

Beyond Sight: The Artist and Mystic Intuition

Michael A. Conway

December 2014

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If you visit *Tate-Britain* and stand in the main foyer and look down the long corridor to your right, you will see in the distance on the farthest wall the extraordinary triptych *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* by Francis Bacon from 1944. Bacon, of Irish Protestant descent, was a non-believer, who had, however, great admiration for the ‘dedication’ of believers despite, what he termed, ‘living by a total falseness’!¹ As you turn left, your vision is, then, rather quickly interrupted by a very powerful and massive sculpture from Jacob Epstein, *Jacob and the Angel* from 1940/41. The mysterious, haunting, background story from Genesis (32:22-32), paradigmatic, perhaps, for all spiritual struggle with power, tells of Jacob’s confrontation with an unknown stranger, *who refuses to reveal his name*. He does, however, concede to give a blessing, in response to which Jacob declares: ‘I have seen God face to face; yet, my life has been spared.’ Richard Harries surmises that this sculpture from Epstein ‘clearly reflects something of the struggle of his own life, both artistic and domestic, out of which he was to wrest a blessing.’² Perhaps, Epstein, himself, was of Jewish background, but he regularly depicted, in various media, Christian themes and subjects. But back to the *Tate*: formally, the space is entirely secular; the supporting language and narratives, however, at least in part, are religious. How is one to read and make sense of such juxtapositions in contemporary culture? What, if anything, has art to do with religion beyond mere mimetic re-presentation, and does religion have something to offer the arts beyond the bare thematic? In his introduction to the Reith Lectures from 1982 Denis Donoghue observes: ‘A work of art is in some sense mysterious; but I see no evidence, in contemporary criticism that the mystery is acknowledged or respected.’³ It is through this lens that I wish to explore the arts in this short paper.

HEIDEGGER AND THE WORK OF ART

In his penetrating study, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Martin Heidegger argues that visual art, in particular, and the wider spectrum of the arts, in general, are a distinct mode of Being. A depth of reality comes to light in them that does not emerge in any other place or in any other way. A work of art is not just about beauty, for Heidegger, but it is in itself ‘an event of truth’

1 See David Sylvester, *The Brutality of Fact: Interviews with Francis Bacon*, repr. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999), 134.

2 Richard Harries, *The Image of Christ in Modern Art* (London: Ashgate, 2013), 19.

3 Denis Donoghue, *The Arts without Mystery: The 1982 Reith Lectures in Expanded Form* (London: BBC, 1983), 7-8.

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(*ein Geschehen der Wahrheit*).⁴ And because of this, the arts enjoy a certain self-sufficiency (*Selbstgenügsamkeit*), which means that they are not *essentially* subservient to any other interest.⁵ Neither, however, are they completely independent of the multiple spheres of human activity, and, therefore, have something essential to contribute to our very being-in-this-world.

For Heidegger, the work of art is not simply a thing (*ein Ding*); it is, rather, that which reveals an Other (*es offenbart Anderes*) and opens up a world (*eine Welt aufstellen*).⁶ Thus he can claim that ‘truth happens’ in Van Gogh’s painting of peasant’s boots. This is not a matter of correct depiction or portrayal, but, rather, it is a matter of a revelation: ‘in the work the truth is at work.’⁷ At the heart of being as a whole, there is a place from which it is illuminated – there is a luminosity – and it is art that has a privileged access to this place.⁸

THE ARTIST AND ‘MYSTIC INTUITION’

If one accepts this analysis from Heidegger, it would seem that art thrives in the penumbra beyond the achievement of conceptual and reflective knowledge. The fundamental intuition is that there is more, and the artist strives to express this in whatever medium might facilitate this expression. The artist Norman Adams, for example, comments interestingly that in painting or drawing one is ‘constantly, imaginatively, trying to pick up things beyond one’s actual comprehension.’⁹ There is something of this in Nietzsche’s more critical comment: ‘We have art in order not to die of truth.’¹⁰ Against what Charles Taylor calls closed world structures, the artist and the arts (not unlike religion, it must be said) stand for ways of exploring life that reflect an openness to an otherness that disrupts our attempts at closure. It is this openness that haunts artistic activity. There is always an horizon and a striving towards it; the artist endeavours to grasp, only to let go again, preoccupied by the very inability to reach a destination that has no name, that remains remote, and that describes something that is closer to nothing than to anything. This is what I will call the artist’s mystic intuition. It is the recognition that art and the artist are acutely aware of an abyss, which is the origin of possibility, of creativity, of hope, and of the future. The artist is never entirely at home in the present, nor, for that matter, in the past.

