

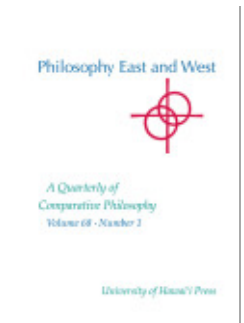


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Tragic Beauty in Whitehead and Japanese Aesthetics by Steve
Odin (review)

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BOOK REVIEW

Tragic Beauty in Whitehead and Japanese Aesthetics. By Steve Odin. London: Lexington Books, 2016. Pp. xxii + 333. ISBN 978-1-4985-1477-4.



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In the preface to his new monograph, *Tragic Beauty in Whitehead and Japanese Aesthetics*, Steve Odin proposes to do two things: better understand Alfred N. Whitehead's "poetic vision of tragic beauty" through comparison with Japanese aesthetics, and thereby also suggest a "new religio-aesthetic vision of tragic beauty and its resolution in the supreme ecstasy of peace" (p. xvi). He does more than that, though. Besides thoroughly discussing Whitehead's aesthetics throughout the latter's works, from *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Natural Knowledge* (1919) to *Modes of Thought* (1938), he enriches this aesthetics by discussing similar themes in American philosophy and literature, including Charles Peirce, John Dewey, Charles Hartshorne, Stephen Pepper, and Robert Pirsig (the author of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*), just to mention a few. More importantly, following Onishi Yoshinori, Odin takes Japanese aesthetics, rooted in "overtones of feeling" (*yojo*), to consist in a combination of *aware* and *yugen*. Focusing exclusively on the Buddhist worldview, Odin associates *aware* with impermanence and sadness, and compares the notion with Whitehead's "tragic beauty" developed in *Adventures of Ideas* (1933). As for *yugen*, Odin follows Izutsu Toshihiko in calling it "atmospheric beauty" (p. 214), and compares it to Whitehead's aesthetics of the dark background, which Odin calls "penumbral beauty" (p. xviii). Thus, the book develops how Whitehead's aesthetics can be understood through tragic beauty and penumbral beauty, in dialogue with not only Japanese aesthetics but also with other American views. Of course, the book contributes not just to a deeper understanding of Whitehead but also suggests an interesting approach to Japanese aesthetics.

The book contains four parts. Part I develops Whitehead's aesthetics by extracting relevant discussions from the latter's works from 1919 to 1938. Part II elucidates Whiteheadian aesthetics by discussing similar themes in other American philosophers and writers. Part III compares Whitehead's penumbral beauty with *yugen* in Japanese aesthetics, and Part IV compares Whitehead's tragic beauty with *aware* in Japanese aesthetics.

Of tragic beauty and penumbral beauty, I would say it is in the latter that Odin makes the more significant contribution. That tragic beauty is an important idea in Whitehead's later philosophy is clear from his writings, but

the vagueness about what he exactly meant by tragedy or tragic beauty (as I will elaborate later) is not problematized in Odin's discussion. On the side of Japanese aesthetics, while Odin makes ample references to scholars writing about *mono no aware*, he makes little reference to the most important person: Motoori Norinaga. Discussion of Motoori's view on *mono no aware* runs from the bottom of page 268 to the top of page 269, and it does not address the fact that Motoori's very motivation for writing about *mono no aware* is to show that the sensitivity is not just about sorrow and that it is not rooted in imported religions such as Confucianism or Buddhism. Perhaps in omitting discussion on Motoori, Odin is trying to avoid Nihonjinron or ultra-nationalism, but I think Motoori's thesis does not necessitate ultra-nationalism, and that it is necessary for a discussion of *aware*.

Penumbra beauty is an important yet overlooked aspect of Whitehead's philosophy. It is important as it is the source of the aesthetic quality of experience, the background against which the focused aspect of experience is contrasted, realizing the creative synthesis through which the disjunctive many of the world become the conjunctive one of concrete entity. Odin derives a succinct definition of penumbral beauty as "the beauty of *hidden depths* as an undiscriminated whole emerging from the dimly felt background of immediate experience, which always haunts those clearly discriminated objects illuminated in the foreground focus of attention" (p. 177). For Whitehead, beauty consists in harmonized contrast, so the penumbral beauty is brought out as the background is contrasted and harmonized with the foreground, as the whole is with the parts, as Causal Efficacy is with Presentational Immediacy, or as Reality is with Appearance. Now the expression of 'haunting' is taken from Whitehead's *Symbolism: Its Meaning and Effects* (1927), in which he says "the contrast between the comparative emptiness of Presentational Immediacy and the deep significance disclosed by Causal Efficacy is at the root of the pathos which haunts the world... Almost all pathos includes a reference to lapse of time" (quoted in Odin, p. 254). In this connection, Odin refers to poems by Keats and Shelly in which they lament impermanence and perishing, thus explicitly indicating how penumbral beauty and tragic beauty come together in Whitehead's aesthetics.

