

PART I

THE FOUNDATIONS OF BEAUTY, ART, AND CREATIVITY

“Radiance”:
*The Metaphysical Foundations of
Maritain’s Aesthetics*

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“Poetry is in love with beauty, and beauty in love with poetry,”¹ Maritain says in the chapter “Poetry and Beauty,” from *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*. In order to understand the relationship indicated by this puzzling claim, one needs to situate this remark within the context of a whole host of metaphysical distinctions that extend from the ordinary to the specialized. Examples of the ordinary include: the relation of the Creator to the universe with its resultant inherent intelligibility, the divine likeness of human nature, and the cognitive/creative dimensions of the intellect; examples of the specialized include: Maritain’s unique claims regarding “poetry,” “spiritualized emotion,” “intelligentiated sense,” and beauty as the “radiance of a mystery.”

By exploring these metaphysical underpinnings, we will see how the “radiance” of beauty and “poetry” found in genuine works of art (and manifested throughout creation) leads us to a glimpse of the Divine, who is the source of all being. It is for this reason that Maritain includes the following passage from Baudelaire in no less than six of his works—works which include discussions about God as well as art, beauty, and “poetry”:

It is the instinct for beauty which makes us consider the world and its pageants as a glimpse of, a *correspondence* with, Heaven. . . . It is at once by poetry and *through* poetry, by music and *through* music, that the soul divines what splendors shine behind the tomb: and when an exquisite poem brings tears to the eyes, such tears are not the sign of

¹ Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953), p. 173.

an excess of joy, they are rather a witness to an irritated melancholy, an exigency of nerves, a nature exiled in the imperfect which would possess immediately, on this very earth, a paradise revealed.²

In this paper, we will articulate the metaphysical foundations of Maritain's aesthetics and explore the early development of his thought. In particular, we will find that the philosophical notion of "radiance" is of special significance metaphysically, aesthetically, and even emotionally. The paper will conclude with some brief remarks about the tragedy of the human condition which results if one is cut off from the ability to delight in and share the aesthetic experience of radiance.

THE METAPHYSICAL FOUNDATIONS OF MARITAIN'S AESTHETICS

Earth's crammed with heaven
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees takes off his shoes—
the rest sit 'round it and pluck blackberries.³

There are at least two contrasting views of reality. One of these conforms to the above lines from Elizabeth Barrett Browning: there is a supreme Creator-God whose creation is "crammed" with divine intelligibility—less apparent in inanimate, material things and more apparent in those created beings (including humans) which manifest, progressively by degrees, higher and higher aspects of life and of immanent, self-perfecting activities. For those creatures that sentiently and intellectually experience the divinely created, material universe, the crowning radiance occurs when the intelligibility of creation is variously revealed and concealed through the cognitive and creative activity of human participated intelligence.

The other opposing view of reality would maintain neither a notion of a Divine Creator nor any "heaven in a grain of sand"—the material universe is simply "there" (*de trop*); it is neither meaningful in itself nor is it in any sense purposeful. Human beings, on this reckoning, are neither endowed with any spiritual intellect, nor is the universe "flooded with intelligibility." Rather, intelligence is understood as a function of a highly developed and

² *Ibid.*, p. 166. See also Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and The Frontiers of Poetry*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), p. 32; *Art and Faith* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1948), p. 91; *The Situation of Poetry* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1955), p. 43; *Approaches to God* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965), p. 80; and *Man's Approach to God* (Latrobe, Pennsylvania: The Archabbey Press, 1960), p. 18.

³ "Aurora Leigh," in *The Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. Ruth M. Adams (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), p. 372.

complex central nervous system. As a result, any notion of “intelligible meaning” is thus seen as the result of an essentially Kantian or post-modern construction of reality; perhaps less true for the derivation of the laws of the physical and natural sciences, where the structure of reality, while somewhat fixed and discoverable, is nonetheless a product of the random and arbitrary forces that govern the physical universe, and more true of all the other “interpretive” sciences—the humanities, history, and the social and political sciences—all of which “construct” the basic insights and meanings found in their respective fields.

The consequences of these two contrasting metaphysical foundations are significant. Does the intelligible structure of the universe derive from some essentially arbitrary evolution controlled by the physical/chemical laws of nature and the natural selection of living beings, or does this intelligible structure go beyond those physical/chemical natural laws to include the meaningful intelligibility that derives from its Creator-God? This distinction between these two fundamentally different starting points is a dramatic example of St. Thomas’s “small mistake in the beginning.” From it will come the foundational principles of every branch of one’s philosophical thinking, including aesthetics.

