

PART II

THE ARTS, THE ARTIST,
AND INTERPRETATIONS

Art's Invaluable Uselessness

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Every work of art reaches man in his inner powers. It reaches him more profoundly and insidiously than any rational proposition, either cogent demonstration or sophistry. For it strikes him with two terrible weapons, Intuition and Beauty, and at the single root in him of all his energies, Intellect and Will, Imagination, Emotion, Passions, Instincts and obscure Tendencies. Art and Poetry awaken the dreams of man, and his longings, and reveal to him some of the abysses he has in himself.¹

When I was young, my father who was a drama critic, had me read twenty pages of fiction a day and, at the same time, would argue with me about art. "Art really had no 'use' and was in no way 'good' for us," he would say. If he thought that, why would he force me to read and experience so much of it? While I knew that there was something wrong with artists teaching or preaching, I wondered about this: If art was no "good" for us, why should we appreciate it? What benefits would we get?

Yes, of course there is pleasure and it is good. According to St. Thomas, no one can live without it.² Thomas goes so far as to say that if one does not enjoy spiritual pleasures one will turn towards carnal ones.³ But to stop

¹ Jacques Maritain, *The Responsibility of the Artist* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960), pp. 58–59.

² For references, see Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 190; *The Responsibility of the Artist*, p. 85; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II–II, q. 35, a. 4, ad 2 (hereafter cited as *ST*). All separate references to the *Summa* will be to the Benziger Edition (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947). See also Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VIII, 5 and 6.

³ Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and The Frontiers of Poetry*, trans. Joseph Evans (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1974), p. 75; Aquinas, *ST* II–II, q. 35, a. 4, ad 2. The source of this notion is found in Aristotle,

the explanation at pleasure is not enough. To tell others that they should appreciate art, and then when they ask why, to tell them it is only a matter of pleasure might cause them to wonder why they are working so hard at getting it! Their bewilderment seems justified. Although it is true that the artist aims at the formally well-constructed object, and although it is true that the viewer views to receive pleasure, it is also true that all pleasures are not the same. There must be other reasons why teachers want their students to read, to go to museums, or to see movies rather than watch television. While my father would write in the book, *The Decline of Pleasure*, that "We must learn to live with the fact that nothing 'good' is going to come of pleasure," he would also write that pleasure makes him "certain that [he is] not a displaced person in a universe indifferent to [him]," and that it enables him "to move about in it." He even adds, "But if I have no direct, deep experience of how much the universe and I agree, I shall doubt the likelihood of our ever coming to a mutual understanding and so become immobilized or very angry."⁴

This brings us back to the question of the value in finding pleasure in great works of art. Maritain claims that art should not give us speculative truths nor practical moral advice. In addition, claims Maritain, it cannot add one drop of grace to the spiritual life. Why then should we value works of art? Why not claim as do Plato and Augustine that most art simply diverts us away from the truth and the real meaning of life? There was no more profound critic of the aesthetic experience than Plato. Plato's and Socrates's basic philosophical idea was that the "unexamined life is not worth living for a human being." Philosophers all tell us (with Socrates chief among them) that it is critical to human living that we critically examine how we are and how we "see" reality. Those who fail to do this to some degree are, in the words of E. F. Schumacher, "being lived" rather than living; they are living their lives according to a default program—the agendas of others. If we are to flourish as human beings, we must then examine ourselves and how we critically understand reality. Now the aesthetic experience, Plato would assert, does not help us to do either one. In fact, Plato would claim, the aesthetic experience makes its appeal to our passions and appetites, not to our reason where we could critically deal with it. Plato tells us in the *Republic* that "[r]hythm and harmony insin-

Nicomachean Ethics VIII.5 and 6, and X.6. Clearly one of the basic benefits of the aesthetic experience is pleasure.

⁴ Walter Kerr, *The Decline of Pleasure* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1964), pp. 245, 311–12.

uate themselves into the innermost part of the soul and most vigorously lay hold of it."⁵ He claims that art does not knock at the front door of our reason to ask permission to enter into our souls, but instead, invites itself right in and plays with us. He forbids the craftsman to practice his art so that our youths will not be reared on images of vice, as it were on bad grass, every day, grazing little by little from many places; and, while they are totally unaware of it, putting together a big bad thing in their souls.⁶ Homer's lies are harmful to us, for if we are not careful, we will be sympathetic toward ourselves when we are bad.⁷ Ultimately, Plato feels that human beings should be searching for the decisive and universal truths that lie beyond the vicissitudes of space and time, but art deals with none of this. Art is concerned with the contingent, the singular, the changing, and the sensual. The artist turns away from the metaphysical domain, from the forms, from logic, to the flesh of material reality. Plato thinks that art's lies are very powerful and penetrating, and may very likely wreck havoc on our souls.

Would Maritain come to the rescue here and claim that art does indeed intend to educate and improve us? Absolutely not! According to Maritain, to respond thus would be to miss the whole point about art and the aesthetic experience. Surprisingly, Maritain thinks that much of what Plato says is true! We must start with the fact that the artist does lie to us and that the work of art does in fact seduce us! Our purpose here is to show that art is most valuable to the human being when it is most useless. It is so because it does what no other dimension of human intelligence can do, and we will find out why by looking at Maritain's famous line: "Beauty is the splendor of all the transcendentals united."

In a way, Plato was right! Maritain argues along with St. Thomas Aquinas, himself no hater of art, that art is supposed to have a *defect in truth* and to seduce us. Thomas tells us that "reason is unable to grasp poetic knowledge on account of its *defect in truth*."⁸ Aquinas tells us in another passage that through figures our reason is even seduced⁹.

