

## IMITATING NATURE: MARITAIN'S RESERVATIONS CONCERNING ARTISTIC MIMESIS

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Maritain's aesthetic theory presents a paradox in its relationship to Aristotle. On the one hand, Maritain insists on the necessity of retrieving the Aristotelian concept of art as a virtue of the practical intellect. From his first major aesthetic treatise, *Art and Scholasticism* (1920), to his last, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (1955), Maritain celebrates the value of a virtue-centered approach to art as an antidote to the Cartesian rule-based approach that dominated French academic art and to the confusion between art and morality that vitiating modern Catholicism's efforts at religious art. On the other hand, Maritain shows little allegiance to the other major pole of Aristotelian aesthetics: the mimetic theory, that is, the thesis that art imitates nature. Not only is Maritain aloof from the mimetic account of art; in many works, he is hostile to it.

The purpose of this essay is to explore Maritain's reservations concerning artistic mimesis. To do so, I will examine three works, drawn from different moments in his career, where he indicates his opposition to the theory and practice of art as the imitation of nature. These works are *Art and Scholasticism* (1920; 1927; 1935), *The Frontiers of Poetry* (1927; 1935) and *The Responsibility of the Artist* (1960). It is my hypothesis that Maritain's critical distance from the mimetic theory is due primarily to the materialism with which mimetic theory and practice had become intertwined in the modern period.

### I. DEBRIS OF THE RENAISSANCE

In his first major work in aesthetics, *Art and Scholasticism*, Maritain already takes his distance from the mimetic account of art. In chapter seven, he briefly notes Aristotle's concept of poetry as the imitation of nature in the *Poetics*, but Maritain alters Aristotle's conception of mimesis. He interprets Aristotle to be referring to a formal condition for the exercise of art, not to the object of the artistic act. "When

Aristotle wrote these words [on art as mimesis], he enunciated a specific condition imposed on the fine arts, a condition grasped from their earliest origin. But Aristotle is to be understood here in the most *formal* sense. If, following his usual method, the Philosopher goes straight to the primitive case, it would be a mistake for us to stop there and always limit the word 'imitation' to its everyday meaning of *exact reproduction or representation of a given reality*.<sup>1</sup> Like manual dexterity in the production of paintings and statuary, a reference to nature may be a necessary condition for the creation of an artwork by a human artisan who can never create *ex nihilo*. But the artist aims for and, if successful, embodies a beauty in his or her work that transcends any external physical object.

Maritain clearly contests any practice or theory of art that rests on a materialist account of mimesis. Just as the virtue of art is not to be confused with technical skill, it is not to be confused with the painstaking reproduction of the external physical world. "The fact remains that if 'imitation' were understood in the sense of *exact reproduction or copy of the real*, it would have to be said that except for the art of the cartographer or of the draughtsman of anatomical plates there is no imitative art."<sup>2</sup> A hyper-realist account of art, which conceives art as the mirror of physical nature, simply suppresses the spiritual nature of the act of artistic creation and the spiritual nature of the idea made manifest through an artwork's material signs. The artisan in this account would be reduced to an illusionist.

To illustrate his argument against materialist mimesis, Maritain condemns the realist genre of painting, centered on the mastery of perspective, ushered in by the Renaissance:

While on visiting an art gallery one passes from the rooms of the primitives to those in which the glories of oil painting and of a much more considerable material science are displayed, the foot takes a step on the floor but the soul takes a steep fall. It had been taking the air on everlasting hills; it now finds itself on the floor of a theatre—a magnificent theatre. With the sixteenth

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and The Frontiers of Poetry*, translated by Joseph W. Evans (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1974), 54.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

century the lie installed itself in painting, which began to love science for its own sake, endeavoring to give the illusion of nature and to make us believe in the presence of painting we are in the presence of the scene or subject painted, not in the presence of a painting.<sup>3</sup>

