

Whitehead and Japanese Aesthetics

By Arlene M. Mayeda

THE SUBTLE BEAUTY OF JAPANESE ART EMBUES IT WITH mystery. Its simplicity and liberal use of empty space has struck many as possessing some deeper hidden meaning. The Japanese call this *yugen* — the form of the formless.

Over the centuries, the principles of *yugen* have been celebrated by poets, monks, and members of the Imperial Court. But they remain an elusive and obscure topic for Western thinkers. In the article entitled “The Penumbral Shadow: A Whiteheadian Perspective on the *Yugen* Style of Art and Literature in Japanese Aesthetics,”¹ Steve Odin attempts to interpret the aesthetic principles of *yugen* in light of the aesthetic theories presented by Alfred North Whitehead, a 20th century American philosopher. In his efforts to draw parallels between Eastern and Western philosophy, however, Odin oversimplifies the complex structures found in the respective theories. Hence he does injury to both Whiteheadian aesthetics and the principles of *yugen*.

My goal here is a critical reevaluation of Odin’s interpretation of Whiteheadian aesthetics and its relationship to the principles of *yugen*. First, I will highlight the essential differences which Odin neglected to indicate between the two theories. Then, I will present a modified version of Odin’s argument. Through my analysis, I hope to bring new insight about the ideas of Eastern and Western aesthetics and arrive ever closer to expressing that which cannot be easily expressed — *yugen*.

IN HIS INTRODUCTION, ODIN STATES THAT WHITEHEAD creates a radically innovative axiology which “establishes the primacy of aesthetics over morality and logic, while at the same time positing the equivalence of religious and artistic values.”² Odin reaffirms his assertion by quoting Whitehead from *Religion in the Making*:

The metaphysical doctrine here expounded finds the foundation of the world in aesthetic experience... All order is therefore aesthetic order, and the moral order is merely certain aspects of the aesthetic order, and the aesthetic order is derived from the immanence of God...³

Indeed, from an initial reading, Odin’s assertion seems accurate. Yet when the passage is read in respect to Whitehead’s overall philosophy, it becomes evident that Odin failed to grasp what Whitehead was trying to convey.

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many other connotations. In the forward to Donald Sherburne's *A Whiteheadian Aesthetic*, F.S.C. Northrop advises the reader "...[t]o read Whitehead with care, looking to one's concrete experience rather than to the dull, dead commonplaces of conventional thought, to learn what his words mean..."⁴ Hence simply taking what Whitehead says at face value is not enough; the reader must constantly question what Whitehead is trying to say. The words 'God' and 'aesthetic experience' quoted above serve as excellent examples of the need to look beyond conventional understanding. Before discussing the meaning of 'God' and 'aesthetic experience,' an understanding of the cosmology in Whitehead's organismic philosophy is necessary. Central to Whitehead's organismic philosophy is the 'actual entity' — "the final real thing the world is made up of."⁵ In Whitehead's cosmology, 'actual entities' are like atoms: they are the building blocks which come together to form larger 'mass' entities. These mass entities constitute objects of our everyday experience, such as trees and houses. Unlike the imperishable atom, the 'actual entity' is transient because it is essentially an experience.⁶ This 'actual entity' or single experience is the culmination of a process called 'concrescence.'

Sherburne, in his book *A Whiteheadian Aesthetic*, provides a comprehensive explanation of the process of concrescence.⁷ He divides the process into four major phases. The first phase is the encounter with the object of experience called the 'datum.' This can be a tree, a song or a work of art. Second is the emergence of the 'physical feeling' which is merely the objective recognition of the 'datum.' That is the act of recognizing a tree as a tree. This then gives rise to the 'conceptual feeling' which is the subjective reaction to the 'physical feeling.' During this phase past feelings and past 'actual entities' enter or rather "ingress" into the process of concrescence. For instance a feeling of fear arises because the tree looks like a ghost seen in a past movie. The ingression is highly significant for maintaining the novelty of each 'actual entity' because it allows for creative combinations of feelings and past actualities.

The third phase is the feeling which emerges from the contrast between the 'conceptual feeling' and the 'physical feeling.' This comparative feeling is called the 'propositional feeling.' Finally in the fourth phase, the 'propositional feeling' is contrasted once again with the 'physical feeling' which results in the 'actual entity,' i.e., the "completed unity of operations."⁸ In this way the process of concrescence brings together feelings and past actualities which contribute to the apprehension of the 'datum' and the development of a new 'actual entity.' This 'actual entity' lasts only for an instant before becoming a past actuality which will be incorporated into the process of concrescence for future 'actual entities.'

