

the aesthetic experience; I felt it was not really necessary to do a second interview with him, but I was really curious to see what he would say after two years.

The Second Interview

After a summer of tree planting, Doug had found himself a very tiny, but extremely attractive one bedroom suite in a small house in Cadboro Bay. We sat in a study that was not more than eight feet by six feet and talked about poetry. We spoke about philosophy, he had just been reading Foucault. It was with the greatest difficulty that we found even a moment for Doug to read the transcript. Eventually, we were able to remain silent long enough for Doug to read over most of it. Then I only needed to set Doug going with a single question.

BB: Do you have anything to say about what you read? I'd be interested in your reaction.

D: I thought a lot of it was pretty sophisticated and interesting, you know, for a young mind. (At this joke we both laughed uproariously.) You know in the sense that I'm still thinking a lot of the same things I thought then, but in a more articulate way. Almost every paragraph I read I agreed with essentially. Gosh, I still believe that the aesthetic experience is to a certain extent mystical; you know that we're connecting with, or at least in the sense that we're perceiving something greater than ourselves, a complexity that the human mind cannot fathom. This is partly to do with the aesthetic experience. That experience of awe, the experience wow, you know, the awe factor of the aesthetic experience. And I think it's still very much a formal thing; that we respond to the complexity of an art work and to its different elements, and that this responding to complexity is something that we can learn. We can be taught to look at a poem in terms of its metaphor, in terms of its synecdoche, in terms of its assonance, in terms of its alliteration things like this. And that we can be taught to look at a poem to see its unity. That's really where for me the experience of the aesthetic comes from because this complexity

intervolved with the impact or the unifying impact of the poem is what really makes the aesthetic experience you know. Where all the qualities of the poem coalesce and cascade and come down at the end of poem into this experience of ah, wow! How did he do that? Or how did she do that? And I think that's basically my train of thought as it went.

BB: So what are the sensations that you associate with that? The physical sensations?

D: A great aliveness of the body. You definitely feel that; it's a great physiological experience you know. It's no more that, at least I haven't had it lately, this sense the spear going through the heart. That was pretty intense, and it was more on the mystical side, a rush. You do feel the prickly sensations in your body, and for me lately I found my experience of beauty being involved with the experience of being greatly moved, and in fact poems are about the only thing that can elicit tears from me. Now I rarely get dejected or sad that I have to beat my breast with my hand and weep, so this is quite an interesting thing; sometimes I wonder whether I'm channelling some of my sadness or grief into the reading of poems and that's why I'm so moved.

These words seemed a confirmation of what Doug had said in the earlier interview. At that time he had not talked about the mystical experience, but he might if he had experienced it.

I asked Doug if he would use the term "transported" in describing the aesthetic experience.

D: I like the word transported because it connects with the mystical side that I was talking about. There's some fundamental connection between aesthetics and mysticism. The word transported, ah, it's doubly good in the sense that I see the aesthetic experience as good and healthy and beneficent to the growth of a consciousness, in that it can break through a lot of the patterns of prejudice and psychological defence and things like that which we build up in our daily lives, and so for a moment all that kind of garbage is

wiped away and we're as it were, our pure being responding to the world purely. So that it's mystical in another sense, that we're experiencing more directly than we were before we read the poem, or before we had the aesthetic experience. And part of that comes from the way the consciousness focuses on all the details of the poem and goes into a kind of meditative state. I definitely think the aesthetic experience it's not just a pleasurable thing for the body or pleasurable for the mind, but it's almost essential, at least for me to becoming a better human being.

For Doug the word "transported" was connected to the idea of a mystical or a transformative experience. As he put it, for a moment the aesthetic experience purifies us, releases us from the day to day preoccupations.

Since Doug had what I thought a very complete grasp of the aesthetic experience when I had first interviewed him, I was not sure how he would respond to a question about what had changed for him in explaining the experience.

