

The Artist and God

DOROTHY DONNELLY

A man is an animal with a sun inside him. That there is such an *anima* in the animal is clear from evidence, early and late. The cave paintings stand witness to its creative force. Plotinus recognized as the birthright of all an inner 'sunlike' eye; Sir Thomas Browne said that 'we live by an invisible sun within us;' and Picasso has claimed that he has a sun in his belly.

Artists strikingly testify to this signet of humanity because as 'makers' they leave in the world enduring traces of its radiant power. Man is a creative creature. (I use the term, to 'create', as it is commonly applied to the arts.) As artist he is privileged to bring new things into existence, endowing substance with singular and personal form. 'Seen' into existence by one man, they may be seen thereafter by all.

This anonymous gift of sun, outside the strictly animal order and indicating an extra dimension, generates questions. Where did it come from? Why is it there?

Speculation, unless of the philosophical variety that provides in itself the pleasure and the end, is not fashionable. The present moment, transient and isolate, provides sufficient stuff to engage all our attention. The artist concentrates on the empirical problem of seeing that the fabulous goose in his possession continues to lay the golden eggs. Though he may suffer 'the disinclination of the sophisticated mind' (de Lubac) to consider the source of his gift, the question is not extraneous. It is a question of life and death, like 'Who am I?' and 'What am I doing here?' By pressure of necessity it asks itself at unexpected moments. It has the vitality of a hydra; cut off one head and it confronts you with another.

The artist, said Henry James, lives intensely in the 'luxurious immersion' of his richly 'inhabited consciousness;' he finds in the exercise of the 'creative passion . . . the highest of human fortunes, the rarest boon of the gods . . .' Li Po mentions creative flashes in which he would 'experience the joys of ten whole days.' Brancusi said there were days of which he would not give fifteen minutes for anything under heaven.

These intensities of sensibility breed their own dangers. Orpheus

strikes his lyre, and in his enthusiasm believes that all things, people, trees, oceans, stars, are divine. For the artist the lapse into pantheism is an occupational hazard. To float on such a cosmic sea of divinity costs nothing and is soothing to the ego. But a belief in God which commits one to institutional religion with its dogmas and rites involves obligations which the artist is likely to resent as infringements of his independence. Mistaking sensibility for intellect, and authority in art for authority in other areas, he frequently disposes unaided of religious and moral problems, and dispenses himself from inconvenient restrictions and obligations.

The question of where man's inner sun comes from can be shunned but not eliminated. Yeats when an old man said, 'Whether we will or no we must ask the ancient questions: Is there reality anywhere? Is there a God? Is there a Soul . . .?'

That elementary divining-rod which is part of our human equipment supplies us with the rudiments of an answer: the sun inside must come from somewhere, from the me or the not-me. I cannot have generated it unless I generated myself. Did my father endow me with it? Who was Sophocles' father, and where could he have got such a first magnitude sun to bestow? Where did Dante get his? or Bach? Are these luminaries all accidents of atoms? Is the answer in biology? in environment?

If that inner sun is given, it implies a giver, and a gift which can itself 'create' indicates a giver of absolute power. The nature of the things which this gift can bring into existence implies the nature of the giver. The sculptor, the painter, the musician, and the poet give to stone and colour and sound and words new natures through new forms. A Power which can bestow the power to create radiantly personal entities must be not only a Power but a Person.

Gifts, according to an inner impulse of justice in us, require to be acknowledged. The plumbline, another tool in man's natural equipment, restless until it equilibrates itself at the stable point of truth, disposes him to give credit where credit is due. Primitives, acknowledging their debt of life and its gifts made thankofferings of beer, bread, and barley to the god who gives. Pindar, in almost every Ode, reminded men of their obligations to acknowledge the gifts of the gods. The Hebrews were insistent that man 'ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name.'

A gift is a link between the giver and the receiver and in the completed mutual act some deep-rooted, elemental pact is sealed. Among

the desert people the gift of bread and salt, mutually partaken of, dissolved enmities and bound to mutual aid; the gift of the ring cements the pledge of fidelity. Between the Giver and the 'gifted', there exists a bond of personal relationship.