Cubism, on the other hand, has liberated art to find its proper intellectual and spiritual object by breaking the mimetic spell over painting. "Cubism has rather violently posed the question of *imitation* in art. Art, as such, does not consist in imitating, but in making, composing or constructing, in accordance with the laws of the very object to be posited in being... This exigency of its generic concept takes precedence over everything else; and to make the representation of the real its essential end is to destroy it."<sup>4</sup> Maritain's sympathy for avant-garde experiments in the art, music, and literature of the period derives in part from his opposition to the materialist realism which these experiments contested in their more formalist aesthetic.<sup>5</sup>

## II. DISAPPEARING MIMESIS

In *The Frontiers of Poetry*, the reference to mimesis has almost entirely disappeared. Maritain treats with sympathy the effort of contemporary art and literature to create "pure art," an art that abandons the earlier mimetic mission to represent material nature in verse or paint. The new mission of the artist is to reveal "spiritual ideas" that transcend the physical world and that invite the reader/spectator to engage in a similar transcendence of the natural. Picasso and Mallarmé emerge as the heroic practitioners of this spiritualized art that has broken the older mimetic mold of material representation.

Strikingly, the only reference to the mimetic account of art—and this is an indirect one—borders on the satiric. Earlier practices of art devoted to the creation of a replica of physical nature represent an

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the paradoxical "ultramodern anti-modernism" of Jacques and Raïssa Maritain and their sympathetic relationship to the artistic avant-garde of Paris, see Stephen Schloesser, *Jazz Age Catholicism: Mystic Modernism in Postwar Paris* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 141-212.

immature stage in the development of art. While worthy of respect, they share a superficiality found in arts that are purely decorative. "There were times when art worked in a blessed innocence, convinced that it was only a craft, intended for the service of the amusement of men, and that its function was to paint grapes which would fool the birds, to celebrate military feats, to adorn the council chambers—and to instruct and admonish the people. It lived then in a servile state, which does not mean that it was enslaved."<sup>6</sup> In such early mimetic practices of art, the artist's virtue is reduced to the skill of an illusionist who can produce a replica of nature that fools the animals as well as human spectators. Art's distinctive mission to grasp and represent spiritual forms in a creative arrangement of matter has yet to emerge in this earlier utilitarian practice of art.

### III. SOCIAL MIMESIS AND PROPAGANDA

In *The Responsibility of the Artist*, Maritain attacks another contemporary variant of artistic mimesis: the social realist tradition, which insists that the purpose of art is to provide a critical mirror of society, especially of oppressive social relations. Maritain criticizes such socially mimetic art as a species of propaganda. The mission of the artist to pursue formal beauty for its own sake in order to initiate the viewer into the knowledge of a spiritual realm is suffocated in such a politicized account of art.

This practice of art as social mimesis, well-represented in the realist and naturalist literature of protest in the 1930s, destroys the very autonomy and specificity of the artistic order. Political ideals are substituted for the formalist criteria of artistic creation. "The theory of *Art for the social group* ... simply ignores this autonomy [of art]; it makes the *social value*, or *social significance*, or *social impact* of the work into an aesthetic or artistic value.... One believes that the work must be judged and attained, in its very making, by judgments and determinants which depend not on the virtue of art but on emotions, purposes or interests of the moral or social order."<sup>7</sup> Just as an earlier genre of moralizing art had subordinated the virtue of art to the virtue of prudence, the new

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<sup>6</sup> Maritain, "The Frontiers of Poetry," in *Art and Scholasticism*, 134.

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Maritain, *The Responsibility of the Artist* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960), 72-73. The book is based on a series of lectures Maritain had delivered at Princeton University in 1951.

politicized art of social mimesis has subordinated the artistic question of form to the extrinsic criteria of social progress.

This politicization of the artistic act inevitably transforms the artwork into a specimen of propaganda. The leftist existentialist vogue of political art in the immediate aftermath of World War II has proved particularly damaging to the vocational freedom of the artist. "What the existentialist fashion today calls committed art, "l'art engage"—we might say as well enlisted art, or drafted art—is, inevitably, propaganda art, either for moral or anti-moral, social, political, or philosophical, or religious or anti-religious purpose. An artist who yields to this craving for regimentation fails by the same token in his gifts, in his calling and in his proper virtue."<sup>8</sup> Fidelity to the party line has replaced the artist's vocation to incarnate beauty of a spiritual order into a creative organization of matter.

