



## Book Reviews

Glenn Hughes, *A More Beautiful Question: The Spiritual in Art and Poetry*, Columbia & London, University of Missouri Press 2011. 184 pp. ISBN 978-0-8262-1917-6.

The ability of art to bridge material and spiritual realms is a philosophical question dating to the time of Plato and has concerned philosophers, artists, and esotericists ever since. Art is a locus of immanence, filled with the potentiality for transcendence, and ultimately, a *cosmion*, a 'unified whole reflective of the unity and completeness of the cosmos,' according to Hughes (p. 128) and an entity imbued with and inspired by our own quest for consciousness. With conscious effort, we are told, it can become a catalyst for spiritual awareness and a rediscovery of the 'balance of consciousness which honors properly both worldly and transcendent reality' (p. 132).

Hughes' quest is to discover whether, and in what way, engagement with the arts can offer a path to transcendence and inner harmony, thus resolving the problem he identifies as 'the increasing popularity of reductively secularist and materialist conceptions of human nature and reality' (p. 8). His insightful and passionately constructed argument employs the philosophical perspectives of Eric Voegelin (1901–1985) and Bernard Lonergan (1904–1984) to explore how the very nature of the arts can lead to this end.

This is a philosophical treatise, not an academic book, and should be approached accordingly. The author makes no pretence to academic objectivity; from the outset he makes it clear that notions such as transcendence, the oneness of the cosmos, and the possibility of experiencing them through engagement with the arts are foregone conclusions. They are treated as such throughout the book, reflecting Lonergan's notion of self-appropriation, according to which the tools of philosophical and aesthetic inquiry are turned to the individual's perspective and preoccupations (Bernard J.F. Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding, Collected Works vol. 3*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran, Toronto: University of Toronto 1992, pp. 11–24; idem, *Method in Theology*, New York: Seabury 1972, pp. 3–25). Hughes is entirely direct about his approach and objective, and attempts to validate them both by contextualising them within this particular discourse, and through the construction of subtle argumentation that displays nuanced and insightful thought.

In the introductory chapter the existential nature of childhood is used to illustrate the experience of transcendence and unity that form the desired objective. In the second chapter Hughes explores the relationships between art-as-cosmion and the harmony of the cosmos, drawing on Lonergan's views on art and Voegelin's views on immanence and transcendence to identify those aspects of art that lend themselves to this purpose. The next three chapters trace these notions through the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Emily Dickinson, and T.S. Eliot, who, as Hughes self-consciously explains, have been selected in order to articulate 'specific symbolic evocations ... of the experiences, difficulties, and insights involved in living out a conscious relationship to transcendent meaning', a function, he argues, best achieved by the literary arts (pp. 6–7). The final chapter comprises a review and set of conclusions based on the preceding discussion. Once again drawing on Lonergan's perspective on human development and the import of 'religious conversion', he explores whether art can have the same effect as other spiritual catalysts, and following a complex and impassioned, though well-constructed, argument regarding the 'types of imbalance' that masquerade as engagement with or realisation of transcendence, he concludes that: 'Art militates against religious fundamentalism or any spiritual or religious posture that pretends to reduce the mysteries of divine transcendence to known facts ... Art is always "the beautiful answer who asks a more beautiful question"' (p. 133).

Hughes' argument rests on the premise that once mankind "discovered" the notion of transcendence (p. 9), a new dimension of meaning was created, ultimately leading to a division between the 'primary experience of the cosmos' (p. 10) and its observation. The analogy of childhood and adulthood is used to make the distinction between the sense of wonder and transcendence that comes automatically to a child, and the rational thought processes blocking this state of wonder in adulthood. For Hughes, a return to enchanted perception that is free of this conceptual separation is both desirable and necessary due to the 'spiritual crisis of "disorientation"' that plagues our time (p. 6). In deep antiquity, he tells us, this state of wonder was our natural mode of perception, now only echoed in the short years of childhood before it is lost as we mature. His entire thesis is constructed with the purpose of demonstrating how engagement with the arts can lead to a rediscovery of the harmony of the universe and our relationship to it in order to enact a permanent return to a state of transcendence.

If this objective and the assumptions on which it rests are taken at face value, then there are interesting philosophical insights to be gleaned about the nature of art from this perspective, and numerous parallels that could arguably be drawn between Hughes' vision, and the notion of the artist-initiate promulgated by Illuminist thinkers such as Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg, 1772–1801), Pierre-Simon Ballanche (1776–1847), and Joséphin Péladan (1858–1918). For Hughes,

art has an almost magical ability to reconcile opposing dynamics and contradictory perceptual dimensions because the pairs of opposites are embedded in its transcendent nature. Hence it is able to equally honor ‘both worldly and transcendent reality’, an expression of beauty within a flawed material reality, but one which is itself free of the trappings of matter, time, or dogma, and therefore able to reconcile the inherent paradoxes and conflicts in other, flawed worldviews. He traces the power of verbal symbolism and expression through the work of his selected poets, explores the power of archetypal notions—love, despair, theosis, transcendence, destiny—and the relationship of their expression through poetry to their actual essence, seeing the art-form and its symbols both as a vehicle, and a catalyst for transformation.