There are lies given in the aesthetic experience, but why? To understand

⁵ *Republic* III.401d, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Harper Collins, 1991).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 401c.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 391e.

⁸ *ST* I-II, q. 101, a. 2, ad 2. "Poetica scientia est de his quae propter defectum veritatis non possunt a ratione capi; unde oportet quod quasi quibusdam similitudinibus ratio seducatur" (Aquinas, *In I Sententiarum*, prol., q. 1, a. 5, ad 3, cited by Jacques Maritain, "Concerning Poetic Knowledge," in *The Situation of Poetry* [New York: Kraus Reprint; Philosophical Library, 1968], n. 16).

⁹ *Ibid.*

this we must examine the creative process and the nature of the creative intelligence.

II

According to Maritain, one of the definitive acquisitions made by philosophy is the distinction between the speculative and practical intellect.¹⁰ Although strongly insisting with Thomas that the intellect is one power,¹¹ it has these distinct and often opposing functions. Maritain holds that the virtue of art, which is a virtue of the practical intellect, disposes the artist not to a knowledge of something, but rather to an object to be made.¹² While the speculative intellect wants only to know being, the practical wants only to use energies to perform some action or to make something. Art has its identity as a virtue of the practical intellect.¹³

While he cannot work without the speculative intellect, the artist nevertheless does not primarily rely on it in making a work of art. Thus, he does not import discursive, step by step, logical, factual "truths" found there into the work of art. For these can only be produced by the speculative intellect. The result is that there is little discursive meaning for the viewer to detect. Maritain maintains this dichotomy all throughout his work, insisting that the artist, insofar as he is in the act of creating, does not and should not consciously and intentionally import any pre-packaged "truths" into the work of art.

Not only does the virtue of art not directly concern discursive truths, but it also does not directly concern the good of man. The viewer will not receive anything resembling moral instruction through the artwork. The artist is not trying to serve men or make them better, he works for the work alone. While art, the capacity to make things well, and prudence, the capacity to

¹⁰ Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, pp. 45–46, 168, 173, n. 22. According to St. Thomas, "[T]he speculative and practical intellects differ. . . . For it is the speculative intellect which directs what it apprehends, not to operation, but to the consideration of truth; while the practical intellect is that which directs what it apprehends to operation" (*ST* I, q. 79, a. 11, resp.).

¹¹ For an excellent analysis of the practical and speculative intellect and the unity of the intellect, according to St. Thomas, see Josef Pieper, "Reality and the Good," trans. Stella Lange, in *Living the Truth* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989).

¹² It might be said in this regard that the creative activity of the artist serves the viewer's ultimate end by helping his intellect in some obscure fashion to be adequately to the ultimate truth about things; but this is not the end of the artist *qua* artist, his end is to make a beautiful object.

¹³ "The *practical* order is opposed to the speculative order because there man tends to something other than knowledge only. If he knows, it is no longer to rest in the truth, and to enjoy it (*frui*); it is to use (*uti*) his knowledge, with a view to some work or some action" (Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 6).

act well, are both virtues of the practical intellect, they are nevertheless different. While prudence concerns the good of the human being, art is concerned with the good of the work alone.¹⁴

Even evil people can be great artists. Maritain writes that "Oscar Wilde was but a good Thomist when he wrote: 'The fact of a man being a poisoner is nothing against his prose.'"¹⁵ In *The Responsibility of the Artist* he quotes St. Thomas as saying, "The kind of good which art pursues is not the good of the human will or appetite [or the good of man], but the good of the very works done or artifacts."¹⁶

Thus, the artist cannot edify the viewer in any way. Any attempt to do so results in polluting the work. Maritain writes in *Art and Scholasticism*, "In this sense every thesis, whether it claims to demonstrate some truth or to touch the heart, is for art a foreign importation, hence an impurity."¹⁷ He rejects the utilitarian and social theory of art and he holds that to the degree that art is put to the purposes or interests of the moral or social order, it is to this "very extent . . . warped and bent to the service of a master who is not its only genuine master, namely the work." Such art, for Maritain, is inevitably "propaganda."¹⁸

III

Now, if art lies and seduces us, what can possibly be beneficial about all of this? A clue to the benefits of the aesthetic experience is found in a rather strange and elusive remark by Maritain: "Strictly speaking, beauty is the radiance of all the transcendentals united."¹⁹

¹⁴ "But the practical order itself is divided into two entirely distinct spheres, which the ancients called the sphere of Doing (*agibile, prakton*) and the sphere of Making (*factibile, poietikon*). . . . Art, which rules Making and not Doing, stands therefore outside the human sphere; it has an end, rules, values, which are not those of man, but those of the work to be produced" (Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, pp. 7-9).

¹⁵ Maritain, *The Responsibility of the Artist*, p. 24.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, pp. 62-63.

¹⁸ Maritain, *The Responsibility of the Artist*, pp. 72-73. The artist or poet deals with that which lies beyond his purposes. On this activity and the ecstasy it brings to the artist see Deal W. Hudson, "The Ecstasy Which is Creation: The Shape of Maritain's Aesthetics" in *Understanding Maritain: Philosopher and Friend*, eds. Deal W. Hudson and Matthew Mancini (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1987).