You can see something of this in many artists as they near the completion of a work of art. To begin a painting or a poem or a play is relatively easy; knowing when it is finished is an entirely different matter. Jean Paul Sartre observes that ‘even if it appears to others as definitive, the created object appears to us to be always in deferral: we can always change this line, that shade, this word; in this way *it is never imposed*.’¹¹ Because the created object itself is never imposed on the artist, it cannot be definitely marked as complete or accomplished. Lucien Freud, who took months with a single painting and who often re-painted whole sections of a canvas (or even added to a canvas), admitted that the completion of

4 Martin Heidegger, ‘Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes,’ in *Holzwege* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1950), 7-68. An updated version of the text was published separately by Reclam in 1960, and I will quote from this later edition (see Martin Heidegger, *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*, mit einer Einführung von Hans-Georg Gadamer [Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 1960], 30).

5 For the idea of the self-sufficiency of the work of art, see *ibid.*, 22. Of course, their potential and their achievement may be brought to bear (or even exploited) in other domains of human activity.

6 *Ibid.*, 10, 40.

7 *Ibid.*, 54.

8 It is, Heidegger adds, like the nothing (*das Nichts*) that surrounds every being. See *ibid.*, 51.

9 See Nicholas Usherwood, *Norman Adams – Memorial Exhibition: Paintings and Watercolours 1952-2000* (Harrogate: 108 Fine Art, 2006), 37.

10 ‘Wir haben die Kunst, damit wir nicht an der Wahrheit zugrunde gehn’ (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Der Wille zur Macht: Versuch einer Umwertung aller Werte*, Sämtliche Werke [Stuttgart: Kröner, 1964], no. 822, 554, emphasis original).

11 See Jean Paul Sartre, *Qu’est-ce que la littérature* (Paris: Gallimard 1948), 46-47.

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any work is the most nerve-racking time for him: 'I worry,' he once confessed, 'in case it isn't really finished.'¹² Although he claimed to know intuitively when a painting is completed (when, as he says himself, he can't do any more to it), Francis Bacon confesses, nonetheless, to sending sometimes a painting out into the world too early.¹³ Leonardo da Vinci is credited with saying that 'art is never finished, only abandoned.' And the poet, Paul Valéry, reiterates this comment for poetry: 'a poem is never finished, only abandoned.'¹⁴ To some degree, there is always a 'letting go' in the 'work' of the artist; and yet, ironically, the moment that a painting is viewed, a poem read, a play performed, something other is born, and even the work itself has changed. This, perhaps, explains why Heidegger insists that even the preservers (*die Bewahrenden*) of the work of art are essential to its being.¹⁵

THE ARTS AND THE UNKNOWN

What is clear is that something of the mystery at the heart of the creative process escapes in the object or the product of art and cannot be definitively made visible. For the artist, the creating is always more powerful than that which has been created. And so enormous is the intuition that accompanies the creative act that the artist cannot but continue to strive to deliver something of the richness of this intuition in yet another creative act. Not to do so is, in a sense, to choose death over life. This might explain Picasso's observation that 'What one does is what counts, and not what one had the intention of doing.'¹⁶ This compulsion to create is not, however, a work that is in vain; nor need it be frustrating or tragic. Something of the unknown is revealed in the work of art in line with artistic expectation.

Essentially, art is not produced for any reason outside of the activity itself of artistic endeavour. Jacques Maritain, reflecting in the Thomist tradition, points out that art is not made in view of moral or religious elevation, but according to the demands and the proper good of art itself.¹⁷ It has its own integrity and its own dignity. The artist's mystic intuition may, indeed, be understood in a religious way, but it is not necessarily religious. On the one hand, for example, Marc Chagall observes:

It is wrong of certain people to be afraid of the word 'mysticism,' giving it as they do a too religiously orthodox colour. One should strip this term of its obsolete, musty exterior. It should be taken in its high, pure, un-blemished form. without mysticism would a single great painting, a single great poem, or even a single great social movement exist in the world? Does not every individual or social organism fade, does it not die, if deprived of the strength of mysticism, of feeling, of reason?¹⁸

And, on the other hand, the Welsh poet R.S. Thomas writes in his poem *Via Negativa*:

Why no! I never thought other than
That God is that great absence

12 See <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/3668104/Lucian-Freud-marathon-man.html> (accessed May 4, 2009).