BB: What do you think is the difference between you now and two years ago in talking about the aesthetic experience?

D: I think firstly, my mind has matured. It knows how to articulate more, and it has thought through the subject in more depth than it had when I started talking about this. As I said, my intuitions are still pretty similar. I'm not sure if my experience has matured so much more. Back when I first talked to you, gosh I can't really remember how I responded to poems back then except from this testimony. The only difference is that I understand the depth of poetry a lot more. I can see into it more. I've accreted tools during my schooling and during my experience in life as to how to look at a poem, how to look at character in a story. And the more ideology that I pick up, the more ideas that confront me, I can apply to poems. Does this

have any bearing on this poem? And I've looked back at "That time of year thou may'st in me behold/ When yellow leaves, or none, or few do hang/ Upon the boughs which shake against the cold./ Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang". And it ends with "This thou perceiv'st which makes thy love more strong,/ To love that well which thou must leave ere long." It just strikes me as so true now, the more I experience of life the more that will seem true to me I bet.

For years I had loved and taught this sonnet by Shakespeare, yet I believed that few if any of my students could more than sense the meaning of closing couplet. And here, Doug, two years after graduating had obviously felt it very deeply. "To love that well which thou must leave ere long."

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

After reading and analyzing the ten transcripts of conversations with my five students I can begin to make some statements about the nature of the aesthetic experience as described by these young people. There were clearly a number of sensations, feelings and thoughts about experiencing aesthetically that were shared. My former students also expressed some common ideas about readiness for an aesthetic experience and the difficulties that most people in high school have in expressing an experience which is almost invariably new to them.

Descriptions of the Aesthetic Experience

Thomas Gray, once the best known poet of the 18 Century, speaks of poetry as producing, "thoughts that breath[e], and words, that burn" (Starr & Hendrickson, 1966, p. 16). These words lend credence to those that flow from my students. Although my students do not express themselves so poetically, they too experience poetry as words that burn.

First let me recount the similarities of the aesthetic experience as described by my students. The most powerful idea, which expresses a sensation and feeling level of experience is the idea of being "transported" or "moved." Ryan described himself as being "oblivious to anything else going on around me." For Michelle, it was "like going either out of my body or into my body. Not being able to hear or feel the physical surroundings at

all, and that spinning sensation." Camilla compared the aesthetic experience to a spiritual one, while Doug called it comparable to a mystical illumination. Although Melissa did not use quite those terms she did describe an "incredible surge, just a rush of emotions and almost to the point of tears." Each of these descriptions is of an emotional experience that is among the most intense that a human being can feel.

Perhaps just as strong were the expressions such as having a "rush" or being "blown away" by the experience of aesthetics. Each person used these rather banal expressions. It is in the commonplace use of these phrases that we can recognize and know them. A rush was originally associated with the sensations after taking drugs, and now with any experience that is electrifying and stimulating to the senses. "Blew me away" is in the same category; it has the meaning of being taken by storm as in a strong wind, and of being transported in a physical and/or spiritual sense.

A gentler and more poetic comparison of the feeling of the aesthetic experience was to compare it to falling in love which three of the young people did. They also described sensations which are often used when talking about falling in love. A shiver up the spine, shaking of the hands, chills in the body, a fluttery feeling in the stomach, these sensations are frequently associated with romantic love.

Finally the feeling of awe was also shared by the five students. An awareness of the complexity of a work of art, its inner unity, the way its constituent parts all worked together gave to the person who experienced that work a feeling of awe. Ryan talked about being "awed with how skilfully Beethoven worked. I was awed by the skill at which he could move the notes, and how easy he made all this very difficult stuff look." In describing her aesthetic experience when I read to her Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" Melissa said, "I think it's mostly due to the beautiful imagery he uses in that poem." It was this awareness of language that inspired her awed response. Michelle's awe came from her awareness of the time, the dedication and the skill that went into the building of Chartres Cathedral which she said, "took my breath away." This is an echo of the words of John Keats who said of poetry "...touches of beauty should never be halfway, thereby making the reader breathless, instead of content" (Rollins, 1958, p. 238). Doug and Camilla, writers of poetry themselves, recognized the amazing skill of poets such as Dylan Thomas, and Percy Shelley. As Doug put it, "the awe factor of the aesthetic experience" comes when "we respond to the complexity of an art work and to its different elements, and that this responding to complexity is something that we can learn." It is the unity in complexity that produces the feeling of awe that each of my former students see as integral to the aesthetic

