

Book Review

Art Comes for the Archbishop

Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love

By Rowan Williams

Morehouse Publishing, 2005.

“NOTHING is more precious than a certain sacred wounding, and *that* kind of imperfection through which infinity wounds the finite.” The modern French philosopher Jacques Maritain made this observation in his breathtaking *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, the 1952 Mellon Lectures at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. Maritain repeatedly returned to this quality of art, its limping gait between two realms, “Just as Jacob limped after his struggle with the Angel.” But it is in the space opened up by what seems an imperfection in strictly finite terms that we glimpse what we might not otherwise have expected: “Things are not only what they are. They ceaselessly pass beyond themselves, and give more than they have.” Devotees of art and poetry sense this, even if most of us could never express it with quite so much grace and force.

One person who can, however, has drawn some luminous lessons from this now more than half-century old text. When you are looking for someone to shed light on the puzzles of aesthetic experience, the Archbishop of Canterbury is probably not the first name that comes to mind. But Rowan Williams, the current occupant of that post, has long been laboring in this and several other vineyards to good

effect. *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love* is Williams’s own series of Clark Lectures given in early 2005 at Cambridge University. In them, he revisits Maritain, underscoring, developing, and adding to that already rich set of theoretical reflections. Williams then goes on to show how they help us in understanding the successes and failures of artists such as Eric Gill, David Jones, and Flannery O’Connor among others, as well as the whole question of God and the artist.

It is bracing to see the Archbishop of Canterbury plunge directly into the theoretical thicket of Catholic neo-scholasticism, which he rightly calls a term “not calculated to fire the imagination.” But the modern philosophers who tried to mine the tradition of Aristotelianism that passed through Thomas Aquinas and other great medieval thinkers, believing that it might shed some light on modern issues, deserve our attention because they produced results. In genial British fashion, Williams is clearly less interested in the scholastic underpinnings than the empirical evidence they help us explore. Maritain is the ideal subject for this operation because in addition to being a Thomist he had, along with his wife Raissa, a wide circle of friends among modernist artists for roughly the first half of the twentieth century. That intimate acquaintance with recent works and the people who produced them gave Maritain an unusual perspective from which to philosophize.

Two principles in particular, according to Williams, emerged from this interplay, which he later applies in his own way to the more recent artists he has chosen to study. First, Maritain focuses attention on the integrity of the work of art as something

required by the “Christian philosophical standpoint.” Messages, ideologies, even religious uplift are foreign to art from this perspective. If those things are desirable in certain contexts, they must come from some source other than art. Art by its very nature must be well made, and the radiance that comes from the well-made object, connected as it is to depths of being, should not be confused with any practical purpose. Second, the ordinariness of the materials art must use almost magically points to those depths and reminds us of the hidden richness of all the objects of the world. So the habit of art “aims not at the good of humanity but at the good of what is made.” The notion of this good as *splendor formae* (“the splendor of form”), a term most modern readers encounter via Joyce’s Stephen Daedalus, thus also makes common cause with the postmodern notion of what is *not* present as perhaps the most important thing about the work. The absence may suggest several hidden meanings of closely related things or deep metaphysical connections of cosmic scope.

Art is thus not the Promethean exercise of genius, or emotion, or intellect that is wholly in possession of itself, as many artists themselves have believed since the Renaissance. Williams chooses to look at modern artists who benefited from the kind of analysis he outlines and who rejected what Eric Gill called the “art nonsense” that usually hovers around artistic circles. Some benefited by distorting the picture themselves. Gill himself, for example, in Williams’s view, fled to the opposite extreme and came very close to obliterating the distinction between a craftsman in service to a particular community and an artist who produces work without any immediate practical aim—except to create objects that, from their own inner necessity, may convey to communities who understand the materials with which the artist has

to work (for writers, this includes the language of a given period) that “things are more than they are.”

