

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

THE WORTH OF ART

The worth of art stands in no need of a special tribute from us, but this makes any tribute we offer all the more delightful to render. Let us also acknowledge, at the outset, that the contemporary widespread appreciation and enjoyment of works of fine art is reason enough to establish the worth of art. In all known civilization, in fact, the arts have had their appeal; they have been valued for their own sake as well as for the role they have played in achieving the good human life. Some arts, it may be granted, are devoted largely to entertainment, and while such a pleasurable good is by no means wholly to be discounted in man's aim to live humanly, nevertheless our concern is with the arts which, though also entertaining, offer us more than the pleasure of a passing recreation. Throughout the ages these more serious arts, if this is the way to designate them, have enriched our vision and understanding of ourselves, especially in our distinctively human condition, and in so doing the arts take their place, along with religion, philosophy and science, as a major influence in the fashioning of man as he now appears in the twentieth century of the Christian era. Art is universally esteemed, perhaps now more than ever. We may indeed say that no human being is unmoved by some fine art in one of its forms. We are inescapably artistic animals.

It behooves us as philosophers, therefore, to recognize the abiding value of art and to strive for a working alliance between philosophers and artists. We can put aside the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry of which Plato spoke and which is periodically revived by ill tempered partisans. Like most quarrels, it rests on misunderstandings, and this is not the occasion to dwell on the sources of the misunderstandings. Let us ignore the philosophers who are barren of poetic insight and the poets who are devoid of philosophical comprehension and reflect, rather, on the great worth of art for man, a reflection and an appraisal that is, first of all, philosophical in character.

This question of the worth of art is primarily one dealing with

the end of art, its final cause or purpose. Art, like any human endeavor, has intrinsic and extrinsic ends. The two most evident extrinsic ends are the didactic and moral aims which works of art often serve. While a didactic aim plays a relatively insignificant part in artistic creation and enjoyment, the moral end of inducing states of character and attitudes with regard to what is good or evil is frequently an important ingredient in the very delight and appreciation of a work of art.¹ Nevertheless, the moral end is extrinsic in the sense that the work of art as such is not ordered properly or directly to possessing moral virtue; the inducement to delight in moral good characterizes great art without the work of art itself being moral in its own nature. If, therefore, we are to assess the primary worth of art, our interest must center on the intrinsic ends of art. Here it seems to me important to recognize that fine art has a twofold end. One end is the arousal and release of the emotions. This is an end which artistic enjoyment properly serves, and indeed is the initial cause which prompts us to turn to art; and yet it is inseparably bound up with the other intrinsic end, a distinctive type of contemplation, and delight in such contemplation, which we gain in our understanding and appreciation of art. In not one, but both of these ends, is the primary worth of art realized.

The arousal and release of the emotions by means of art brings us face to face with the notion of catharsis, as originally developed by Aristotle.² The question has been raised as to whether catharsis, for Aristotle, means a purgation or a purification of the emotions. Catharsis as a purgation suggests the medical origin of the term, which implies relief from the emotions or a ridding of certain emotional impurities; as a purification, it suggests rather the ordering of the movement of passion so

¹ "The ethical function of art, therefore, is never in opposition to the purely artistic end; on the contrary, it is best achieved when the artistic end has been best accomplished, for it is only a further consequence of the powers of art." Elder Olson, "An Outline of Poetic Theory," in *Critics and Criticism*, edited by R. S. Crane (Chicago, 1957), p. 23.

