Beyond Superlatives

Beyond Superlatives: Regenerating Whitehead's Philosophy of Experience

Edited by

Roland Faber, J. R. Hustwit and Hollis Phelps

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PART II: BEYOND SUPERLATIVES OF LIVED EXPERIENCE

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AE: Whitehead, Alfred North. 1967. *The Aims of Education and Other Essays*. New York: The Free Press.

AI: Whitehead, Alfred North. 1967. *Adventures of Ideas*. New York: The Free Press.

CN: Whitehead, Alfred North. 1964. *The Concept of Nature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

ESP: Whitehead, Alfred North. 1947. *Essays in Science and Philosophy.* New York: Philosophical Library.

FR: Whitehead, Alfred North. 1958. *The Function of Reason*. Boston: Beacon Press.

MT: Whitehead, Alfred North. 1968. *Modes of Thought*. New York: The Free Press.

PR: Whitehead, Alfred North. 1978. *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*. Corrected edition. Edited by David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne. New York: The Free Press.

R: Whitehead, Alfred North. 1922. *The Principle of Relativity with Applications to Physical Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

RM: Whitehead, Alfred North. 1960. *Religion in the Making*. New York: Meridian Books.

S: Whitehead, Alfred North. 1927. *Symbolism, Its Meaning and Effect*. New York: Macmillan.

SMW: Whitehead, Alfred North. 1967. *Science and the Modern World*. New York: The Free Press.

PREFACE

In celebration of the 150th anniversary of the birth of Alfred North Whitehead (February 15, 2011), the Whitehead Research Project gathered emerging Whitehead scholars both from Claremont and from the international community on December 1 – 3, 2011. The conference, which traversed numerous disciplines and explored multiple trajectories, was aptly named "Whitehead: the Next Generation."

Whitehead's philosophy traverses the fields of mathematics, philosophy of science, and metaphysics, and the influence of his philosophy can be seen today in a wide spectrum of disciplines extending from quantum mechanics to theology and including such fields as biology, political theory, economics, psychology, education, and myriad philosophies. The essays make a significant intervention in the field of Whiteheadian scholarship by creating new intersections and paths that aim to extend Whitehead's thought in novel, and often unexpected, directions.

During the proceedings, it often felt as if we were acting as "mad scientists." This is not to imply that we thought our job was to reanimate the corpse of Whitehead's thought—quite the opposite. The participants in this conference had received a living body—the inherited readings of Whitehead—and our approach to that body turned out to be quite experimental, even a little irreverent. Dissections, fusions, and unholy marriages took place in that auditorium over three days. There was a shared sensibility that Whitehead's thought does not comprise a self-consistent totality, but rather a manifold of possible combinations, always productive of emerging forms, depending on one's focus. Some of these experiments may have produced stillborn monsters, while others may go on to forge a novel body for future adventures. How can one capture those cacophonous experiments in the format of an anthology?

Perhaps Whitehead's resistance to totality and his corresponding focus on the continual regeneration of new experience is the key to answering this question. Superlatives—those value-laden concepts that occupy the extremities of human experience— abound. But Whitehead cautions us to attend to their multiplicity. The mutual immanence of events constantly generates new configurations of these superlatives, and so they cannot be taken for granted. "Freedom" or "consistency" may have a particular significance today, but as events coalesce into new constellations, those ideals will take on new meaning. Far from indicating a new superlative of

holistic integrity, Whitehead prefers the always incomplete movement of all realities, which is the source of vitality for every new generation. As for these realities, the philosophical generation of concepts thereof is only as valuable as their limitation in the circulation of their mutuality. This collection of essays then, explores how, in the deconstruction of our most cherished superlatives, an unceasing invitation of possibility and change is released, both in relation to ongoing philosophical conversations, and as applied to lived experience.

We begin with George Lucas' narrative of an earlier interruption to the *status quo* among Whitehead's intellectual heirs. Noting that "Whitehead himself had, at least by the second generation following his own work, spawned a community of disciples, rather than founding an authentic philosophical and self-critical school of thought," Lucas argues that the reverence with which many Whiteheadians regard Whitehead would be anathema to his own philosophical method.

Lucas' call for a "rehabilitation" of Whitehead that goes beyond the mere scholastic repetition of his thought grounds the essays that follow. As philosophy ought to be the "critic of abstractions" (SMW, 87), the careful deconstruction of inherited systems ought to be the first task of every generation as it works toward a new synthesis. The first half of the book probes the hallowed shibboleths of meta-philosophy, or philosophical method. These essays trace the adventures of concepts like systematicity, novelty, truth, and justification. To this end, ossified oppositions between experience and reason, possibility and actuality, unity and diversity are fractured, indicating new directions for growth.

In "Metaphysical Creativity and Creative Metaphysics: An Emersonian Perspective," Dennis Sölch observes an ambiguity surrounding Whitehead's descriptions of creativity—at once both an *a priori* metaphysical prop and a featureless substance. Sölch recommends a new reading in light of Emerson's notion of "power," to refashion creativity "as a name for the potentially self-deconstructing universal contingency."

In "The Notion of Substance in A. N. Whitehead's Cosmology," Aljosche Berve focuses on an oft-ignored element of Whitehead's speculative philosophy, the notion of substance. Although Whitehead's thought is rightly understood as a critique of the substance-based metaphysics of much previous philosophy, Berve argues that Whitehead does not entirely jettison the notion of substance. By focusing on the different ways Whitehead deploys and critiques the notion of substance in his works, Berve argues for a more balanced view that takes into account the ways in which Whitehead also affirms the notion of substance from within the strictures of his speculative philosophy.

