

A Footnote to Vivas' Aesthetic Transaction

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IN HIS book *The Artistic Transaction*, Eliseo Vivas repeated the definition of aesthetic experience which he wrote first in the *Journal of Philosophy*, November 11, 1937:

The aesthetic experience is an experience of rapt attention that involves the intransitive apprehension of an object's immanent meanings in their full presentational immediacy.¹

Professor Vivas in his new work has based the distinctive difference between the aesthetic experience and other modes of experience in the concept of Intransitive apprehension. He holds that the aesthetic experience (which includes the artistic experience)² is intransitive, while the other modes of human experience are transitive.

It is Professor Vivas' contention that there are "four distinctive modes of activity that, taken together in their relative autonomies and their interrelationships, make up culture."³ The aesthetic is one of these modes; the intransitive one. By intransitive experience, Professor Vivas means that the experience does not go beyond itself for verification or fulfillment. It is self-contained; autonomous. The other three modes of activity are the moral, the cognitive, and the religious, and are, Professor Vivas holds, all transitive. By transitive experience he means those experiences which do go beyond themselves to something else; e.g., to consequences, or to external validations, or expectations etc.

Professor Vivas finds the moral experience transitive in the fact that it relies on consequences and/or philosophical principles which are external to

the experience itself.⁴ The cognitive experience is also transitive. It is so on at least two counts: as practical knowledge, and as the critical knowledge. (1) Practical knowledge applies not to itself only but "to a more or less clearly preconceived or defined end" for which it is fulfilled. Practical knowledge is thus clearly transeunt. It operates beyond itself. Its meanings are fulfilled in its effects. (2) Theoretical knowledge seems at first glance not to be of this character. As Professor Vivas points out, *theoria* is a beholding, a contemplation, a seeing, which is certainly what artistic experience is, and what is meant by intransitive experience. But, Vivas goes on to argue, the "man who claims knowledge beholds truly. And this means that what he beholds has been or can be tested."⁵ In this fact, that it can be tested, it must be recognized that "what he beholds has been or can be referred to something not in the focus of intransitive attention."⁶

The religious experience is transitive, Professor Vivas holds, because it always refers beyond the immediate experience to what the worshiper hopes will be accomplished through his act of worship; e.g., the surcease of certain problems though divine intervention, or an infusion of strength to sustain the

⁴ "The characterization of a thing or event as good or right is not possible, except in terms of considerations that are not immanently present in the thing or situation but that are adjudged to be present because of criteria and consequences external to the thing or situation under appraisal . . . the goodness of a thing or the rightness of an act is good or right because of a quality disclosed to attention and belonging, not to a thing or act in itself, but to the thing or act in relation to consequences or to the will or intention that brought it about, or to whatever factor moral philosophy may decide is the appropriate term in relation which a thing or an act becomes a moral one. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁶ *Ibid.*

¹ Eliseo Vivas, *The Artistic Transaction* (Ohio State University Press), 1963, p. 30.

² "The artistic involves the vivid apprehension of the immanent meaning of an object that is viewed intransitively." *Ibid.*, p. 40.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

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worshiper in the face of problems which are inimical, non-manipulable, and disruptive of cherished values, i.e., religious problems. Professor Vivas writes:

Religious experience involves a worshiper and an Object. The worshiper addresses himself to the Object because he somehow recognizes It as a power or force that either sustains him or threatens him . . .

The distinctive trait of a religious transaction is found in the communion with which he seeks either acquiescence for the trials endured or expected, or relief from them . . .⁷

My "footnote" is concerned with Professor Vivas' thoughts about the mode of experience called religious experience. He has failed, I believe, to recognize a central feature of high religious experience which, like the aesthetic experience, exhibits no transitive character.

Professor Vivas has defined religion in only a partial and inadequate fashion. To be sure there is metatechnology⁸ in religion— especially primitive ones, and all religion functions importantly in providing man with a sustaining morale in the face of actual or threatening trials and tragedies. There is much looking beyond the religious act to benefits to be gained from it. But anyone truly sensitive to deep religious living would not settle for this as a definitive definition of religion. It does not account for the most private aspects of religion (for the feeling of elation and ecstasy) which the worshiper, and especially the mystic, finds the most important and definitive characteristics of all. Professor Vivas seems to have missed what Whitehead was suggesting when he said religion is what an "individual does with his solitariness." Religion is not just a practical procedure which looks beyond itself to benefits, but is something which happens within the inner life of the person

