

PART TWO

EXISTENCE AND THE EXISTENT

B. Being

THE INTUITION OF BEING: METAPHYSICS OR POETRY?

John P. Hittinger

I. THE "INTUITION OF BEING"

In *Existence and the Existent* Maritain says that an "intuition of being makes the philosopher."¹ In the *Peasant of the Garonne* his words are more emphatic. He says "The intuition of being is not only, like the reality of the world and of things, the absolutely primary foundation of philosophy. It is the absolutely primary principle of philosophy." The intuition of being is really the key to Maritain's work; to his mind it is the key to St. Thomas and philosophy as such.

We must try to re-capture that germinal insight which bears so much weight in Maritain's philosophy. He is fond of recounting numerous ways or roads to the intuition of being. In *Existence and the Existent* he merely lists some of these. For example, he mentions the way of Thomas Aquinas who grasped the being of things through an "imperial intelligence serenely relying on its limpid strength." He mentions also a "natural grace" at the sight of a blade of grass; the sudden perception of self; the sense of the contingency of the world; the inner experience of duration, anguish, or fidelity. Many of these concrete ways are fleshed out in other works.² He was fond of recounting his wife's vivid experience of self-awareness. He often elaborated upon the sense of contingency in his proof for God's existence. The writings of Bergson, Marcel, and Heidegger he used for the way of inner experience. And we cannot fail to mention his praise of poets like Wordsworth and Hopkins for their appreciation of singular beauty.

The following is Maritain's own attempt to render in metaphoric terms the intuition of being:

What I then perceive is like a pure activity, a consistency, but superior to the whole order of the imaginable, a vivid tenacity, at once precarious (it is nothing for me to crush a gnat) and fierce (within me, around me, mounts like a clamor the universal vegetation) by which things surge up against me and triumph over possible disaster, stand there,

and not merely there, but in themselves, and by which they shelter in their thickness, in the humble measure meted out to what is perishable, a kind of glory demanding to be recognized.³

The act of existing in things is a "glory to be recognized." In each case of the concrete approaches, including his own metaphorical description, the intellect must "release in one authentic intellectual intuition, the sense of being, the sense of the value of the implications that lie in the act of existing."⁴ *Existence and the Existent* is an attempt to release this intuition and to unfold its implications through various metaphysical issues like act/potency, causality, and evil.

What are we to make of this claim to an "intuition of being"? Any claim based on intuition is immediately suspect to philosophers. Perhaps it is nothing more than "mere poetry." It bespeaks vague feeling or easy and gratuitous assertion. It is a term more suited to poetry, not the stern stuff of metaphysics and logic. Moreover, for Thomist philosophers, the question arises as to Maritain's faithfulness to the master. Is this notion of an intuition of being derived from or compatible with St. Thomas?

In this paper I shall assess Maritain's intuition of being by examining its Thomistic origins and by noting the similarities and differences between poetry and metaphysics in Maritain's philosophy. I shall argue that the charge of "mere poetry" is formally incorrect; that the "intuition of being" as a fundamental habit of mind is essential to any Thomistic philosophy, as well as to any realistic metaphysics; and lastly, that the charge ironically displays a dissociated sensibility that Maritain sought to overcome.

II. THOMISTIC ORIGINS

The Thomistic context and warrant for the "intuition of being" is well laid out in *Existence and the Existent*. As a preliminary to the intuition, Maritain goes over the familiar ground of the role of judgment in Thomistic epistemology.⁵ Simple apprehension abstracts an intelligible note from things and forms a concept. But the act of knowing must return through judgment to the sensible being in order to judge the truth of things. The intellect does more than contemplate the picture of essences in ideas: it must restore them to existence through judgment. The concept, the universal, exists only in the mind; what actually exists is a "subject," a being. The reality known derives from a "trans-objective subject." Thus the function of judgment is "existential": judgment "transposes the mind from the plane of simple essence of the simple object of thought, to the plane of the thing, of the subject possessing existence."⁶ Judgment is fundamentally an affirmation of existence.

But, since existence is of another order than essence, existence is not an intelligible or object-like essence. It cannot be grasped conceptually, but only in judgment. The concept of existence cannot be visualized apart from

being. Being contains within itself the two-fold valence of essence and existence, a notion of "what something is" and the judgment "that it is." In the intuition of being, the mind surges beyond the grasp of essence to the existence of things. But the existence of the being draws the mind to consider something more than brute facticity or a dark surd. The intuition of being grasps the formality of existence, a "super-intelligible" datum for the mind.