In "Novelty and Universality of Whitehead's Philosophical Style," Koji Yoshida focuses on a tension that runs throughout Whitehead's philosophy. Yoshida stresses that it is a philosophy of process in both form and content; yet, like its predecessors, it also aims to construct a metaphysics that has the features of necessity and universality. Yoshida suggests that the apparent incompatibility of these two aims dissolves if we attend to the *style* of Whitehead's philosophy. That style, Yoshida suggests, is found in Whitehead's endeavor to construct a rational philosophical system that always remains open to plural facts. It is in this style of philosophy, Yoshida suggests, that Whitehead's future lies.

Hollis Phelps stages an encounter with Whitehead and the contemporary French philosopher Alain Badiou in "Eternal Objects, Eternal Truths: Whitehead, Badiou, and the Structure of Worlds." Phelps argues that, although these two philosophers are in many ways quite different, their respective systems share a similar structure when it comes to the relationship between possibility and actuality. Specifically, Phelps suggests that Badiou's notion of eternal truths, which takes center stage in *Logics of Worlds*, has a similar structure to Whitehead's eternal objects. The similarity between these two concepts allows Phelps to use Whitehead's notion of eternal objects to shore up some of the shortcomings in Badiou's theory of truths, specifically the transmission of truths across disparate worlds.

In "The Imaginal Solvent: Coleridge and Whitehead on Novel Forms," J. R. Hustwit focuses his attention on the role that imagination plays in the production of novelty. Although, as Hustwit points out, Whitehead was a champion of the imagination, he tended to underestimate its power, focusing too heavily on its receptive rather than its willful attributes. To remedy this, Hustwit turns to Coleridge's doctrine of primary and secondary imagination, which Hustwit argues better accounts for the productive role of the imagination in its willful acts. What ultimately results is a metaphysical model that is more open to the ways in which imagination interrupts rationality, predictability, and hierarchy.

The preceding essays comment on how Whitehead is able to dissolve the ideals and norms of philosophical method. Though lived experience should not oppose philosophical reflection, the essays in the second half of the book reflect on the influx, fragility, and impossibility of superlatives outside of the domain of philosophy proper, e.g. care, grief, and love. These newly generated reflections on experience fill out and support to those ontological claims of interconnection.

In "Sustainability and Other Mistakes: In Defense of Moral Ideas," Brian Henning focuses on the sustainability approach to ecological crises.

Advocates for sustainability often eschew theory for a more pragmatic, policy-focused approach to environmental issues. Drawing on Whitehead's philosophy, among others, Henning demonstrates the vacuous and reductive nature of the sustainability paradigm. He argues instead that moral ideals should play a vital in our understanding of and response to ecological crises.

Kristopher Klotz in "Becoming Democratic: Nietzsche and Whitehead on Civilization," puts Whitehead and Nietzsche in dialogue to explore the question, "To what extent do our accounts of nature inform our accounts of society?" Nietzsche and Whitehead, as Klotz shows, have similar conceptions of nature, but they differ in their interpretations and estimations of civilization's potential. Rather than merely offering a Whiteheadian correction to Nietzsche's negative diagnosis of civilization's potential, Klotz argues that reading Nietzsche and Whitehead together on this question allows us to begin to imagine a more democratic future.

In "History as Process and Historical Materialism: Whitehead and Benjamin on Tragedy in the Wake of Progress," Jeremy Fackenthal examines the philosophies of history articulated by Whitehead and Walter Benjamin to deal with the tragic aspects of history. Against notions of progress, which tend to elide the tragic aspects of history, Fackenthal shows how Whitehead and Benjamin adopt non-linear and non-teleological accounts of history that maintain tragedy. The remembrance of the tragic past, Fackenthal concludes, may serve to interrupt narratives of progress and the contemporary structures that enable and perpetuate suffering and oppression.

Brianne Donaldson, in "'Does Whitehead have a Theory of Mourning?': A Response to Butler's Inquiry," focuses on the role that grief and mourning play in the work of Whitehead and Judith Butler. For both thinkers loss is an inevitable part of social existence, but they deal with it differently: Whitehead depersonalizes mourning through his metaphysics, while Butler personalizes grief through the body. For Donaldson, however, it is not about choosing one or the other but about seeing how these two views function in tandem in our fragile dealings with non-human and human others.

The final contribution to the section on the superlatives of lived experience is by Alan Van Wyk. In "Dangerous Loves: A Whiteheadian Political Ecology," Van Wyk reads together the final sections of *Process and Reality* and *Adventures of Ideas,* and arrives at the articulation of a political theology of Love. He then articulates this political theology of Love by, first, unfolding Whitehead's determination of the political desire of civilization; second, displaying the ecology of Love through which

Whitehead presents the productive relation of the World and God; and finally, demonstrating the ways in which Whitehead's politics of civilization finds its possibility and completion in an ecology of Love.

The final contribution to this essay is a lecture given by Roland Faber, who was the organizer of the "Whitehead: the Next Generation" conference. Given on April 22, 2010, this event marked Faber's inauguration as the Kilsby Family/John B. Cobb, Jr. Chair in Process Studies at Claremont Lincoln University. Called "Theopoetic Justice: toward an Ecology of Living Together," Faber ties together the metaphysical, ethical, and meta-philosophical threads gathered in this volume. By defining process studies as processuality that defies totalization, Faber suggests the *poietic* promise of Whitehead's thought is that although violence is unavoidable in the situation of living together, this violence can be countered by the love of multiplicity. This leads to "the secret of 'living together' *justly*—to always, without the promise of totality, un-create orders, mirroring them with the impossible alternative of non-violence." In the end, living together justly, Faber argues, is "impossible *as totality,* but possible *as process*."