¹⁹ Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 173, n. 66; translation of "A vrai dire il est la splendeur de tous les transcendants réunis" (*Art et scolastique*, p. 225, n. 66). The phrase first appears in the footnotes of *Art et scolastique* in the second edition in 1927. May we suggest at this point the significance of the word *réunir*? According to Cassell's *French and English Dictionary*, the primary meaning is "to

We may see in this phrase either something so abstract that it doesn't seem to help us much, or nothing but a simple truism. If we know our perennial philosophy, we know that being is one, true, good, and beautiful and we might think that we can mix and match as we please, but this is not the case, according to Maritain. Unless one were God, the transcendentals do not appear united; the good is not necessarily the true, and vice versa.²⁰ While operating in the world, the different faculties of man grasp being differently. Our "will . . . does not of itself tend to the true, but solely and jealously to the good of man."²¹ The intellect by itself desires the truth, which of itself does not inspire but "only illumines."²² In fact, nothing with a drive toward the infinite—as is the human aspiration for truth or for goodness—is in accord with any other similar drive.²³ Maritain even tells us that they can be enemies. We see the resulting conflict being played out in those who, according to Maritain, in the "spirit of Luther, Rousseau, or Tolstoy defend the order of the moral good,"²⁴ while others like Aristotle²⁵ and Aquinas defend the order of truth. "Here are two families which hardly understand each other, here as elsewhere, the prudent one dreads the contemplative and distrusts him."²⁶ Often, even in ordinary life, we separate out

reunite." The beautiful brings the transcendentals back together. It is interesting to note that Cornelia N. Bergerhoff, who worked with Maritain on *Creative Intuition and The Responsibility of the Artist*, translates the same phrase as the "splendor of all the transcendentals gathered together" (*An Introduction to the Basic Problems of Moral Philosophy* [Albany, New York: Magi Books, 1990], p. 69; *Neuf leçons sur les notions premières de la philosophie morale* [Paris: Pierre Téqui, 1960], p. 63).

²⁰ "Wherefore beauty, truth, goodness (especially when it is no longer a question of metaphysical or transcendental good itself, but of moral good) command distinct spheres of human activity, of which it would be foolish to deny *a priori* the possible conflict, on the pretext that the transcendentals are indissolubly bound to one another" (Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 174, n. 68). It must be clarified that while the "moral good" with which much of art is concerned, is not the ontological "good" of the transcendentals, nevertheless it, like the relationship of aesthetic beauty to transcendental beauty, is a particularized form of it and is based upon it. For references see *ST I-II*, q. 18, a. 1–2.

²¹ Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 7.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 26.

²³ "The fact is that all these energies, insofar as they pertain to the transcendental universe, aspire like poetry to surpass their nature and to infinitize themselves. . . . Art, poetry, metaphysics, prayer, contemplation, each one is wounded, struck traitorously in the best of itself, and that is the very condition of its living. Man unites them by force" (Maritain, "Concerning Poetic Knowledge," in *The Situation of Poetry*, p. 56).

²⁴ Maritain, "An Essay on Art," in *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 98.

²⁵ Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 33.

²⁶ Maritain, "The Freedom of Song," in *Art and Poetry*, trans. Elva de Pue Matthews (New York: Philosophical Library, 1943), p. 103.

either the truth or the value of something and focus upon that. We look upon a thing and immediately categorize it as "good," that is, somehow beneficial to us or others, or "intelligible," and we try to figure out its meaning, but "beauty is the splendor of all the transcendentals united." This tells us that here, in the aesthetic experience, the different transcendental energies can and do unite. Knowing how they do so is crucial to understanding the effects upon the viewer. They do so by surrendering and consenting to the seduction of the aesthetic experience. The faculties of intelligence and will must lay down their arms. The viewer is neither taught nor moved to action. If he consents, if he is seduced, his intelligence becomes bound by the *magical sign*. This is a sign not for his logical reason but for his imagination and emotion only. Here, his ego is not in control.

To understand why the aesthetic experience is so powerful for Maritain, we need to examine his view of the soul's powers. Maritain claims that in every human soul there are the different speculative, practical, and creative aspirations mentioned above. When we are thinking in any of these modes, we are engaged in a specialized way of thinking. However, for Maritain, there is an extremely cognitive and common root of the soul where all of the different energies of man originate, develop, and evolve. It is like a common factory or laboratory where all of the theoretical concepts, the practical ideas, and creative germs are born and are first formed. It is into this molten core of his personhood that the artist's soul suffers and takes in reality, and that the viewer receives the effect of the aesthetic experience. This is illustrated by Joseph Conrad:

Confronted by the same enigmatical spectacle, the artist descends within himself, and in that lonely region of stress and strife, if he be deserving and fortunate, he finds the terms of his appeal. His appeal is made to our less obvious capacities: to that part of our nature which, because of the warlike conditions of existence, is necessarily kept out of sight.²⁷

According to Maritain, it is only by giving up any chance at benefitting or being "useful" to any single faculty of the human being that the work of art really enriches the viewer. Reality has to be completely digested by the artist, recollected, known through emotion, and encoded in *magical signs*. Signs in which all of the distinctions between viewer and viewed, subject and object, and all of the laws of contradiction and identity break down. It

²⁷ Joseph Conrad, Preface to "The Nigger of the Narcissus," in *Great Short Works of Joseph Conrad* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).

is this revised reality that reaches the viewer beyond the faculties in an astonishing integrity.