Odin argues convincingly that the Japanese aesthetic category of *yugen* overlaps in important ways with Whitehead's penumbral beauty. Firstly, through discussion of Kamo no Chomei and Fujiwara no Shunzei, Odin identifies *yugen* as atmospheric beauty, which "involves a deeper mode of nonattachment to phenomena, whereby one instead focuses not on the evanescent colorful blossoms themselves, but rather on the patterns of shadows which they cast as they recede into the surrounding void of profound darkness, thereby to conjure an aura of mystery and depth" (p. 212). On this understanding, *yugen* is the beauty of the dim background, which is contrasted with the foreground that is clearly discriminated, in a way similar to

Whitehead's contrast between Reality and Appearance. Secondly, from Kamo no Chomei's statement that one who lacks sensitivity to *yugen* is only capable of appreciating what is directly observable, Odin refers to an important point in Whitehead's aesthetics. Aesthetics, and therewith appreciation of penumbral beauty, is important because, for Whitehead, one of the primary purposes of philosophy is to overcome what he calls "the fallacy of vacuous actuality," which falsely views bare appearance in presentational immediacy as reality. In response to this view, Whitehead draws our attention to the causal efficacy of the value-laden background out of which the presentational immediacy emerges and in reference to which the latter can acquire meaning. As Odin expresses it, the "task of philosophy" is to penetrate beyond presentational immediacy to the "penumbral background... The problem is to discriminate exactly what we know vaguely" (p. 180). Thirdly, Odin suggests Zen *sumie* inkwash landscape painting, particularly works of Sesshu, as representative of *yugen* aesthetics and "perhaps the closest parallel" to Whitehead's aesthetics of penumbral beauty (p. 225). While Odin does not specify which painting(s) of Sesshu he is talking about (perhaps all of them), I have an idea of which one he has in mind. When I attended his seminar on Japanese Aesthetics as a graduate student at the University of Hawaii, he showed us the following painting of Sesshu (Image 1).



The image caption should read (as cited in the Wikipedia post):

Splashed-ink Landscape (破墨山水 *Haboku sansui*), 1495

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sesshu%C5%AB_T%C5%8Dy%C5%8D, Visited 8/5/2017

In the foreground, there is a small island with trees and bushes on it. The background comes in two shades, the visible background with mountaintops, and the invisible background into which everything visible in the painting disappears. In comparison with this analysis of the painting in three planes, Odin

makes an important point that for Whitehead, too, the background can be distinguished into two: the visible background that contrasts with the foreground so as to enhance the intensity of feeling; and the invisible background that recedes into triviality, from which the foreground nevertheless draws meaning and significance. We can readily see in Sesshu's painting that the empty space is by no means merely empty; on the contrary, it is an indispensable component of the painting that charges its entirety with a certain mood or ambience. Thus, Sesshu's painting can serve as an illustration not just of *yugen* beauty but also Whitehead's penumbral beauty, clarifying the two shades of background in Whitehead's aesthetics.

Odin points out that the comparison not only helps us understand Whitehead's aesthetics better, but also that the latter can enrich *yugen* aesthetics. He lists three points: 1) Whitehead helps understand *yugen* in terms of clear foreground shading into dark background; 2) Whitehead helps understand *yugen* as an atmospheric beauty that is not simple location but a pervasive aesthetic quality; and 3) for both, the pervasive aesthetic quality of darkness and shadows involves a notion of mysterious beauty as an epiphany of depth (p. 219). Thus, Odin demonstrates that Whitehead and Japanese aesthetics are mutually enriching.