Maritain explicitly parallels the dangers of contemporary socially mimetic art with the dangers of materially mimetic art that had reduced the arts to a type of decoration. "Poets do not come on stage after dinner, to afford ladies and gentlemen previously satiated with terrestrial food the intoxication of pleasures which are of no consequence. But neither are they waiters who provide them with the bread of existentialist nausea, Marxist dialectics or traditional morality, the beef of political realism or idealism and the ice-cream of philanthropy. They provide mankind with a spiritual food, which is intuitive experience, revelation and beauty; for man, as I said in my youth, is an animal who lives on transcendentals."<sup>9</sup> Like an earlier generation of artists who considered art as a technique to provide masterful illusions of material nature, contemporary artists practicing social mimesis reduce art to a technique to indoctrinate the spectator through an appealing presentation of the ideological antidote to the depicted injustices of society.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Maritain's longstanding aloofness from the mimetic account of art is rooted in the conjunction between his theory of art as a practical virtue and his realist theory of beauty as a matter of integrity, proportion, and

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

radiance. While he draws both these theories from the medieval scholastics, he combines them in a manner that Maritain readily admits is not found in the medieval thinkers themselves and that is closer to the Enlightenment account of the *beaux-arts*.<sup>10</sup> Already in *Art and Scholasticism*, Maritain conceives the purpose of art as the embodiment of a spiritual reality in a finite organization of matter. The quest to grasp and present the transcendental becomes the fundamental dynamic of the artistic act. In such a transcendentalist account of art, the mimetic effort to present art as the imitation of material nature or as the critical mirror of temporal society can only receive censure.

Metaphysical considerations also guide Maritain's critical treatment of mimetic theories and practices of art. The two branches of mimetism most severely criticized by Maritain are tainted by their materialist frameworks. The early modern account of art as the skillful reproduction of material nature rests on the illusion that the most important object of human intelligence is the physical cosmos and the human body; the vocation of the artist and the metaphysician to awaken others to the reality of the spirit through image and argument respectively is suppressed in this draftsman version of mimesis. The contemporary mimetic account of the artist as the activist who creates critical mirrors of social oppression ignores the transcendental activity, specifically the religious activity, of the members of society. The reduction of the human person to *homo economicus* reflects a truncated, materialist anthropology. Unsurprisingly, as Maritain notes in *The Responsibility of the Artist*, this politically committed art often exudes the strict materialist metaphysics of Marxist-Leninist dialectic. The materialist infrastructure of these two major versions of mimesis rendered the mimetic theory of art unredeemable. Although the early Maritain attempted to repair the Aristotelian theory of mimesis, the later Maritain showed little interest in rehabilitating an approach to art that had become the theoretical and practical ally of materialism.

Strikingly, Maritain does not explicitly attack the original Aristotelian theory that art is the imitation of nature. Aristotle's particular version of mimetic theory contended that the object of

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<sup>10</sup> Maritain clarifies his distance from earlier scholastic aesthetics on this point in "Apropos an Article by Montgomery Belgion," in *Art and Scholasticism*, 113-15.

artistic imitation is the virtuous or vicious character of human beings.<sup>11</sup> In particular, tragic drama takes the actions of a hero hobbled by an ethical flaw as its mimetic model.<sup>12</sup> It is a moral reality, not the reality of the material cosmos or the economic structure of society, that constitutes the “nature” Aristotle claims as the object of art’s imitation. Nonetheless, Maritain finds little use even for this rarified mimetic theory in his effort to develop a contemporary philosophy of art. His reproaches of the mimetic theory during four decades of philosophical reflection on art indicate that for him the tacit alliance between mimetic theory and materialist practices of art in modernity had made the mimetic theory incapable of rehabilitation.

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<sup>11</sup> See Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1448a.

<sup>12</sup> See *Poetics*, 1453b.