A few elements of Hughes’ theory initially appear to reflect certain aspects of Partridge’s definition of occulture, including the notion of the sacralization of the self (Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture and Occulture*, Vol. I, London & New York: Continuum 2004, p. 72), the value afforded to imagination and inner experience (Partridge pp. 75–76), and the recourse to antediluvian cultures held up as an ideal of the transcendent life (Partridge pp. 52, 69, 77). These three elements are in fact foundational to Hughes’ argument: the greatest authority cited is that of primordial man who viewed the world with a sense of wonder, held up as an ideal through which to regain the unity of vision that has been lost since the collective maturation of the human race; and this is presented as a capacity inherent in human nature, available to one and all if we can overcome the divisive effect imparted by our observation of transcendence. It is also according to these elements that one might, under certain circumstances, consider placing this book in the same philosophical tradition as the late Illuminists, with echoes of Schopenhauer and Husserl.

However, this would be a mistake, for the similarities are superficial despite the three aforementioned characteristics. As has been effectively argued in the past, for Voegelin, on whose work Hughes draws, gnosis is a ‘disease of the mind’ (Voegelin 1952, in Wouter J. Hanegraff, ‘On the Construction of “Esoteric Traditions”’, in: Antoine Faivre [ed.], *Western Esotericism and the Science of Religion*, Leuven: Peeters 1998, 11–61, p. 30), and for Hughes, esoteric viewpoints are fundamentally flawed and “unhealthy”, leading to essential imbalances on the part of their adherents (pp. 131–133). Hughes goes so far as to argue that not only does art stand in clear opposition to pantheism and occultism, but that by its very nature, art reveals their inadequacy by ‘effectively expressing, in symbols, the incapacity of any and all symbols to express the ineffable divine mystery, the radical transcendence of divine transcendence’ (p. 133).

Given the plurality inherent in the ‘vast spectrum of beliefs’ constituting “occulture” in this context, wherein ‘the left-wing, peace-loving environmentalist

may share certain basic beliefs with neo-Nazi Satanists' (Partridge, pp. 69–71), it quickly becomes apparent that at least according to this definition, Hughes' work does not belong to this genre, and is in fact directly opposed to it. The differentiations are ideological as well as definitional: Hughes fills several pages with a detailed analysis of why occult perspectives cannot lead to the transcendence he speaks of, beginning with the fact that occult thinking is characterised by its immanence, while his ideal is that of transcendence. These two ends are at odds, for the former maintains the differentiation between matter and spirit, and the latter subsumes the one into the other. He borrows Voegelin's flawed terminology (Hanegraaff, pp. 30–32), but maintains a more consistent rationale, arguing that immanence produces imbalances by its very nature, either by opposing or denying transcendence, or by distorting it (p. 131). He then delineates a series of categories in which this occurs, explaining why they cannot achieve the harmony necessary for transcendence, whether due to "intransigent certitude", "anti-cosmism", or "lack of spiritual discernment" (pp. 131–132).

Despite Hughes' philosophical justifications for this perspective, it does rest on the aforementioned assumptions that notions such as 'ineffable divine mystery', 'the wonder and enchantment permeating the child's experience of the cosmos', and 'the absolute transcendence of the spiritual' (p. 133) are concrete facts requiring no additional exegesis. This may be of no import to those readers with whom it resonates as a worldview, but for others, may constitute the book's greatest flaw. Certainly it renders the book more of a primary source for scholars of Western esotericism or religious studies. For art historians and literature scholars, if taken on its own terms it provides a source of philosophical discourse replete with rich examples and refreshing views that could be used to bolster a given theoretical paradigm or open up discussion of various artistic and literary endeavours in relation to wider society. For theologians and philosophers, it adds to a specific discourse, and if theologians of esotericism in particular were to pick up the gauntlet and respond to the philosophical claims Hughes makes, a very interesting dialogue could well ensue. Artists, poets, and writers may well discover a particularly valuable impetus and rich intellectual—and spiritual—foundation for their creative work, and the eclectic art-lover will certainly find some points that resonate, whether or not they agree with the general premise.

Overall, this is a book dedicated to celebrating the creation and appreciation of beauty in the most classical sense, as well as an exhortation to use, and read, art as a practical tool for the improvement of society and a return to transcendent innocence for the individual. In these two objectives, the author will have succeeded as long as the reader is prepared to accept his premises without question. Those assumptions and flaws that may detract from the argumentation or raise eyebrows in the worlds of philosophical and esoteric scholarship are

more likely to be the result of imposed expectations, rather than any fault of the author, and in that sense, it is one of those works that deserves to be evaluated, and enjoyed, on its own terms.

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