The realization of this person to Person relationship is the root of religion, in which man expresses his inescapable dependence in the high and free act of adoration. 'Religion,' said Von Hügel, 'is adoration.'

Feelings, impressions, and sentiments do not constitute religion's prime matter. The poet, Juan Ramon Jiménez, said: 'I consider poetry as profoundly religious, that immanent religion without an absolute credo which I have always professed.' He 'believed' that man 'can attain a certain degree of divinity . . . by mystically, immanently participating in that beauty which itself is immanent in the universe.' For Jiménez his feelings were his authority.

But feelings are as unreliable as the weather; in fact the weather may have a great deal to do with them. They are shifting sands, and quite insufficient as foundations of action. 'I have no feeling, no taste for institutional religion,' the artist may say. He may just as well say, 'I have no taste for illness or old age.' Feelings provide necessary flavour, but not nutriment. A man must be fed by the Real; he can be nourished only when he has submitted to the Truth his own fanciful inclinations. But, he may ask, 'What is Truth?'

We are not provided with coercive proofs of the Truth, that is, of God, but we are equipped for truth's recognition, and we move in a world full of imperishable clues.

One such clue is man's ingrained need to worship. It is so strong that if he refuses to worship God he ends by worshipping a golden calf, Nature, Money, Art, Science, the State, or Man himself. The existence of such a need is inexplicable unless there exists, and is discoverable, one proper Object of worship.

Is it not a clue that we sometimes suffer feelings of exile here in our own home-world? or that we should experience flashes of light which reveal glimpses of something beyond our natural reach - tastes of perfection, presentiments of impinging paradises? 'By the way, speaking of happiness, why is it that even when we are enjoying, say, some good music, or a beautiful evening, or a conversation with people we like - why does it all seem more a hint of some vast happiness somewhere else . . .?' (Turgenev).

Animal is limited to animal, adequate to its mode of existence, but man sometimes exceeds his natural limits, experiencing desires beyond

human power to fulfil. Who but God can give the desire of God? Who by his natural resources could foresee that no matter how far knowledge and desire advance us we never attain the limit, that there are realities surpassing any longing of which we are capable, in a word that 'God is greater than our heart'? Scrutinize the homely biological egg of our origin as we will, we shall see nothing in it able to generate such concepts.

Such clues, oblique, tenuous, unaccented, unisistent, are nevertheless as real as the filament that invisibly suspends the infant spider in mid-air.

As to that question, immemorially and everywhere asked, 'Is there a God?' is not its answer in its inception? is it not there, implicit and germinal, concealed and intrinsic? If there were no God, how, and to what purpose, could one conceive such a question?

That derided human creation, the anthropomorphic god, likewise yields its own explanation. Unless a man were made in a God's image, with a God's likeness already in him, how could it occur to him to make a god in a man's image? He is fashioning the only *image* of God humanly possible. The anthropomorphic god is an illuminating misconception possible only to a theomorph.

Though man is certainly an animal straight out of protoplasm like the hyena or the vulture, he alone has a sun inside him which he values more than his eyes or his hands. For the artist it can offer rewards exciting enough to betray him into being satisfied with them alone. He has been warned against 'trusting only in the senses,' against being so carried away by beauty and art as to account himself a god. (Wisdom).

On the other hand, the forms of beauty which preoccupy him put into his grasp one of the most attractive and impressive clues to the portrait of the prime Designer. Even ugliness, stalking beauty like a shadow, is a negative clue, recognized as a fall from the form which it obliquely projects.

Creative power, isolated from charity, acts like a drug, producing hallucinations of independence and self-determination, and ending in the caricature of the uncommitted and 'superior' man. Malraux has added his touch to the puffed-up image of the usurper: the artist's hand, he says, 'is vibrant with one of the loftiest of the secret yet compelling testimonies to the power and glory of being Man' - the anthropocentric version of the original: '*Thine* is the power and the glory.'