With this in mind, it is easy to trace the essential pieces in Maritain’s aesthetics. Maritain recognizes the metaphysical importance of the Creator/Creation relationship when he talks about the created universe in which artists find themselves. “I need to designate the secretive depths and the implacable advance of the infinite host of beings, aspects, events, physical and moral tangles of horror and beauty—of that world, that undecipherable Other—with which . . . the artist is faced; and I have no word for that except the poorest and tritest word of the human language; I shall say: the things of the world, the Things.”⁴ But these “things,” he goes on to say later,

are not only what they are. They ceaselessly pass beyond themselves, and give more than they have because from all sides they are permeated by the activating influx of the Prime Cause. They are better and worse than themselves, because being superabounds. . . .⁵

Those familiar with Maritain’s aesthetics know that this understanding of the superabundant, inexhaustible, and intelligible richness of the universe is complemented by the “infinite depths of this flesh-and-blood and spiritual existent, the artist,”⁶ and that both together provide the ingredients

⁴ Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, p. 10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

for Maritain's signature use of the notion of "poetry"; it is "that intercommunication between the inner being of things and the inner being of the human self which is a kind of divination." "Poetry," on this reading, is "the secret life of each and all the arts. . . ."⁷

Careful attention to his notion of "poetry" reveals two distinguishable senses of the term "things" which are, so to speak, wrapped up together. On the one hand, there are the "things" of the natural universe which derive their inexhaustible intelligibility from their Creator, while on the other hand, there are also those "things" of the artist's making (works of art) which derive their intelligibility from the richness of the artist's own subjectivity or "Self." Considered all together, they form that classic, analogous relationship between God the Creator and the works of creation on the one hand, and the human creator-artist and the works of art on the other; the analogy is found in Maritain's earliest writing in aesthetics, *Art and Scholasticism* (1920).⁸ But there is more.

In *Creative Intuition* (1953), Maritain describes his unique notion of "poetry" as possessing two distinguishable moments: "poetic knowledge as cognitive" and "poetic knowledge as creative."⁹ Both of these moments, Maritain makes clear, are the unique knowledge proper to the creative, work-producing artist. As such, however, they only tell half of "poetry's" story. With the original 1920 publication of *Art and Scholasticism*, one may be surprised to learn that his special use of the term "poetry" does not appear. Instead, Maritain's initial aim was to discuss the metaphysical fundamentals of art and beauty. And since beauty is primarily a transcendental, it is not limited to aesthetics alone. Manifested in both natural creation and art, it always involves a relation to an intelligence, either God's or our own. This discussion of the perception of beauty is especially significant since it opens the way to a broader treatment of the triadic relationship of "artist/work/audience," and does not limit the discussion to the creative artist alone.

MARITAIN ON "POETRY" AND THE PERCEPTION OF BEAUTY

In Maritain's two detailed discussions of the perception of beauty, the chapters "Art and Beauty" from *Art and Scholasticism* and "Poetry and

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁸ See Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and The Frontiers of Poetry*, especially pp. 30–35.

⁹ For the discussion of these two moments, see Maritain's *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, pp. 117–41.

Beauty” from *Creative Intuition*, his method of proceeding is initially the same in both cases: he begins with the fundamentals of St. Thomas’s claim that the beautiful is “that which, being seen, pleases: *id quod visum placet*.”¹⁰ Maritain is quick to point out, of course, that the kind of seeing implied here is not confined to the senses. But he is also prudent in his claim that it is not an exclusively intellectual seeing either; rather, it is a unique mode of *intuitive* intellectual knowledge. What distinguishes this mode of intuition from others is the part that the senses play in the act of knowing. Only in sense knowledge do we “possess perfectly . . . the intuitiveness required for the perception of beauty. . . . [It] delights the intellect through the senses and through their intuition.”¹¹

Maritain uses the term *intelligentiated sense* to identify this interdependent union of sense and intellectual intuition. Although prominent in *Creative Intuition*, his use of that term actually first appears in a celebrated footnote from *Art and Scholasticism*.¹² A careful examination of the original French edition reveals that the paragraph containing it was inserted in the 1927 edition. Like the notion of “poetry,” it too did not appear in the original 1920 publication. Maritain is at pains to make clear the contrast between that intellectual knowledge which terminates in a concept, and that intellectual knowledge which does not. Concerning the joy which an encounter with the beautiful gives us, we are placed, Maritain says, “*through the means of the sensible intuition itself*, in the presence of a radiant intelligibility . . . which . . . cannot be disengaged or separated from its sense matrix and consequently does not procure an intellectual knowledge expressible in a concept.”¹³ And in the 1927 insertion, he adds, “it is intellect and sense as forming but one . . . *intelligentiated sense*, which gives rise in the heart to aesthetic joy.”¹⁴