experience.

The language these young people used, the consistency that they expressed from the first to the second interview two years later, the forcefulness of their convictions that an aesthetic experience was one of the most important emotional experiences of their lives all combine to convince me that they had indeed had vivid aesthetic experiences which go far beyond aesthetic pleasure.

The Problem of Articulation

I had felt that the first interview provided me with enough data to write this thesis. However, most of the students I interviewed would pause and say as Melissa did, "It's hard to say what I feel." And a little later she said, "I can't think of the right words" when trying to describe the feelings aroused by an aesthetic experience. All the students with the exception of Doug expressed similar difficulties. These same difficulties were not apparent in the second interview. Even Michelle, who had not had another aesthetic experience since high school, seemed to have no difficulty expressing her feelings. There were several reasons for this, some may be obvious, but I think two are worth looking at here.

Ryan referred to what he called the "incredible language barrier...about how to express your feelings." Melissa explained that "it's probably due to the limitations of the English language." For Camilla the difficulty has "a lot to do with finding vocabulary

and knowing, really knowing what the words mean." This knowing the meaning of words came as the result not of dictionary definitions but as Camilla continued, "having experienced what they mean." In the intervening two years their vocabularies had increased, and their experience of life had forced them often to learn to articulate their feelings on a variety of experiences.

Having fallen in and out of love, having to make difficult choices in life about careers and university, having to move away from home, all of these enriched them with life experience. Michelle made an interesting observation. "I'm sure that any person couldn't describe the feelings that they had at being married two days after they were married, but ten or fifteen years after they've been married they can look back on that experience and describe it with clarity, about how they were feeling." Distance from the aesthetic experience, more experience of life, maturity were all factors that also contributed to the students' ability to explain more clearly and precisely what they felt when they experienced a work of art aesthetically.

Readiness "The Freezing Burden of My Inexperience"

Each of the people I interviewed had their first aesthetic experience within the past three and one half years not earlier than seventeen years of age. I tend to believe that a younger person has just not had enough experience in life or attained

enough physical and mental maturity to have an aesthetic experience. I asked the people I interviewed if they thought they could have had an aesthetic experience much earlier than they did. Each thought that it was unlikely that they would have been ready for such an experience. Margaret Laurence in her novel *A Bird in the House* (1981, p. 59) has her young protagonist Vanessa lament on "the freezing burden of my inexperience" in trying to understand experiences which were just beyond her grasp. She simply had not lived long enough, seen enough to be able to comprehend much of what the adult world already knew. Being able to understand the complexity of a work of art, to see the amazing unity necessary to great art takes a long time and requires some maturity of experience. Michelle said, "I don't think age is a limitation for an aesthetic experience. I think maturity to describe that aesthetic experience or realize it as one is needed." Doug put it very well in our first interview done at the end of his Grade 12 year when he described a child learning about nature.

D: I think the more we know the more we perceive perhaps, because we can connect more things. A child looking at say a tree would see the green, and some twigs or something like that, but when you point out the kind of bark to him, then point out the kind of leaves and how it's different from others, and that's how it gets its nutrients, you start to see more of the tree. And once you see more you see how complex it is. The child won't see how complex it is necessarily.

Readiness to learn about and understand the complexity of a work of art is then essential to having an aesthetic experience.

