

The Emergence of the Romantic Self in John Ashbery's Postmodern Poetry

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Abstract:

This study attempts to investigate the subjectivity in John Ashbery's poetry. John Ashbery (1927-2017) is one of America's most controversial postmodern poets. His work often represents the new modes of expression in postmodern society, a distorted language and an interest in the ordinary experience of everyday life. His concern is not solely finding a way through language to communicate thoughts, his work instead shows a longing for the past romantic subjectivity which presents a more solid ground for the self in opposition to the fluidity of the postmodern self. In looking for consistency in the experiences of the self while giving importance to the performative quality of language, Ashbery reproduces the old romantic self in postmodern terms. Ashbery's poems attempt to reveal the experience of the subjective self as it unfolds but without a closure which is a postmodern quality.

Keywords: romanticism, postmodernism, John Ashbery, subjectivity, language poetry, American poetry.

انبثاق الذات الرومانتيكية في شعر ما بعد الحداثة لجون أشبيري

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الملخص:

تحاول الدراسة التقصي عن الذاتية في شعر جون أشبيري. يُعد جون أشبيري أحد أكثر شعراء ما بعد الحداثة إثارة للجدل في أمريكا. يمثل شعره غالباً أطواراً تعبيرية جديدة لمجتمع ما بعد الحداثة؛ مثل استخدام اللغة المشوهة والاهتمام بتصوير الأحداث اليومية الاعتيادية. لم ينحصر اهتمامه فقط في إيجاد اللغة المناسبة لإيصال أفكاره، بل يظهر من خلال أعماله توق إلى النزعة الذاتية الرومانتيكية لكونها أساساً أكثر ثباتاً للتعبير عن النفس في مقابل السبولة التي تتميز بها النفس كما يتم التعبير عنها في ما بعد الحداثة. يقوم أشبيري من خلال إيجاد الثبات في التجربة الفردية بالإضافة إلى الدور الذي تؤديه اللغة إلى إعادة خلق الذات الرومانتيكية القديمة ولكن في ضوء مفاهيم ما بعد الحداثة، فتظهر قصائده النفس وهي تعبر عن تجاربها بأسلوب رومانتيكي ولكن دون أن تصل إلى نهاية محددة وهو ما يجعلها تنتمي لما بعد الحداثة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الرومانتيكية، ما بعد الحداثة، جون أشبيري، الذاتية، الشعر الأمريكي

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1.Introduction:

Romanticism is a term, once mentioned, elicits responses that deem it as a self-centered, individualistic agony in the face of life's realities. A romantic poet is always engaged with his consciousness of his place in the world, how nature shapes his awareness and response. Although this intense subjectivity is harshly criticized yet, the romantic spirit is constantly reproducing itself in a way that forces critics to revisit romantic theory when evaluating contemporary poetry. This leads to understanding romanticism as a progression rather than a set of concepts or a specific style, it is a culmination of the intellectual process, "*the peripeteia*, the instant of reversal" [emphasis original] (Moulin 2014:3) that could repeat itself at different times. Although postmodern poetry is noted for experimentation and new interpretations of life, romantic subjectivity can be traced in the poetry of some postmodern poets like John Ashbery. This research takes the concept of subjectivity as defined by Lacan's theory to be the condition of one's being which enables one to recognize themselves as subjects or persons (Sheikh, 2017).

1.2. Background and Scope of the Study:

The romantic notions of subjectivity were tackled in the modern era, however, for the purpose of denouncing and undermining them. Eliot famously declared that poetry must be impersonal and objective since subjectivity is incoherent. Based on this notion the attention shifted from the author to the text and language. But the question remains of whether the poet will always be able to separate his identity from his work. Against Eliot's rigid theory of impersonality, Ashbery and other postmodern poets preferred the romantic notion of using a daily, simple language to engage the reader's subjectivity in the individual experience. American poetry after the Second World War suggested that a poet can use fragmentary language and still maintain subjectivity (Bhattacharya, 2017). Ashbery takes from the romantic tradition the necessity of having a subjective point of view to start with, he deals with events and situations that are not abstract or conventional but simply taken from real life. Ashbery uses language not to disenchant like Auden or to play

games with language like the Language Poets, he advocates romantic spontaneity and the lack of closure to the individual experience. The research examines how Ashbery repositioned the romantic subjectivity in a postmodern context with the attempt to highlight how he used the postmodernist notion of the artificiality of language in articulating the inner subjective world. The research analyzes two major poems by Ashbery; *Soonest Mended* and *Self-Portrait on a Convex Mirror* in addition to reference to some of his poems to clarify his poetic style and intentions.