We have seen that penumbral beauty and tragic beauty come together in Whitehead's aesthetics, but how about in Japanese aesthetics? Odin mentions Kamo no Chomei and Fujiwara no Teika expressing preference for *yugen* over *aware* (p. 213), but he goes on immediately to warn that "[i]t should be underscored that the mysterious beauty of *yugen*, as well as the sad beauty of *aware*, are both alike modes of evanescent beauty" (p. 214), insofar as *yugen* is about "insubstantial phenomena of nature shading into the twilight darkness" (ibid.). He makes the important point that *yugen* and *aware* can come together as modes of evanescent beauty. As an example, he alludes to the image of the burning Golden Pavilion in Mishima Yukio's *Kinkakuji*, with this remark: "The majestic beauty of the Golden Pavilion is fully revealed to the Zen monk only when he gazes upon it for the last time. For it is only through the heightened awareness of the evanescence of the Golden Pavilion as it burns into a black void of nothingness, that the tragic beauty of the Golden Temple as *yugen* or darkness and shadows is finally brought to full disclosure" (p. 285). While this image beautifully captures the union of *yugen* and *aware*, I must point out that it is absent in the novel itself. The Zen monk, the protagonist who burns down the temple, gazes upon the temple to appreciate its beauty for the last time only before he sets it on fire, and there he realizes that it is *nihility* that constitutes the beauty of the temple (虚無がこの美の構造だったのだ).¹ He burns down the temple in order to negate its nihilism, and feels the need to do so even though it is a vanity (徒爾であるから、私はやるべきであった).² If there is anything tragically beautiful about the last scene of the novel, I think it is to be found in the persistence of nihilism (embodied by Golden Pavilion), and

in the vanity of the protagonist's attempt at negating it. This consideration brings me to a pair of questions I wanted to find in the book but did not: What is so tragic about tragic beauty? What is so beautiful about tragic beauty?

To clarify what one means by tragic beauty, we can ask four questions: Does tragedy make something beautiful tragically beautiful? Does tragedy make tragically beautiful something that would otherwise be not beautiful? Is tragic beauty an addition to beauty? Or is tragic beauty a special kind of beauty? Someone who says the cherry blossom is tragic beauty probably takes the tragically beautiful to be already beautiful even without the tragedy but whose beauty is enhanced by its tragedy. Someone who regards the cicada to be tragically beautiful might take tragic beauty to be something given in its entirety to a tragic object which is otherwise not beautiful. Odin speaks of both the cherry blossom and the cicada (its empty shell, to be precise), so it is hard to say. It seems that Odin takes tragedy to consist simply in perishability, loss of value, and impermanence. Whitehead's process philosophy implies that every actual entity perishes as soon as it realizes itself, and the Buddhist worldview has it that everything is impermanent. So, if everything perishable is tragic, every perishable beauty would be tragic beauty. If we answer the second question in the affirmative, then everything perishable would be tragically beautiful. I am not certain enough to assert it, but from reading the book I get the impression that Odin regards everything perishable to be tragically beautiful.

While Odin seems to take the tragedy of tragic beauty to consist in the simple fact of perishability, I think an understanding in the line of *profound vanity* would serve better both in respect of Whitehead and *mono no aware*. In the analysis of Whitehead's process philosophy, we see something more complex than just perishability. Every actual entity, as process of becoming, aims at self-realization by synthesizing the multitude of the world into a concrete unity, which is the same thing as production of beauty. But insofar as completion of process means end of existence as a process entity, the moment of self-realization would at the same time be the moment of self-loss, and the acquisition of beauty would simultaneously be the loss of beauty. So the more profound and hard-acquired the beauty, the more it is in vain; tragic beauty can be said to consist in one's aiming toward such vanity. A similar understanding can be gleaned from Watsuji Tetsuro's observations about Motoori Norinaga's discussion of *mono no aware* in the *Tale of Genji*. In it, Watsuji characterizes *mono no aware* as "longing for eternity" (永遠への思慕), which is embodied in Lady Murasaki's depiction of Heian court ladies who long for the absolute yet fall far short of it, remaining subservient to indulgent men of the time.³ We can also get a vivid image from Mishima's *Kinkakuji*, where in the very part in which the expression "tragic beauty" (悲劇的な美しさ) occurs, the Golden Pavilion is said to have taken on tragic beauty by virtue of its imminent destruction *in spite of its quasi-eternity* (半ば永遠の存在).⁴ On this construal, not everything

perishable is tragically beautiful: something that is established for temporary purposes is not tragically beautiful, but something meant to be eternal in spite of its futility is tragically beautiful. If we assume that *aware* in *Tale of Genji* is tragic beauty, the above account lets us explain why Safflower (Suetsumuhana), say, is tragically beautiful in a non-trivial sense.

