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The Artist and Religion in the Contemporary World

ABSTRACT

Although we begin with the words of the poet Henry Vaughan, it is the visual artists above all who know and see the mystery of the Creation of all things in light, suffering for their art in its blinding, sacrificial illumination. In modern painting this is particularly true of van Gogh and J.M.W. Turner. But God speaks the Creation into being through an unheard word, and so, too, the greatest of musicians, as most tragically in the case of Beethoven, hear their sublime music only in a profound silence. The Church then needs to see and listen in order, in the words of Heidegger, to learn to “dwell poetically on earth” before God. To dwell thus lies at the heart of its life, liturgically and in its pastoral ministry, as illustrated in the poetry of the English priest and poet, David Scott. This can also be seen as a “letting go” before God and an allowing of a space in which there might be a “letting the unsayable be unsaid” and order found even over the abyss. This is what Vladimir Nabokov has called “the marvel of consciousness” which is truly a seeing in the darkness. The poet, artist and musician can bring us close to the brink of the mystery, and thus the artist is always close to the heart of the church’s worship and its ministry of care where words meet silence, and light meets darkness. Such, indeed, is the true marvel of consciousness in the ultimate risk which is the final vocation of the poet and artist, as it was of Christ himself, and all his saints. The church must be ever attentive to the deeply Christocentric ministry of art and the creative power of word and image in the letting the unsayable be unsaid. With the artist we may perhaps stand on Pisgah Height with Moses with a new imaginative perception of the divine Creation. The essay concludes on a personal note, drawing upon the author’s own experience in retreat in the desert, with a reminder of the thought of Thomas Merton, a solitary in the community of the Church.

ABSTRACT

They are all gone into the world of light!
And I alone sit lingering here;
Their very memory is fair and bright
And my sad thoughts doth clear.

I see them walking in an Air of glory,
Whose light doth trample on my days:
My days which are at best but dull and hoary,
Mere glimmerings and decays.
(Vaughan 318)

In the beginning, before time itself began, God said let there be light and there was light. The divine creative word is different from any human word for as the Lord says in Isaiah, “it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose and succeed in the thing for which I sent it” (Isaiah 55:11). In this word are contained all the secrets of creation, from chaos is brought an order that is brought into being by the will of God and the distinction is made between Creator and creature.

This material order is formed from the immaterial not first in the shapes and forms of nature but in the distinction between light and darkness, a distinction in which the most profound and mysterious of meanings resides. From the beginning of creation the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overwhelmed or even understood it. This is most truly and perhaps only known to us in the vocation of the artist which is at once the most sacred and profane of all callings. In the eyes of Vincent van Gogh in his self-portraits, especially those painted in the near madness of his final years, we can see him striving to reveal to us the deepest abyss of his vision which at once sees everything and nothing. In his last letter to his brother Theo, and his last letter ever written, composed only days before his suicide on 27 July 1890, van Gogh wrote: “Well, my own work, I am risking my life for it, and my reason has half-foundered owing to it . . . ” (qtd. in Roskill 340). In the depths of van Gogh’s seeing the natural and the supernatural become one, nature and grace flow together, and he sees with horror the truth of the moment of God’s words, “Let there be light” (Genesis 1:3) for then, too, darkness is revealed. In the passion of the eyes of van Gogh there is a meeting of all opposites and a new totality which is at once the darkness of death and a vision that is the sanctification of even darkness itself, in Milton’s phrase, a “darkness visible”¹ and transfigured as in Christ’s passion on the cross. In such a vision, which in European art is revealed most fully in the Gothic art of Giotto, we see

¹ See, John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1667), Book 1, line 63.

Christ portrayed as at once fully human and fully divine, a mystery that is proclaimed in the doctrines of Christian theology, but is finally beyond all theological understanding except in what is seen in the eyes of the artist.

