

*Introduction*  
*“A Bracelet of Bright Hair  
About the Bone”*

Ralph McInerny

The purpose of an introduction is to say what need not be said and very likely will not be read. One can seek to stave off this unsavory fate by choosing an arresting title. But over and beyond this ploy, the line from Donne is meant to recall the profound spiritual and withal romantic love that linked Jacques and Raïssa, to whom he applied Horace's phrase, *dimidium animae meae*. He deferred to her in many things, but particularly when it was a question of aesthetics, and if I do not show this in the lines that follow, let mentioning it here, if not suffice, excuse. They have lain together in their common grave at Kolbsheim many decades now, but they are joined eternally elsewhere.

Among the many attractions of Jacques Maritain as a thinker is the range and depth of his interests. From metaphysics to the philosophy of history, from political philosophy to the philosophy of nature and its offspring modern science, from mysticism to morals—has anything escaped him? Is there any area of culture on which he has not written? Looked at in this way, Maritain's aesthetics may seem the final fillip, sprinkles on the waffle cone of his remarkable genius. But it is not so. Art is not an incidental add-on; it is of the essence.

When Chesterton, in *The Everlasting Man*, compared the God in the Cave and the Man in the Cave, he was taking up the dispute that had arisen about the prehistoric inhabitants of southern France. Had they been human? Typically, Chesterton went to the heart of the matter. Look at the drawings on the walls of the caves. There is your answer. Where there is art, there is man. Of course, *homo faber* has long been a designation of our ancient for-

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bears, but the making involved had been tools and weapons. The line drawings of animals on the cave walls are something more. With them the move from the useful to the fine arts was already made.

One of the earliest discussions—letting the Bekker numbers establish chronology—of art in Aristotle occurs in Book Two of the *Physics*. His aim is to clarify nature by contrasting it with art. Nature is a first principle of motion and rest in that to which it belongs as such and not incidentally. This definition is illustrated by the two constituents of physical things that Aristotle had established in the previous book. Both matter and form, in their different ways, save the definition of nature. Some activities of the thing have their origin in its matter, others in its form. But the common mark of the natural is that it proceeds from what is intrinsic to the thing. Art by contrast is an extrinsic principle of change.

Since every efficient cause is extrinsic, this seems to have the unsettling effect of making every efficient cause artful. This is avoided by requiring that the cause that is art be intelligent and endowed with will. The alteration of the natural by the human agent, by design and for his own purposes, that is art. Elsewhere, Aristotle observes that, compared with other animals, man seems to have been ill-provided for by nature. Turtles and porcupines are armored; all animals are clothed and most species are programmed to find shelter. Watching ovenbirds or even wrens construct their nests or muskrats build their watery homes, who has not felt a Walt Disney impulse to see more than an analogy with human art? And of course there is intelligence involved, but it resides in the one who fashioned their nature, the artist *par excellence*. Against these fully endowed species stands man, the poor forked animal, naked, defenseless, homeless. And yet, Aristotle sees him as the most richly endowed of all. He has a prehensile hand, the instrument of instruments, and what it is an instrument of is reason. Art is necessary for man if he is to survive: art is natural to him.

Clearly then when art is opposed to nature, it is not nature in the narrower sense of human nature that is meant. The panoramic description of human life with which the *Metaphysics* begins, glossing its opening generalization—“All men by nature desire to know”—characterizes man first of all as the one who from experience can acquire an art. One might by luck or inadvertence produce something and be unable to repeat the feat. One might be able to repeat the feat and not know why certain actions of ours have the effect that they do. Aristotle is thinking of medicine—more than once we are reminded of the fact that his father was a physician, and there is a tradition that he was too—and the difference between a midwife and a

physician. Experience guides the midwife and she can give anecdotal reasons for doing what she does, referring to Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Brown, but why this procedure worked with Mrs. Smith and Brown she does not know. Art appears when the Why is grasped.

It is no accident that such an art as medicine enters into the discussion here. A little later, the art of building illustrates a point. We are confronted, in other words, with the practical arts, man's use of natural materials to provide for himself—clothing, shelter, food, tools, weapons. We are first occupied with the necessities of life and art is necessary if we are to secure them. But the artful ordering to satisfy our needs—agriculture, fishing, hunting, trade—creates conditions for something more. Earlier when Aristotle illustrated his initial generalization about our natural pursuit of knowledge, he pointed to seeing. Seeing is along with the other senses indispensable to our getting along in the world, but Aristotle notes that we take pleasure in seeing "even when it has no purpose beyond itself." This is an adumbration of the theoretical. Hugh of St. Victor, in his *Didascalion*, gives such a list of seven practical arts as contrast to the liberal arts.