Implications for Pedagogy

The strong testimony as to the nature and importance of the aesthetic experience suggests to me that it should be a larger part of every young person's educational experience. Michelle, who had not had an aesthetic experience in over two years, referred to it as "like a large event in my life. It's a pinnacle of experience." And Doug said "it's not just a pleasurable thing for the body or pleasurable for the mind, but it's almost essential, at least for me, to becoming a better human being." Such unequivocal statements from these young people suggest that the quality of their lives has been enhanced by the aesthetic experience. The students' perceptions about art and literature have developed, and they have entered into a fuller mastery of different bodies of knowledge. With these ideas in mind, pedagogues might consider aesthetics and the experience of aesthetics as a more essential part of education than they now do. Maxine Greene said:

This, in part, is what leads me to propose that art education be infused with efforts to do aesthetic education.....By aesthetic education I mean the deliberate efforts to foster increasingly informed and involved encounters with art works that often free people to be fully present to a Cezanne, an Ailey, a Stravinsky, a Joyce. To be fully present depends on understanding what is there to be noticed in the work at hand, releasing imagination to create orders in the field of what is perceived, allowing feeling to inform and illuminate what is there to be realized, to be achieved. (1991, p. 29)

Additionally, while it is not the focus of my thesis, the part that analysis plays in preparing the student for an aesthetic experience needs to be considered, for this reason I explain my theory of aesthetic development and how I came to form it.

Theory of Aesthetic Development

My vision of teaching aesthetics began when I made the decision to teach poetry to my students in Masset in my first year of teaching. After my own aesthetic experience I began to analyze what had happened to me. I remembered my favourite English classes and professors. The classes had been the ones where we made an intense and close analysis of every word and line of a poem. In one class we analyzed the imagery, the figurative language, every other poetic device and the structure of each poem with the carefulness of a lab technician, and I came to thoroughly enjoy this process of analysis. We spent four months discussing first W.B. Yeats's *Lapis Lazuli* and then Dylan Thomas's *Fern Hill*; those two poems are still among my favourites. Out of this in part had come my own feeling for poetry. Could not this process of analysis do something similar for my students? I hoped so.

In essence, I believe that there are three stages that lead an individual to the aesthetic experience. The first stage is the childlike stage. During this stage, we respond to beauty naturally and simply, but, I think, not very intensely. Young children

"naturally delight in appearances, a delight that is aesthetic in character. The young child is a citizen of the aesthetic domain by birth and not by education" (Parsons, 1987, p. 26).

The second of the three stages is the stage of analysis. It is the stage that I think school is all about. Analysis is necessary because "artistic learning is not an automatic consequence of maturation, [but] it can be facilitated through instruction" (Eisner, 1968, p. 391). During this stage we learn self-consciously to take apart a poem, a painting, a piece of music and find what gives it beauty. We learn to ask and answer questions. What is it that makes us say a thing is beautiful? What is it that enables us to say one poem is more beautiful than another?

There are things in the world in which students are interested, but which themselves could not be called works of art. Yet these things, whether they be cars or clothing, can both become invested with greater meaning and serve as vehicles for the development of aesthetic sensitivity if they become the focus, in schools, of aesthetic analysis. (Eisner, 1968, p. 409)

Ralph Smith in The Sense of Art makes a case for deemphasizing creative and performing activities at the secondary level "...in favour of teaching critical appreciative skills" (1989, p. 207). The stage of analysis is long and arduous, and I believe that students must have attained a certain level of maturity and readiness to enable them to pass through it. There can, I think, be no substitute for the time that must be devoted to analysis.

The last stage is what Eisner (1976, p. 335) calls connoisseurship. At the stage of connoisseurship the labours of the analytical stage reach fruition. The student responds to the poem intensely, emotionally. There is an underlying awareness of the qualities of the poem that can be analyzed, but there is no longer any need to use analysis exclusively. At this stage the individual knows the beauty in a deeply spiritual way, which for me far surpasses the delight of analysis and intellectual understanding. This is not to deny the importance of the cognitive aspect of the aesthetic encounter. It comes before most aesthetic pleasure and is itself pleasurable. Reflection usually follows the aesthetic experience, which is too intense to be more than brief.