A difficulty in assessing Maritain's intuition of being comes in the interpretation of the nature of metaphysical judgment. As he acknowledges in a long footnote in *Existence and the Existent*, metaphysical judgment is a judgment of "separation." That by virtue of which a thing is what it is, is different from that by which a thing is said to be as such. Thus, the intelligibility of being is seen to be free from the intrinsic determination of matter; that is, being need not be material. There is dispute among Thomists as to the conditions necessary for this judgment. Does it require prior knowledge of immaterial substances such as angels or God? Or does it require merely an understanding of intellectual immateriality? Or can it be derived from the distinction of essence and existence as separate intelligibilities?⁷ Maritain seems to think that the last is true, and this has drawn some criticism, which has been directed also at many existential Thomists, who are accused of seeking to pull being out of a chair, somehow short circuiting the long arduous path to metaphysics. Others may reject this approach because it operates in the sphere of naive understanding without critical awareness. The notion of being must be derived, they would say, from a transcendental analysis of the structure of human knowing. Others may even argue that the notion of being is derived from the Christian distinction between God and creatures, and thus the intuition is sensible only within the ambiance of faith. Although Maritain did intend the intuition to constitute the entry into metaphysics, he also considered it the formal habit of mind that must constitute the basis for any Thomistic philosophy.

The intuition of being is the beginning of philosophy; it is a "beginning" in both senses of the word, genetically and formally. It is the *arche* of philosophizing, as Socrates considered wonder to be, calling it "the beginning of philosophy." Indeed, the intuition of being is the experience of wonder at the "inexhaustibility" of the real and the "super-intelligibility" of being. The intuition of being is first and foremost a habit of mind, a disposition towards the world, that envelopes the entirety of the intellectual life, giving it a certain tone. Maritain does not mean to suggest that all of reality can be seen at a glance or deduced from this simple but profound intuition, thereby obviating the need for any science or logical analysis. Maritain is not guilty of such romantic or apriori excess. Rather, the intuition of being is a testimony to the integrity and wholeness of things, the depth of reality that will always elude our final grasp, which yet gives the thinker a reason to inquire further, as he strives for greater integration of

knowledge of the real. It is the source and inspiration of "Thomistic realism."

As a habit of mind, the intuition of being is the proper "dwelling place" or "modus" for any type of Thomistic metaphysics, and, as Maritain would argue, for any realistic metaphysics. By whatever process one deems metaphysical judgment to be legitimately effected, the effect in the knower is a habit of mind by which the intelligibility of being in "its full amplitude" is acknowledged. In the *Preface to Metaphysics*, Maritain speaks about the intellectual virtue of the metaphysician. In addition to the objective light constituted by the degree of immateriality which specifies a science, there is a "subjective light perfecting the subjective activity of the intellect, by which the intellect is proportioned to a given object, fitted to apprehend it."⁸ I believe that this is a key to the importance and relevance of Maritain's notion of the "intuition of being." By a habit one is disposed to think or to act in a determinate and stable way; in this case one becomes disposed to recognize and acknowledge the presence of being and the full amplitude of being as such. Thus by whatever means one comes to the judgment of metaphysics the effect is the same acknowledgement of the intelligibility of *esse* as the act of all acts and the perfection of all perfections.

And the intuition of being should be appreciated in the order of the formality, as much as in the order of the genesis, of metaphysics. That is, even if one is uncomfortable with the attempt to base metaphysics in an intuition of being, without the steps of natural philosophy or other discipline, the result of any Thomistic metaphysical system must be the return to the intuition as the stable habitual center of the intellectual life. We must begin with the "sense of the value of the implications that lie in the act of existing."

We have a further clue concerning the intuition of being in the distinction between "ratio" and "intellectus," or reason and intellect.⁹ In Maritain's account "intellectus" is rendered as "intuition." There is textual warrant for translating in this way.¹⁰ Perhaps however this term is misleading and should be replaced by "vision" or "understanding". Maritain would have philosophy begin with a vision, acknowledgement, or awareness of the being of things.

