CHAPTER THREE

The Intensification of Experience

So far, I have set a mannerist definition of being against the modern experience of nature that arises from the gesture of bifurcation. There is nothing beyond manners. Mannerism has been offered as a possible and coherent route for thinking a pluralist universe, one that is constituted by a myriad of centers of experience each of which is equally important, equally active, of which the human anthropological experience represents one form but is never able to claim to be either their foundation or model.[1] In order to provide consistency, it has been necessary to relocate all those qualities that have been extracted from things into the interior of existence itself: perspectives, aesthetic sensations, the sense of importance and of value. What is needed is a philosophy that, in its very form, its ambition and its manners of relating to things, can grant due importance to the deeply plural experience of nature. I will call this philosophy "speculative" and will define it through its function: *the intensification of an experience to its maximal point*. In order to outline this function, I will draw on two elements that come from Whitehead's last great work, *Modes of Thought*. When readers and specialists of Whitehead have encountered this book they have either shown little interest—a position that they believe to be justified, as they feel that it involves little more than an attempt to simplify what had already been dealt with more fully in *Process and Reality*—or they are wary of the book, as it is too metaphorical, too lyrical, and seems to

introduce more confusion than clarification. However, a new question runs through this book, one that is absent from Whitehead's previous writings and that I will place at the heart of the speculative enterprise: What is it that produces a sense of importance? This question involves a multiplicity of others that provide it with its consistency: Does this sense of importance refer to a particular faculty, a faculty of feeling, imagining, or reasoning that projects its own interests and values onto the things of the world? Or should importance be situated at the heart of existence itself, as if things were important by themselves, independently of the intentions of those who affirm such importance? Does importance vary from one era to another, undergoing historical fluctuations that make us reject as outdated what another era believed to be crucial? In a nutshell, does this sense of importance refer to a human faculty or to a dimension that goes beyond an exclusively anthropological realm?

Before offering a definition, I will start with two contrasts that readily come to mind regarding importance. First of all, importance differs from matters of fact. Whitehead places both at the heart of all experience: "There are two contrasted ideas which seem inevitably to underlie all width of experience, one of them is the notion of importance, the sense of importance, the presupposition of importance. The other is the notion of matter-of-fact."[2] Importance concerns the value of a thing; facts designate brute existence. Such a notion of brute existence is a pure abstraction that comes from an act of simplification carried out by the intellect.[3]

What would a factual existence, one that is essentially, absolutely, without importance, be like? Even if we found an example of such a fact, would we not make the very possibility of such a fact a matter of importance? Would it not confirm or deny the importance of the hypothesis that is being tested? But we could say the same of the concept of importance. What would importance in itself *be*, independently of any situation, of any factual existence? Would it not immediately lose all value if it did not refer, in one way or another, to those beings that support it or make it important? The contrast between importance and matters of fact is not an opposition; it is the highlighting of distinct qualities of experience. Consequently, "there is no escape from

sheer matter-of-fact. It is the basis of importance; and importance is important because of the inescapable character of matter-of-fact."[4] As a result, the notion of importance can be distinguished from another notion with which it is regularly confused: interest. When we say that something is interesting or of interest, are we not, ultimately, saying that it is important? In this sense, does it not have the same value as when we say it matters, that it has importance? Likewise, does the importance that we attribute to a thing not simply refer to the interest that we have in it? However, there is a clear and fundamental difference between these two notions: importance expresses the manner in which an event crystallizes what is at stake beyond its immediate existence hic et nunc. We say of a discovery or an invention that they are important when we wish to highlight the fact they have genuinely changed a situation in the world in which they occur. Whitehead is willing to take up this commonplace view and affirm that the importance of a historical event, for example, is proportionate to the transformations that it produces in the course of history, beyond its own reality. Ultimately, if we extend this view, then we are led to assert that importance is the expression of a "unity of the Universe."[5] From the moment that a historical event has taken place, all the preceding events seem to converge, retrospectively; the historical event makes them adjust to a new era that has importance precisely because it is essentially a question of the course of the world in which the event is situated but surpassed. The notion of interest is not so broad; it relates to the particularity of an event, to its individuality. If we link what is conveyed by these two contrasts (importance and matters of fact/importance and interest), we arrive at the idea that importance is this unity of the universe, always situated in an actual event.