2.2. Objectives and Major Research Questions:

Ashbery's poems frequently contains layers of meaning and invite multiple interpretations. He aimed to create works that were open-ended and resisted easy categorization, allowing readers to engage in their own subjective responses and interpretations. This research intends to make a survey of two major poems *Soonest Mended* and *Self-Portrait on a Convex Mirror*. As the analysis of these two poems is presented the research attempts to answer the following questions: How does Ashbery employ the traditional romantic self in creating a new post-romantic self? How does Ashbery use language to intermingle the poet's subjectivity with the reader's subjectivity? The research aims to show that Ashbery succeeded in keeping the postmodern appeal of his poetry while relying on romantic subjectivity.

2.The Romantic and the Post-Romantic Self:

The significance of individualism in Romanticism stems from the notion that a human life, an actual one, can only be perceived in the human consciousness itself (DeJong, 2015). Humans live inside their minds, and what makes the world (nature) real to them is their ability to infuse its elements with the mental processes of the mind, Eldridge (2001:3) states that "without the exercise of imaginatively informed, thoughtful perception there is no human habitation of reality, no place in reality for human life." However, this revolutionized the concept of the individual mind leaving the human experience with no further

movement. Romantic experience as McGann (1983) puts it has no clear beginnings or conclusions. A romantic poet simply lives in an ideal world that is always “precarious – liable to vanish or move beyond one’s reach at any time” (p.72) The inconsistency of selfhood that McGann refers to in his *The Romantic Ideology* is reminiscent of Eliot’s modernist concept of “impersonality.” Eliot rejected romantic subjectivism, claiming that any literary work should be an expression of the impersonal feelings common to all human beings. The poem is a product of a unity between the poet’s impressions and those of all humanity, rather than a product of the poet’s private and feelings and visions, (Bressler, 2007). In Hugh Kenner’s (1971:136) expression “Eliot’s difficult art, the art of creating with an air of utter precision the feel of concepts one cannot localize.” Leaving any guiding authority and relying on the poet as a person not the poet as an artist, for Eliot, means relying on the incoherence of the subjective self, “poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*... more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect.” Eliot (1921) says in his *Metaphysical Poets*. Although it seems to be an objective approach, Eliot’s impersonality could hardly apply to his poetry, as Randall Jarrell (1963:14) states in his *Fifty Years of American Poetry*, “he was one of the most subjective and daemonic poets who ever lived.”

The self cannot escape its preoccupations and intuitions. Poetry is one of the most subjective activities, it is the self’s response to the various experiences of life, of which the experience of the sublime is prominent. The experience of the sublime is the mind’s confrontation with some object that evokes, with its vastness or vagueness, the self’s awareness of the infinite in opposition to clarity and intelligibility. Moreover, Lokke (1982) states that there is the feeling of fear that is engendered by the mind’s realizing its own limits in the face of the infinite. For poetry to express such experience, it has to go beyond the sensible “objective” expression of reality. This persistence of recreating the romantic subjectivity for the self to be able to confront a new kind of sublimity

that is basically “postmodern” is what characterizes the romantic in John Ashbery's poetry.

Ashbery's poetry “evinces a tacit acknowledgment of postmodernity's claim that the coherence of subjectivity is one of our grandest and long-standing illusions” (DeJong, 2015:3). In this sense, his poetry implies a paradox; a postmodern concept that attempts to show the inconsistency of the self through what he calls disjunct poetry that reflects and reproduces the thought in language as it flows in the mind, on the other hand longing to the constant romantic self in its continuous attempt to crystallize the moments of epiphany as Ashbery writes in his *Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror*

...The soul establishes itself.