The energy behind the process of concrescence is *causa sui*, that is, self-generated. This means that there is no external force categorizing the various feelings; instead "there are first feelings which through integrations, acquire [an] unity."⁹

These feelings, rather than floating around in chaos, come together as a unit due to the direction provided by the 'subjective aim.' This aim is essentially the ideal for the 'actual entity;' it represents the maximum

potential comprehended subject which the 'datum' could become. For instance, suppose we are looking at a pine tree. Though it is a unique pine tree, there is an universal element within the pine tree and all other trees which direct our reactions so that we experience the pine tree. This eternal element is the 'subjective aim' and is derived from both the physical tree at the present moment, and that enduring element of the tree which will always make it a tree.

Having provided a brief overview of the essential ideas which constitute Whitehead's organismic philosophy, I will now identify the major problems in Odin's interpretation of Whitehead's philosophy. These problems fall under two major categories; first, the relationship of art and the aesthetic experience; and second, the significance of the 'penumbral shadow.' By analyzing Odin's understanding of the Whiteheadian perspective in light of Whitehead's organismic philosophy, I make evident the importance of interpreting Whitehead's ideas within the larger context of his cosmological system. Odin's failure to consistently explain how his interpretations fit into the larger context becomes the essential shortcoming of his Whiteheadian perspective of yugen.

THE FIRST PROBLEM IN ODIN'S INTERPRETATION concerns the relationship between art and aesthetic experience. In Odin's citation of Whitehead from *Religion and the Making*, the words 'aesthetic experience' and 'God' were highlighted as having atypical definitions in contrast to their conventional understanding. By reinterpreting the definition of these two words, I will now discuss the relationship between art and aesthetic experience.

The Whiteheadian definition for 'God' has no religious content and is incompatible with the conventional understanding of that term as referring to a divine being. According to Whitehead, God is the thing which combines the temporal and the timeless aspects of an 'actual entity'¹⁰ and is the "chief exemplification of all metaphysical principles."¹¹ In other words, 'God' is like the 'subjective aim,' (i.e., ideal) of the universe. In the Whiteheadian organismic cosmology the universe would be considered a conglomerate of all 'actual entities.' God is the universal 'subjective aim' from which each individual 'actual entities' derive their particular 'subjective aim.'

The 'aesthetic experience' works closely with the 'subjective aim.' Using Sherburne's analysis of a Whiteheadian aesthetic theory,¹² 'aesthetic experience' is the "experience of aesthetic re-creation."¹³ This aesthetic recreation is explained by Sherburne:

[aesthetic re-creation]...demands that the contemplator have the ability to seize the proposition objectified by the performance as the datum for subjective aim and then successfully carry out that aim to re-create the proposition in his own experience.¹⁴

The key difference between aesthetic experience and everyday experience is the objectified proposition — that which the performer is trying to express through his performance.¹⁵ The individual who is watching the performance

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must first come to recognize the proposition. Then, the individual must use that element as the datum to derive the 'subjective aim' which will then initiate concrescence. In this sense an aesthetic experience is one in which the individual re-creates the performance in his own experience.

By saying that "the aesthetic order is derived from the immanence of God," Whitehead is not "positing the equivalence of religious and artistic values," as Odin asserts. According to Whiteheadian aesthetics, the statement is simply alluding to the ontological basis of the 'subjective aim' in aesthetics, namely the 'subjective aim' is part of the universal 'subjective aim' called 'God.' Secondly, the aesthetic experience aims toward re-creating the final 'actual entity.' As in any process of concrescence, past actualities play a vital role. Morals and logic are past 'actual entities' which contribute to the formation of the new 'actual entity.' Aesthetics is simply the name given to this overall concrescence. Hence Whitehead did not necessarily intend to establish a primacy of the aesthetic order over other orders.