This special relationship between beauty, the senses, and the intellect provides the context for understanding the three classic characteristics of beauty: integrity (“because the intellect is pleased in the fullness of Being”), proportion (“because the intellect is pleased in order and unity”), and radiance or clarity (“because the intellect is pleased in light and intelligibility”).¹⁵ It is here that we encounter “radiance”; Maritain says that, of the three characteristics of beauty, radiance is the most important because it

¹⁰ Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 23.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 23–24.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 162–67, n. 56.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 163–64.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

is the proper principle of intelligibility. It is the splendor of the form, the splendor of intelligibility. This form is "a vestige or a ray of the creative Intelligence imprinted at the heart of created being."¹⁶ Beauty is thus "a flashing of intelligence [either God's or the artist's] on a matter intelligibly arranged"¹⁷ or, as Maritain adds in the 1927 edition of *Art and Scholasticism*, it is "the ontological secret that [things] bear within them[selves], their spiritual being, their operating mystery."¹⁸

Maritain the metaphysician is quick to remind us that this aesthetic beauty is primarily a participation in ontological beauty. He cautions us in a different inserted note, also in the 1927 edition, that it is all too easy to misunderstand words like *clarity*, *radiance*, *intelligibility*, and *light*, if we attempt to understand these terms in relation *to ourselves*, rather than as something clear and luminous *in themselves*. For this reason, beauty is often obscure to us though not in itself. "The more substantial and the more profound this secret sense is, the more hidden it is from us; so that, . . . to define the beautiful by the radiance of the form is in reality to define it by the radiance of a mystery."¹⁹ Accordingly, our intelligence must be equipped with some means of being able to apprehend these mysteries and spiritual secrets as they are obscurely radiant in matter, or all would be lost to us, and it would make no sense to speak of them at all. In this context, we can appreciate the genius of Maritain's notion of "poetry" as a purely natural, human means of "divining" the "spiritual in the things of sense. . . ."²⁰

Although a detailed discussion of this relation between "poetry" and the perception of beauty appears in *Creative Intuition*, there are several occasions in Maritain's earlier writings where he does give us a clear indication of "poetry's" purely contemplative function. "Artistic [or poetic] contemplation," he tells us, "affects the heart with a joy that is above all *intellectual*. . . ."²¹ Other references include:

Poetry . . . is clearly no longer the privilege of poets.²²

One can be a poet and still produce nothing.²³

Poetry . . . can also be found in a boy who knows only how to look and to say ah, ah, ah, like Jeremiah. . . .²⁴

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

²⁰ Maritain, "The Frontiers of Poetry," in *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 128.

²¹ Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 164, n. 56.

²² Maritain, "The Frontiers of Poetry," in *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 129.

²³ Maritain, *Art and Faith*, p. 90.

²⁴ Maritain, *The Situation of Poetry*, p. 44.

Thus we find: on the metaphysical side, a universe flooded with radiant intelligibility, whether created by God in the beauty of nature or made by the human artist in the beauty of the art work. On the epistemological side, we observe that human intellectual knowledge can (1) result in abstract understanding (where the term of the intellect’s activity is a concept or *verbum mentis*), or that it can (2) function non-conceptually and manifest itself in either: (a) the *creative* intuition of “poetry” (where the term of the intellect’s activity is a work made or *objet d’art*), or (b) the *contemplative* intuition of “poetry” (where the term of the intellect’s activity is an aesthetic delight that finds its rest in a joy of the heart or *verbum cordis*). Of course, the fundamental Thomistic insight that is at work here concerns the cognitive and creative functions of the human intellect, both of which pass beyond themselves on account of their spiritual energies. What unites them is the intelligible radiance of “things” on the one hand, and the unified, intuitive, intellectual/affective nature of the human person on the other; a person capable of grasping this radiance in a non-conceptual way and of beaming in ecstasy with a joy and delight that spills over and expands the heart with a love that is at once natural and divine.