In the art of Rembrandt and van Gogh the light shines in an absolute *depth*; by contrast, in cubist and modern abstract painting it moves across the absolute *surface* of the deep. Light at once reveals and hides, for the deepest mystery and glory of God's creative word is at once known and utterly unknown. In the art of the English painter J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851) such absolute light both blinds and reveals as the forms of nature are the signs of divine order and yet are consumed by the radiance of God's glory. In 1828, Turner painted the legend of Regulus, a Roman consul whose suffering St. Augustine compares even to Christian martyrdom in *The City of God*, and whose punishment after capture by the Carthaginians was to be forced to look into the glare of the setting sun until blinded by it. In Turner's work, we see the painting as if we were Regulus himself, blinded by light. It is a theme taken up even more radically almost twenty years later by Turner in his late work, *The Angel Standing in the Sun*, which draws on the image from Revelation 19:17 ("Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly in midheaven, 'Come, gather for the great supper of God'"). A contemporary reviewer in *The Spectator* for 9 May 1846 described the painting as a "*tours de force* that shows how nearly the gross materials of the palette can be made to emulate the source of light" (qtd. in Joll, Butlin, and Herrman 7). The artist as creator is thus, as it were, a mirror image of the divine creator in the beginning who speaks light into being to reveal the material substance of the creation. In Turner's painting the angel with raised sword emerges as from a vortex of dazzling light that begins as white, gradually shading to yellow and finally red. The angel and the light are one. Around the rim of the vortex flit, indistinctly, the birds of prey of Revelation. In the foreground, and equally indistinct, are various biblical figures, among whom may be identified Judith holding aloft the severed head of Holofernes, and perhaps Adam and Eve lamenting the death of Abel. Like van Gogh, as he approached death, Turner sees into the abyss which is both the beginning and the end of all things, seeing with the eyes of the artist that are at once all light and all darkness.

But who heard the voice of God as he spoke the world into being? Just as van Gogh and Rembrandt know most deeply the light that is within an absolute darkness, even the darkness of God, so the poet and the musician alone truly hear the word and the music within the deepest silence. Thus the Egyptian poet Edmond Jabès can write of silence:

You do not go into the desert to find identity but to lose it, to lose your personality, to become anonymous. You make yourself void. You become

silence. It is very hard to live with silence. The real silence is death and this is terrible. It is very hard in the desert. You must become more silent than the silence around you. And then something extraordinary happens: you hear silence speak.²

The voice of God which brought all things into being through light is also that silence which speaks. It is almost impossible for us to hear such silence, which is the fullness of all language and from which everything and nothing emanates. But the poet, the maker in language, is absorbed in the silence which is both the beginning and the end of all speech, the silent text which is the blueprint of all creation. Such is the silence of Elijah's still small voice in the wilderness which is truly the voice of God: a sound without sound, a wind without a stir and wholly present only as an absence (1 Kings 19:12). Silence, too, is at the very heart of music. Some of Beethoven's most sublime composition is found in his late string quartet No.15, Opus 132 (1825). It is music which the composer himself never actually heard except within his inmost being and soul, trapped as he was in a profound physical deafness to which his conversation books and battered piano bear tragic witness. It is music also born out of the practical chaos of Beethoven's life—financial worries, illness, concern for an errant ward and nephew. As from the chaos before creation God brings all things into being, so from the mess and muddle of our fallen lives, the artist hears the silence of God and speaks of it out of an inner silence which few of us can even imagine or dare to think of. It is no accident that this quartet was written not long after Beethoven had completed his great Mass in D, the *Missa Solemnis* (1819–23), for which he had made a close study of liturgical music. The results of this are most deeply apparent in the quartet's sublimely mystical third movement, the *Molto adagio*, which he entitled, "A convalescent's Hymn of Thanksgiving to God, in the Lydian mode."

The artist ever seeks finally the hymn of thanksgiving, that which in the Christian tradition (and it is a hymn present also and variously in Islam, Judaism and the great religions of the East) lies at the heart of the Eucharist: and at its centre is the silence in which alone we know the unknowable, the total presence of God. For, in the words of the theologian Thomas J.J. Altizer, "the real ending of speech is the dawning of resurrection" (96)—a present actuality that is glimpsed and momentarily heard in the sacramental enactment of the liturgy as a miraculous impossibility. But this is an actuality which is known also to the poet—as the dying King Lear, slipping into eternity with Cordelia in his arms, speaks his version of Christ's last word from the cross in the Fourth Gospel, "It is finished,"

² I have never been able to trace the source of these words in Jabès' writings.

in that most moving line in all of Shakespeare's works—the five repeated “nevers.” The past is past and for Lear there is only the vision of the future—the call to *see* and to look (as with the eyes of van Gogh):

Thou'lt come no more,
 Never, never, never, never, never!
 Pray you, undo this button: thank you, Sir.
Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips,
 Look there, look there! (5.3.306–10)

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Through the unseeing eyes of the aged Lear we see into that abyss, though “we that are young / Shall never see so much, nor live so long.” But yet even we might glimpse the light and catch the word of Total Presence which we can never fully grasp, in the words of the poet Wallace Stevens, those “evanescent symmetries” (97), sacraments of the harmonious whole.