The key idea that must be kept in mind about aesthetic experience is recreation. Whatever object that is considered aesthetically pleasing or aesthetically beautiful has a proposition which instills within the individual a 'subjective aim' that directs the individual toward recreating the object within his or her own experience. Even something that is ugly can be experienced aesthetically, says Sherburne; "it can because horror, for example, can fascinate and induce aesthetic *recreation*."¹⁶

Odin, however, seems to have missed the point of recreation and instead argues for a kind of revelation, a coming out of darkness. He contends that according to Sherburne, "the function of art from a Whiteheadian perspective is to bring clarity to the 'vague and inarticulate feelings from a dim, penumbral region.'"¹⁷ To the contrary, Sherburne asserts that "[t]he art object is an object intended by its maker, through its propositional character, to serve as a lure which will determine the 'subjective aim' of prehension of it."¹⁸ That is, the art object provides hints and clues about its proposition to initiate concrescence. This is distinct from clearly indicating which feelings are to be used in concrescence. In fact Whitehead himself would disagree with this latter interpretation, for he insists that 'actual entities' are *causa sui*; the feelings which unite to form the 'actual entity' are not pre-determined. Whitehead is concerned with maintaining the novelty of 'actual entities,' which is only possible when the feelings used in concrescence are spontaneous.

Odin's failure to see the function of art within the overall context of Whitehead's organismic philosophy leads him to misinterpret the idea of hinting at a direction for the idea of clearly delineating the experience. Hence Odin wrongly concludes that "the ultimate creative purpose of human art and literature is to depict the beauty of the phenomena arising from the haunting presence of the whole on to its various parts."¹⁹ He also describes the relationship between beauty and the aesthetic experience:

According to Whitehead's phenomenology of aesthetic experience, it is the vague undiscriminated background field surrounding all objects clearly discriminated in the foreground focus which confers upon them their quality of beauty or depth.²⁰

Here Odin seems to imply that the quality of beauty is bestowed upon an art

object as a result of some aesthetic experience.

Beauty plays a different role in Whiteheadian aesthetic theory. The quality of art is important in so far as it attracts the individual to the object so that the object may provide the necessary proposition for that individual to gain the desired 'subjective aim'. Sherburne describes the function of beauty as follows:

...beauty invites the attention to its object. A performance that is experienced as beautiful, qua the beauty attributed to it, encourages the involvement of the subjective aim, which [is the] sine qua non of aesthetic experience.²¹

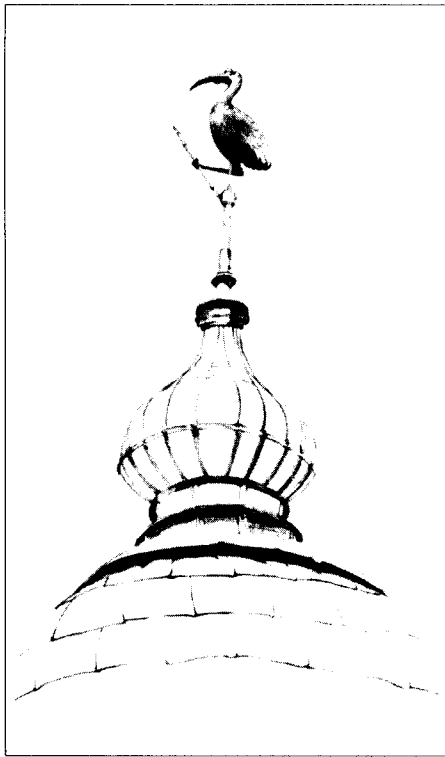
Notice that beauty only attracts and encourages the involvement of the 'subjective aim.' The aesthetic experience occurs when the 'subjective aim' fully engages in recreation. Hence there lies a major difference between beauty and aesthetics: something may be beautiful but not aesthetic because it does not give rise to the 'subjective aim' which causes aesthetic recreation. Unlike Odin's explanation of the relationship between beauty and aesthetics, this understanding of Whitehead claims that art is beautiful not because it is aesthetic but rather because it can lead to an aesthetic experience.

THE SECOND PROBLEM WITH ODIN'S ANALYSIS OF the Whiteheadian perspective of yugen concerns the 'penumbral shadow.' Odin stresses the existence of a 'penumbral shadow,' and uses it as the essential concept which links Whitehead with the principles of yugen. The 'penumbral shadow,' however, does not play a significant role in his organismic philosophy. Out of a need to find some common element between Whiteheadian aesthetics and the principles of yugen, Odin places superficial importance on the concept of the 'penumbral shadow.'