But how far can it swim out through the eyes

And still return safely to its nest? (Ashbery, l.24-26)

In his *American Sublime: The Genealogy of a Poetic Genre*, Rob Wilson (1991) refers to the relocation of the American sublime. The grandeur of nature, which engendered awe and overwhelmed the ego, represented for the romantic poets the demise of the individual mind in the face of the vast natural landscapes. The ego is absorbed and driven into a struggle with infiniteness, which increasingly corners it into smallness and inability. The new postmodern sublime presents new infinitudes and powers that are equally keeping the ego with the old struggle to overcome the materialistic vastness that seeks to absorb it, “the poet stood alone yet as a social representative before vast forms of totality, ontological depth and black holes, atomic figurations of energy and formlessness: a whole natural and technological theatre of deformations emerging.” The new sublime replaced the massive features of nature with gigantic technological structures, the discoveries in outer space helped to marginalize human beings into a state of ontological conflict with these decentering powers, (Wilson, 1991). In “Landscape,” Ashbery finds out these two kinds of sublimity,

Dreaming, I'll hear the wind in the steeples close by

Sweep the solemn hymns away. I'll spy

On factories from my attic window, resting my chin
In both hands, drinking in the songs, the din.
I'll see chimneys and steeples, those masts of the city,
And the huge sky that makes us dream of eternity.
(Ashbery, 1.3-8)

The above lines show that, as in the romantic period, the self can not totally escape to the world of nature nor get completely absorbed by the sublime scene without being pulled back by real life. The new postmodern sublime is very compelling and alienating. In "Soonest Mended," Ashbery refers to this state in relation to the daily life,

Barely tolerated, living on the margin
In our technological society, we were always having to
be rescued
On the brink of destruction, like heroines in *Orlando Furioso*
Before it was time to start all over again. (Ashbery, l. 1-4)

Ashbery seems to be disappointed in terms of the present, and nostalgic in terms of the past. The confrontation with the new postmodern sublime leaves the poet with a continuous struggle with the limits of language as to how it could shape the experience. The romantic sensibility in the past made it possible to fix the experience of the subjective self and to express its inner thoughts in relation to specific occasions, for instance, Wordsworth's encounter with the mountain view in *The Prelude* that caused him to feel fear and guilt. The limitation of language is mainly resulted from the nature of reality itself. While art is capable of capturing moments in life, reality seems to be in flux. As Ashbery states in his own words,

I think that any one of my poems might be
considered to be a snapshot of whatever is
going on in my mind at the time- first of all
the desire to write a poem, after that

wondering if I've left the oven on or thinking
about where I must be in the next hour.
(Baym, 2012:519)

In "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," (1975) Ashbery uses the distorted reflection that a convex mirror shows in order to point to poetry's inability to capture a specific moment in life to make it static. In this poem, he seems to be roaming in and out of the conscious. Each time the soul attempts to delve deep into a particular moment in time it is encountered with elusive nature of real life,

The words are only speculation
(From Latin *speculum*, mirror):
They seek and cannot find the meaning of the music.
We see only postures of the dream. (l.48-51)

Ashbery points to the fact that, meanwhile, as the figure in the mirror (the Italian painter Parmigianino who painted the self-portrait) is posing in front of the convex mirror for self-portrait, there must be a struggle that he went through to ignore the details surrounding him,

...The soul has to stay where it is,
Even though restless, hearing raindrops at the pane,
The sighing of autumn leaves thrashed by the wind
Longing to be free, outside, but it must stay
Posing in this place...(l. 34-38)

Apparently, the painter was able to ignore whatever details were distracting him, and the self-portrait being completed is evidence of his success, however, for Ashbery, this struggle seems never ending. In fact, the whole poem is an indication that he is still captured in the fluidity of his thoughts.

Edward Hirsch, (2021) argues that, unlike Wordsworth, Ashbery recognizes epiphany as a terminal point, a continuous attempt to postpone the insight and to keep the consciousness from reaching a closure or a conclusion. His poems display a kind of rising and fall that

illustrates the poet's ability to manipulate the power of what Wordsworth called "unknown modes of being." This is a distinctive feature of Ashbery's poetics. Moreover, Andrew Epstein (2019) links this instability to Ashbery's connection with American pragmatism. Instead of lamenting the state of uncertainty or screaming over the impotence of the self to overcome its insecurities, Ashbery shows that what Epstein calls "the equation of doubt with motion." It is a willingness to remain undefined by a final closure, since the disappointment that comes with growing up and realizing the futility of one's dreams and ambitions is not a reason for loud declarations of hopelessness, they are dealt with as reasons for the artistic and personal progress.