The poet, the musician and the artist are never more needed by the church than today, the church whose religion E.M. Forster describes in *A Passage to India* (1924) as “poor little talkative Christianity.” For the artist, as S.T. Coleridge in “Kubla Khan” (1798) and all the Romantic poets knew, exists on the edge of the utterly sacred and the absolutely profane, speaking the word into silence and seeing in the moment of the transfiguration of darkness into pure light. Thus to dwell poetically on earth is to live in awareness of the godhead, in the face of the Nothing, that, as has been said, looking back to the thought of Martin Heidegger, “grants the possibility of the presence of and the Being of the things that there are” (Edwards 184). Thus to dwell moves finally beyond the formalities of theology and even our practices of worship (though yet it lies at the heart of the liturgy), and it is to risk reason and even, as for van Gogh, life itself. Yet, as art above all is utterly truthful, its poetry is what tries to make music of what occurs in life. Those words are not mine, but were said by the French poet Yves Bonnefoy of his own book of poetry which is beautifully entitled *Ce qui fut sans lumière* (1987), and in the English translation, *In the Shadow's Light*: again, it is the light that shines in the darkness. But now let us turn to a contemporary English poet/priest, David Scott, and his poetry of pure understatement and the silence that heals and enlightens. It is a deliberate move from the vast to the beauty and tragedy of common human experience and the pastoral life of the church. The poem is entitled “Parish Visit:”

Going about something quite different,
 begging quiet entrance
 with nothing in my bag, I land
 on the other side of the red painted step
 hoping things will take effect.

The space in the house is ten months old
and time has not yet filled it up,
nor is the headstone carved.
He died when he was twenty
and she was practised at drawing
him back from the brink
cajoling in spoons of soup.
We make little runs at understanding
as the winter afternoon
lights up the clothes on the rack;
we make so many
the glow in the grate almost
dips below the horizon,
but does not quite go out
It is a timely hint
and I make for the door and the dark yard,
warmed by the tea,
talking about things quite different. (77)

Scott here catches perfectly the profound truth that the words of care embrace a greater silence in which it is profoundly necessary both to speak and not to speak, just as no-one heard God's word in the beginning, that which brought order from chaos. The poet knows, then, that the text, as with the word of pastoral care, is precisely *not* a matter of getting at some hidden meaning, but rather, as has been said by Heidegger, a "letting the unsayable be not said" (qtd. in Clark 118), and a being before the salving mystery. Another form of this is the knowing when to let go, to let being be before God. Perhaps the only moment of pure poetry in the writings of that most intellectual of creatures, C.S. Lewis, is on the final page of his meditation on his loss of his wife to death, *A Grief Observed*, a moment of transcendence in the letting be of the other:

. . . I have come to misunderstand a little less completely what a pure intelligence might be, lean over too far. There is also, whatever it means, the resurrection of the body. We cannot understand. The best is perhaps what we understand least.

Didn't people dispute once whether the final vision of God was more an act of intelligence or of love? That is probably another of the nonsense questions.

How wicked it would be, if we could call the dead back! She said not to me but to the chaplain, "I am at peace with God." She smiled, but not at me . . . (63-64)

We stand over the abyss and even there we can smile. The poet knows what one modern writer, Vladimir Nabokov, has called "the marvel of

consciousness—that sudden window swinging open to a sunlit landscape amid the night of non-being” (qtd. in Danto 159). It is that sunlit landscape which van Gogh sees, and paints for us in the countryside around Saint-Rémy even as he looks into the very night of death. In the Christian church’s liturgy it is found in the moment in the Great Thanksgiving prayer when the earthly congregation loses itself in that multitude of angels and archangels and the whole church past and present, a supremely timeless moment when we, the least of all that company, dare to sing with them the anthem to God’s glory, the Sanctus even as we stand in the edge of death itself—“on the night when he was given up to death.” Thus we shift, in a moment, from all eternity to the supreme moment of non-being in human time when Christ was given up to death.