At the heart of the distinction is Thomas's insistence upon a non-discursive moment in intellection. In addition to the complex apparatus of dialectic and abstraction, demonstration and reasoning, the human knower must be said to "see" simply. In fact Thomas says that reason begins and ends with intellection; "ratio" is related to "intellectus" as motion is related to rest, as the imperfect is related to the perfect, and even as time is to eternity. The process of reasoning terminates in vision of what a thing is or the truth of some conclusion. Reasoning without some terminal insight, at least in aspiration, is non-intelligible in Thomas's scheme. All human knowledge, all human science, aspires to fruition in metaphysical

knowledge. The labor of reason aspires to the intuition of being. Hence we arrive again at the dynamic character of the intuition of being as a habit of mind. For Thomas describes the relation of "ratio" to "intellectus" in terms of a power specified by a habit. Reason and intellect are not two distinct powers in man, he argues, because the intellect functions as a habit specifying the rational power.¹¹ Philosophy as a function of "intellectus" is a contemplative act; the mind must be receptive. Maritain says: "It is difficult to arrive at the degree of intellectual purification at which this act is produced in us, at which we become sufficiently disengaged, sufficiently empty to hear what all things whisper and to listen, instead of composing answers."¹²

Thus, as much as Maritain insisted upon a "rational confirmatory analysis" of the intuition of being, he equally insisted that logical analysis alone would not yield the intuition.¹³ Philosophy can neither begin nor end with the confirmatory analysis: intellect is related to reason as motion to rest. Analysis by itself lacks insight. Maritain admits that the intuition is beyond technical manipulation. The rational confirmation is a part of a way of judgment, a "via iudicii," whose function is to go over the discovered truth and affirm its validity. It does not replace the original intuition or deductions. The explicit rational confirmation, as well as any sophisticated epistemological defense of realism, must finally come to the simple moment of vision. The mystery predominates over the problem. Being remains an object for "enraptured contemplation."¹⁴

Maritain warns of the two dangers of the average functioning of the intellect in our time, "mental productivism" and the "primacy of verification over truth."¹⁵ Mental productivism elevates the sign over the reality known, as we take more interest in the conceptual apparatus than the real being made manifest by it. Similarly, the mania for an external process of verification and proof could also nullify the vision of being which comes from common experience. Maritain says: "We take more interest in verifying the validity of the signs and symbols we have manufactured than in nourishing ourselves with the truth they reveal." The intuition of being is first and foremost a habit of mind in which the encounter with being is fully appreciated and "suffered." It is a habit of mind rooted in pre-scientific experience. The contemplative moment is a habit alien to a scientific/technological bent of mind. Thus, the intuition of being is an antidote for misplaced abstraction. Whitehead speaks of philosophy as "the critic of abstractions," which completes them "by direct comparison with more concrete intuitions of the universe."¹⁶ As Whitehead appeals to the evidence of pre-scientific experience and poetry, as found for example in Wordsworth, to refute modern subjectivism, Maritain would similarly find in the poet a great support for the recovery of a sense of being.

III. POETRY AND METAPHYSICS

Maritain is quite adamant in preventing a confusion of poetry and philosophy. In *The Range of Reason* he remarks that, "if one confuses the planes or orders of things, if poetic knowledge claims to become philosophical knowledge," then both are spoiled.¹⁷ On a number of points poetry must be rigorously distinguished from philosophy. First of all, they are entirely different orders of rationality: poetry is ordered to making, not to knowing. Its good is a work produced "ad extra," not a concept or judgment produced within for speculative knowledge. It is axiomatic for Maritain's poetic theory that poetry be held within the genus of making. When freed from this restraint, the poet loses his way. The very object of poetic knowledge is non-conceptualisable. Thus, poetic intuition is a type of "divination," a knowledge of the heart; the intuition of metaphysics is an "abstractive visualization." Again, the poet engages his subjectivity and emotion as he grasps the world; the philosopher is more purely intellectual. Finally, the poet is engaged more directly with the things of sense, with singularity and particular things. Metaphysics is more universal and abstract. In *Creative Intuition* Maritain gathers these ideas into a memorable passage:

Poetry is a divination of the spiritual in the things of sense --which expresses itself in the things of sense, and in a delight in sense. Metaphysics also pursues a spiritual prey, but metaphysics is engaged in abstract knowledge, while poetry quickens art. Metaphysics snatches at the spiritual in an idea, by the most abstract intellection; poetry reaches it in the flesh, by the very point of sense sharpened through intelligence. Metaphysics enjoys its possession only in the retreats of eternal regions, while poetry finds its own at every crossroad in the wanderings of the contingent and the singular.¹⁸

Maritain sharply distinguishes poetry from metaphysics. However, we should not "run the risk of forgetting that though poetry cannot be confounded with metaphysics," Maritain says that "it yet responds to a metaphysical need of the spirit of man, and is metaphysically justified."¹⁹ Poetic knowledge of the world is allied to metaphysics; Maritain says that the poet aims at "being." This is manifest in a number of ways. The poet is existential precisely because he must be directed to the good of the work; a concrete work to be made and "posited in existence." Further, poetic knowledge is existential because it must attend to the sensible particulars; it is less apt to be lost in a cloud of abstraction. By affective connaturality there resonates "that which is most existent and most concrete in things in that which is most existent and concrete in the subject." Although