involved. It is something which happens in his utter aloneness. When a person prays for rain or engages in any other metatechnological operation, the transitive character of that particular religious act can easily be seen. But men often engage in worship where adoration seems to be the only concern. They may, in fact, be not at all concerned with petition or benefits. When the crudities of praying for benefits (rain, health, wealth, etc.) are excluded from the worship act and only the worshiper and his object of devotion remain, it would appear that there is no transitive element present at all. There is only the I-Thou relationship. Vivas (I believe erroneously) tries to deny this. He argues that no matter how it might seem that there is only the worshiper and the Divine Object involved, the fact is that the situation is covertly transitive. The worshiper addresses himself to an object which he believes to be the sponsor of all the daily work in which he dwells, and he "addresses himself to the object because he somehow recognizes it as a power or force that either sustains him or threatens him."⁹ This puts the worshiper in the tension of almost complete subordination. He is a creature extremely aware of a Creator in "communion with which he either seeks acquiescence for the trials endured or expected, or relief from them."¹⁰ In other words, no matter what the worshiper claims he is doing, or even thinks he is doing, he is, Professor Vivas believes, seeking an end beyond the worship experience itself. This is not always easy to see, but it is always there. Professor Vivas states: ". . . the act of worship presents itself in such a guise as to minimize its transitive character; worship almost becomes aesthesis, almost intransitive contemplation. Almost, but not quite. For there is a reference beyond the Object of worship to reward and punishment."¹¹

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.

⁸ Metatechnology is a term coined by Professor William H. Bernhard, which designates any attempt to introduce supernatural or extra-natural force into natural processes.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

At this point, one might want to argue with Professor Vivas, insisting that the covert transitivity which Vivas seems to see in every act of worship is actually not always present in every act of worship; that, indeed, the worshipper may experience a kinship with God which is not as lowly creature to awesome and frightening Creator, but as son of Father in a communion of love and understanding which does not go beyond its own immanent meanings, which is, in short autonomous and intransitive. Possibly a strong case could be made at this point, but it would involve much hair-splitting and probably get lost finally in semantic quibbling.

The case I want to make is much more decisive. I am concerned with a form of religious experience (if indeed it is religious experience and not a unique mode of experience not recognized by Professor Vivas in his cultural scheme) which is as intransitive (in Professor Vivas' terms) as is the aesthetic experience; yet is an experience which virtually no religionists, and, I think, few aestheticians would be willing to identify as aesthetic. The experience I refer to is the one called mystical.

Mysticism, although not a common experience, is a universal one. That is, it is an experience found among all men and reported in all ages. Also, although the experience is interpreted according to the age, culture, religion in which it occurs, the experience itself, as reported by mystics, is identical no matter what the environment is. Christian mystics explain what happens to them in Christian terms, Muslims in Muslim terms, Hindus in Hindu terms, and philosophical mystics in philosophical terms, but no matter what terms are used, the same kind of experience is invariably described.

First, common to all reports of the mystical experience there is a special type of consciousness. Apparently the mystical consciousness is very different

from man's normal consciousness. The normal consciousness is sensory-intellectual consciousness. It is compounded of all sorts of mental objects—sensory stimuli, mental images, idea, etc. But mystical consciousness is radically different from the normal sensory-intellectual consciousness. In fact, it is the exact opposite of the normal consciousness. The mystical consciousness is empty of all sensory-intellectual objects. The stimulation of external sights and sounds is gone from it. Mental images are gone. All thinking has stopped. At this point one might expect (with Hume) that when all the objects of consciousness disappear, the consciousness itself disappears. There is nothing left to be conscious about. But this is exactly what the mystics all deny. At the emptying of the consciousness of sensory-intellectual contents, the consciousness does not disappear, but is transformed into a radically different kind of consciousness. This different kind of consciousness enjoys a different kind of experience—an ineffable and paradoxical experience of unity with ultimate reality in which all subject/object multiplicity disappears. Once the normal consciousness has been emptied of all mental contents, including the consciousness of self, it is flooded with a new experience: the experience of Nirvana, or the Universal Self, or the One, or Tao, or God, depending upon the religious-cultural term used to define ultimate reality by that particular mystic. There is, as Professor Stace informs us, a fading or falling away of the personal ego into "an apprehension of an ultimate nonsensuous unity in all things, a oneness or a One to which neither the sense nor the reason can penetrate."¹² Here, unlike the worship experience described by Professor Vivas, there is no subject standing in radical subordination to "a power or force that either sustains him or threatens him."

¹² Walter T. Stace, *The Teachings of the Mystics* (New York: Mentor), pp. 14-15.

Indeed, there is no subject standing over against an Object. All has become one, and all is beatific.

The practical validity of mysticism seems to be contained within the experience itself. It may change the life of the mystic, but this is a by-product of the experience (as good taste may become one of the by-products of the artistic experience), not a necessity or intention of it.

Mysticism is an experience which under certain conditions simply occurs. After the experience the mystic may try to rationalize his experience, i.e., explain it to others, but because the experience is so completely an intransitive one, without transitive reflection, the mystic inevitably only hints at something which in the last analysis is ineffable. Consider two brief statements from two Christian mystics—Dionysius the Areopagite and Jan van Ruysbroek.