CONCLUSION: THE RADIANCE OF LOVE AND THE LOVE OF RADIANCE

The more you love, the more you see . . .
The more you see, the more you love.

When we speak of love philosophically, we may place our emphasis on either its cognitive/intellectual aspect or on its affective/emotive aspect. On different occasions, Maritain writes about each. On the one hand, he had learned from Bergson the necessity of using the term “intuition” to identify those non-conceptual human experiences not adequately expressible in concepts. From St. Thomas, he learned that all senses of “intuition” are always and primarily intellectual.²⁵ But Maritain also recognized that love too can become a vehicle for non-conceptual knowledge. He writes:

By love, finally, is shattered the impossibility of knowing another except as object. . . . To the degree that we truly love (. . . when . . . the intellect within us becomes passive as regards love, and, allowing its concepts to slumber, thereby renders love a formal means of knowl-

²⁵ See Jacques Maritain, *Bergsonian Philosophy and Thomism* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1955), pp. 148–52.

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edge), to this degree we acquire an obscure knowledge of the being we love. . . .²⁶

Maritain occasionally refers to such love/knowledge as an affect of the heart: "This eye-covered love of intelligence, this is what you call the heart, isn't it? *The illuminated eyes of the heart*, say the Scriptures."²⁷ Surprisingly perhaps, this use of the notion of the "heart," as regrettably metaphorical as some may find it, does have its root in St. Thomas himself. In the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, St. Thomas writes: "For love proceeds from a word: we are able to love nothing but that which a word of the heart [*verbum cordis*] conceives."²⁸

On the other hand, it is often the emotive dimension of our affective experiences that receives his attention. When discussing this topic, Maritain is careful to distinguish genuine affective experiences from brute emotion and the sentimentality of feelings (which "sends a chill down the spine," so to speak). Always permeated by intellectual light, love can also stir "affective resonance,"²⁹ or what Maritain also calls "spiritualized, intentional, or significant emotion"; it too can function as a determining means of genuine intellectual knowledge. Like the terms "poetry" and "intelligentiated sense," his use of "spiritualized emotion" is his own unique contribution to Thomistic epistemology and aesthetics. Reminiscent of the earlier passage where love becomes a means of knowledge, Maritain tells us that this significant or spiritualized emotion also can become

for the intellect a determining means . . . through which the things which have impressed this emotion on the soul, and the deeper, invisible things that are contained in them . . . are grasped and known obscurely.

It is by means of such a spiritualized emotion that poetic intuition, which in itself is an intellective flash, is born in the unconscious of the spirit.³⁰

Radiance, then, is the luminosity and beauty of all being and of the fullness of being, our Creator-God. The *love of radiance* is manifested in our aesthetic or emotional love/experiences of the mysterious and ineffable, transcendent secrets of being which shine forth in works of art, of nature,

²⁶ Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1948), p. 84.

²⁷ Maritain, *Art and Faith*, p. 109.

²⁸ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* (*On the Truth of the Catholic Faith*) (New York: Image Books, 1957), p. 140.

²⁹ For the discussion of "significant, intentional, or spiritualized emotion," see Maritain's *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, pp. 118-25.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

and ultimately, *when we shall see face to face*, of the Divine radiance itself (recall the quotation from Baudelaire). The *radiance of love* is manifested by the creative expressions of love and goodness found proportionately in God and creatures; for “God’s love causes the beauty of what He loves, whereas our love is caused by the beauty of what we love.”³¹ To perceive that radiance and beauty is to glimpse paradise even on this earth; but to be cut off from it, even while the creative artist may be participating in it unaware, is to know the pain and suffering of isolation. Maritain notes how remarkable it is that we communicate with one another at all, given our human limitations. And yet only through genuine communication do we pass beyond ourselves and “escape from the individuality in which matter encloses us.”³² If we remain on the level of our sense-needs and sentimentality only, then we may tell or sing or yell or scream our stories, but each remains alone, and we do not understand one another. Maritain says: “[We] observe each other without seeing each other, each one of [us] infinitely alone, even though work or sense pleasures bind [us] together.”³³ But enter love, “poetry,” beauty, and radiance, and all the walls are broken. For “the moment one touches a transcendental, one touches being itself, a likeness of God, an absolute, that which ennobles and delights our life; one enters into the domain of the spirit.” For we know that we “are really united only by the spirit; light [Radiance!] alone brings [us] together.”³⁴

³¹ Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 27.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 32.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 32–33.

³⁴ *Ibid.*