Michael Clune, (2008) points to a characteristic in Ashbery's poetry that he calls the "leaving-out process" which is a description that embodies the thing as it appears within a certain context, a view from within the world while leaving out the details in the background because they are already realized as familiar to the context. This 'left-out' element is what Ashbery tends to defamiliarize. The inadequacy that Ashbery sees in art regarding its representation of a moment in time is based on this inability to present things as they manifest in their network of associations and relations, to attempt a full description of an object's material shape is to attempt to detach the thing's formal involvement with numerous other things in a world. Moreover, Clune (2008) clarifies that Ashbery does not present a full account of the painting upon which the poem is based, he is more interested in what is 'left-out' in the background. Normally, things appear within a context, they do not have an autonomous existence, and to describe them as they normally appear to someone familiar with them means missing what is important. In this sense, Ashbery attempts to bring to the reader's consciousness what is unfamiliar and show them what it would be like if it was familiar.(Clune, 2008).

The defamiliarization technique is a result of an obsession to create new abstractions that could help the ego to 'disalienate' from the environment around it. In this sense, Ashbery uses a variety of unfamiliar

juxtapositions that explain why his poetry seems difficult to understand. Unusual images like, "Our star was brighter perhaps when it had water in it"(Portrait,24) or in *Chinese Whispers* "Mute, the pancake describes you." (1.5) or in *A Suit* "The new apartment building, now vacant, circling like a moth"(1.5)

3.The Language of the Subjective Self and the Reader

In Ashbery's poetry, the shift between different pronouns 'we,' 'I' and 'you' could represent the various voices that the flow of thoughts brings to the poet's consciousness. It is an attempt to engage the reader with the dialogue that is going on inside the poet's mind, Clune (2008, 454) states "By placing a thing in a dialogue, placing it between people, he transforms it from a surprising juxtaposition to a familiar thing instantly recognizable." Here is an example from "Soonest Mended,"

None of us ever graduates from college,
For time is an emulsion, and probably thinking not to
grow up
Is the brightest kind of maturity for us, right now at any
rate.

And you see, both of us were right... (l. 59-62)

Ryan Ruby, (2022) observes that what makes Ashbery's poetry difficult is something totally different from what makes the other modernist and language poets difficult. His poetry rarely demonstrates straightforward distortions of syntax or word order. They are grammatically correct units combined to produce semantically nonsensical expressions. In his analysis of Ashbery's final poem "Climate Correction," (published in Harper's *August 25, 2017*) Nathan Goldman (2018) argues that although the thematic connections between the stanzas are not very explicit, yet the poem is able to engage the reader through the language itself. The first lines begin with what seems to be an invitation, "So what if there was an attempt to widen/ the gap. Reel in the scenery?" as if the talk is about something already familiar to the reader and the speaker is engaging him by the phrase 'So

what?' In this sense, Ashbery is not retreating into his subjectivity alone, he tries to place the reader at a certain point inside the process of his mind. His subjectivity is two-folded; he reminisces over the past self through his memory while at the same time, he maintains that the 'other' is necessary for this self to be acknowledged. The new postmodern sublime causes disappointment as it makes it hard for the self to face the ontological crisis that is caused by the confrontation with the new technological greatness. Wilson (1991) asserts that like a romantic poet, Ashbery looks back at his old self with a nostalgia to more constant and steadfast entity that is filled with ambitions and dreams. As time passes, this self loses this steadfastness to a more fluid and inconsistent state that is a result of maturity. Postmodernity posits an everlasting revolution in the face of a reality that is no longer recognized as clear and identifiable. This instability of the real is reflected by the self in the form of disruption in expressions and dynamic, ever-changing modes of presentation. (Wilson 1991)

...In the circle of your intentions certain spars
Remain that perpetuate the enchantment of self with
self:
Eyebeams, muslin, coral. It doesn't matter
Because these are things as they are today
Before one's shadow ever grew
Out of the field into thoughts of tomorrow. (l. 145- 150)