He who makes himself sole authority for his principles of action is stranded on the small island of his narrow and fallible conclusions.

Unless a man is to be the dupe of his limitations there must be some Polestar of absolute reference from which he takes his bearings, moving on his own path but never out of his orbit. Reason cannot create such an absolute point of reference but, moving by verifiable and retraceable steps, it can make discoveries which it has the power of recognizing as true.

This is illustrated in a highly symbolic paragraph by the botanist, Reginald Farrer: 'I knew that somewhere in that direction lived Monte Viso; and that it was eminent. Yet the mountain was only a name for me, and for some time I could not believe that what I saw up there in the sky could really be mere soil and rock. However, as sunset drew on, the clouds floated away like glowing rags, and left the furnace of the west in unbroken clearness. And still that needle of amethyst hung solid in high heaven. I was forced to believe, and, in the believing, to recognize the Seen Mountain.'

By evidence in the world and in the 'little worlds' that men create, the mind can arrive at the discovery of a personal God; then, that a personal God must surely provide some means of contact between himself and those creatures to whom he has given the power to know him; and that therefore the existence of some revelation is a reasonable expectation. Though reason cannot discover the content, it has the power to recognize, by the superior claims of internal and historical evidence, which is the impeccable canon of revelation.

The artist is a man, hence rational, hence not exempt from the demands and recognitions of reason. So he cannot, pleading exception of sensibility or taste or talents, create his own laws.

What, then, becomes of freedom which the artist insists on as the very oxygen of the creative life? What freedom does he mean? Total? uncurbed by convention, morality, or reason? no subjection to anyone - *except himself*? That he could never lose, because he never had it. It is no more than a myth, and the wish for it an aberration, out of correspondence with reality. If he refers to the freedom in accord with his rational nature and central to the human personality, then there is no diminution.

The artist, prizing what is original and individual, and temperamentally averse to clichés of behaviour and imposed restrictions of thought or action, is apt to conclude that religion and freedom are contradictory and incompatible. He may rationalize himself out of conforming to religion to avoid its too stringent moral requirements, or, in an attitude not altogether free of snobbishness, turn away,

misled by the narrowness, naivete, sentimentalism, ugliness, ignorance, cupidity, bad taste, and bigotry which sometimes disfigures religion and religious practice. Actually what scandalizes him is the stupidity of 'fallen man', a chronic state in which we are all included, tramp, beatnik, and bourgeois. He forgets that all of us, banker, merchant, poet, thief, are the mentally retarded sons of Adam.

The flotsam which litters the surface is easy enough to see. It takes a deeper look to discern the solid rock, the real substance, which is the adamant foundation. Some men never penetrate to the core, the pure light. Some fall at the stumbling-block of evil and suffering - grim, terrible, and fearful - interpreting what they see in altogether inadequate terms of personal feeling and comprehension.

These, the real malnourished, starve their way through the world. They confine their attention to the trivia or the human failures instead of concentrating on the great irrevocables. 'Credo in unum Deum.' 'In the beginning was the Word.' Such are the irreversibles, the super-evolutionary truths by which we live or die.

There is an excitement and glamour about the 'rebel' lacking to the steady, stable, traditional person. The explosives of refusal fascinate, like fireworks, and the destroyer, the iconoclast, the shocker, rushes onto the scene with more fire than the quiet, patient man. The exotic has an advantage over the familiar whose dignity and beauty are little noticed or understood. Perhaps that is why Ezra Pound extolled Confucian counsels such as: a man should always look his heart in the eye, and ignored Christian ones: 'If thy eye be single, thy whole body shall be lightsome,' or, 'let your speech be: Yea, yea; No, no.'

Obedience is not a stylish word. It suggests servility, subjugation, immaturity. Only children or slaves 'obey'. Commonly overlooked is the fact that obedience, even though required of the creature as creature, can be a free act. I am free to obey. Nevertheless it is difficult. Lucifer failed in it. And Eve. And Adam. The current of self resists snags of restriction. But the pearl is stimulated into its beautiful existence by grits and irritations; the crystal comes into its own matchless form only under great pressure. Obedience, of creature to Creator, the response to pressures of necessity and of love with a free 'yes', does not diminish but enlarges freedom, lifting the whole of life onto a plane of choice.