### ART IMITATES NATURE

Art relates to nature as imitation, and imitation can be grasped in a first and obvious meaning in this connection through the example of medicine. The art of medicine seeks to aid nature in doing what it can often do unaided. Wounds heal, fevers subside, bruises fade away, bones knit. The physician's acts seek to imitate nature in these various effects. Clearly, imitation does not mean replicating identically what nature can do unaided. A broken bone that knits naturally might very well leave a person permanently handicapped. Imitation takes into account the end of nature's self-healing, which is the fitness and health of the person. It is the end that governs the medical procedure; the means are sometimes suggested by nature, but increasingly medicine employs means to the end of health that nature herself could not supply. Open-heart surgery could not of course take place without a surgeon. But however sophisticated the procedures become, they are guided by knowledge of nature, of what in the nature of things the healthy condition of a person is with all the variations that age and gender introduce into the concept. The experience of the physician provides an ever-broadening empirical base for increased knowledge of health.

## MAN IS BY NATURE A POLITICAL ANIMAL

This relation of practical reason to the given can also be seen in the Aristotelian dictum that man is by nature a political animal. Nature in the phrase suggests the given, not the elective. Aristotle is not suggesting that we are such that we have a tendency to enter into groups contractually, to form associations. There is a community which is necessary for our existence and survival, the family. Any reflection on the good of man which overlooks the given truth about its subject will produce fantastic theories. The contract theory of society may seem to be merely a heuristic device, something like Rawls's Veil of Ignorance, but it leads all too easily to the supposition that human beings are isolated individuals which show up in an adult condition and then, out of self-interest, decide that the trade-offs involved in forming a community are such that advantages outweigh the disadvantages. Of course, there are no such human individuals. Humans begin as infants, helpless, totally dependent on parents, in need of years of nurture and education before they are recognizably responsible persons. Man's natural condition therefore is as a member of a community. The good for man must of necessity concern his fulfillment or perfection as a member of a society. The moral dimension then is not some putative choice to live or not to live in society, but how to do this well. The willy-nilly is always a presupposition of responsible acts of will.

Much the same is true of the initial claim of the *Metaphysics*: "All men by nature desire to know." The desire is natural, that is, it is not initially a choice. The senses and the mind are fashioned to know, and they perform those actions independently of any choice. The cognitive is ordered to the true and the mind cannot fail to reach that goal. But the natural beginnings of the life of the mind are truths known by all. Thus, Thomas will distinguish between *ratio ut natura* and *ratio ut ratio*, just as he distinguished between *voluntas ut natura* and *voluntas ut voluntas*. The will cannot not will the good, that is its nature; the mind cannot not grasp the true. But these natural grasps provide only the beginnings of rational activity; principles are inchoative starting-points, and moving out from them carries with it no guarantee that one will hit upon further truths, anymore than deliberate will-acts always relate to the true good. The art of logic elevates the hit or miss activity of mind as it moves off from principles in search of more specific truths.

The sense of "natural" in natural law is clear against the background of such considerations. The first precepts of practical reason are those a person cannot fail to know, and they are followed by others which can

be grasped *cum modica consideratione*. Discussions of whether *synderesis* is a habit stir up considerations of the kind in which we have been engaged.

### ART AS A VIRTUE

Man's characteristic activity, that which sets him off from every other agent in the cosmos, is rational activity. In this he engages naturally and necessarily, but he does not necessarily do so well. The modification or perfection of this activity, so that it achieves its naturally given end surely, is its excellence or virtue, and because rational activity has an ordered set of meanings, there is an ordered set of virtues. Insofar as what is sought is the perfection of rational activity as such, the achievement of truth, virtues of speculative reasoning are distinguished. Sometimes we use our mind, not to perfect mental activity as such, but to gain truths which enable mind to govern activities other than mental activity. Aristotle distinguished two virtues of the practical intellect, art and prudence, calling art the perfecting of practical reason with regard to things to be made, and prudence the perfection of practical reason with respect to things to be done. *Agenda*. The doing of things to be done, when perfected, is the perfection of the doer. Prudence guides choices in the light of our given appetite for pleasure and given aversion to pain. The cardinal virtue bearing on the former is Temperance, the cardinal virtue bearing on the latter is Fortitude. Unlike the activities that art directs, those directed by prudence are immanent; when perfected they perfect the agent as such. Art in its first sense involves transitive activity: it modifies a material external to man, and its perfection will be the perfection of the thing made. It comes within the ambit of the moral in the way in which other commanded voluntary acts do, such as walking, throwing, striking, on and on.