In the aesthetic experience, we are given a reality more real than in its logically interpreted appearances.²⁸ According to St. Thomas, “[R]eality is more real when taken up by the intellect than it is in itself.”²⁹ But here we go one step further, it is even more real when taken up not by the intellect alone but with the will and with the integral whole of man together in all his faculties.³⁰ When there is no separation of the faculties we receive an impression like none other. Maritain frequently quotes his wife Raïssa in this regard:

Poetry asks to be expressed by life bearing signs, signs which conduct the one who receives them back to the ineffability of the original experience, since in this contact all the sources of our faculties have been touched, the echo of it ought itself to be total.³¹

If it is true that an artist cannot impart logical or scientific truths, then it is also true that the primary reception of art is non-discursive. We are neither instructed in propositional truths nor moved to action. We are hit behind the front lines and at the heart. We are touched at the area of ourselves where will and intellect are one.

If it is true that the work of art cannot simply be an intelligibility to be understood nor a good to be possessed, it is not because it lacks either, but because it has a superabundance of both. The work of art must be not only a good object, but also a good object full of signification; otherwise the work of art, according to Maritain, would have nothing to say.³²

But, again, this “saying” cannot be purposively intended by the artist. It

²⁸ Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, p. 30, n. 254.

²⁹ Maritain, “Frontiers of Poetry,” in *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 127, n. 182. See ST I, q. 19, a. 1, ad 3.

³⁰ Poetic knowledge uses the entire human self, with all of the body, will, emotions, instincts, senses, etc., as an instrument to catch and detect reality. Reality reverberates through all of this.

³¹ Maritain, “Concerning Poetic Knowledge,” in *The Situation of Poetry*, p. 61. “Née dans une expérience vitale, vie elle-même, la poésie veut s’exprimer par des signes porteurs de vie, et qui ramèneront celui qui les reçoit à l’ineffabilité de l’expérience originelle. Comme dans ce contact toutes les sources de nos facultés ont été touchées, l’écho en doit être total, lui aussi” (*Situation de la poésie*, pp. 122–23).

³² “The greatest poets and the most disinterested ones, the most ‘gratuitous’ ones, had something to say to men” (Maritain, “An Essay on Art,” in *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 95); Maritain also writes, “If he (the artist) unhappily has nothing to tell us, his work is valueless” (*The Range of Reason* [New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1952], p. 20); for further discussion see Maritain, *The Responsibility of the Artist*, p. 56.

cannot be a thesis.³³ This "saying" cannot even be apart from the artist's life, but must arise from within his bloodstream.³⁴ What is said must be the result of an expression of the artist's own self into words on paper or paint onto canvas. By bringing forth his own self, he also casts out, with himself, the world that he suffers (experiences) at his depths. It is, as Deal Hudson has highlighted well, "the ecstasy which is creation."³⁵ The resulting work of art then is a well-constructed object whose value and significance lies within itself and yet reverberates with meanings.

If what we have said is true, then there are going to be two conditions for an effective reception of art. The vision, ideas, and values that pass through the work of art have to be of the form that will organically flow through the artist and his brush and then permeate the viewer; and the viewer needs to have a posture that will allow that vision, embodied in the canvas, inside. The beauty of the work must be, as Plato said, "a soft smooth, slippery thing, and therefore of a nature which easily slips in and permeates our souls."³⁶

From the viewer's perspective, all great art causes itself *to be perceived* at a subdiscursive level so that the ultimate impact of the work cannot be discovered in advance. It can only be discovered by *magical signs* that cast a spell on our intelligence causing it to operate at a deeper and more condensed level. As Maritain quotes Henri Bergson in the very first edition of *Art and Scholasticism*:

The aim of Art is to lull the active or rather the resistant powers of our personality and so bring us to a state of perfect docility, in which we realize the idea suggested, or sympathize with the feeling expressed.³⁷

Once there and through our consent, our intelligence is held joyful prisoner by the imagination, and the work reveals to us—viewers whose various human transcendental energies are always fighting—a reality that is both true and good simultaneously.

³³ Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 62; *Art et scolastique*, p. 109.

³⁴ Maritain frequently uses the image of nutrients moving through a plant or tree. For references see *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 74; *The Responsibility of the Artist*, pp. 58, 72.

³⁵ See Hudson, "The Ecstasy Which is Creation," in *Understanding Maritain*, pp. 235–56.

³⁶ Plato, *Lysis*, 216b.

³⁷ Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism* 1923, p. 164; "L'objet de l'art est d'endormir les puissances actives ou plutôt résistantes de notre personnalité et de nous amener ainsi à un état de docilité parfaite où nous réalisons l'idée qu'on nous suggère, où nous sympathisons avec le sentiment exprimé" (*Art et scolastique* 1920, p. 166). While for Maritain this entrancement is not the object of the work of art, it nevertheless characterizes all great art.

In the aesthetic experience, we do not focus on one type of knowledge or concern, we do not experience the dichotomies that arise between theory and practice, the true and the good, knowing and loving, but have an experience of these transcendentals united. They are united in the creative sufferings of the artist, they are united in the work of art, and they are united in the receptive intuition of the viewer. This experience gives us a powerful sense of the simultaneous synthesis of different transcendental perspectives, hence enabling us to drop the restrictions of logic and form in the speculative sphere, the restrictions of preconceived purposes in the practical sphere, and to acquire a fresh and more holistic perspective on being.

Usually, in ordinary life, we need to make distinctions, to isolate and define the natures or structures of things or, in the practical sphere, to categorize things as good or useful, but the artist does not do this. No, the artist experiences or "suffers"³⁸ reality at a level within himself, where intellect and will are one.³⁹ He produces an object that displays some aspect of reality as well as his will's relationship to it.⁴⁰ Finally, his work will reach us at the place where our will and intellect are both active.

