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CHALLENGE TO TEMPORALITY, SEARCH FOR THE SUBLIMITY; MYSTIC QUEST OF THE NARRATOR IN WILLIAM BECKFORD'S EXCURSION TO GRAND CHARTREUSE (1779)

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Abstract: *William Beckford was born into a wealthy and politically prominent family on September 28, 1760. His father represented London in Parliament and became twice a Mayor of London. After his father's death, he became the wealthiest son of England. He fell in love with Lord Courtenay of Powderham's cousin William which ended his political career with Lord Loughborough's rumor that Beckford was seen through a keyhole at Powderham Castle in sodomy with his nephew, William Courtenay. After this incident, he was excluded from political life and polite society (Tinker). Then, he traveled to Grand Chartreuse in Switzerland where he wrote Excursion to Grand Chartreuse (1779). His reflections in the letters from the Excursion to Grand Chartreuse, display the profound effect of the temporal time upon the mind of the author. It is obvious from the letters that the narrator tries to escape from the limit of physical time [life] and space [society]. This paper aims to discuss the effect of time on Beckford in the letters.*

Introduction

Time consists of past, present and future. The past can only be concretized with respect to the present. What we cannot experience immanently makes up our past experience. The present may be identified as what we can immanently be conscious of in our experience. The future is the possible, expected experience that may and may not take place in the expected time to come. The three dimensions of time and its perception are closely knitted to space and conscience. Considering that time can only be identified as experience in the past, present and future, it is inevitable to refer to the space where the experience actualizes itself. Time-space compression, thus creates a sense of the presence. If 'presence' is divided between spatial and temporal properties, the experience of time becomes an existential question.

The question, then, is what is the relation between present and presence, between time and being? The most striking and controversial answer to the question is given by Martin Heidegger. According to Heidegger, all kinds of meaning actually miss the "meaning of Being." He identifies the question as "emphatic" and starts with another question, 'the semantic question, which is: What we mean when we use the term "being" (*seiend*), in what "sense" do we speak of Being (*Sein*)?' (Safranski 147) The term "being" takes its meaning from the discovery [presence] of the present [immanent]. The moment [immanence of the perception of one's own experience] is a critical keyword in Heidegger's debate:

The "moment" has a strange pathos for Heidegger. What he means by it is not the commonplace that elapsing time always passes through a present, through a moment-point. To him, the moment is not simply "given" but has to be discovered, for the simple reason that our customary relation with time conceals momentariness under an empty or stable and-so-forth. Momentariness is not an occurrence but an achievement of *Dasein*, a virtue of authenticity. "The moment of vision is nothing other than the look of resolute disclosedness in which the full situation of an action opens itself and keeps itself open" (Safranski, 173).

Here, the moment and the present have similar meaning. However, the meaning of the moment [present] is not independent from the perception of the moment. The perception is a conscious act; it is the awareness of the individual action, and the discovery of the moment is self-referential and existential (Werkmeister, 83). It is an immanent-self-involvement of the self in his action. If the immanence [present=presence] is a constitutive for the condition of time, it is not possible to separate time from being [existence]. The discovery of the moment and the experience of time are constitutive of one's own existence [being]. Each self-conscious act is also a mode for being [existence]. Each mode of being is a new form of experience. As a result, "existence" and "experience" have simultaneous and "momentary" [immanent] form.

The relation between existence and experience is complex and abstract. In the present study, we do not want to take Heidegger's notion of experience and existence as self-referential and existential act, or as a metaphysical question [the emphatic one in search of meaning]; rather the present study aims to reconsider the mystical aspect of the immanent human experience. In this study, time is transformed into a mystical ground in order to explain how sublimity challenges the temporality. What we mean by sublimity is an everlasting creation of the self, independent of time and space [temporality].

II. Sublimity and Atemporality

The notion of sublimity has ancient origins. Longinus excavates the idea and source of sublimity *On the Sublime* (1.A.D.). Longinus argues that sublime is "a certain distinction of mind" ... and it is an innate source for "eminence" and "immortality". The elevated mind has a pure, great and undefiled, soul: "sublimity is the echo of a great soul" (Longinus, 79). The poet of a "pure soul" and "greater thought" has an innate power to "find" and "bring together most vehement and striking ideas" (80). The selection and combination of the most striking ideas "into a single whole" produces and evokes the unique feelings (82). The elevation of the mind, greatness of the thought and ability to create vivid image are aspect and echo of the sublimity. The sublime does not only consist of the ability of the greater soul to create vivid description and great images before the eyes of the hearers but it is also introduces what happened in the "past" and "present" as if taking place "now". It is timeless, because "sublime art pleases the all and all the time". It is semi-divine because "sublimity raises men near the majesty of God". The ordinary universe is within the limit of the ordinary imagination; the extra-ordinary space of the universe is beyond the limit of imagination. Once the concrete bounds of the space and time are passed, the excellence, greatness and beauty of the atemporal universe can be perceived.