Odin derives the strength for his concept of the 'penumbral shadow' from the "aim at contrast" which Whitehead discusses in his book *Process and Reality*. Odin argues that Whitehead is making a contrast between clarity and vagueness. By using Whitehead's descriptive terminology, Odin goes on to construct a structure which features an opposition between foreground and background. The foreground is characterized as being "articulated with clarity and distinctness," while the background remains in a kind of "dim remoteness and massive uniformity."²² This background represents the 'penumbral shadow.'

Whitehead's intention in the sections Odin quoted from *Process and Reality* is to describe the objective of his philosophy, that is, his search for a rationalistic scheme to explain complex habitual experiences.²³ He discusses how "[t]he methodology of rational interpretation is the product of fitful vagueness of consciousness. ...And yet all occasions proclaim themselves as actualities within the flux of a solid world, demanding a unity of interpretation." In this way, he introduces the idea of actualities and a need for a unity of interpretation, thus establishing the groundwork upon which he builds his organismic philosophy. He establishes the dichotomy between methodology and fitful vagueness of consciousness only to stress the need for developing a coherent scheme which incorporates the two apparently bipolar

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positions. Hence, Odin gives the false impression that Whitehead is trying to develop the concept of a 'penumbral shadow.'

Odin uses other text beside *Process and Reality* to show that the 'penumbral shadow' has significance in Whiteheadian aesthetics. Despite the fact that Whitehead mentions the existence of a "penumbral region," he seems to be using the term to represent the common notion that outside of the realm of rational thinking there exists an obscure region. From the time of ancient Greek civilization, philosophers have used this notion. Plato wrote about the philosopher king who emerges from the cave, which represents a world of shadows, and enters the light, which represents truth. In light of this understanding of Whitehead's intentions, Odin's argument for the significance of the 'penumbral shadow' becomes questionable.

These major problems in Odin's interpretation of Whitehead's philosophy renders his overall analysis of the principles of yugen tenuous. Odin's failure to show the significance of shadows in the Whiteheadian perspective cripples his latter arguments about yugen. Furthermore his misinterpretation of the aesthetic experience as establishing clarity, rather than as providing a 'subjective aim,' calls for a need to provide an alternative analysis of the Whiteheadian perspective of yugen. But before presenting my alternative analysis, I will first define what Odin meant by yugen and identify the shortcomings of his analysis as it stands. The point of my next discussion is to show that the 'penumbral shadow' does not serve as an adequate counterpart to the concept of yugen.

IN DESCRIBING YUGEN, ODIN HIGHLIGHTS THE word's literal meaning — "shadowy darkness."²⁴ Based upon this definition he links yugen with the concept of the 'penumbral shadow' discussed above. He says:

...like Whitehead's notion of a 'penumbral shadow'... the traditional Japanese principle of yugen or "shadowy darkness" signifies the aesthetic value content intrinsic to all phenomena due to their hidden depths.²⁵

According to Odin, yugen represents Japanese aesthetic value, which is associated with the "hidden depths," namely the mysterious, invisible elements in the phenomena. Ryusaku Tsunoda in *Sources of Japanese Tradition* describes this aspect of yugen as "an awareness of the existence of something beyond the form."²⁶ Yugen is then a highly metaphysical aesthetic value which is grounded not in the positive aspect of experience (i.e., that which can be experienced), but rather in negative experience (i.e., that which cannot be experienced).

The aesthetic principles of yugen differ on this fundamental point from Whiteheadian aesthetic theory. According to Whiteheadian aesthetics the negative experience is not valued. What is important in determining aesthetic value is the occurrence of the aesthetic experience; the recreation of the concrescence directed by the 'subjective aim' of an artistic object or phenomena. The primary objective of the experience in Whitehead's philosophy is to overcome the obscurity — the 'penumbral shadow' — and form an 'actual entity'. Hence, the 'penumbral shadow' does not share the same significance which yugen enjoys in the Japanese aesthetics. The

'penumbral shadow' is dismissed because of its obscurity, while yugen is cherished because of its obscurity.

Failing to see this essential difference, Odin continues to liken yugen to the 'penumbral shadow'. In describing the association between yugen and the idea of impermanence he says:

Moreover, like Whitehead's organismic metaphor of a "penumbral shadow", the Japanese yugen concept indicates the total unsubstantiality of events due to their impermanence.²⁷

According to Japanese aesthetic principles, events are impermanent. Yugen, the "shadowy darkness," makes us aware of this fact.