BEGINNINGS

WHITEHEAD: THE NEXT GENERATION

GEORGE R. LUCAS, JR.

Nearly a quarter century ago, while serving as a professor at Emory University, I wrote a book entitled, *The Rehabilitation of Whitehead* (Lucas 1989). The title was meant to be both provocative and a challenge to the philosophical *status quo*. It proved unintentionally instead to be offensive to Whiteheadians, in that it seemed implicitly to demean the status of their heroic figure while making light of their own scholarly accomplishments. Why would Whitehead, after all, need "rehabilitation" unless he weren't quite as significant as they had taken him to be, or else unless their own scholarly work on his thought was deemed collectively second-rate?

What I meant instead, of course, was that the figure of Whitehead himself, along with their efforts at interpreting and advancing his thought, were not getting the wider public attention deserved, especially from the "mainstream" philosophical community. And while I thought this unfortunate turn of affairs was due in part to a prevailing intellectual climate that was inherently hostile to Whitehead's manner of philosophizing, I also suggested that the relative neglect was due at least as much to the direction in which Whiteheadian scholarship itself had subsequently veered.

In particular, I faulted a kind of scholastic preoccupation with the precise meaning of arcane terms and esoteric texts, alongside a single-minded obsession with "process theology" to the exclusion of the wider interests that Whitehead himself exhibited. I attributed this altered direction to the influence of Charles Hartshorne, thus managing to seriously annoy two of the patron saints of our philosophical circle: Hartshorne himself, and John Cobb, Jr., both of whom felt I was criticizing their work and their influence in particular. And I suppose, in truth, that I was, at least in the sense that I thought that their work and its influence

had not, finally, proven nearly so salutary to the cause of process *philosophy* generally as it had to the reputation of those two scholars themselves, and to the sort of personal idealist philosophical theology that their own thought more closely resembled (Lucas 1996).

What I wanted to do instead, rather than celebrating the extraordinary genius of Whitehead as a unique and unprecedented figure, was to restore him to the philosophical and historical context of discussion in which he was immersed, and in which he played so integral a part: namely, the mathematical physics and attendant concept of nature that emerged from his work alongside that of Maxwell, Poincare, Lorentz, Boltzmann and Einstein; and the generalized philosophy of experience that was the joint product of Whitehead and his British and American colleagues and predecessors, C.S. Peirce, William James, Josiah Royce, F. H. Bradley, and W. E. Hocking. Much of this wider context had been lost to us, I believed, precisely through elevating Whitehead himself to the exalted status in which devout and devoted disciples inevitably hold their founder and mentor.

Philosophers bequeath schools of thought with devoted adherents, while it is more characteristic of the founding figures of religious movements to inspire deeply loyal and often uncritical disciples. Both are necessary to the transmission and preservation of the achievements of the founder, but they go about these tasks in sharply variant ways. The tragedy to which I pointed was that Whitehead himself had, at least by the second generation following his own work, spawned a community of disciples, rather than founding an authentic philosophical and self-critical school of thought. The irony was, of course, that Whitehead himself eschewed both: he had no apparent interest in fostering a distinct school of thought, and he assiduously refused to let his own immediate students assume the role of disciples, wallowing in the worship and interpretation of the teachings of the master. Instead, numerous students like Van Quine, Paul Weiss, and Charles Hartshorne were encouraged to become their own persons and figures, and develop their own style of philosophy, their own distinct and unique lines of thought.

True to form, Whitehead encouraged originality, novelty, and the flourishing of creative individuality among those whom he touched personally (including even Russell and Wittgenstein). Of those first-generation students of Whitehead's, only Victor Lowe chose to pursue the more modest role of historian, interpreter, and biographer. Unconsciously, Victor (along with A. H. Johnson in Canada) assumed the function of the Hellenic ideal among this first generation—recollection, preservation,

admiration, transmission—as opposed to the other students' Hellenistic ideal of independence, originality, and explosive creativity.

The overarching goal of *The Rehabilitation of Whitehead*, along with my earlier works on Hegel, Whitehead, and the history of process philosophy (Lucas 1979, 1983; see also Lucas 1986 and Lucas and Braeckman 1990), was to trace the historical transformative process of Hegel and Hegelian idealism; the transformative biological process of the evolutionary cosmologists, like Henri Bergson and C. Lloyd Morgan; the experiential pragmatists, James, Peirce, and Dewey; and finally, demonstrate how Whitehead himself had come to serve as the confluence of these various older streams of process thought. That was a rather different, somewhat more modest Whitehead than the unique, iconoclastic genius manufactured and celebrated by Hartshorne himself, and by Hartshorne's students, who comprised the better part of a second generation of Whiteheadian disciples.

Subsequently I was invited to deliver the keynote address (in 1998, I believe) at the University of Texas-Austin's celebration of Hartshorne's centennial birthday. Let me hasten to add that this certainly was not because I myself was so eminent or worthy; instead, I gave the address because Robert C. Neville, who surely was, couldn't attend for some reason, and had graciously suggested me instead. In that presentation of "Hartshorne, the last or the first?" (Lucas 1998), I raised the question about this subsequent, alternative direction that process though had taken, post-Hartshorne. On the categories I had provided, and with what limited knowledge of Hartshorne's biography and intellectual development that I possessed, I argued that Hartshorne was, in effect, the last in a long line of eminent personal idealists or personalists, a movement that (as I had documented in my earlier historical studies) had its origins as a stream of Hegelian idealism, rather than Whiteheadian process philosophy, and it was the adherents of that stream of personalism, rather than Whitehead himself, who were so preoccupied with the problem of God, power, and evil. Hartshorne's panentheism was an ingenious and highly original development of that line of thought. But it resulted in a focus far from that of the philosophy of nature of Whitehead, or more kindly, suggested that Hartshorne had come to play a kind of Thomas to Whitehead's Aristotle. In this, I was seeking to disambiguate some of the traditions that Hartshorne himself had earlier rather uncritically conflated. Hartshorne did not appear to like it, not at all. He would not speak to me afterwards. He just glared at me in silence. It was one of the most difficult moments of my life.