The idea of temporality and perception of the atemporal universe give sublimity a mystic dimension. The sublime [great] mind [sublime-poet] speaks the language of nature: "the most rhythmical and natural discourse" (94). The harmony of the sublime speech moves the hearer to the divine sphere where the harmony of the ordinary universe is re-presented with striking and vivid images. Atemporality expresses itself through symbols, or symbolic language which can also be identified as the language of nature. The language of nature is silent and eyes blind. It is necessary for a person who wants to speak such a language to become deaf and blind. The mystic quest is an atemporal spiritual journey which reveals to the quested the secret language of the living universe in a language different from the ordinary discourse of man. The language of mysticism is symbolic for the fact that the likeness between the objects in nature can truly be re-presented through symbols. Fall of the leaves, return of the winter, and death of a man all rest on the fact that things in the nature have something in common. Symbolic language expresses atemporal and common likeness between the things in nature. This paper aims to explain how the quest and mystic language of the narrator in the letters written from the Grand Chartreuse challenges the temporality of the human experience.

III. Mystic Quest of the Narrator in William Beckford's *Excursion to Grand Chartreuse* (1779)

William Beckford was born into a wealthy and politically prominent family on September 28, 1760. His father represented in Parliament and twice a Mayor of London. After father's death, he became the wealthiest son of England. He fell in love with Lord Courtenay of Powderham's cousin William which ended his political career with Lord Loughborough's rumor that Beckford was seen through a keyhole at Powderham Castle in sodomy with his nephew, William Courtney. After the rumor, he was excluded from political life and polite society (Tinker, Int.). Beckford decided to end up his career and parted himself from social life for a retirement into seclusion in the Grand Chartreuse in 1779 where he transforms himself into a mystic hero and undergoes a spiritual quest. His letters written from the Grand Chartreuse display the profound effect of temporal time upon the mind of the narrator. They reflect a desire to escape from the limit of space and time [temporality]. Beckford admits: "The grand Chartreuse has exceeded my imagination, it is wonderfully wider than I can describe or even you can imagine" (Thoughts and Incidents, 263). He delves into the midst of the Nature. He becomes deaf and blind for a while. Then, he goes through cleft, cavern, valley and cataract; listens to the silent language of the Nature. He admits that he listened to the mingling murmurs of nature and heard the strangest sound that ever reached his ear (264). In the *Excursion to Grand Chartreuse* he transforms himself into a mystic hero and challenges the physical impact of temporality upon his experience. He compares himself to Saint Bruno and Moses, respectively. Like the Saint, he achieves spiritual revelation in seclusion.

The mystic quest is a process of spiritual apprehension of truths beyond the mental understanding. It is the spiritual journey of a person who has to keep his eyes and lips shut to the physical world to capture the secrets of the divine (Spurgeon, 1). The mystic is the one who sees things as God sees them. Each divided, single object is part of the atemporal, individual body (Aquinas, 117). Nature is the physical symbol of the atemporal self in which each single and divided object represents itself free from the whole body of the nature. A mystic experience is the awareness of the division and wholeness; it is an ability to read and interpret the symbols in the book of the nature. Quest is an enterprise and an adventurous journey whose experience leads to psychological maturity. In the psychical sense of the quest, the experience and its psychological outcomes illuminate the false-and-true dichotomy. It is temporal [time and space dependent], as such a true-false dichotomy is apprehended by the human mind [psyche, conscious and intellect]. In the spiritual sense, quest is an atemporal [independent of time and space] process of spiritual revelation. The quest of the mystic hero does not end with the illumination of the true-false dichotomy: "Not the paradox of the dual perspective, but the ultimate claim of the unseen is here intended" (Campell, 327). There are two main processes of the mystic quest. The first one is the initiation which illuminates the fact that each single object is an individual [undividable] part of the one-great body. The second process is a return in which a mystic hero realizes the fact that he is also a part of the one-great body. The outcome of the spiritual quest leads to the atemporal spiritual wisdom which illuminates the visible and invisible parts of the great-body. "To see one changeless Life in all the Lives/And in the Separate, One Inseparable" (The Bhagavad-Gita, Book 18). Thus God, angels, the spirits of nature all become visible [revealed] to the mystic hero. As Spurgeon identified in *Mysticism in English Literature*: "the aim of life is to become like God, and thus to attain to union with the Divine ... life is a continual advance, a ceaseless aspiration ... God and I are one in the act of my perceiving Him (4).