### LIBERAL ARTS

The art of logic is a liberal art, liberal as opposed to art in a more basic and practical sense. Art is used here in an extended or analogous sense of the term. In its first sense, *techne* or *ars* involves the production of some artifact which mimics the composition of something produced by nature. The result of natural becoming is a compound of matter and form. The result of artful making is a compound of a natural material and a humanly induced form. This is done with an eye to the necessities of human life. The liberal art has an *opus* only in a sense: not an *opus* external to mind but rather internal to it. The affirmations and denials, the arguments, studied in logic are

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products of thought which organize and direct thought more surely to the end of truth. The arts of language and the arts of quantity all have *opera* of this not extra-mental sort. As the *artes humaniores*, they perfect the man, but partially. One is not thought to be a good man *tout court* because he is a good logician or a good geometer. These virtues concern a partial good of the agent and do not as such relate themselves to man's overall or total good. Insofar as they are so related it will be by another virtue, prudence, and then an activity can receive two appraisals, one as mathematical, say, and another as moral. One can be a good mathematician and a morally bad man, one can be a morally good man and a poor mathematician. While the moral virtues are more fundamentally virtues and more necessary for us, they do not substitute for nor render less fulfilling of us as rational agents the liberal arts and the sciences.

### THE FINE ARTS

Where do the fine arts fall in this schema? The things recalled provide the context within which Jacques Maritain takes up the discussion of the fine arts. The *beaux arts*, the arts of the beautiful. Maritain had to fashion from implications and suggestions in the texts of Thomas what we have come to call an aesthetics. The Thomistic context does not easily accommodate the fine arts as a distinct consideration. It will occur to us that music is mentioned among the liberal arts, whereas house-building (architecture) falls to the practical arts. It seems clear that the fine arts will cut across the division of arts into practical and liberal. It is no easy matter to say what they have in common and what would distinguish them.

The example of architecture makes clear that being useful to our material needs can characterize a fine art, but then how does shoemaking or industrial design fall short of being a fine art. *Ars gratia artis*? But architecture is irredeemably connected with providing shelter. Sculpture may be the sweatiest of the fine arts and we would doubtless group it with painting. Music as the quantification of sound which when heard somehow structures our emotions seems ethereal by comparison, and the old question whether music is music when it is not being played or performed is not the same question as whether a statue or painting are achieved works of art when unobserved. The arts of language begin with grammar but scientific treatises do not seek the same effect as fiction or poetry, and in opera we have that fusion of music and poetry that struck Kierkegaard's pseudonym as the apex of art.

This is the area in which Maritain made one of his greatest contributions

to philosophy done in the tradition of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. Readers can argue about the degree, or indeed whether what he has to say can be traced back to his philosophical mentors, but it is clear that he has gone far beyond them. There is nothing comparable to the *Poetics* in Thomas—a work which had not yet in Thomas's lifetime been translated into Latin—but we can be sure that the discussions of music in the *Politics* and *Republic* had their effect on Maritain's truly original aesthetic work.

### NOVA ET VETERA

It is pleasant for an old Thomist to rehearse the matters that make up the first part of this essay, matters that provide the backdrop for Maritain's aesthetics. But unsettling questions must arise with respect to that background. It is of course Aristotelian, it is pre-Copernican, and it is even more distant from the situation in which we find ourselves, what Rémi Brague has called *la perte du monde*: the loss of the world. The Aristotelian cosmos, like the world of the Middle Ages, provided a sustaining matrix for moral philosophy as well as for reflections on human artistic activity. The universe no longer functions in that way for the modern mind. The almost cozy cosmos that provided Dante with an astronomical metaphor of the inner life has been replaced by accounts which seem almost more poetic than scientific. Our solar system has long since been swallowed up in a galaxy which in turn is recognized as one of innumerable others in a universe that is rushing ever outward toward God knows what. It looks as if the nature which grounded both morality and art simply isn't there anymore.

One of the fascinations of Maritain's aesthetics, particularly as we find it in *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, is his response to modern art. Only a cynic would attribute this to his many friendships with contemporary artists. One detects unease before Picasso, and not because they were not friends. The distortions of the human figure bother Maritain, an apparent hostility toward the natural. Reed Armstrong has developed an unflattering interpretation of modernity with Picasso's *Demaiselles d'Avignon* providing the bridge from then to now. It is not of course the function of the artist to convey contemporary scientific accounts of the universe, but the discarded image of a cosmos and world necessarily affect the artist, whether or not the new astronomy is *toto caelo* different from the old. It feels that way. Already with Pascal *le silence de ces espaces infinis m'effraie*, and we can imagine the artist in that interiority where Maritain locates the *fons et origo* of art having to deal with being lost in space. Read the Mellon lectures with this in mind. Remember Maritain's lifelong effort to put together the

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philosophy of nature of Aristotle and Aquinas and the science of his day. But however the philosopher might resolve the apparent quantum jump from old to new, the creative membrane of the poet's soul will respond to the current vision of the universe to which chaos theory is another response. Auden spoke of the poet's as a secondary world. But what if the primary world is gone? Maritain's work is a first step in an unfinished journey for Thomistic aesthetics.