This experience is part of why I don't think that discipleship is always a good thing. I think it has been off-putting to the wider community, who view "Whiteheadians" as an odd bunch, preoccupied with arcane technical language and odd metaphysical preoccupations, especially theology. Tragically, this does not do justice to the richness and variety, the Aristotelian quality of Whitehead's own work. My defense of the Whitehead Research Project, and of the push for a Collected Edition of Whitehead's works, is not based upon some judgment that Whitehead himself is or was some sort of fantastic, misunderstood genius. Rather, it is that he was a worthy, original philosopher, the equal, if not the superior, of James, Dewey, Peirce, and others who are still rightly themselves celebrated and studied. If we have scholarly editions for them, and value their cultural patrimony, and even extend this to bi-cultural figures like Santayana (certainly *not* Whitehead's intellectual equal, however interesting he may be), then why not support a Whitehead edition as well?

That argument, too, has been smashed pretty flat. Our Whitehead Edition project has been rejected some three times for modest funding support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, by scholarly reviewers who apparently place an edition of Santyana's or of Josiah Royce's writings at a higher priority than those of Whitehead. We may have to produce the edition, or at least the first few volumes of it, entirely without any help, simply to demonstrate how flawed that judgment is.

If there is a questioned "rehabilitation" or renaissance of Whitehead studies, however, one extraordinary manifestation of it is in the growth of a European and continental interest in what we might term the phenomenological side of Whitehead. My own generational colleague and esteemed friend, Jan van der Veken, had written his dissertation on Merleau-Ponty and Whitehead. And Merleau-Ponty himself, toward the end of his life, became very interested in Whitehead's thought, as did Teilhard de Chardin and Martin Heidegger toward the end of theirs. Van der Veken founded what has become an internationally-renowned center of influence for Whitehead scholarship, the European Center for Process Studies, at the Katholieke Universiteit in Leuven, Belgium, at which several of the contributors to this volume have studied.

Initially in this European renaissance, philosophers and scientists like Alain Badiou and Giles Deleuze, and somewhat earlier, Illya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, cited Whitehead favorably as influences on their own work. And now an entirely new wave of scholarly interest and productivity, led by both the scholarly writing and the teaching influence of Roland Faber, has begun to emerge as demonstrated so convincingly in these pages. These studies range from the thoughtful ecological and

political reflections of Brian Henning, Alan Van Wyk, and Kris Klotz, to the bold forging of new syntheses of Whitehead with the thought of other important historical and philosophical figures (e.g., Emerson, Coleridge, Benjamin, Badiou, Butler and Nietzsche, among others) by Phelps, Hustwit, Sölch, Fackenthal and Donaldson.

Accordingly I chose my somewhat "tongue in cheek" title for this introduction, in order to illustrate how one need not remain mired in the disappointments I have cited, any more than the innovative science-fiction works of Gene Roddenberry had to remain buried by their initial unpopularity and failure as television shows in the 1960s. What is a genuinely interesting parallel is, not only did the original works of Roddenberry and his now-famous initial cast of characters enjoy a tremendous renaissance, but that an entirely new cast of characters took over their work, and continued their fictitious adventures far into that series' future. That was a remarkable rehabilitation, and we have grounds, as this book and its new cast of authors indicates, for a similar rehabilitation not just of interest in Whitehead himself, but (as he himself would have preferred) in the work of energetic and original philosophers like the contributors to this fine collection, who benefitted from, and were perhaps inspired by, Whitehead's work. Theirs is indeed "the next generation" of Whitehead scholarship, and of constructive new reflections on the profoundly transformative influence of process metaphysics.

PART I:

BEYOND SUPERLATIVES OF PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY

1. CREATIVITY

METAPHYSICAL CREATIVITY AND CREATIVE METAPHYSICS: AN EMERSONIAN PERSPECTIVE

DENNIS SÖLCH

Introduction

It is often overlooked how deeply Whitehead's thought is embedded in the American philosophical tradition, despite his British background. The venue of his first lecture as a professor of philosophy in America, Emerson Hall, symbolizes a subtle yet undeniable continuity. But while Whitehead's indebtedness as a pragmatist and religious thinker to William James can hardly be missed, Ralph Waldo Emerson's influence is much more finespun, and it is perhaps most prominently felt in his philosophy of education. Unlike William James, Whitehead never knew Emerson in person, but had read him "a good deal" (Price 1954, 20) when he was younger, probably even at school when he was discovering the English romantic poets. Some of his most personal and passionate texts on education bewail the increasing specialization in teaching and learning that not only lacks breadth and depth, but also stands in the way of developing an organic individual perspective. His complaint to Lucien Price that "in the nineteenth century you get the scholar and the gentleman; then in the twentieth century you have the scholar, and drop the gentleman" (Price 1954, 70) is emblematic of his criticism, in the sense that modern education remains alien to the learner and is unable to shape character, outlook, and conduct on a more than superficial basis. Whitehead's educational jeremiad and his suggestions for a drastic reform of schools, universities, and the political goals involved thus echoes Ralph Waldo Emerson's 1837 address *The American Scholar* with its plea to allow for the development of "Man Thinking" (Emerson 1903f, 86) instead of the mere thinker who rehashes inert knowledge.