Mystic experience is different from ordinary human experience. The ordinary method of reasoning reveals the great-body [universe] in division. Visionary experience, on the other hand, reveals the secret of the division. Space and Time belong to physical life and experience of space and time is a temporal experience. The inward, spiritual aspect of the physical world is a visionary experience. Feeling

and intuition belong to spiritual life and they are atemporal experience. They are given a privilege in the spiritual quest: “The mystic is somewhat in the position of a man who, in a world of blind men, has suddenly been granted sight, and who, gazing at the sunrise, and overwhelmed by the glory of it, tries, however falteringly, to convey to his fellows what he sees” (5). Thus, the mystic experience can be identified as ‘I feel therefore I exist’. Joseph Campell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (2004) identifies the mystic hero as follows:

Endowed with a pure understanding, restraining the self with firmness, turning away from sound and other objects, and abandoning love and hatred; dwelling in solitude, eating but little, controlling the speech, body, and mind, ever engaged in meditation and concentration, and cultivating freedom from passion; forsaking conceit and power, pride and lust, wrath and possessions, tranquil in heart, and free from ego—he becomes worthy of becoming one with the imperishable (327).

The ego is burnt out. Like a dead leaf in a breeze, the body continues to move about the earth, but the soul has dissolved already in the ocean of bliss (327). Campell identifies Saint Thomas Aquinas as a mystic hero. Aquinas, who as the result of a mystical quest, in Naples, put his pen and ink on the shelf and left the last chapters of his *Summa Theologica* to be completed by another hand. “My writing days,” he stated, “are over; for such things have been revealed to me that all I have written and taught.” Thereafter, Saint Aquinas becomes the ideal role model for the quest of many Christian mystics. Saint Bruno, who likes Aquinas, leaves the physical world behind for a retirement into seclusion in Switzerland. Bruno later becomes a role model for William Beckford.

In the seclusion at the Grand Chartreuse, the narrator admits that he feels seized by the genius of the place and with its spiritual gloom. The mystic narrator of the letters feels that the sublimity of the Chartreuse would alone be “sufficient to merge the physical existence and spirit of the quested. The merge of the physical experience and spiritual intuition transcend the temporal limit of the visible world and the vision of the narrator begins to form the sublime foundation of the letters (268). The narrator falls so much under the influence of this place that he becomes blind and deaf: “he can neither think nor speak”. The excursion mediates the mystic quest and the spiritual journey to discover the silent language and the invisible spirit of nature. During the residence at the Chartreuse, the narrator’s journey through the cleft, cavern, valley and cataract takes his spirit to the atemporal sphere where he listens to the mingling murmurs of nature and hears “the strangest sound that ever reached [the] ear[s]” (“Thoughts and Incidents” 264).

The quest of Saint Aquinas first becomes a role model for St. Bruno and then for the narrator. Saint Bruno was talented in science and was remarkable in the qualities of the mind. St. Bruno became head chancellor at the age of twenty-one. He protested against the misdoings of the Archbishop, disposed of all his offices and flew to seclusion in 1076. He founded the Charthusian Order near Grenoble. But, “being always poetical, singular and visionary, he soon grew disgusted with the world and in early life went into retirement” (274). Later, he also refused to be Archbishop and all ecclesiastical offices. He spent the rest of his life in the desert in Calabria in a monastery. This monastery was an asylum for anyone who was disgusted with the temporal world. However, retirement to seclusion was not escape from the physical world but an attempt to discover and become One with the great body of the universe. After his journey to the Chartreuse, Bruno completed the spiritual quest and became the guiding spirit of the valley. The narrator transformed the Saint into a spiritual hero. The narrator re-imagines and identifies with the despair of the Saint and enters the valley to escape from the limit of the temporal world¹.

¹ Here, it is also possible to compare the actual author [Beckford] and the Saint. They both had considerable wealth before they retired into seclusion.