In these lines from *Self-Portrait*, Ashbery's tone of disappointment is evident. The poetry that results from this state is not to be understood as an escape from disappointment or as a vent. Laura Quinney(1999:137) points out in her book *The Poetics of Disappointment: Wordsworth to Ashbery*, that in Ashbery's expression of this state "there is no restored contact with the transcendent, nor any true accommodation to its loss." Ashbery realizes that once this loss is realized it becomes chronic, it is unavoidable, yet it is commonplace and undeserving of sympathy. It is not triggered by a traumatic event or a loss; rather, it is woven into the fabric of existence, unfolding gradually and manifesting as already

familiar. It has nothing to do with a specific style of life or a certain way of thinking, it is "incapable of either precipitating a tangible crisis or of being resolved" (p.137) It is expressed in the following lines from *Self-Portrait*,

The skin of the bubble-chamber's as tough as
Reptile Eggs; everything gets "programmed" there
In due course: more keeps getting included
Without adding to the sum, and just as one
Gets accustomed to a noise that
Kept one awake but now no longer does, (1.170- 175)

The question remains as to the part that the reader has in this new recognition. Surely the reader is not required to sympathize or engage in an emotional way. Part of the quality of romanticism in Ashbery is his acknowledgment of the self-dependency on the 'other' to be understood. The poem once written is no longer a possession of the poet's mind, it becomes a possession in the hand of the reader.

Helen Vendler (2005:57) refers to the 'you' that Ashbery excessively uses as "an invisible listener." Ashbery is constantly inviting the reader to live the experience by himself rather than delivering to him its outcome. Unlike Eliot, who sought to impersonalize the poem and keep a distance between the reader and the poet, Ashbery is more concerned with the reader. He is not totally postmodern in the sense that he separates himself from his community. The reader is not required to be highly educated in mythology, for instance, to understand any kind of allusions as much as he is required to engage in the experience. The poet has deliberately created the poem not in the form of a verbal artifact but as a living system that the reader can be part of. Costello (1982) finds out that in his poem "Paradoxes and Oxymorons" Ashbery plays with language to involve the reader and to put him directly in the experience, he begins in this manner: "This poem is concerned with language on a very plain level." And then he addresses the reader in terms of his relation to the poem "Look at it talking to you. / You look out a window/Or pretend to fidget." In these lines, he seems to be anxious

about the poem, whether the reader can communicate with it or not, Ashbery wants the reader to be able to live the experience by himself, "here is not the image of experience but experience itself, not the record of a relationship but the establishment of one" (p.493). Furthermore, Frank J. Lepkowski (1993) suggests that with Ashbery the reader roams through thoughts that are not random or confused, they are dramatized. What makes certain details in the world familiar to people is that they are seen as they are shown or described, regardless of how they genuinely are. Lepkowski, (1993) cites the following lines from Ashbery's "Grand Galop,"

these abstractions

That sift like marble dust across the unfinished works
of the studio

Aging everything into a characterization of itself (l. 35-
37)

To spark new ways of perceiving what is familiar for the reader, to defamiliarize and thus disalienate, the perception is renewed by paying attention to hidden, ignored elements, and rearranging them in a new context. Instead of living in the confusion of the self's agony, Ashbery attempts to create the moment in a different way, in more comfortable terms. The sublime is not causing him to escape or flee, he rather knows that even when he is able to flee now, the agony is recurring. In response to that, Ashbery offers unusual abstractions or calls attention to what is left 'unsaid' to reveal the structure of experience as it imposes itself on the mind. The experience that a poet relates does not come to his mind as one clear line of thoughts, it is rather fragmented and opaque, Ashbery is not willfully making his poetry hard to read or understand. His opacity refers to the obscurity not only of language, but also of experience itself, thus language's function is not to become a reflection of life, but rather a form of life, (Norton 1995:292). Ashbery states in his interview with *The Spectator*,

On the one hand I have always felt the most important thing that a writer should do is to write something that people will understand. But I also want to write poetry that expresses my usually tangled thoughts without condescending to a reader,

Here, language functions as a medium that is itself blurred and not lasting. The romantic poets insist on recollecting the moment of epiphany and through the use of the lyrical "I" they would the culmination of the experience the "I" lives through, however, in Ashbery's poems the speaker, who is probably the poet himself, seems to be unwilling to possess anything from the moments, he lives through, not even to rely on the words he is using to speak about them, because he is aware of the manipulative nature of language as well. This unreliability of language to hold the moment is finely expressed in these lines from "A Man of Words,"