13 Sylvester, *The Brutality of Fact*, 196.

14 'Un poème n'est jamais fini, seulement abandonné.' Both of these aphorisms are attributed widely to Da Vinci and Valéry respectively, although there is no extant documentation to support the attributions directly.

15 Heidegger, 'Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes,' 67-68.

16 See Pablo Picasso, 'Statement to Marius de Zayas (1923),' in *Makers of the Western Tradition: Portraits from History*, ed. J. Kelley Sowards, 4th ed. (New York: St. Martin's, 1987), 303.

17 See, for example, Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontier of Poetry* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), 73.

18 A short essay on mysticism, typed on blue stationery from Réserve Miramar in Cannes, France and signed by Marc Chagall in black crayon (see also <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bvMs7iFHjUY>, accessed October 18, 2014).

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In our lives, the empty silence
Within, the place where we go
Seeking, not in hope to
Arrive or find. He keeps the interstices
In our knowledge, the darkness
Between the stars. His are the echoes
We follow, the footprints he has just
Left. We put our hands in
His side hoping to find
It warm. We look at people
And places as though he had looked
At them, too; but miss the reflection.¹⁹

There is, therefore, for the arts a knowing that, strictly speaking, is a not-knowing, a *via negativa*; a knowing that all that has been said and done, expressed and captured, painted, played, performed, acted, or built has not yet exhausted the depths even of human creativity. There is something, and, perhaps, someone, waiting in the darkness that beckons to create again. To read this simply in religious terms as a kind of spirituality is to misunderstand the very complexity of the human condition, and it is to risk resolving in a pious fashion something that cannot be acquired in such an easy and cheap way – in the sense of Bonhoeffer’s ‘cheap grace’ in *The Cost of Discipleship*. It is, also, to misunderstand the potential and the power of artistic expression, which has, in itself, an infinite capacity in exploring the human condition. Hegel, to some degree, misses this point, in seeing the arts, and in particular the visual arts, as ultimately limited and bypassed by religion and philosophy.²⁰ Against his position, it could, easily, be argued that the arts have a creative integrity that resists any denigration or sublimation in the name of a higher register. And so, Charles Taylor glosses Hegel’s discussion with the telling remark: ‘Far from taking a second place in the spiritual life of modern man, art has taken over from religion in the lives of many of our contemporaries, in the sense that it is for them the highest expression of what is of ultimate importance, and/or the highest activity of man.’²¹ For the contemporary mind and heart, the atmosphere in an art gallery is often – and this has been remarked upon – akin to that of the cathedral: we look and we gaze in the expectation of recognizing something about ourselves, in the desire to be liberated, and, ultimately, in the hope of being redeemed. The language of spirituality is, for many, far too gossamer to grasp the density, dynamism, and depth of what it is to-be-in-this-world.

THE ARTS, MYSTICISM, AND RELIGION

In an important sense, the arts are secular and must remain secular.²² They are an expression and an exploration of something of what is deepest in the human condition. They may, *and perhaps must*, point to an otherness, to a beyond, to a darkness, to something transcendent, or to an unknown; but the mystery will always remain in its integrity. The artist ‘sees’ –in the sense of seer – more clearly an absence, an emptiness, a mystic site, which she knows, without knowing, to be the nothingness that might just be everything: a source, a well, an energy, a power, and, perhaps, a God.

It is, I think, evident that the artist does not in any fashion give us access to the divine, to the transcendent, to the almighty; rather, he or she opens for us avenues of possibility in our personal and communal journey *into* the divine. The mystic intuition of the artist points to, but does not deliver, the mystic site inhabited by, among others, Eckhart, Tauler, Ruysbroek, Teresa of Avila, and, most significantly, in terms of an engagement with the arts, John of the Cross. In a way, not dissimilar to that of the mystic saint, the

19 R. S. Thomas, *Collected Poems: 1945-1990* (London: Phoenix, 1999), 220.

20 See, for example, Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: CUP, 1975), 465-79.

21 Taylor, *Hegel*, 479.

22 Such ratification of their autonomy does not, however, preclude the recognition of faith that they have their ultimate origin in God.