According to the narrator, St. Bruno's retirement to this holy place enabled the Saint to have spiritual wisdom. He thinks that the Saint's retirement to the desert was rewarded by the good fathers "with admirable dish of miracle, well-seasoned with the devil, and prettily garnished with angels and moon-beams". Beckford, the narrator in the letters, expresses this as follows:

This venerable prelate imparted him a vision ... Whilst he was ardently gazing at this wonder; a still voice was heard, declaring it, the future abode of Bruno; by him to be consecrated, as a retirement for holy man, desirous of holding converse with their God. No shepherd's pipe was to be heard within these precincts: no huntsman's prophane feet to tread these silent regions, which were to be dedicated, solely, to their Creator. ("Thoughts and Incidents" 274)

The seclusion of the narrator inspires the secret, unspoken and silent language of the universe. In the Chartreuse, the narrator sits down before the works of St. Bruno during the nights to read the allegory of the birds, beasts, fishes, paradise, the glory of Solomon's temple, the New Jerusalem and numberless other subjects full of superstitions. The narrator expresses the situation as follows: "Saint Bruno was certainly a mighty genius: I admire the motives which drew him to this desert" ("Thoughts and Incidents" 274). This distant desert and the Saint also mediate the visionary revelation. The narrator begins to see things with new and fresh eyes. This is apparent in the meditation of the narrator on the portrait of the Saint with his pupils. Being captured by the painting of the Saint in the Chartreuse, he writes his reflections as follows:

Were I, after walking along the dim cloisters, and passing through the anti-chapel, faintly illuminated by a solitary lamp, suddenly to enter this solitary hall at midnight, when the convocation is assembled, and the synod of the venerable fathers, all in solemn order, surrounding the successor of Bruno; it would be a long while, I believe, before I could recover from the surprise of so august a spectacle. ... For my own part, I must confess, that the hall, though divested of all this accompaniment, filled me with veneration I scarcely knew how to account for; ... the form of Bruno was almost lost in the splendors of stars which hovered above him. (271)

The narrator fancies himself capable of plunging into the horrors of the desert by forgoing all the vanities and delights of the world for the sake of this sublime consecration. He is much tempted by the wonders and miraculous nature of St. Bruno and his seclusion in the desert near Grand Chartreuse. Excursion mediates inspirations, apparitions and mystery. The tranquility of the region fills the narrator with the most pleasing and sublime sensations (277). He follows the impulse which drives him to the summit of mountains, he "casts a look upon the whole extent of wild woods and romantic precipices," contemplates every rock "that might have met" the Saint's eyes. He runs to every "withered pine" whose appearance bespeaks the antiquity or witnesses the repose of Bruno to feel the sacred spirit of his institutions. During "this wild excursion," he thinks of the days of St. Bruno but cannot "unfold the strange things" in prose (279). The narrator's visionary state of the powerful feelings and extraordinary sensations continue until he leaves the valley.

The residence in the Grand Chartreuse and the letters written during the retirement into seclusion at the Chartreuse reflect the atemporal aspect of the narrator's quest. As noted by Brian Fothergill, the visit to the Grande Chartreuse mediates the mystic experience (39). The narrator went through the mountains, valleys, dark forests, good fathers, and the vast desert of Grenoble. Here the narrator is led by the spiritual guide of the Saint [Bruno]. [T]he vastness, the intimacy of the nature occasioned a spiritual effect. It became possible for the narrator to define –at the moment – and transcend the border of the time and space.

Conclusion

The mystic narrator in the *Excursion to Grand Chartreuse* writes about a specific experience of time and space. The spheres of the experience of the narrator in the letters open a new perspective for the reader to re-consider the temporal aspects of the human experience. Ordinary human experience is temporal; it is identified within the context of time and space which constitute and pose the meaning of everyday life. A mystic experience is atemporal and immanent. The immanency does not pose or presuppose meaning concordant with everyday life. Atemporality has a different order of experience concordant with the metaphysical world. There are also two main aspects of the quest of the mystic hero. The first one is initiation which illuminates the fact that each single object is an individual [undividable] part of the one-great body. The second process is a return in which a mystic hero realizes the fact that he is also a part of the one-great body. The outcome of the spiritual quest leads to the atemporal spiritual wisdom which illuminates visible and invisible parts of the great-body. The mystic narrator in Beckford's *Excursion to the Grand Chartreuse* transcends the temporal border of the experience. The narrator creates an atemporal sphere and transmits the sublime experience of the mystic hero. The immanent revelation alters the unalterable present and challenges the temporality of the human experience.

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