Time and again the poet and the artist risk everything to bring us to the brink of the mystery, inviting us to see the unseeable and to hear the word of silence as it speaks. At their most daring artists have suffered as have the greatest of saints—St. John of the Cross, Meister Eckhart and all those others abused and despised even by the church itself. Artists and those whom genius touches traditionally are not necessarily the best of people, though they may be, and even the sublime John Milton was once described as “a true poet and of the Devil’s party without knowing it.” But that remark is made in a work by his fellow poet William Blake entitled *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (c. 1790–93)—and that perhaps is the true and sacred vocation of the poet, to see into the abyss in which finally heaven and hell are one and reconciled in the peace which passes all understanding. It is very hard for the church to look into this abyss, for, except at moments of pure transcendence in its liturgy, it is still too preoccupied with fighting the battles against sin, the world and the devil, and, perhaps, sometimes less worthy battles as well. That is why it is too often easy to criticize the artist for impracticality, for failing to be useful, for, it might be said, the artist is the one who fully believes, who dares, impossibly, to shed doubt, though perhaps at the cost of everything. Thus the greatest artists are deeply Christocentric and one with the creator God in their daring to be even within the creative and visionary logos—why van Gogh and Beethoven and Turner each suffered their own passions of suffering in their lives. For, in the words of the so-called “Father of Canadian Poetry,” Charles Sangster (1822–93), writing of Moses, perhaps the greatest of all poets, in his poem entitled “Faith,” for who knows if, after all, Moses did not write the first books of the Bible as Turner thought:

Faith is the Christian’s Pisgah. Here he stands
 Enthroned above the world; and with the eye
 Of full belief looks through the smiling sky

Into the Future, where the Sacred Lands
Of Promise . . . are brought nigh,
And he beholds their beauty . . . (qtd. in Landow 204)

But Moses himself, of course, never entered the Promised Land of Canaan—he merely beheld it from Pisgah heights: and so with the artist. In the eighteenth century poetry was described as the handmaid of religion, but nothing could be further from the truth: for creativity cannot be commissioned nor can the reproduction of appearances do finally more than replicate our theological shortcomings. Over fifty years ago, in a bid for the freedom of religious art from the institutions of religion, the American theologian Paul Tillich remarked that the “sentimental, beautifying naturalism. . . the feeble drawing, the poverty of vision, the petty historicity of our church-sponsored art is not simply unendurable, but *incredible*. . . it calls for iconoclasm.”³ Now, of course, iconoclasm has ever been within the Christian church which in its early days took over the Jewish prohibition of idolatry, summed up in the Second Commandment, more or less wholesale. And the fear of idolatry propelled the Protestant reformation of the image into images as little more than illustrations of the already proclaimed theology of the church and thus towards that poverty of vision of which Tillich speaks. The fact is that there never has been in the church what the British theologian Jeremy Begbie has called a direct and ultimately harmonious relationship between its theology and the arts, but rather one which is far more edgy and more problematic, the vision of the latter always seeing further, both more darkly and more brightly than ever the necessary compulsions of the former.

But this is not to say that theology and the arts do not have much in common: both the theologian and the artist have a calling to the *prophetic*; they have a responsibility to the *sacramental*; they understand the fundamental importance of the art of *memory*. But the theologian, it may be, carries a responsibility from which the artist is free—though his or hers may be, in the end, the far darker tragedy. For Moses, after the vision of the Pisgah height, was buried in an unknown grave in the wilderness, and did not go on to bear the burdens of settlement in the Promised Land. At the conclusion of Arnold Schoenberg’s unfinished opera *Moses und Aron* (1932), Moses, the supreme architect of the vision of the people, finally sinks to the ground in despair in silence: “O Wort, du Wort, das mir fehlt!” (“O word, thou word, that I lack!”). But in his silence he saw the land for the people to which he had led them, and the world was all before them though nothing could be taken for granted. Our version of the Pisgah vi-

³ See further, Paul Tillich, “Art and Ultimate Reality,” 219–35.

sion which challenges all inherited speech and image is perhaps described by the late Peter Fuller in his book *Images of God* when he writes:

Even if we have ceased to believe in God, nature can provide [the symbolic order] for us; the answer lies not in the reproduction of appearances, but in an *imaginative perception* of natural form, in which its particularities are not denied, but grasped and transfigured. (16)

This shift from the “reproduction of appearances” to “imaginative perception” is both challenging and deeply uncomfortable, especially for those of us who would prefer to keep up appearances and pretend that things are as they always have been, and that, perhaps, the repetition of ancient formularies in religion and the imposition of established disciplines will suffice to counter the flow of change.