The idea of impermanence is also evident in Whiteheadian aesthetics. However, impermanence is evident, not as a result of the 'penumbral shadow,' but from the doctrine of creative advance. This doctrine focuses on the life cycle of the 'actual entities,' which starts from a feeling, develops into an experience and is used in the creation of future 'actual entities.' "This is the doctrine," says Sherburne, "that the creative advance of the world is the becoming, [and] the perishing,...of those things which jointly constitute stubborn facts (i.e., 'actual entities')." ²⁸ Whiteheadian aesthetics draws little, if not any, attention to the 'penumbral shadow' when explaining impermanence. Hence the 'penumbral shadow,' unlike yugen, is not associated with impermanence.

In respect to the essence of the fundamental aesthetic value and impermanence, the 'penumbral shadow' differs from yugen. It lacks the essential characteristics to adequately describe yugen from the Whiteheadian perspective. As a result the 'penumbral shadow' serves only as an incompatible counterpart to the principles of yugen.

Odin failed in his attempt to provide an accurate Whiteheadian perspective of yugen because he simply mismatched certain concepts, namely yugen and the 'penumbral shadow.' Mindful of Odin's shortcomings, I will now try to reconstruct the Whiteheadian perspective of yugen so that it adheres to Whitehead's overall organismic philosophy. I will compare the experience of yugen with the Whiteheadian aesthetic experience, concluding that the function of yugen closely resembles that of the objectified proposition.

THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM LIES IN ODIN'S misinterpretation of Whitehead's organismic philosophy and how it is translated into an aesthetic theory. Odin simply interpreted the words used by Whitehead and failed to understand the meaning behind the words. This caused Odin to identify the 'penumbral shadow' with the "shadowy darkness" of yugen simply based on common physical features. Odin's mistake indicates that the physical features of yugen holds little significance from the Whiteheadian perspective. Tsunoda says:

To achieve the end of yugen, art had sometimes been stripped of its color and glitter lest these externals distract;...²⁹

This statement makes apparent the need to focus, not on the external qualities of yugen, but the internal aspect, namely the function of yugen.

Odin provides a number of examples citing when yugen is experienced.

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Kamo no Chomei, a waka poet during the Kamakura period, writes about such an experience on an autumn evening.

On an autumn evening, for example, there is no color in the sky, nor any sound, and although we cannot give a definite reason for it, we are somehow moved to tears.³⁰

Obviously, the shadowy darkness aspect of yugen is evident in the dull color of the autumn sky; however, it is not clear how and why the viewer is moved to tears. The only solution Chomei provides concerns the personality of the viewer. He says:

A person lacking in sensitivity finds nothing particular in such a sight, he just admires the cherry blossoms and scarlet autumn leaves that he can see with his own eyes.³¹

From the Whiteheadian perspective Chomei’s explanation makes apparent that the first experience of being moved to tears is an aesthetic experience.

These two examples given by Chomei resembles the beauty versus aesthetic dichotomy discussed in Part II. The major difference between beauty and aesthetics lies in their consequences. Something aesthetic gives rise to aesthetic re-creation, while something beautiful but not aesthetic has no effect.

The first situation exemplifies an aesthetic experience because of the reaction by the viewer. The Whiteheadian aesthetic explanation for the entire situation would be as follows. First, the beauty of the autumn sky attracted the attention of the viewer. Second, the beauty of the sky lures the viewer with a proposition that will lead to a ‘subjective aim’. Third, the viewer proceeds to re-create the sky within his own experience. Fourth, the experience culminates in the final ‘actual entity,’ which is accompanied by the physical reaction of tears flooding the viewer’s eye.

Since the object of attention in this case is nature, the mechanics of the second step requires further explanation. According to Sherburne’s interpretation of the Whiteheadian aesthetic, the luring proposition refers to the meaning of the art object — the artist’s intention behind his work. Nature, having no meaning “unless it be put there by the man who encounters it,”³² lacks the luring proposition. Hence the person viewing the autumn sky is reacting not to the sky itself but to the meaning he has placed upon the gray sky.

The second situation, featuring the insensitive person, lacks the presence of the luring proposition, and therefore cannot be aesthetic. The insensitive person simply appreciates the beauty of nature and does not provide it with any meaning. Without meaning, no proposition exists. Therefore there is no opportunity for the person to be lured by the proposition and to aesthetically recreate what he sees.