There is, then, in all real art a certain gratuitousness, akin to the gratuitousness of God in making a world that is not necessary except insofar as it proceeds from love. At the same time, created objects cannot help betraying that excess of love. David Jones reacted to the overemphasis on craft in Gill, a personal friend, by talking of art in sacramental, even incarnational terms, while holding on to the idea of art as making “things” that both had learned from Maritain. For Jones, rich possibilities existed for new forms of contemporary art in Celtic sensibilities, which he described as “a certain affection for the intimate creatureliness of things—a care for, and appreciation of the particular genius of places, men, trees, animals, and yet withal a pervading sense of metamorphosis and mutability. That trees are men walking. That words ‘bind and loose’ material things.” Williams deftly guides the reader through the ways Jones embodied those notions in his landscape paintings of the 1920s and 1930s; Jones referred to such operations somewhat metaphorically as related to the priest at the altar engaged in “making things other.”

Williams’s treatment of Flannery O’Connor is equally illuminating, beginning with the appreciation of the difference it makes that she was a cradle Catholic who remained in the Catholic Church, not a convert like Gill or Jones. For her, Catholicity was not something she achieved, and in her work it shows up as a faithfulness to everything that she has “seen,” good and bad, beautiful and grotesque, all as part of a world God created and loved enough to die for as it is: “Doing justice to the visible world is reflecting the love of God for it.” But O’Connor was not going back to some pre-modern notion of art as reflecting

“reality” in this belief. Her stories, too, are made objects, and faithfulness in her art consists in letting her characters go where they, not the author, naturally lead. Williams offers some brilliant aperçus on this material. He says of the discomfort that we experience in reading the novel *The Violent Bear It Away*, “Part of the unease is that the laconic narrative unsettles any clarity about the emotional perspective we ought to be adopting,” a result of O’Connor’s belief in letting the characters be themselves. At the same time, it is part of O’Connor’s genius that her characters show a hunger for something that leads them beyond themselves, even if only potentially.

There is one shortcoming in Williams’s brief text. He has many original points to make in the course of his overarching argument. Of necessity, he sometimes slips into unclear and abstract writing that stalls progress. Maritain occasionally fell into similar abstractions, but he included after every chapter pages of “Texts without Comment” and numerous plates showing the artworks under discussion. The texts and images did not always bear a clear relation to Maritain’s analysis, but the simple fact that they were there alongside some intricate arguments let the reader go back and forth while still sensitized to unusual dimensions of art by Maritain’s skill. Perhaps Williams or his publishers did not want to make this small book into a large one. But to say, for example, that “much has been written” about David Jones’s “Y Cyfarchiad i Fair” (“The Annunciation”) and to begin a discussion of the details of “one of his best-known images” without actually setting the picture in front of the reader may leave even most David Jones fans

without a compass. This is particularly frustrating because when Williams quotes texts, he shows himself to have a very discriminating eye, as in this from Jones’s “*A,a,a, Domine Deus*”:

I have been on my guard not to condemn the unfamiliar. / For it is easy to miss Him at the turn of a civilization.... I have said to the perfected steel, be my sister and for the glassy towers I thought I felt some beginnings of His creature, but *A,a,a, Domine Deus*.

It is clear that this Archbishop of Canterbury is not merely doing his duty, but takes these matters quite personally.

In the final chapter, Williams turns to the question of whether all art necessarily has some relationship to religion, and he considers this by invoking a surprising variety of figures, Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche, George Steiner, Susan Sontag, and Hans Urs von Balthasar among them. Perhaps most surprising, he uses Douglas Hofstadter and Daniel Dennett’s suggestive book *The Mind’s Eye* to reinforce the notion that to be human means to be in a network of not immediately perceptible meanings that makes art possible in the first place. His conclusions display a proper Anglican modesty: it would be foolish to claim that art is a way to prove the existence of God, but it does lead us close to realms of what is usually called the sacred. In the end, though, art carries us toward a love of objects, and Williams concludes without reticence: “being in love is normally thought to mean delighting in the simple actuality of the other.”

—Reviewed by Robert Royal

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