It is the combination of the faculties in the artist and the combination of transcendental properties in the work of art and the subsequent combination of faculties in the posture of the viewer that allows the viewer to penetrate reality, to see the insides of things and people. For the intellect alone seeks the transcendental of "truth." It wants only to possess abstract forms and equations. The will alone wants to seek—at the level of the moral good—the transcendental "good," that is, the perfection of its own being. It wants only to go out from the human to be in union or sympathy with the other. Thus, the intellect has clarity but little penetrative power by itself. The will,

³⁸ Cf. Pseudo-Dionysius, *Mystical Theology*, chap. I; see "The Experience of the Poet," in *The Situation of Poetry*, p. 80. For further discussion, also see Maritain, "The Freedom of Song," in *Art and Poetry*, pp. 90, 198–99.

³⁹ "Confronted by the same enigmatical spectacle, the artist descends within himself, and in that lonely region of stress and strife, if he be deserving and fortunate, he finds the terms of his appeal. His appeal is made to our less obvious capacities: to that part of our nature which, because of the warlike conditions of existence, is necessarily kept out of sight" (Preface to "The Nigger of the Narcissus," in *Great Short Works of Joseph Conrad*, pp. 57–58).

⁴⁰ One can examine what Maritain has said of Rouault and Chagall. In *Rouault*, Maritain writes, "Beauty is the form love gives to things" (*Rouault Retrospective Exhibition* [New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1953], p. 28). He writes elsewhere that Rouault "makes (natural forms) his own through the love he bears them" (*Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, p. 78, n. 6). Concerning Chagall he writes, "[H]is clear eyes see all bodies in a happy light, he delivers them from physical laws, and makes them obey the hidden law of the heart" ("Marc Chagall," in *Art and Poetry*, p. 17).

on the other hand, can penetrate but cannot possess knowledge of this union or penetration immanently within itself. It is only in the synthesis of both faculties that we have an intellectual penetration *and* possession of reality. It is only with both that we can appropriate our continual discovery and penetration into things.⁴¹ Because it is a knowledge by connaturality, it is a knowledge which involves both intellect and will, knowledge and love. Because love goes beyond the frontiers of our present knowledge,⁴² we can go out of ourselves towards the good. Often we know that something is good before we know facts about its nature; and it is precisely because of beauty that we often know about the nature of a particular good, "for," as Aquinas writes, "beauty adds something to the good, namely an order which enables cognition to know that a thing is of such a kind."⁴³

Now, according to general Aristotelian and Thomist philosophy, we learn about things and their natures by receiving the effects of their activity on us. Ordinarily, in the case of scientific knowledge we receive sense impressions and abstract or intuit an essence and judge it. We do likewise in practical knowledge where we have our ready-made categories. In either area, we straightjacket reality and grasp its contours; however, reality is "more than is dreamt of in our philosophies," and Aquinas wrote that we can never fully know the essence of a single fly.⁴⁴ It is the artist who em-

⁴¹ Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, pp. 93-94, 237-38. It is also remarkable in this regard that two prominent philosophers of science see scientific discovery as aesthetic or poetic. According to Thomas S. Kuhn, in the acceptance of new scientific paradigms, "the importance of aesthetic considerations can sometimes be decisive," and "Something must make at least a few scientists feel that the new proposal is on the right track, and sometimes it is only personal and inarticulate aesthetic considerations that can do that" (Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970], pp. 156-58). According to Karl Popper, "In this way, theories are seen to be the free creations of our own minds, the result of an almost poetic intuition, of an attempt to understand intuitively the laws of nature," and "Among the real dangers to the progress of science is not the likelihood of its being completed, but such things as lack of imagination" (Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* [New York: Harper & Row, 1965], pp. 192, 216).

⁴² Maritain, *The Situation of Poetry*, p. 48; *Situation de la poésie*, p. 100.

⁴³ Thomas Aquinas, *In De Divinis Nominibus*, IV, 5.

⁴⁴ According to St. Thomas, "Our knowledge is so weak that no philosopher was ever able to investigate perfectly the nature of a single fly. Hence we read that one philosopher passed thirty years in solitude in order that he might know the nature of the bee" (*Symbolum Apostolorum Expositio*, quoted by Norris Clarke, S.J., "Action as the Self-Revelation of Being," in *History of Philosophy in the Making: Essays in Honor of James Collins*, ed. Linus Thro [Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1982], p. 73).

braces this knowledge and mystery and has penetrating knowledge of it. Instead of receiving the impressions of things in reality and then confining them by definition or reducing them to objects of utility,⁴⁵ he loves them⁴⁶ enough to continue to suffer the actions of these natures. If it is true, as Norris Clarke claims, that we know by the activity of things and people what kind of "actors" they are,⁴⁷ it is also true that by letting go of the contours and conceptual outlines of things and people, by continuing to love and suffer them,⁴⁸ the artist learns about their insides, their hidden meanings, energies, inclinations, and motives. This can only be done through the intellectual "sharpening" of the artist's senses and by letting the actions of things and of men penetrate and echo in his interiority.⁴⁹ In a real sense he is the keyboard the world is playing, he is the canvas the world is stroking with its brush. Only by filling himself up with the things of the world can he, the artist, come out of sleep together with reality.⁵⁰ And we, the viewers, are invited to his awakening. We in turn are penetrated,⁵¹ played, painted on the inside by both the artist's interior vision and the reality he suffers.⁵²

IV

If Beauty is the radiance of all the transcendentals united, that is, if it is the radiance of being confronting the power of knowledge (the true), being as confronting the power of desire (the good),⁵³ and being as undivided (the one), then these three dimensions can be separated out for analysis.