Despite the "rediscovery" of American Transcendentalism in the neo-pragmatist writings of Cavell, Poirier, and West, the overall view with which Emerson's work is approached is still not as large as it could be. Cavell's interest in moral perfectionism and West's highlighting of the intentional evasion of epistemology should not make us overlook the fact that Emerson's philosophy is pervaded by a sense of the processual nature of being, metaphorically illustrated by the mythical figure of Proteus, whose ever-changing forms do not permit pointing to a self-identical substance underneath. For Emerson, the essence of nature consists in the process of its own ceaseless transformation, and although the ever changing world cannot be taken at its face value, it is not a "mere" appearance but an embodiment of the processual principle inherent in the cosmos. "Each particle is a microcosm, and faithfully renders the likeness of the world," (Emerson 1903c, 48). The world is a creative process that lends itself to characterization as a form of "will to power,"[1] which permanently transcends itself. Process is given priority to forms and stable entities, insofar as the world only exists in the very process of creatively producing and negating new forms.

If we consider Emerson's dynamic ontology to be a genuine process ontology in its own right, it is precisely with regard to the concept of creativity that Emerson becomes a dialogue partner for Whitehead. Although *Process and Reality* essentially hinges on creativity as "the universal of universals" (PR, 21), the notion itself in many contexts remains rather vague and ambivalent. On the one hand, creativity is defined as "the principle of novelty" (PR, 21), suggesting a relapse into the pre-Nietzschean metaphysics of *a priori* concepts behind empirical reality. On the other hand, it is "without a character of its own" (PR, 31) and thus seems to transcend the experiential universe, apparently adopting those vices Whitehead vehemently criticizes in the concept of substance.

This article offers a solution to the ambiguity of the notion of creativity by interpreting it against the background of Emerson's philosophy, that is, comparing it to Emerson's concept of "power." Similar to Whitehead's notion of creativity, power is inherent in every moment of becoming, but at the same time remains conceptually the elusive other, which cannot be apprehended or grasped in the form of a unifying principle. Regular patterns, which continuously emerge out of the ceaseless flux, are of

[1] The notion of the "will to power" is one among countless examples of the striking continuities between Emerson and Nietzsche. An elaborate study of similar motifs is provided by George Stack (1992). More recent comparative analyses of their respective metaphysics and modes of philosophizing can be found in (Friedl 1997) and (Soelch 2011).

pragmatic value, but must not be regarded as permanent or transcendental structures. Additionally, Emerson reflects the pervasive self-overcoming of processual structures in his writing, which can be read as a performative attempt to prevent philosophy from representing the world in the form of a systematic "block universe." Hence, Emerson's understanding of universal creativity leads him to perform a continuous deconstruction of his writings' systematic status as a philosophy of process. This will put us in a position to reflect on the significance of the poetic creation of meaning in Whitehead's philosophy as a reaction to the creative power of the universe.

The Ambivalence of Whitehead's Creativity

Creativity is both the most important and the least clearly defined component in Whitehead's metaphysics of process. It is introduced as "the universal of universals" (PR, 21), which is the most comprehensive and abstract characterization of the world that can possibly be given. While together with "many" and "one" the concept of creativity completes the Category of the Ultimate, creativity as such does not fulfill an explanatory function. It is the dialectic of "one" and "many" that provides the structural description of a pluralism of actual entities that are prehended into a single actual entity, which then is available for a proliferation of the meta-process. If Whitehead means creativity to be the principle according to which the many become one and the one in turn adds to the many, then its precise status seems to be that of a metaphysical principle propelling and coordinating the flux. As Lowe puts it, "all actual entities are in the grip of creativity" (Lowe 1985, 225). This description fits with Whitehead's formulation of creativity as "the principle of novelty" (PR, 21), which actively "does" something insofar as it "introduces novelty into the content of the many" (PR, 21). While God in Whitehead's system continuously offers or suggests specific directions for the individual processes of becoming, the fact that there is a transition from one actual entity to another is due to creativity, "in virtue of which there can be no 'many things' which are not subordinated in a concrete unity" (PR, 211). Despite his insistence on the experiential foundation of his cosmology, Whitehead's reference to "the creative urge of the universe as it functions in each single individual occasion" (AI, 193) strangely resembles the essentialist talk of an absolute or transcendent power, similar to Schopenhauer's *Wille* or Bergson's *élan vital*, characterized as "an original impetus of life [which] is the fundamental cause of variations" (Bergson 1911, 52).