The flower of freedom is the free act. Work as a free act produces the fruit on the tree of a man's life. The work of the artist is art.

But what has art to do with religion? 'Heaven is the heaven of the Lord, but the earth he has given to men' - to discover; 'to dress it, and

to keep it.' 'Make it yours,' God said. In the slow process of discovery men discover themselves in relation to him. In this relation is their *raison d'être*.

Religion does not, necessarily, change either the matter or the form of the artist's art, though the art may well differ - by finer consciousness of life and deeper human applicability - from that of someone who is merely expressing 'himself'.

An artist is a worker working in the world. Only the naive will expect or demand as 'Christian art', works in which the subject matter is always and explicitly religious. The subject matter will depend on the artist - on what he likes, what he sees, and what he makes of it. God saw that all the things he had made were good. So all 'matter' must be good subject matter. 'Everything, everything in this world has a sacred meaning,' said Degas. The artist transmutes his raw material - anything in the world - by bestowing on it 'harmonious and unforgettable shape.' (Valéry).

The artist's work is unique in that it can kindle light and make it blaze again when the opacities of existence have almost extinguished it. Art is not a luxury; it is necessary nutriment. It comforts, said Petrarch, refreshing me with food . . . that has the sacred power to revive . . . and drink that is as nectar for its sweetness.' It is a spur to the spirit. 'Beauty,' said Dostoevski, 'will save the world.'

Banish art and lights would go out all over the cosmic polis that men have been building from the beginning of time. It would become the desolated city described by the prophet, where the lyre sounds 'no more,' the colours flake away, the lamps are extinguished.

How we rejoice when some luminous fragment - a few lines of a lyric, a bit of shimmering glass, a little ivory head - is salvaged from the past and added to the treasures that are scattered through the world. That God should have created good things only to let them perish seems to us a monstrous contradiction. But he has said that in the end there will be a new heaven and a new earth. We may believe, too, that man's 'creations' will not perish but will have their place in the ambit of their makers when all *things* are made new. 'Behold, I make all things new.'

Paul Henry, in an essay on the humanism of St Paul, writes that St Paul clearly means to say (Rom. 8, 19-22) that things themselves, the stars, the flowers, the earth, will participate, according to their kind, but transformed, in the universality of salvation. The human person, complete, flesh and spirit, will be restored to life and along with

man, the whole world embellished by man's work, his science, letters, and arts.

Man, the animal with the sun inside him, has not been created to be a 'cooling planet', but to move in saecula saeculorum in the orbit of the Sun and to 'shine as the stars in heaven'. And - as it is solemnly declared in the Mass for the dead - his works will follow him.

Catholic Attitudes about War¹

F. H. DRINKWATER

Three priests talking: an imaginary conversation

JAMES. Well, here we meet again. Quite a lot has happened since our last conversation on nuclear war.

PHILIP. One thing has *not* happened, thank God. Nobody has actually used a nuclear bomb on human beings.

JAMES. Not yet. Not intentionally. Though they seem to have come pretty near doing it by misunderstanding once or twice, don't they?

JUDE. The only thing I'm really interested in is the Catholic teaching on the subject. It does seem to be clarifying itself a bit, don't you think?

PHILIP. Oh, do you think so?

JUDE. Well, take our own country. All the responsible people - theologians, prelates, editors and so on - now seem to be saying that indiscriminate killing must always be unlawful. A few years ago they were saying, or letting it be said, that the indiscriminate killing of a few million people is quite all right in a good enough cause; all the bomber need do is to fix his intention on some military target in the area. Now they condemn that as wicked mass-slaughter, a crime against God. That *is* a real advance, surely?

JAMES. Ah, we needn't worry. It's just these theologians all over. They give out solemn statements of principle like that, as a sop to the traditional teaching, but they wouldn't dream of making any practical application of it that would 'disturb' anybody's

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