As the beautiful is the radiance of being confronting the intelligence, it gives the viewer a penetrating vision of reality. The work of art enables the

⁴⁵ Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, p. 335, n. 3.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁴⁷ Clarke, "Action As the Self-Revelation of Being," in *History of Philosophy in the Making*, pp. 63–80.

⁴⁸ Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, pp. 93–94.

⁴⁹ Maritain, *Art and Poetry*, p. 90.

⁵⁰ Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, p. 114.

⁵¹ "We feel penetrated by a deeper mystery, a transcendent poetry, an absolute-ness in liberty and pictorial science which convey to us a kind of burning serenity" (Maritain, "Georges Rouault," in *Rouault Retrospective Exhibition*, p. 4).

⁵² "It is above all with the reverse sign that investigations are concerned wherein the work of art is, for example, studied as a sign of the cultural backgrounds which engross the psychic life of the artist and of his epoch, and as a sign of the forces which clash in him without his even being aware of them" (Jacques Maritain, *Ransoming the Time* [London: G. Bles, The Century Press, 1943], p. 254). The work of art reveals the life of social groups, most often those other than the viewer's own.

⁵³ Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, p. 162.

viewer through the instrumentality of intentional emotion, which in the fine arts binds the true and the valuable together, to have a glimpse of the depths of reality.⁵⁴ The emotion that is the form of the work of art unites our energies and our very selves with the work of art and with the reality it embodies. It draws us toward things and toward knowing more of being.⁵⁵ While there are always essences in the world, it is primarily *esse* or the existential aspects of reality that the viewer is drawn or led to grasp.⁵⁶ It is those aspects of reality that the existentialists have been trying to get us to appreciate.

The aesthetic experience through the knowledge by connaturality allows us to penetrate things, to go deeper than science and philosophy, and to discover the kind of "actors" natural things and men truly are. It enables the intellect to see in, around, and between the contours of the natures of things in reality. Ordinarily, we do not want to go deeper. We like our formulas and our comfortable consciences. Our knowledge in the speculative domain gives us security and stability, but we must be "seduced" out of ourselves. The receptive intuition does this. It draws us out into an ecstasy which is vision—an existential vision of *esse*, the inner life source of things and their actions.

As beauty is the radiance of being confronting the power of desire, we receive a vision of our own hearts⁵⁷ and of the various crags and cavities within its own caverns.⁵⁸ We see what it is that our heart wants, a heart hitherto obscured by the cages of science and the fog of practical concerns. We feel our hearts, our desires beating with the work, and if no other in-

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8. Emotion draws us to see new and different relationships in reality.

⁵⁶ Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 195, n. 130 (added in 1935 version). Maritain for all his existentialism was careful never to abandon natural forms or essences. They, after all, are the matrices through which *existence* (*esse*) flows into action and freedom.

⁵⁷ "Poetry . . . forces every lock, lies in wait for you where you least expected it. You can receive a little shock by which it makes its presence known, which suddenly makes the distances recede and unfurls the horizon of the heart" (Maritain, "The Frontiers of Poetry," in *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 129). Also, Maritain writes, "For in the long run any deeper awareness of what is hidden in man turns to a greater enlightenment of moral conscience" (*The Responsibility of the Artist*, p. 88).

⁵⁸ John Updike, for example, insists that "Fiction is nothing else than the subtlest instrument for self-examination and self-display that mankind has invented yet. . . . For the full *parfum* and effluvia of being human, for feathery ambiguity and rank facticity, for the air and iron, fire and spit of our daily mortal adventures there is nothing like fiction" (*Writers on Writing*, ed. Jon Winokur [Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Running Press, 1990], p. 126).

sight about the world occurs, still we know how we have felt. While we may not be able to identify completely the subject being viewed, we know that it probes us profoundly. The hole left in our heart is enough. At some point in the past, reality has left its trace or footprint. Experiencing the music of Bach or a tragedy like *Othello*, we know that we have the capacity to feel this way, and to some extent, our feeling grasps reality. To have a tiny glimpse of the inner mountains and glaciers of our inner world⁵⁹ is to know that some reality has left its imprint there.⁶⁰ Nothing comes from nothing, and the inner cravings of the heart are sublime as it thirsts to see the vistas it has been made for.⁶¹ Thus, for Maritain, an artist may be a devout believer or an atheist; what matters is the depth of the heart he has reached. The artist or poet shows us reality in reverse, not in its positive material dimension, but in its negative imprint left on the heart by some reality through emotion and feeling.⁶² There is truth in art and it is the conformity of reality with emotion. It is reality as suffered, reality as felt.⁶³

This is especially helpful because man is a seriously *incommodated* spirit.⁶⁴ Following Augustine, Maritain holds that we don't know our own heart and its desires.⁶⁵ He quotes Pascal saying that man's heart is full of

⁵⁹ "The reality expressed by Music is the universe and the soul as fused together, the astounding oceans and glaciers and skies of the inner world of man, in which the world of created things is transfigured and mirrored" (Jacques Maritain, "The Drawings of Arthur Lourié," *Latitudes* 2, no. 2 [1968], p. 6). According to Franz Kafka, "A book ought to be an icpick to break up the frozen sea within us" (*Writers on Writing*, ed. Jon Winokur, p. 46).

⁶⁰ Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, p. 254. The work of art is a "by-product of the state, a trace, the footprint of the state."