However, Whitehead not only modifies the definition of creativity as cause or effective principle in the course of *Process and Reality*, but also transforms it from a transcendent agency to a general description of concrete individual processes. “The creativity is not an external agency with its own ulterior purposes” (PR, 222). The transition from an actual entity that has reached its stage of satisfaction to a new concrescing actual entity is clearly not to be conceived of as caused by something, but takes place *causa sui*. A novel occasion is contingent because its coming into being as an individual subject is not predetermined by its environment. “Self-realization is the ultimate fact of facts. An actuality is self-realizing, and whatever is self-realizing is an actuality” (PR, 222). The only things that actually exist are the fundamental processual units which by way of prehending and defining their past, by abstracting potentials for their own becoming, and by culminating in their private satisfaction shape the present character of the universe. “Creativity is without a character of its own” (PR, 31), and seems to reside only in the events that take place. Yet, the individual activity of an actual occasion “is nothing but the mode in which the general activity is individualized” (SMW, 177) and “conditions the synthesizing activity” (SMW, 177). While it is difficult to imagine something that is conditioned but without a character, it might be conceded that creativity is simply an abbreviation for each individual creative activity. “Accordingly, the creativity for a creature becomes the creativity with the creature, and thereby passes into another phase of itself. It is now the creativity for a new creature” (RM, 89f.). Hence, creativity first of all refers to the fact that “the many” are a potential for the becoming of a new actuality. As soon as the concrescence is on its way to its self-realization, the emergent creature is accompanied by creativity, since it will eventually also turn into a potential for future concrescences. There is nothing apart from the present occasions which might function as a generator for new actual entities, and in that sense creativity is passed on from creature to creature without being a definite agency that contributes to the transition. Consequently, Whitehead speaks of “creative advance” (PR, 21, 28, 45, 227, 277, 346), “creative urge” (AI, 192), “creative action” (ESP, 63, 69), “creative act” (PR, 245, 247, 250), “creative emphasis” (PR, 47), or “creative idea” (PR, 150) in order to make plain that there is no hidden reality behind the individual subjects.

Whitehead’s formulations up to this point are puzzling. If creativity does not mean anything apart from the creative advance of each single individual entity, what makes it a principle? Does not creativity appear to be a *deus ex machina*, which is meant to explain why each actual entity is part of the process of transition at all? If so, would it not suffice to

describe the "mechanism" of the transition from satisfaction to novel occasion as provided by the "one" and the "many," plus the fact that each actual entity does actually contribute to this dialectic? Creativity does not seem to add anything to the description, and yet it is treated as the most important principle in Whitehead's cosmological scheme. Is it possible that the difficulty, like many others, arises from the peculiarities of language and its inability to represent a protean world? If so, what resources could Whitehead rely on to minimize the tension?

The ambivalence of the notion of creativity is especially prominent in Whitehead's metaphysics, but the problem revolving around it can be found in other process philosophies as well.[2] As already suggested in the introduction, my contention is that Emerson's way of dealing with the tension between a creative metaphysical principle and a processual account of nature is both highly original and helpful for an understanding of the difficulty. By many readers, Emerson is hardly considered to be a thinker with any direct relevance for Whitehead, but his significance as a process philosopher is underestimated by far.

Creativity and Self-Deconstruction in Emerson

It has become almost customary to justify any philosophical reading of Emerson by emphasizing that he was a philosopher at all (Buell 2003, 199). This, however, seems to require a conception or definition as to what philosophy is and what it is not—a task which even the greatest optimist could not hope to settle without provoking vehement protest from every side. As Whitehead's understanding of philosophy involves the attempt to bring seemingly unrelated thinkers into a dialogue, reading for example Wordsworth and Coleridge as voices in and responses to the long tradition of footnotes to Plato, it can be assumed that a detailed exploration of Emerson's relevance in this context would have found his consent.

Elaborating on the metaphor of Proteus, Emerson characterizes the world as essentially processual. "There are no fixtures in nature. The universe is fluid and volatile: Permanence is but a word of degrees" (Emerson 1903a, 282). Amid the constant flux, each appearance or fact in nature can be opened up from a teleological perspective with regard to specific purposes. "Whoever considers the final cause of the world will

[2] The most prominent example of a process philosophy struggling with the status of its fundamental principle is Bergson's account of the élan vital, whose characterization in *Creative Evolution* oscillates between an external force, a monistic internal principle, and a conceptual shorthand for an immanent pluralism.

discern a multitude of uses that enter as parts into that result. They all admit of being thrown into one of the following classes: Commodity; Beauty; Language; and Discipline" (Emerson 1903c, 18). Nature is here defined pragmatically by reference to the uses it can be put to and the services it can perform for humans engaging with it. The world becomes available for those who approach it with specific intentions, and Emerson makes plain that the list of classes of possible uses is not meant to be exhaustive, but rather suggestive of an infinite array of alternative classifications. The world has no boundaries that forever define the horizon of human existence but is subject to ongoing change that continuously allows for new categorizations, purposes, and methodological approaches. Similar to Whitehead's speculative enterprise, Emerson throughout his essays seeks to find a theory of nature that includes potentially every pragmatic approach. While the individual sciences are restricted by their pragmatic focus on sound classes of observable phenomena, a metaphysical theory "will explain all phenomena" (Emerson 1903c, 10).

The decisive turn away from the Western philosophical tradition, even that of German Idealism, consists in the refutation of the quest for a single principle of change behind empirical phenomena. Emerson's evasion of metaphysics consists in the rejection of any absolute being that stays the same behind or within the flux. "To Be is the unsolved, unsolvable wonder" (Emerson 1903g, 15). The fascinating ontological enquiry for Emerson is that into the act or process of being, not into being as a substantive to be described without reference to that which exists. Something does not exist because it has a specific being, but its being consists in the specific form of its process of becoming. This ontological connection is pictured as a "circular power returning into itself" (Emerson 1903f, 86) in which being and existence—the process of self-actualization—coincide with neither preceding the other. Hence, power means the self-realization of actuality as "a system in transition" (Emerson 1903c, 174), which perpetually transcends itself and receives its self or being only through its becoming.