Guide us to that topmost height of mystic lore which exceedeth light and more than exceedeth knowledge, where the simple, absolute, and unchangeably mysteries of heavenly Truth lie hidden in the dazzling obscurity of the secret Silence, out shining all brilliance with the intensity of their darkness, and surcharging our blinded intellects with the utterly impalpable and invisible fairness of glories which exceed all beauty!¹³

In the abyss of this darkness, in which the loving spirit has died to itself, where begin the manifestations of God and eternal life. For in this darkness there shines and is born an incomprehensible Light, which is the Son of God, in whom we behold eternal life. And is given to the simple sight of the spirit, where the spirit receives the brightness which is God Himself, above all gifts and every creaturely activity, in the idle, emptiness in which the spirit has lost itself through fruitive love, and where it receives without means the brightness of God, and is changed without interruption into the brightness which it receives . . . this brightness is so

great that the loving contemplative, in his ground wherein he rests, sees, and feels nothing but an incomprehensible Light; and through that Simple nudity which enfolds all things, he finds himself, and feels himself to be that same Light by which he sees, and nothing else.¹⁴

One might be inclined to dismiss all this as a form of religious insanity. But to do so would lay him open to a charge of reductionism, which might please Professor Ayer and his language colleagues, but not, I think, Professor Vivas. An intellectually honest aesthete should be no more willing to dismiss the claim of mystical experience simply because he may not have had such experience and/or the report of it sounds exceedingly odd, than he would consider rejecting the aesthetic validity of color because some men are color-blind, and/or because the aesthetic experience is extremely different from any other.

Professor Stace, hoping to overrule a simple dismissal of mysticism as unreal, or subjective, or "ridiculous" writes:

But I wish to point out that even if one should choose the skeptical alternative and suppose that the mystical consciousness reveals no reality outside its owner's brain, one is far from having disposed of mysticism as some worthless delusion which ought to be got rid of. Even if it is wholly subjective, it still reveals something which is supremely great in human life. It is still the peace which passes all understanding. It is still the gateway to salvation—not, I mean, in a future life, but as the highest beatitude that a man can reach in this life, and out of which the greatest deeds of love can flow.¹⁵

To deny that the mystic is really in touch, as he claims to be, with a reality greater than himself, with an Infinity which transcends and unifies the ordinary, seeming flux of things, is a serious

¹³ Dionysius the Areopagite, *On the Divine Names and the Mystical Theology*, quoted from Stace, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

¹⁴ Jan van Ruysbroek, *The Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage*, quoted from Stace, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

¹⁵ Walter T. Stace, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-28.

charge religiously and metaphysically, but I think not aesthetically. The aesthetic concern remains whether or not the mystic is experiencing ultimate Being, or simply his own ultimate self. He is experiencing, and his experiencing is very like Professor Vivas' aesthetic experience in the fact that it is intransitive; it does not reflect beyond itself. As we saw, the definitive character of aesthetic experience according to Professor Vivas is the fact of intransitive apprehension. But mysticism is also intransitive apprehension. The point is that whether or not the mystic is "wrong" about the "truth" of his vision, the experience is there to be reckoned with within the culture.

If the mystical experience is part of the religious experience, then religion is by so much intransitive, the Professor Vivas is incorrect in characterizing religious experience as he does. The aesthetic experience and the religious experience (at least the mystical part) become the same thing. On the other hand, if mysticism is not fundamentally a religious experience, but an autonomous mode of experience simply congenial to religious interpretation, Professor Vivas must account for its as at mode of experience which is different from aesthetic experience. It would appear that he is either in error or incomplete. However, this charge even if true, does not shatter his contentions about the aesthetic experience, for it would appear that another step of delimitation might enable his aesthetic definition to exclude the mystical experience not as between intransitive and transitive, but as between **stable** intransitive

experience, and **unstable** or **collapsed** intransitive experience.

The real difference between an aesthetic experience (as Vivas views it) and a mystical experience is in the fact that the subject in an aesthetic experience remains at a distance from the aesthetic object. The experience is an emergent between firm polarities—the viewer and the viewed, the apprehender and the apprehended. In mysticism this is not so. Subject and Object fuse. There is a loss of subject identity. Subject and object become one. The distance collapses. In other words, the aesthetic experience has "aesthetic distance"; the mystical experience does not.

Without presuming to force anything upon the thought of Professor Vivas, or to rewrite his book, I would simply suggest, as a kind of interpolated footnote, that to his definition of the aesthetic experience could be added, perhaps should be added, the words: **by a subject who stands at an aesthetic distance from the aesthetic object.** The definition would then read:

The aesthetic experience is an experience of rapt attention that involves the intransitive apprehension of the object's immanent meanings in their full presentational immediacy, by a subject who stands at an aesthetic distance from the aesthetic object.

This idea of "aesthetic distance" (which has been long recognized by some authorities as part of aesthetic experience) would appear to be important to Professor Vivas' definition if he is to maintain a "definitive distance" between his definition and the facts of the religio-mystical experience.

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