Whitehead provides a more technical definition: importance "is that aspect of feeling whereby a perspective is imposed upon the universe of things felt."[6] This definition is somewhat obscure, and Whitehead simply announces it, without looking to justify or develop it, as if the definition were self-evident and no other explanation were necessary. It is true that the terms used, notably those of feelings and perspectives, have been the subjects of numerous analyses in other works. Whitehead dedicates a complete chapter to perspectives in *Modes of Thought*.

Nevertheless, the speed with which this definition of importance is formulated is certainly not justified by the fact that its components have been dealt with elsewhere. I will take this definition as it is given in this passage, without overloading it with other such interpretations. We find that the term "feeling" appears twice, giving the impression of a circular definition that starts with "feeling," with an aspect of "feeling," and ends up with what is "felt" as a perspective upon the word felt. However, the insistence on placing feeling at the heart of the definition has a direct and radical effect. Feeling takes the place of that which, when it comes to importance, is usually ascribed either to consciousness or to intentionality. We can, therefore, infer that the importance of an event is not related to the consciousness that we may have of it, to the intentions that we project on to it, or to the effects that we may foresee or imagine that we can deduce. Whitehead reiterates this point several times, leaving no doubt as to the reason why he gives such a place to feelings: "We put aside, and we direct attention, and we perform necessary functions without bestowing the emphasis of conscious attention,"[7] or again, "A feeling does not in itself involve consciousness."[8] This does not mean that consciousness has no role in relation to importance, but it is neither its origin nor its basis. A sense of the importance of events, a manner of experiencing and feeling what matters (what is important), is prior to any consciousness. This sense of importance indicates a wider dimension than that expressed by consciousness; it can be found in the activity of living: "The sense of importance [. . .] is embedded in the very being of animal experience."[9]

Propositional Lures

However, this placing of importance within feelings, at a level prior to consciousness, leaves a critical question unanswered: How to intensify this sense of importance? If importance is uniquely "that aspect of feeling whereby a perspective is imposed upon the universe of things felt," then where do its increase and its gradation come from? How can events that were previously insignificant grow in importance or, similarly, lose importance after either a longer or shorter period of time? If, as Whitehead's suggests, there is a cosmological element to this defini-

tion, in that it concerns all feelings, then how can we explain the variations, intensifications, reductions, or even ranking of importance? This question of changes in importance is central to the task of defining the function of speculative thought. For, if importance is given once and for all, instantly, for each event, then speculative thought will have no purpose, except to state that there is importance, but now importance has become so widespread that it has lost all relevance. I am suggesting that the unique function of speculative philosophy is to make experience *matter*, to make it important, to intensify it to its maximum. It is, therefore, the increase in the importance of an experience that is of interest. Unfortunately, the definition of importance that Whitehead has given, in so far as it seeks to give a central role to feelings, does not help us at this point. It needs to be completed.

In *Process and Reality*, Whitehead dedicates an entire chapter to "propositions." The question of propositions, what characterizes them, what they require, and their effects, is one of the constants of the work of Whitehead from the time of *Principia Mathematica* at least. My aim is neither to trace the history of the concept of "proposition" in Whitehead's work, nor to establish any links between it and other philosophical positions that were in evidence when Whitehead was writing. Nor will I compare Whitehead's "propositions" to other philosophical approaches, such as logic, epistemology, or semiotics, which also try to grant propositions a fundamental status. My aim is more precise: to understand how there can be an intensification of experience. For, when he deals with "propositions" in *Process and Reality*, Whitehead does so in terms of an intensification, as I will demonstrate shortly. A proposition is not a description of matters of fact, nor is it a representation, or a judgment; it is a *lure for feeling*.[10] The making of a proposition is, essentially, the luring of a multiplicity of feelings.

We should consider the term "lure" for a moment, as Whitehead uses it in a quite particular sense, removing all negative connotations. In Whitehead's vocabulary, "lure" certainly does not carry the idea of either an artifice designed to fool someone, or an illusion that masks reality. For Whitehead, the term is resolutely neutral: a lure incites a change that can be either positive or negative, according to the circumstances; it entices someone, produces a diversion, modifies the course

of an event, and makes it go in a new direction. Thus, when Whitehead says of propositions that they are "lures for feeling," there is no criticism, no denunciation, intended by his use of this phrase. It simply is a matter of seeing propositions as involving a *capture* or a *grasping*.