Maritain's poetic is known most of all for the epistemological notion of the connatural knowing of the self and the world, his theory actually culminates in the metaphysical notion of the superabundance of being. The work of art opens out onto the world of being and presses to the infinitude of being itself:

Poetic intuition does not stop at this given existent; it goes beyond, and infinitely beyond. Precisely because it has no conceptualized object, it tends and extends to the infinite, it tends toward all reality which is engaged in any singular existing thing. . . . As grasped by poetic knowledge, things abound in significance, and swarm with meanings. Things are not only what they are. They ceaselessly pass beyond themselves, and give more than they have, because from all sides they are permeated with the activating influx of the Prime Cause. . . . I would think that this mutual communication in existence and in the spiritual flux from which existence proceeds . . . is perhaps in the last analysis what the poet receives and suffers.²⁰

This passage from *Creative Intuition*, similar to a passage contained in *The Situation of Poetry*, corresponds very closely to a section of *Existence and the Existent*.²¹ Maritain explains that the metaphysics of Thomas Aquinas is not essentialist, not centered upon static essences, but rather upon the dynamic reality of existence, grounded in a superabundant divine being. Maritain has discovered here not only the diffusive nature of the good, but also the relevance of process, context, and relation, to our understanding of the being of things in the world.²² Maritain exhibits in his poetic theory a notion that finds some affinity with Whitehead's use of Wordsworth. In *Science and the Modern World* Whitehead points to Wordsworth's awareness of "that mysterious presence of surrounding things, which imposes itself on any separate element that we set up as an individual for its own sake. He always grasps the whole of nature as involved in the tonality of the particular instance."²³ Maritain and Whitehead both see a positive value in the sheer self-assertion and endurance of things and the relation of one to another. Granted, the two thinkers conceptualize the insight in very different ways. Whitehead uses the notion of "event" to name the actuality that emerges against the flux; Maritain, of course, retains the perennial notion of "being." But, as mentioned above, both would agree that the "poetic rendering of our concrete experience" must not be omitted from a metaphysical account of the real. Time does not permit analysis and judgment as to whose account is truer to concrete experience.

For its existential mode of knowing and for its grasp of the superabundance of being, poetry is salutary for philosophy, given its present

state. Although in its essence philosophy is free of the poetic mode of knowing, the state of philosophy is another consideration. Maritain says that "to philosophize man must put his whole soul into play, in much the same manner that to run he use his heart and lungs."²⁴ And poets can enliven the metaphysical habit. The intuition of being may receive a deep confirmation, for example, in the works of Wordsworth, Hopkins and Eliot; a similar concern may be found in the writers of the American South with whom Maritain was familiar: Tate, Gordon, and Ransom. These poets are enraptured with being; they recognize that there is indeed ensconced in the humble things of the world "a glory demanding to be recognized." They give this glory expression through their verses and stories. Maritain remarks in *A Preface to Metaphysics* that the metaphysician must be a sensitive man and "keenly and profoundly aware of sensible objects. And he should be plunged into existence, steeped ever more deeply in it by a sensuous and aesthetic perception as acute as possible so that aloft in the third heaven of natural understanding he may feed upon the intelligible substance of things."²⁵

In light of that remark allow me to end with a reading from Nathaniel Hawthorne, surveying his garden at the Old Manse:

Speaking of summer squashes, I must say a word of their beautiful and varied forms. They presented an endless diversity of urns and vases, shallow or deep, scalloped or plain, moulded in patterns which a sculptor would do well to copy, since Art has never invented anything more graceful. A hundred squashes in the garden were worthy -- in my eyes, at least -- of being rendered indestructible in marble. . . . There was a hearty enjoyment in observing the growth of the crook-necked winter squashes, from the first little bulb, with the withered blossom adhering to it, until they lay strewn upon the soil, big round fellows, hiding their heads beneath the leaves, but turning their great yellow rotundities to the noontide sun. Gazing at them, I felt that, by my agency, something worthwhile living for had been done. A new substance was born into the world. They were real and tangible existences, which the mind could seize hold of and rejoice in.²⁶