Based on the fact that an aesthetic experience depends heavily on the luring proposition, I associate the function of yugen with that of the objectified proposition. As mentioned in Part II, the difference between an aesthetic experience and everyday experience is the incorporation of the objectified proposition in concrescence. An aesthetic experience is characterized by recognizing and then recreating the proposition objectified in the artwork. The subtle experience of Japanese aesthetics also requires the realization of a

hidden beauty which is called yugen. Hence yugen and the objectified proposition similarly affect aesthetic experience.

EASTERN AND WESTERN PHILOSOPHY ARE ESSENTIALLY DIFFERENT. THE challenge of comparative philosophy is to acknowledge the differences and yet to discover the integrating force which brings diverse philosophies together.

Throughout this paper, I have tried to integrate the Eastern and Western aesthetic theories by identifying the major shortcomings of Steve Odin's analysis of Whiteheadian aesthetics and the aesthetic principles of yugen. My aim was to show that Whiteheadian aesthetics relates to the principles of yugen with regard to more than just the concept of the 'penumbral shadow.' I argue that the entire aesthetic experience, according to Whitehead, closely resembles the yugen experience to such an extent that the subtle experience of yugen follows the same schematic procedure of Whitehead's aesthetic re-creation. By doing so, I have in effect changed the ultimate function of art in the yugen style of Japanese aesthetics. No longer is yugen found in the beauty of the hidden depths, as Odin argues; instead yugen must be realized in one's own re-creation of art. ϕ

ENDNOTES

- ¹Steve Odin, "The Penumbral Shadow: A Whiteheadian Perspective on the Yugen Style of Art and Literature in Japanese Aesthetics," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 12/1 (March 1985): 63-90.
- ²Odin, p. 64.
- ³Alfred Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, p. 116 as quoted in Steve Odin, "The Penumbral Shadow:...", *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, p. 64.
- ⁴F.S.C. Northrop, "Foreword," in *A Whiteheadian Aesthetic*, by Donald Sherburne, p. xv.
- ⁵Donald Sherburne, *Key to Whitehead* (New York, NY: Macmillan Co., 1966), p. 205.
- ⁶Ibid.
- ⁷Sherburne, *A Whiteheadian Aesthetics*, p. 56-65.
- ⁸Sherburne, *A Key to Whitehead*, p. 14.
- ⁹Ibid., p. 244.
- ¹⁰Sherburne, *A Key to Whitehead*, p. 25-26.
- ¹¹Ibid., p. 226.
- ¹²Whitehead himself has not written a comprehensive theory for aesthetics, though he often eluded to one in his writings. Donald Sherburne provides a thorough analysis of Whitehead's aesthetics in his book *A Whiteheadian Aesthetics*. From this point on, I am referring to Sherburne's book when discussing Whiteheadian aesthetics.
- ¹³Sherburne, *A Whiteheadian Aesthetics*, p. 118.
- ¹⁴Ibid., p. 149.
- ¹⁵The proposition is considered a premature 'actual entity' because it lacks concrescence. In other words, a work of art is the culmination of many experiences by the artist. However, the artwork itself does not make those experiences clearly evident; it only hints at them. Hence in order to truly appreciate the artwork, the viewer must re-experience those experiences. This is what is involved in aesthetic recreation and the entire process is called the aesthetic experience.
- ¹⁶Sherburne, *A Whiteheadian Aesthetics*, p. 119.
- ¹⁷Odin, p. 67: emphasis added.
- ¹⁸Sherburne, *A Whiteheadian Aesthetics*, p. 118: emphasis added.
- ¹⁹Odin, p. 73.
- ²⁰Ibid.
- ²¹Sherburne, *A Whiteheadian Aesthetics*, p. 119.
- ²²Odin, p. 68.
- ²³Alfred Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, corrected ed., (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1978), p. 114.
- ²⁴Odin, p. 74.
- ²⁵Ibid.
- ²⁶Ryusaku Tsunoda, ed., *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1958), p. 278-279.
- ²⁷Odin, p. 74-75.
- ²⁸Sherburne, *A Key to Whitehead*, p. 16.
- ²⁹Tsunoda, p. 280.
- ³⁰Odin, p. 76.
- ³¹Ibid.
- ³²Sherburne, *A Whiteheadian Aesthetic*, p. 158.