⁶¹ "Art . . . begins groping about for Heaven. It may take the wrong road, go astray in a false night that is but a counterfeit of the divine night: we recognize the hunger that is in it" (Maritain, *Art and Faith: Letters Between Jacques Maritain and Jean Cocteau*, trans. John Coleman [New York: Philosophical Library, 1943], p. 104).

⁶² Perhaps we may suggest that the heart, or the root of the soul, is like emotional photographic paper and the work of art is like a playful combination of reverse images which suggest both the contours of the heart and the reality that has shone on it.

⁶³ In many ways Maritain is very close to the philosophy of Suzanne Langer. See "The Symbol of Feeling," in *Feeling and Form* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), especially pp. 27ff. Their views are similar except for the key fact that for Langer it is emotion that is known, as *medium quod*, and not, as it is for Maritain, a *medium quo*, that through which something else is known. We would argue that both the emotion plus the strange clues and signs of both the reality of the feeler (subject) and the world are given together.

⁶⁴ Maritain, *The Situation of Poetry*, p. 38.

⁶⁵ "Man does not know himself through his own essence. His substance is hidden from him" (Maritain, *Art and Poetry*, p. 89).

dirt.⁶⁶ Any knowledge that can be given concerning the invisible world which stirs within him is of utmost help,⁶⁷ for we act through notions and desires, the existence and nature of which we do not have the slightest clue. But because the intellectually appetitive *élan* toward the sign involved in a work of art is the same as the *élan* toward the actual object,⁶⁸ we can become dimly aware of our actual feeling and desire for things.⁶⁹ We can see what our soul's depths truly want—what is truly good.

But the aesthetic experience is not only about the "good," it also reveals to us the mysterious workings of evil. "He who does not know the regions of evil, does not know much about the world," writes Maritain.⁷⁰ But we cannot know evil except in the good that it wounds.⁷¹ Although, as Augustine had discovered, evil has no intelligible nature of its own, in the aesthetic experience, it can have a life of its own. Through the various "defects in truth," deformations, distortions of logical and natural appearances of the forms of things and life, it can become a legitimate part of the universe of art,⁷² and while not having to corrupt us (we do not need to eat from the tree), it becomes observable. It shows itself and its ways, so that we can see it! Having a knowledge of what Maritain calls a "geography of evil,"⁷³ we are better able to practically navigate through the deep waters of the soul and the world.

As the beautiful is the radiance of being as undivided or one, the work of art provides the viewer with a view of reality that includes and encom-

⁶⁶ Maritain, *Art and Faith*, p. 130.

⁶⁷ "For in the long run any deeper awareness of what is hidden in man turns to a greater enlightenment of moral conscience" (Maritain, *The Responsibility of the Artist*, p. 88). Our hearts become a sounding board for the work, for the novel especially. Maritain writes, "For the writer works with words, which convey ideas and stir the imagination and which act through intelligence on all the rational and emotional fabric of notions and beliefs, images, passions and instincts on which the moral life of man depends" (*ibid.*, p. 68).

⁶⁸ Maritain, *Ransoming the Time*, p. 232. "Sic enim est unus et idem motus in imaginem cum illo qui est in rem" (*ST III*, q. 25, a. 3).

⁶⁹ Perhaps we can see in ourselves, as the artist does in his own heart, the various repressed tendencies and monsters of singularity. For further discussion, see Maritain, *The Responsibility of the Artist*, p. 105.

⁷⁰ Maritain, *Art and Faith*, pp. 94–95.

⁷¹ Maritain, "Dialogues" and "The Freedom of Song," in *Art and Poetry*, pp. 55 and 83.

⁷² Maritain, *Art and Faith*, p. 96. This in no way implies any evil on the part of the author or artist. He, like anyone else, needs only to look at his own repressed inner tendencies (*The Responsibility of the Artist*, pp. 111–12). He puts us in touch with ours.

⁷³ Maritain, *The Responsibility of the Artist*, p. 112.

passes him. It presents him with a view of reality that is not problematic, objective, cut-up, analyzed, but a reality of which he is a part; a reality that is mysterious, complete, and full of meaning. The resemblance to Gabriel Marcel's philosophy is striking. Marcel focused upon the encompassing nature of being and its ability to resist complete exhaustive analysis, such as would deprive it of value. Being has a mysterious nature of which we are an integral part, and from which we cannot be separated.⁷⁴ One might also consider here the world-views of the Native American Indian.

Maritain writes that it is in the presence of beauty that the soul makes contact with its own light, a light that is beyond it. We seek beauty as we seek our cause.⁷⁵ Beauty laden with emotion helps us to see the interpenetration of man and nature.⁷⁶ It helps us to see how our life breathes with nature and nature breathes with us. Beauty helps us to see how we fit or do not fit in with the world.⁷⁷ Look at Rodin's *La Main de Dieu* or *Le Baiser* and then look at a shriveled man of Giacometti. In the aesthetic experience, we perceive the hidden truth to which the work and our minds are subject.⁷⁸ In that experience, we sense our soul's attunement to the mathematical, musical, and spiritual laws of the cosmos.⁷⁹ It becomes clear why we cannot objectify this discursively! The truth we are concerned with is above and encompasses us. We and nature are the data.

⁷⁴ Maritain, "The Experience of the Poet," in *The Situation of Poetry*, p. 73; "L'Expérience du poète," in *Situation de la poésie*, p. 146; *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, p. 382. See Gabriel Marcel, "On the Ontological Mystery," in *The Philosophy of Existentialism*, trans. Manya Harari (Secaucus, New York: Citadel Press, 1980), pp. 9–46, especially p. 14, "Being is what withstands—or what would withstand—an exhaustive analysis bearing on the data of experience and aiming to reduce them step by step to elements increasingly devoid of intrinsic or significant value." While Maritain's philosophy is very different from Marcel's, still this is close to his aesthetic grasp of being.