In this sense, it is imperative not to confuse propositions with judgments. Their functions complement each other but they are not identical. Thus, Whitehead is particularly virulent in his numerous attacks on those theories that try to make propositions particular instances of judgments. For example, he writes, "Unfortunately theories, under their name of 'propositions,' have been handed over to logicians, who have countenanced the doctrine that their one function is to be judged as to their truth or falsehood."[11] This attack on logic is only a pretext. The problem is much broader and relies upon an illegitimate belief according to which the primary function of a proposition is to be the vehicle for a judgment. This is not to deny completely this aspect of propositions but to limit its relevance: "The doctrine here laid down is that [. . .] 'judgment' is a very rare component, and so is 'consciousness.'"[12] In order to make this difference as telling as possible, Whitehead starkly summarizes, almost to the point of caricature, any conflation of propositions with judgments as being not only illegitimate but almost comical. "The existence of imaginative literature should have warned logicians that their narrow doctrine is absurd. It is difficult to believe that all logicians as they read Hamlet's speech, 'To be, or not to be: . . .' commence by judging whether the initial proposition be true or false, and keep up the task of judgment throughout the whole thirty-five lines. Surely, at some point in the reading, judgment is eclipsed by aesthetic delight."[13]Although the soliloquy is purely theoretical, as a series of statements, it has a function that clearly goes beyond its exclusively verbal expression: the capture of a multiplicity of feelings. When judgment is taken as operating in an overly narrow dimension, it loses the imaginative leap implied in the proposition. The feelings that are implied in the soliloquy might well be of different orders: aesthetic, moral, axiological, and, in certain cases, even logical. But they run through the thirty-five verses. These verses cannot be judged individually nor through a series of judgments that would somehow reveal the true meaning of these feelings. Taken as a proposition, the soliloquy

produces a clear and dramatic intensification of the feelings that they lure. These feelings aim at "value as elements in feeling."[14] In this sense, it would be absurd to ask if the propositions uttered during Hamlet's soliloquy are true or false, as they have a completely different function: increasing the importance of the experience that is embodied in the feelings, and to which these feelings are attached.

Alternative Worlds

The function of propositions is to produce an intensification of feelings. But a question still remains: How do they manage to do this? What, exactly, do propositions put into perspective that enables them to induce such an intensification of these feelings? To be precise, what is captured in these propositions when they act as lures, so that these feelings now acquire a dimension that was previously unknown to them? Let us take a new example: the Battle of Waterloo.

> This battle resulted in the defeat of Napoleon, and in a constitution of our actual world grounded upon that defeat. But the abstract notions, expressing the possibilities of another course of history which would have followed upon his victory, are relevant to the facts which actually happened. We may not think it of practical importance that imaginative historians should dwell upon such hypothetical alternatives. But we confess their relevance in thinking about them at all, even to the extent of dismissing them.[15]

Using the example of a battle to explicate a theory of propositions is not without certain dangers, for it accentuates the idea of an irruption, of an event as a rupture that leads to a new epoch; this might seem to situate the concept of propositions in a predominantly anthropological framework. This example of a battle is both pertinent and risky. However, the way in which Whitehead presents this example, the elements that he musters, the terms that he uses, allow us to pinpoint the speculative dimensions of propositions that are required for the argument that I am making.

Propositions link actual feelings (subjects) and possible worlds (predicates). When he mentions the Battle of Waterloo, Whitehead intro-

duces something very specific that forms one of the ongoing concerns of his theory of propositions and which is the central point of the question of intensification, according to the role that I want to give it in the framework of speculative propositions. He raises the idea that another "course of history was possible." This is neither a slogan nor a simple assertion that could be added to any interpretation of historical events—that things could have been otherwise. This insistence on another course resonates at the heart of an event. The question of another course of action, for either the event or for history, is an urgent one that is posed in each act that makes up the battle, at all levels of its existence, in both the daunting possibility of defeat and the hesitations of the soldiers at the very moment that they occur. Running through these hesitations, a multiplicity of possible worlds is attached to each act as it plays out: the French armies come out victorious; they are defeated; the coalition crumbles and a new equilibrium comes to light; the battle continues and carries on and victory no longer makes any sense.