But neither the poet nor the artist of themselves can make things better. As the First World War poet Wilfred Owen wrote: “All a poet can do today is warn. That is why the true Poets must be truthful” (31). The poet reminds us that ugliness will continue to exist despite art and despite the church, but poetry never allows us to install the unreasoning of ugliness in our institutions. In the words of the art critic Donald Kuspit,

. . . artistic form mediates ugliness without socially and metaphysically reifying it, which allows it to give birth to beauty. Art in fact strips ugliness of the social and metaphysical overlay that obscures and sanitizes its insanity. Art does not rationalize ingrained irrationality but lets it stand forth in all its inevitability. (186)

In what then can we believe if the irrational is inevitable? But, does this not precisely describe the scandal of the cross, a supreme moment in art beyond all reason in all its ugliness and beauty, supremely a new space for exploration, a space indeed for the sacred, placing us where now, perhaps, we even have little wish to be and where we have no language to interpret the mystery. Then, in this space as in all art, we have to do the impossible.

In the creative power of the word and in the power of images and music the impossible does not cease to be impossible, but can present itself to us in all its impossibility in moments of supreme beauty, or awe and terror; in moments of searing consciousness in a world in which we too often prefer to close our eyes and not to see the ugly and disfigured. But finally in that marvel of consciousness—that sudden window swinging open to a sunlight landscape amid the night of nonbeing—we are prompted to dare to be what we have not been in a radical re-vision of the ethical, the aesthetic and finally the spiritual. The poet and the artist draw us to be-

hold that which God saw in the beginning, and saw that it was good—the beauty in the particularities of the commonplace, the world in a grain of sand, the ever new glories of the natural and the sublime. Both Velasquez and van Gogh drew us in their art to contemplate the profound beauty in the faces of the aged and worn, in the everyday things which we take for granted—domestic pots, shoes, the common stuff of daily life—prompting us afresh to contemplate therein the questions of most profound importance.

Throughout the ages of Christianity in the West the Christian church has been one of the greatest of patrons of the arts. But it has also too often patronized the artist whose greatest works have frequently been too edgy, too difficult, too impossible for the church to tolerate. In his last portraits van Gogh stares into an abyss which even he cannot bear, suffering for his art even to death. It is an abyss known also to the figures of Saul and Bathsheba in Rembrandt's art. The greatest art, poetry and music is that which lets the unsayable be unsaid, so that silence may speak and we hear, glimpse the terrible beauty of the God whom we dare to worship in the Sanctus. In the icons of Christ's face in the Eastern Church it has been said that the image of Christ is empty of His presence and full of His absence:

What could be more faithful to the Incarnation (it has been remarked), which the Greek Fathers also called *kenosis*, evacuation or emptying? To incarnate. To empty. When the Word became flesh, divinity did not fill up with matter nor did matter fill up with divinity. (Baudinet 151)

And so finally we return to where we began—with the Word which links matter with divinity.

Allow me to end on a personal note. Some years ago I undertook a solitary retreat for some time in the deserts of West Texas. It was there, in a very faint manner, that I knew for the first time what it is to be at once solitary and to be in communion with all being, and to begin to hear the words of silence, and see in nature the images beyond image which lie at the heart of all true art. I saw, perhaps, so faintly, with the eyes of van Gogh and heard the music in the silence of Beethoven: impossible, fearful—but it is possible if we take care enough. Then I realized what the monk Thomas Merton meant when he wrote these words, and I thought of van Gogh: "It is only when the solitary dies and goes to heaven that he sees clearly that this possibility was already actualized in his life and he did not know it for his solitude consisted above all in the 'possible' possession of God and of nothing else but God, in pure hope." (Merton 242–43). To see this possibility in the world of light, and to see that it is

good, is the deepest work of the artist and the artist's gift to the church in a moment suspended in time, in equilibrium, in all things: "One with One, one from One, one in One and one in One in all eternity. Amen" (Eckhart 108).

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