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artist is drawn by darkness – in the sense of being called forth and shaped. And, ultimately, there is no end to this drawing because – if I may quote from U2’s latest album – ‘there is no end to love.’²³

It does, I think, need to be acknowledged that there is nothing exclusive about this mystic site. To some degree all of us have already arrived there – through the incarnation – so that the question is not that of journey and arrival, but rather that of freely engaging this mystic site or reserving the right to keep it at a distance. Such distance, however, is itself beholden to divine generosity. God’s infinite goodness allows us not only to reject him, but also even not to recognize him. We can look the icon in the eye and insist in seeing only a phantom or a forgery.

We can, I think, explore a little further and suggest that because of the intensity of this ‘discovery,’ namely, of this emptiness, of this darkness, of this mystic site, of this hole in the heart that has to do with love, the artist intensifies the ‘unknown’ at the centre of the human condition. Part of the delight of poetry is the ‘unsaid’ in the saying: the hint, the hurt, and the hope. I’m told that some people burst into tears before a Rothko and don’t even know why!²⁴ Art is revelatory without revealing, it is intrusive without intruding, it is mystic without giving us any access to the *mysterion* (in St. Paul’s sense). It exposes for us, and to us, the depths of our vulnerability, without being able to heal definitively the very wound to which it points. In what is its most terrifying and challenging gesture, art confronts us with, and in, our mortality. Francis Bacon was acutely aware of this (and had no desire, whatsoever, to transpose it into a religious setting):

But then, perhaps, I have a feeling of mortality all the time. Because, if life excites you, its opposite, like a shadow, death, must excite you. Perhaps not excite you, but you are aware of it in the same way as you are aware of life, you’re aware of it like the turn of a coin between life and death. And I’m very aware of that about people, and about myself too, after all. I’m surprised when I wake up in the morning.²⁵

It is important to recognize that one should not turn the arts into religion or, for that matter, instrumentalize them for religious purposes. They have an integrity in themselves that ought to be fully respected. Our personal engagement with any work of art may – and for many often does – facilitate a deep spirituality and, indeed, the very life of religious faith, but the arts in themselves as being-present-in-the-world can welcome, mirror, and instigate a multiplicity of meanings and a range of parallel perspectives. Such is the power of art.

In a privileged way, it is, of course, true that the arts have always nourished the human religious instinct. Through the mystic intuition (that I am highlighting today) they help ratify and illuminate the otherness at the core of being. And for its part – but it is a discussion for another day – religion offers the artist a name and a language to approach the unknown at the heart of all creative activity.²⁶

I would like to finish with a poem, entitled *Art* from Herman Melville (better known as the author of *Moby Dick*):

23 U2, ‘*There is no end to love*’ (song title), Album: *Songs of Innocence* (Island Records, September 9, 2014). At the pinnacle of the mystic life, John of the Cross can write:
O night, that led me, guiding night,
O night far sweeter than the dawn;
O night, that did so then unite
The lover with his Beloved,
Transforming lover in Beloved.

24 ‘The people who weep before my paintings are having the same religious experience that I had when I painted them’ (See Simon Schama, *Power of Art: Rothko*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WWvbjI2Z5YM>, accessed October 18, 2014).

25 Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon*, 78.

26 See, for example, John Paul II, ‘Letter of his Holiness Pope John Paul II to Artists,’ http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_23041999_artists_en.html, accessed October 18, 2014.

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In placid hours well pleased we dream
Of many a brave unbodied scheme.
But form to lend, pulsed life create,
What unlike things must meet and mate;
A flame to melt – a wind to freeze;
Sad patience – joyous energies;
Humility – yet pride and scorn;
Instinct and study; love and hate;
Audacity – reverence. These must mate,
And fuse with Jacob's mystic heart,
To wrestle with the angel – Art.²⁷

²⁷ Herman Melville, 'Art' (<http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/eng372/melart.htm>, accessed October 18, 2014).