This "creative advance" of the permanent self-transcendence of becoming is characterized by the non-identity and non-permanence of everything that is. Through the circular return into itself power becomes what it is without having an individual "being thus," independent of the ongoing creation and overcoming of "difference," in the vocabulary of Deleuze (Deleuze 1994, 222). Accordingly, every being is provisional in the sense that it transcends itself precisely in the moment that it has become itself, and it has its reason in the continuous tension between the

being which is to be transcended on the one hand, and the being which it is to become on the other. Thus, the world brings forth provisional entities that in the process of becoming always elude every attempt at ascribing to them a fixed identity (Friedl 2002, 465). In other words, power as that which becomes is *causa sui*, and can be understood as a subjective entity with an inherent teleology, namely as an "exercise of the Will" (Emerson 1903c, 45).

Although Emerson rejects the idea of an objective and identifiable direction of the development or unfolding of the world, nature is not chaotic. Nature is "upward, downward, without centre, without circumference" (Emerson 1903c, 45), and while there is no comprehensive teleology controlling the plurality of becomings, every single one of the world's processes is intentional. Every instance of becoming forms a perspective that "prehends" the world with itself as its center, so that the cosmos "may be conceived of as a system of concentric circles" (Emerson 1903a, 292ff). The intentional directedness of each instance of power cannot be thought of independently from the subjective perspective, and it ceases to exist when there is no will to further self-transcendence. "Power ceases in the instant of repose; it resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state, in the shooting of the gulf, in the darting to an aim" (Emerson 1903d, 69). While there appears to be no reason for becoming in general, the specific character of each instance of becoming has its reason in itself. "Power, the Being of beings, . . . is a persistent, a continuous, a steady, self-grounding of beings. The becoming of beings—their Being—is a self-conditioning" (Friedl 1997, 272). This self-conditioning, however, is both an uncircumventable premise for self-conditioned becoming and an irrefutable challenge for us humans, who believe "that a higher law than that of our will regulates events" (Emerson 1903e, 132). Although becoming grounds itself in itself, our philosophical intellect seeks a conceptualization of the principle underlying the permanent flux.

> Fortune, Minerva, Muse, Holy Ghost,—these are quaint names, too narrow to cover this unbounded substance. The baffled intellect must still kneel before this cause, which refuses to be named,—ineffable cause, which every fine genius has essayed to represent by some emphatic symbol, as Thales by water, Anaximenes by air, Anaxagoras by . . . thought, Zoroaster by fire, Jesus and the moderns by love: and the metaphor of each has become a national religion. (Emerson 1903b, 74)

All these notions—and we might add an endless amount of others—represent attempts at a conceptual approximation of a general principle that evades our intellectual grasp. Human reason can only, like every

"concentric circle," acquire perspectival knowledge, which it then generalizes for the purpose of a cosmological description of the totality of the world. However, as there is an infinity of possible starting points for perspectives, no individual principle can claim objectivity or completeness.

This is not to say that the speculative generalization of a creative principle behind the self-conditioning becoming is a misconception or results from a flaw in our reasoning. If things are related to each other and if any perspective seeks to include—understand, prehend, perceive, interpret—its objectified correlates, there will always be a general idea of a principle underlying the flux. "In our more correct writing we give to this generalization the name of Being, and thereby confess that we have arrived as far as we can go. Suffice it for the joy of the universe that we have not arrived at a well, but at interminable oceans" (Emerson 1903b, 74).

The notion of "being" as the most general description of what is may seem to appear as a refutation of the entire project of metaphysics. If the term "being" merely serves as a stopgap for something that by its very nature cannot be apprehended, then every attempt to build a philosophical system on that term must necessarily fail. The reference to "interminable oceans" makes plain that there is not one single source behind the flux of nature. Accordingly, in the essay *The Over-Soul* alone, Emerson (1903h) suggests more than a dozen different expressions for the indeterminable highest law, such as "Unity," "Over-soul" (252), "the wise silence," "the universal beauty," "the eternal ONE" (253), "the Highest Law" (254), "God" (255), "Divine mind" (263), "the absolute Law" (265), or simply "the Highest" (276). In other words, Emerson permanently deconstructs his own metaphysics in order to avoid having a closed system of thought that seeks to explain all phenomena by recourse to one single explanatory principle. While every systematic account of the world explicitly or implicitly introduces at least one fundamental premise, this premise must not be regarded as the Archimedean foundation of a single, adequate, and true metaphysical theory. "I confess to a little distrust of that completeness of system which metaphysicians are apt to effect. 'Tis the gnat grasping the world. All these exhaustive theories appear indeed a false and vain attempt to introvert and analyze the Primal Thought. That is upstream, and what a stream. Can you swim up Niagara Falls?" (Emerson 1903g, 11).

Emerson's metaphysics is not just revisionary with regard to its ungrounded processual character; it is also revolutionary in its criticism of philosophical modes of expression. His renunciation of the analytical sciences, of empiricism and rationalism as well as of any form of linear historical and genealogical explanation of reality as a whole, culminates in

a decisive turn away from any attempt at representing being in definitions or fixed concepts. However, the notion of being is not discarded but remains that which is hinted at in philosophical systems. There is a conspicuous parallel or anticipation of Heidegger in this Emersonian idea. The phenomenology Heidegger develops in *Being and Time* is the method of the "letting be seen" (*Sehenlassen*) of that which shows itself. That which shows itself is not an entity but that which constitutes entities as entities and serves as the foundation on which all entities are always already opened up and understood. Phenomenology thus represents our human, or rather philosophical, access to the Being of beings.