Without doubt, Whitehead knew of Renouvier only through the praise that William James had given him.[16] Nevertheless, the emphasis that Whitehead gives to envisaging other courses of history, taking account of events as they could have been, is not so different from a genre established by Renouvier in his book *Uchronie*.[17] What is the function of these "uchronies"?[18] Are they not just abstract exercises, whose aim is to relativize events and remind us that history is not totally determined in the moment that it is made? Uchronies are much more substantial than this; they are not simply pedagogical or heuristic tools. They are the condition of what I have called the rise in importance, of intensification. This point is key to the function of speculative thought, so there is a need to be more precise. If the outcome of the battle had always been written, if it merely followed a routine course that had been established once and for all, if it actualized only historical overdeterminations, then all the value of the event would dissipate, and with it our heritage. This would make the battle only one event in a linear sequence; it would miss precisely what makes *this* occasion *that* historical moment where the creation of our actual world was played out. These possibilities dramatize, and thereby intensify, the defeat.

However, it is important not to exaggerate the status of these possible worlds. They would be only pure, general, abstractions if their existence were not always local, situated in concrete events: the hesitation in *this* action, the worry felt at *that* moment, the bifurcations that come to be in *this* lack of action. Thus, of all the deeds, of all the actors, of all the actions, it is necessary to state that they are "a hybrid between pure potentialities and actualities."[19] In this sense, speculative propositions require a milieu that gives them their consistency. They do not make decisions for the world; they articulate events differently. In order for the idea of another course of history to acquire any consistency, it must lure, or capture, the real worries, the effective feelings, that partially preexist them. These feelings are the feelings of the battle that develop in the memories of the participants, in literary works, in books written by historians as they depict its unfolding. This group of physical, aesthetic, and imaginative feelings form the milieu of new propositions that persevere with regard to the battle. When the "imaginative historian," as described in Whitehead's example, meditates on these other courses of history, life is given to the possibilities that are attached to that historical occasion. The propositions that the historian develops, and to which the historian is closely tied, will gain in importance as they bring together the hesitations that accompanied this singular historical event. The importance of propositions is, therefore, related to the relevance of the articulations that they produce.

It is certainly legitimate to ask who judges this relevance. Where might we find the criteria that would allow us to say that one proposition is more relevant than another, and according to what perspective would we be able to evaluate the extent of the articulations that they entail? If, in reality, a plurality of possible worlds is formed in the course of the battle, if these possible worlds come to be confirmed or refuted by the histories that tell us of this battle, how can we establish any differences between them? Should we take them all as equal, as having the same level of existence, the same force and intensity? In the passage that I have cited, Whitehead gives us a way of responding: "This battle resulted in the defeat of Napoleon, and in a constitution of our actual world grounded upon that defeat."[20] It is not in the battle itself that its importance can be found. This would be a rather

uninspiring finding. Intensification carries all the hesitations that run through the battle, all the possibilities that animate it and that come to destabilize its grandeur.

Ultimately, the relevance of a proposition is related to the constitution of our actual world. We cannot go beyond this. This "other course of history," these alternative worlds that are dramatized by the "imaginative historian" who develops such uchronies—these have no other function than making sense of our actual world, what it inherits, the fragility of the history from which our world is derived, the possibilities that continue to have a latent presence. These past conditionals, these "could have beens," are focused on the constitution of our actual world, a world-in-the-making, with its hesitations, its latent bifurcations, its tendencies, which says nothing definitive beyond itself.

It is now possible to return to my initial definition of the function of speculative philosophy: the intensification of an experience to its maximal point. Importance is given. It belongs to all existence in so far as importance embodies a particular perspective on the universe that is expressed in each of the elements of the cosmological dimensions it inherits. The ways of feeling, of connecting, of grasping, and the importance that these assume, are constitutive of nature itself. It is not that there are primary qualities on one side and secondary qualities on the other; rather, there are the specific articulations of each existent that are the affirmations of what matters here and now. But even if importance is everywhere, it is nevertheless up to us to intensify it, to give to importance all the dimensions that it requires. In a word, to establish its *value*. Even if this question has been posed in terms of a historical event, it is clearly not limited to the realm of history and its legacies, as it concerns our contemporary experience and the possibilities that animate it. This is an inherently moral activity whose maxim could be "Whether we destroy, or whether we preserve, our action is moral if we have thereby safe-guarded the importance of experience so far as it depends on that concrete instance in the world's history."[21]