Behind the mask
Is still a continental appreciation
Of what is fine, rarely appears and when it does is
already
Dying on the breeze that brought it to the threshold
Of speech. (l. 18-22)

In this sense, the poem must be left to the reader, for Ashbery the ideal situation is to make the reader himself be the speaker of the poem. Here reading becomes more active since it engages the reader to the extent that he would write the poem for himself (Herd, 2009). Language on some occasions becomes equivalent to existence, to the act of living itself. To create a poem that is a living system and not merely a structured form based on rhyming, Ashbery's poems mostly start as if they are in the middle of something, there is no central point in the poem upon which the reading can be based. The reader finds himself directly

engaged in a process of filling gaps and attempting to follow the stream of thoughts that he suddenly finds himself in, (Spurr, 1981).

Norton, (1995) argues that, in this sense, Ashbery's insistence on engaging the reader with the subjective self, through the distortion and fragmentation of language, is counter to the Language poets' claim of poetry as a reader-responsive mode which would normally exclude any role of subjectivity as a reference. In the language poets' view, a poem is open to the reader to construct its meanings, whereas exploring the interior of the consciousness could prevent this interaction. What Ashbery offers here is not an introspection that the reader can not relate to, he rather attempts to bring the attention of the reader to that two-fold nature of subjectivity which generates the paradox; relying on (and often times longing to) a deceivingly steadfast subjective self to start with; and the realization that this self can not be reliable, Ashbery is telling the reader that instead of residing on this truth, they have to deal with this nature of the self as being chronic, thus to think of self-representation as something one can play with or even make part of existence itself. (Norton, 1995) This is shown in the following lines from Ashbery's "Drunken American," "For it seems that all/ Moments are like this: thin, unsatisfactory/ As gruel, worn away more each time you return to them."

By connecting the reader, not to the poem as an organic object but to the subjective self that is represented in the poem through the speaker, Ashbery's poetry attempts to display a constitutive relationship with the reader. The poet is not in a position where he has to confess to the reader some inner or private feeling that is so personal, the connection here is based on the idea of individuals who share the quality of being different. These differences intersect at a certain point, and that is what makes this reader-poet communication possible without the need for the poet to give up his subjectivity or to objectify the poem, (DeJong 2015). In the following lines from "Soonest Mended," the shift from the pronoun 'you' to the pronoun 'we' help achieve what appears as a dialogue that is

taking place, the reader is part of the stream of thoughts in the mind of the poet,

Did you think of listening to something else? We are all talkers

It is true, but underneath the talk lies

The moving and not wanting to be moved, the loose

Meaning, untidy and simple like a threshing floor. (l. 32-35)

4.Conclusion:

Romanticism as an artistic movement reveals to what extent an artist fails to reach to a closure to his experience. There is a tendency to resist any specific form of agony that the artist feels. This lack of a fulfilled experience leads to the realization that Romanticism is more likely to be a culmination, a peak that keeps reproducing itself in various contexts and times. Although the closure is not determined in such an experience, the romantic self is always daring and revolting.

The findings: as an American poet who lives in the postmodern era, John Ashbery tends to leave himself to his romantic tendencies to bring back to the self the past boldness and ambition that were accompanying his early life experiences. Yet he is not fully immersed in this romanticism since postmodernism pulls him back to an ever-growing technological sublimity that unlike nature's is the creation of humans. This new sublimity arouses a sort of ontological disappointment, a realization that the passage of time with all the change that comes with it does not allow man to accumulate memories and knowledge, instead, there is a constant displacement, oblivion and loss. For Ashbery this disappointment is not a cause for lamenting nor a reason for becoming wiser, through his poetry, he shows how one should live with this recognition, "To step free at last, minuscule on the gigantic plateau/This was our ambition: to be small and clear and free." To dwell with this state and to communicate with the reader, Ashbery uses distorted language through which he allows the reader to view himself as part of the experience rather than looking at it from an objective point of view,

in Ashbery's own words, his poems are about the experience of the experience.

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