However, none of the above actually fits with what Whitehead means by tragic beauty. For Whitehead, tragic beauty is closely associated with the notion of peace. While Whitehead identifies perpetual perishing as “ultimate evil,” he distinguishes between “tragic evil” and “gross evil,” and associates the former with peace, which is “tragedy not in vain”; in contradistinction, gross evil would presumably be defined as tragedy in vain.⁵ It seems to me that Whitehead’s “tragic beauty” is after all not tragic; if anything, what he calls “gross evil” seems better fit for the title. Indeed, Odin correctly observes that for Whitehead, “the pathos, suffering, and tragic beauty of life as perpetual perishing are reconciled in the ecstasy of peace” (p. 301). Besides “reconcile,” he uses expressions like “resolution” (p. 302), “overcome” (p. 304), and even “celebrate” tragedy (p. 311). So here is my question once again: What’s so tragic about tragedy that is overcome, reconciled, resolved, or celebrated? In *Adventures of Ideas*, Whitehead says “Peace carries with it a surpassing of personality... and interest has been transferred to coordinations wider than personality,” and that the reaping of tragic beauty consists in the successful realization and preservation of such transpersonal aims, and thereby “intuition of permanence.”⁶ I take tragedy to be something that involves failure, or more profoundly a story in which the tragic hero tries to resist fate and ultimately fails; but that may be wrong generally or in view of Whitehead. Whitehead’s own understanding of tragedy may be something that resonates with what Odin says: “in the Western literary tradition the tragic hero strives to defiantly resist and triumphantly overcome tragedy” (p. 304). That sounds to me more like an epic rather than tragic hero. Perhaps one can say it is the paradox of tragic beauty, that its beauty consists in the very resolution of its tragedy. At this point I lack the resources to decide whether it is a profound paradox or an oxymoron.

If my preceding questions are well-taken, it is interesting that Odin appeals to the Zen aesthetic principles of “peace” (静寂) and “tranquility” (寂) as counterparts to Whitehead’s peace (p. 307). This seems to come very close to what Whitehead calls Anaesthesia, the “bastard substitute” of Peace.⁷ It is helpful that Odin mentions Schopenhauer in this connection, who speaks of tranquility of mind through resignation and thereby illustrates Anaesthesia. However, Odin’s elucidation of Whitehead’s peace sounds more like Anaesthesia, for he says “peace is realized through a tranquil observation of evanescent occasions with the pathos of tragic beauty from the standpoint of an aesthetic attitude of artistic detachment, psychical distance, or disinterested contemplation” (p. 306). From what I understand, for Whitehead, peace is achieved not through distancing oneself from ego but through self-

transcendence or extending beyond one's ego so as to contribute to transpersonal aims: "Beyond the soul, there are other societies, and societies of societies... associated in the joint enterprise of keeping alive."⁸ In any case, I think the appeal to Zen peace and tranquility as expressions of such aesthetic detachment is interesting because if it is Anaesthesia, then Onna Sannomiya is right in saying that Buddhists lack sensitivity to *mono no aware*, as in her response to Genji's complaint about her becoming a nun without his consent (on the assumption that *mono no aware* is tragic beauty). Therefore, when Odin keeps to his promise of offering a "new religio-aesthetic vision of tragic beauty and its resolution in the supreme ecstasy of peace" (p. xvi), I wonder if he has erased the tragedy from tragic beauty in resolving it, and whether that is really a good thing.

So I think *Tragic Beauty in Whitehead and Japanese Aesthetics* raises more questions than answers regarding tragic beauty. As a pioneering work on comparative philosophy of tragic beauty, this book is indispensable for anyone interested in the aesthetics of tragic beauty. Also, as I have illustrated, the book is very instructive about Whitehead's aesthetics of penumbral shadows and its comparison with the Japanese aesthetics of *yugen*. Those who are interested in Whitehead's aesthetics, Japanese aesthetics, or the soteriological significance of aesthetics should read this book.

Notes

1 - Yukio Mishima, *Kinkakuji*, (Tokyo: Sinchosha, first published 1960, 137th edition 2015), p. 321.

2 - *Ibid.*, p. 325.

3 - Tetsuro Watsuji, "Mono no Aware ni tsuite," *Shiso*, no. 13 (October) 1922, pp. 136, 141.

4- Mishima, *Kinkakuji*, p. 54.

5- Alfred N. Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, (New York: The Free Press, 1933, first paperback edition 1967), p. 286.

6- *Ibid.*, pp. 285, 286.

7- *Ibid.*, p. 285.

8- *Ibid.*, p. 291.