> Manifestly, it is something that proximally and for the most part does *not* show itself at all: it is something that lies *hidden*, in contrast to that which proximally and for the most part does show itself; but at the same time it is something that belongs to what thus shows itself, and it belongs to it so essentially as to constitute its meaning and its ground. (Heidegger 1962, 59; original emphasis)

Phenomena, for Heidegger, are not appearances, indicators, or semblances but in the strict sense refer to Being as the sole object of phenomenology. The Being of being, i.e. the creative reality in or beyond all entities, is only hinted at, because it would lose its meaning as the ground of phenomena if it were part of the category of being. This Heideggerian idea of creativity does not stand for "something" behind phenomenal reality, since, as Emerson would agree, a fixed principle or notion would immediately become a being instead of the hidden source which allows itself to show itself. "Behind the phenomena of phenomenology there is essentially nothing else; on the other hand, what is to become a phenomenon can be hidden" (Heidegger 1962, 60). Heidegger in this sense echoes Emerson's attempt at conceptually grasping metaphysical creativity, which, I think, indicates what Whitehead means by the notion of creativity. Although Emerson's phrasing is different, the parallel is obvious: "Whilst the eternal generation of circles proceeds, the eternal generator abides" (Emerson 1903a, 297).

Neither Emerson nor Whitehead choose Heidegger's path of phenomenology as philosophical access to reality. Nevertheless, their endeavors are more closely related than might at first be assumed. This is true both in regard to the idea of a "history of being" (*Seinsgeschichte*) and to the need for a new philosophical language as a reaction to the revisionary diagnoses of the structure of reality. Thus, before looking in more detail at Whitehead's conception of creativity and the difficulty of expressing that which by definition is the uncircumventable condition for

his metaphysics, it is helpful to analyze Emerson's strategy of "doing" philosophy.

As has already become obvious, Emerson is confronted with the problem of expressing the principle of novelty within or behind the flux of nature without ascribing to it the status of a fixed and objective meta-perspective. Hence, an adequate theory of nature must not stop at being satisfied with the notion of "being." Instead of trying to find a conceptual fixation of the principle of becoming, the task of philosophy consists in the poetic evocation of provisional and perspectival conceptualizations of an ultimate reason, i.e. in the development of approximations. "In my thought I seem to stand on the bank of a river and watch the endless flow of the stream, floating objects of all shape, colors and natures; nor can I much detain them as they pass, except by running beside them a little way along the bank" (Emerson 1903g, 15).

Being shows itself not only in nature as *natura naturans*, but also in its emblematic articulation through the philosopher. Emerson's writing is a text "in a permanent state of transition" (Tanner 2000, 4), forever transcending its own symbolic fixations of the processual world. In this sense, poetic language already appears to be the language of a new metaphysics in which the ontological structure of the world expresses itself. The world as self-transcending and self-grounding act of becoming finds its continuation in human thinking and writing, although these processes themselves can never come to an end. Poetic philosophy aims at continually deconstructing metaphysical fixations by breaking with established categories, terminologies, and concepts, liberating metaphysics from the "foolish consistency" (Emerson 1903d, 46) of dogmatism. The poetic continuation and evocative representation of creativity provides new perspectives for thought and action, which might, in Whitehead's words, be called "objectively immortal": "Nothing divine dies. All good is eternally reproductive. The beauty of nature re-forms itself in the mind, and not for barren contemplation, but for new creation" (Emerson 1903c, 28). Philosophical, scientific, and religious theories have a pragmatic function, but they become dogmatic and false as soon as they are taken to embody eternal truths about the universe. Regular patterns, which continuously emerge out of the ceaseless flux, are of perspectival value, but must not be regarded as permanent or transcendental structures.

Power and creativity for Emerson are real in the sense that the actual world can be understood as a creative becoming of a circular power, i.e. of provisional entities which in the very process of becoming transcend themselves. Becoming itself, however, does not lend itself to a characterization as a universal metaphysical principle, because such a

characterization would turn it into a permanent structure beyond the flux. Creativity might be regarded as a possible universal description of that process, but Emerson's skepticism towards language as a tool that immediately distorts and conceptually fixes processes leads him to a radically poeticized idea of metaphysics. Hence, although every science and philosophy aims at finding a comprehensive theory of nature (Emerson 1903c, 10), these theories are perspectival systematic approximations that are related, without limiting or excluding each other. "Every end is prospective of some other end, which is also temporary; a round and final success nowhere" (Emerson 1903c, 182). Systematization always leads to a final principle, which then has to be deconstructed in order to allow other perspectives to come forth.

Creativity and Poetry in Whitehead

Emerson, it seems, touches upon a fundamental problem in process metaphysics that cannot easily be discarded. Without denying the obvious and the more subtle differences between Emerson's and Whitehead's approaches to metaphysics, an Emersonian perspective is a useful tool to both reassess the principle of creativity in *Process and Reality* and to take a closer look at the function of poetry, which Whitehead explicitly brings forward in his late *Modes of Thought*. This will also allow us once more to include Heidegger in the discussion, whose idea of a history of being is akin to the historical dimension of Whitehead's creativity.

Emerson's stress on the self-grounding of becoming, which does not depend on an external reason for its existence, is analogous to the self-realization of actual entities, each as a process *causa sui*. He leaves unanswered the question of whether the attempt at defining the "over-soul" or the creative principle behind the continuous flux of the world is a metaphysical or an epistemological problem, because it necessarily transcends all possible conceptualizations. At least, we cannot be certain that our phenomenological or intuitive glimpse of a higher law or principle is more than another conceptual circle we draw in order to satisfy our will to understand the world.

Against this background, there are two complementary ways of understanding Whitehead's concept of creativity. In the first case, creativity can be seen as comprising all the countless verbalizations of a final principle that Emerson evokes. Instead of a ceaseless construction and deconstruction of articulations for a general theory of nature, Whitehead offers the term "creativity," knowing it to be "elliptical" (PR, 13). It is "the ultimate irrationality which must be accepted simply as