Hawthorne surely has the germ of Maritain's intuition of being in this appreciation of the squash's "victorious thrust over nothingness." An abstractive leap is required to form terms like the "diversity and autonomy of being," "the superabundance of being," and so forth. But I have learned from the Southern poet and critic, Marion Montgomery, whose work *Why Hawthorne was Melancholy* I commend to you very highly, that Hawthorne

was quite aware of the issue of being and the tragic presumption of men who elevate their mind to a point of denying the givenness of things and the common plight of humanity.²⁷ Hawthorne faced the specter of Emersonian transcendentalism, a form of idealism or "ideosophy," which seemed to be premised on the denial of the fundamental intuition of being. Emerson viewed nature as a "subjective phenomenon," an "apparition" or shadow cast by the knowing mind. "Perhaps there are no objects," Emerson opines. "Once we lived in what we saw; now, the rapaciousness of this power, which threatens to absorb all things, engages us."²⁸ After witnessing the loss of the world in abstraction, Hawthorne attends to the lowly squash and savors the glory of its being.

Maritain, I think, would be delighted to have these prophetic poets return us to the savor of being as they call forth that intuition. They will strengthen that habit of mind, the habit of being. Ironically, the turn to poetry might bring us around to a more demanding metaphysics of being and a greater appreciation for Thomas's strict logic. The intuition of being --metaphysics or poetry? It is both; but let us distinguish in order to unite.

College of St. Francis

NOTES

1. Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, transl. Lewis Galantière and Gerald B. Phelan (New York, 1966), p. 42. See *A Preface to Metaphysics* (New York, 1939) "It is this intuition that makes the metaphysician" (p. 44). *The Peasant of the Garonne: An Old Layman Questions Himself about the Present Time*, translated by Michael Cuddihy and Elizabeth Hughes (New York, 1968), pp. 110-111. See also, *The Range of Reason* (New York, 1960), p. 9.
2. *Preface to Metaphysics*, pp. 47-51; *Approaches to God* (New York, 1942), chapter one.
3. *Peasant*, p. 111.
4. *Existence*, p. 21.
5. See, for example, Joseph Owens, *An Interpretation of Existence* (Milwaukee, 1968).
6. *Existence*, p. 17.
7. See John Wippel, "Metaphysics and *Separatio* in Thomas Aquinas," in *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, 1984), pp. 69-104.
8. *Preface*, p. 45.
9. Thomas Aquinas, *De Ver.* XV, 1; *In Boeth. de Trin.*, VI, 1, pt. 3. See J. Peghaire, *Intellectus et Ratio selon s. Thomas D'Aquin* (Paris, 1933) and my unpublished M.A. dissertation, *Reason and Intellect in Two Texts of St. Thomas Aquinas*, The Catholic University of America, 1978.
10. See *De Ver.*, I, 12; *In II Sent.*, d. 9, 1, 8, ad 12.
11. *De Ver.*, XV, 1.
12. *Preface to Metaphysics*, p. 48.
13. See *Preface*, pp. 54-57.
14. *Preface*, pp. 3-7, 56.
15. See *The Range of Reason*, p. 27.
16. Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (Macmillan Free Press, 1967), p. 87.
17. *Range*, p. 29.
18. *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New York, 1963), p. 236.
19. *The Situation of Poetry* (New York, 1955), p. 59.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 127.
21. *Situation*, p. 79; *Existence*, p. 42: "Being superabounds everywhere; it scatters its gifts and fruits in profusion. This is the action in which all beings here below communicate with one another and in which, thanks to the divine influx that traverses them, they are at every instant . . . either better or worse than themselves and than the mere fact of their existence at a given moment. By this action they exchange their secrets, influence one another for good or ill, and contribute to or betray in one another the fecundity of being."
22. See for example, Thomas Langan, "Substance, System, and Structure," *New Scholasticism* LXI (1987) 285-306.
23. *Science in the Modern World*, p. 83.

24. On the distinction between nature and state, see Maritain's *An Essay on Christian Philosophy* (New York, 1955), pp. 11- 33. 25. *Preface*, p. 23.
25. *Preface*, p. 23
26. Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The Old Manse," in *Tales and Sketches*, "The Library of America," edited by Roy Harvey Pearce (New York, 1982) pp. 1132-1133.
27. Marion Montgomery, *The Prophetic Poet and the Spirit of the Age*, Vol. III *Why Hawthorne Was Melancholy* (New York, 1984). See also *Possum: and Other Receipts for the Recovery of "Southern" Being* (Athens, 1987).
28. See Emerson's essay "Experience." Irving Howe, in his *American Newness* (New York, 1987), says: "To confront American culture is to feel oneself encircled by a thin but strong presence: a mist, a cloud, a climate. I call it Emersonian." In this mist, consciousness becomes "the beginning and end of existence . . . swallowing the very world in its pride."