Leading the students from the childlike stage to the stage of the connoisseur through the process of analysis became my main focus as a teacher. "A work of art, when attended to for its qualities, for what it does, can release a reader into his own subjectivity, his own inner world" (Greene, 1968, p. 205).

Michael J. Parsons, in How We Understand Art, attempted to create a cognitive developmental account of aesthetic experience. Parsons focuses on painting, but I believe his theory is relevant to any art form. His account parallels Piaget's theories of cognitive development and Kohlberg's theories of moral development. In comparison to my own theory of aesthetic development, Parson's

theory encompasses similar stages but his emphasis is entirely on the cognitive.

Parsons describes five stages beginning with what he calls stage one, "Favouritism", where children express liking based on such criteria as favourite color or an animal that they like in the painting, to stage five called "Autonomy", where the individual has become a connoisseur. His first two stages, "Favouritism" and "Beauty and Realism" correspond to what I call the childlike stage. "Young children respond aesthetically from the beginning, and ... their response is strong and untaught" (1987 , p. 26). At the second stage, "the dominant idea is that of subject....The basic purpose of paintings is to represent something" (p. 22). However, at this childlike stage Parsons states.

There is a whole series of insights about paintings that they (children) do not have and that are of great importance.... Aesthetic development consists precisely in the gradual acquisition of these insights. We reach the later stages only with an education in which we encounter works of art often and think about them seriously. (p. 27)

Encountering works of art, and reflecting about them is the process of my second stage, the analytical. This analytical stage corresponds to stages three and four of Parsons. In stage three "Expressiveness":

We look at paintings for the quality of the experience they can produce, and the more intense and interesting the better the painting. Intensity and interest guarantee that the experience is genuine.... (p. 23)

At stage four, "Style and Form" "The work exists in a public

space; aspects of its medium, form and style can be pointed to in an intersubjective way; in this way interpretations can be corrected and improved" (p. 24). Furthermore, at this stage also:

It is reasonable to be guided by what they (critics, art historians, teachers, connoisseurs) say and by the tradition they embody. This is not now a form of domination by outside influences; it is listening to the great conversation. (p. 85)

However, I want to claim that at Parson's stage four the student is becoming a connoisseur, and may be ready for the aesthetic experience.

Stage five is called "Autonomy." At this stage Parsons says "...we make judgements on our own authority and not on that of tradition" (p. 144). This is the place of the sophisticated individual and includes the art critic and the museum professionals of Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson. I think my five students are located within stages four and five.

Parsons talks about the last two stages as a cognitive process dominated by the intellect. In this sense I think he misses what the aesthetic experience is all about. These cognitive stages are necessary precursors to the aesthetic experience, but the experience itself is not cognitive, it is intensely emotional.

To conclude then, "aesthetic education...involves intentional efforts to foster increasingly informed and ardent encounters with art works" (Greene, 1991, p. 29). Each of the five people interviewed believed that learning to analyze and understand both

the meaning and complexity of poetry led them to have an aesthetic experience. I find this conviction on the part of my former students reassuring. It gives me the energy to continue the teaching and analyzing of poetry especially when some students resist the process. When Ryan said, in talking about Blake's "Tiger", "it almost moved me back physically, and that was really exciting because I thought well hey, now I know what this guy's talking about. You've been standing there all year telling me this," I felt that all the effort had been worthwhile. This was the confirmation that analysis worked, and that sooner or later many of my students and former students would come to know that. Perhaps other teachers too may find the teaching of analysis valuable in enabling students to gain aesthetic pleasure and to reach that pinnacle, the aesthetic experience itself.

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