⁷⁵ Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 173, n. 66.

⁷⁶ Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, p. 5.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 9ff.

⁷⁸ Maritain, "On Artistic Judgment," in *The Range of Reason*, p. 19. The selection is from the 1943 issue of *Liturgical Arts*.

⁷⁹ See Maritain, *Art and Faith*, p. 100. The work of art presents us with a reversal of what C. S. Lewis called transposition. See "Transposition" in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Macmillan, 1980), pp. 54–73. According to Lewis, the higher reality can and often is made known through a lower one with some elements of the lower being repeated due to the lower's relative capacity. Thus both joy and grief, two very deep emotions, may be displayed through one facial expression. According to Maritain, art does the reverse. It uses paradoxes, transfigurations, "defects in truth," and "departures from form" (John O'Connor's translation of *déformations* in the first edition of *Art et Scolastique*) to reveal a higher reality through emotion. Through the aesthetic experience, the viewer experiences a "kinship with eternal things" (*Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, p. 87).

Just as the child learns his first things through imitation and through play, so we, too, through the aesthetic experience learn, not what can be formulated and taught, but how to navigate through life. Or, as Maritain reminds us, "It is for beauty that wisdom is loved."⁸⁰ We may not see the rocks under the waters of our hearts, but art provides us with bell-bearing buoys that warn us in the dark. If art provides us with an echo of reality, it is because we are bats⁸¹ and depend on our soundings in the aesthetic experience to know our position.

Watching the movie, *Sterile Cuckoo*, we sense the grey arbitrariness of a world that lacks the mountains and valleys of any objective values. Through seeing the ending of Chaplin's *City Lights*, we resonate with Chaplin's depiction of charity's invisible face. Through reading Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, we sense the "rightness" of child-like trust in the face of a mad world. The storm of Bach's *Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor* drowns all of the listener's interests and affirms the power and greatness of creation in motion. Through Rouault's canvases we sympathize with and see the beauty in men and women trapped in the cages of society. Eliot's "Love Song of Alfred J. Pufrock" reveals modern man's suffocation of the spirit. Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* reveals the value of an ordinary single existent man and the powerful impact of his freedom on the social fabric of society. But these works of art do not teach us anything new; rather they reveal some mystery of our world through what we already connaturally know or feel in our depths. The "heart has its reasons" and the receptive intuition reveals these.

And when the work is truly a masterpiece, the viewer experiences an unexpected synchronicity of his various transcendental aspirations to desire truth, to desire goodness, and to desire unity. This synchronicity brings into play a teleological sense that permeates the entire human being and shows him that he is made for more than himself. It makes him aware that his concepts capture only a small portion of the mystery of life. He finds out that his thoughts and desires are not blind but conspire secretly along different lines of being, and speak softly about a distant source from which they all

⁸⁰ Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 26.

⁸¹ Mark D. Jordan writes: "We require human arts in order to simplify and reduce the natural beauty of the world for our bat-like eyes" ("The Evidence of the Transcendentals and the Place of Beauty in Thomas Aquinas," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 29, no. 4 [December 1989], p. 407). While there is a reduction of natural beauty, that is not all that is happening. There is the interaction of the "free" artist with creation. We do introduce something new into works of art. Dante was right in saying that art is the grandchild of God.

flow. Maritain writes, "Poetry is spiritual nourishment, but it does not satiate, it only makes man more hungry and that is its grandeur."⁸²

In sum, the aesthetic experience allows us to appropriate our "emotional" perceptions of reality.⁸³ Just as we feel that one of the values in studying philosophy is the self-appropriation of our minds via the understanding of concepts and ideas and frameworks through which we do and should think, so too the aesthetic experience does the same for the heart and emotions. To reap this benefit, we must forego the ordinary, the predictable, and the philosophical. In order for the Son of God to be known, He had to speak in parables, so that those listening would not understand (Recall that in the Gospels the Son of God has to *explain* the parables.), and attain no more than the worth of a crucified thief—He Who called Himself the Way, the Truth, and the Life! How else would we have known God's love and the paradoxical nature of the Christian life?

The reconciliation of opposites now becomes clear as we see the separate lines of the transcendentals uniting ever more closely in the distance. The saints tell us that the only place where one's appetites are completely in accord and are satisfied is in the beatific vision. Meanwhile, on earth, the best of the fine works of art draw everyone, the Thomists and the Augustinians, the intellectualists and the voluntarists, the theorists and practical people, to the greatest receptive intuition of all.

⁸² Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, p. 235. This is similar to C. S. Lewis's notion of joy, a desire which is itself wonderful. See "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, pp. 3–19.

⁸³ Lloyd J. Aultman-Moore writes of Aristotle's *Politics* VIII.5.1340a23f, that the "confirmation of feeling appropriately through tragic catharsis will educate the viewer of the play to understand what it means to feel and act appropriately in actual life situations." Aultman-Moore adds that, according to Cicero, emotions or passions can be useful: "If one were to remove fear, all carefulness in life, which is greatest among those who fear the laws, would be eliminated" (*Tusculan Disputations*, IV, 19–20). See L. J. Aultman-Moore, "Aristotle and Sophocles on the Elements of Moral Virtue" (Diss. Loyola University, Chicago, 1991), pp. 239–40.