² Aristotle's treatment is brief. Except for a passing reference in Chapter 17 in the *Poetics*, the term "catharsis" appears only in the definition of tragedy in Chapter 6. However, the notion of it is elaborated in Chapter 13 and the opening lines of Chapter 14. In a different, though related, context catharsis is treated more extensively in the *Politics*, Book VIII, with reference to music.

as to produce a better psychological and even moral state. A complete understanding of catharsis, in my judgment, encompasses both of these meanings; moreover, both meanings are necessary for understanding the cathartic effect of art and why catharsis is such a necessary ingredient in the enjoyment of art.³

To appreciate this role which catharsis plays, let us first note that the human emotions are naturally ordered to be aroused and subsequently released. Moreover, it is good that the emotions are aroused and resolved in us, good in proportion as they realize the direction of reason in their activity. The role of reason is needed, therefore, to direct emotional life so that we do not have too much nor, for that matter, too little emotional activity in our human life. At the same time, the emotions in us have a life of their own and are capable of going against the direction of reason as well as being in conformity with it. There is a sense in which it is true to say that there is a natural contrariety between sense and reason which can be overcome only by a congenial rule of reason as it induces order in the movement of passion. Hence human beings normally have emotional tension to a greater or lesser degree, and such tension develops in proportion as the emotions go against what we conceive to be the ordering of reason.

Herein lies the basis for the needed cathartic effect as it is proportionately realized in the enjoyment of art. Art presupposes emotional life going on in man, more or less in conformity with reason and yet with a certain continuing contrariety giving rise to some inevitable tension and even disorder. The experience of enjoying good art permits us to surmount a good deal of such tension and at the same time to attain a finer emotional experience

³ Some critics and commentators on Aristotle tend to suppose that one meaning rejects the other. For example, Gerald Else maintains that in the context of the *Poetics* catharsis is "a process, not an end-result, and a process operated by the poet through his 'structure of events.'" He therefore argues: "If the *pathematon* are incidents of actions rather than emotions, then 'catharsis' must mean purification of some kind, not purgation . . ." (*Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument*, Cambridge, 1957), pp. 230-21. But purgation and purification are not opposed; similarly, *pathematon* need not be contrasted disjunctively with structural events and emotions since these, too, are not mutually opposed. The "structural events" of the plot in a tragedy give rise to the artistic emotional response of those witnessing the drama.

than we normally have in our daily life. We therefore turn to the world of art to seek a degree of emotional satisfaction and ultimate repose that we often lack. The drama, for example, presents to us an imagined world of human action and passion wherein our emotions can be aroused and resolved skillfully and delightfully. Music invokes a tonal representation of the flow of human passion that is finer and more ordered than the movement of passion normally is in us. And thus it is that catharsis purges and purifies: it purges the tensions and disorders permeating so much of our emotional life, and it purifies the movement of the passions so that, in the words of Aristotle, "all are in a manner purged and their souls lightened and delighted."⁴

The great appeal of art for us lies initially in this need and desire for cathartic effect and its artistic resolution. Moreover, this function is indispensable for achieving a richness of mind appropriate for a full appreciation of the work of art, and for knowledge generally. Helen Highet, writing as Helen MacInnes, expresses this point succinctly in one of her suspense masterpieces: ". . . why did the Greeks believe so much in tragedy? They must have, or they couldn't have written such good ones. Didn't they believe that men must have a periodical house cleaning in their minds and emotions? Wasn't that why they gave men drama which roused their pity and fear? . . . Pity and fear together make a powerful purge for any mind. A public which won't look at or listen to tragedy develops a sluggish mind. That's what the ancient Greek knew. And the richness of their minds has never been equaled."⁵

However, though truly an end of art, the cathartic effect also serves to dispose us for contemplation and its ensuing delight.⁶ Now we have to recognize, of course, that there are various kinds of contemplation, and hence there are various meanings

⁴ *Politics* VIII, 7 (1342a 14).

⁵ *While We Still Live* (A Crest Reprint. Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, Inc. 1964), p. 109.

⁶ "The work of fine art, after arousing the emotions of interest and sympathy, goes on to bring them to a repose in the beautiful object so that our vision becomes crystal clear. The emotions are said to be 'purified' because they now aid us to contemplate, rather than hinder us." Benedict Ashley, O.P., *The Arts of Learning and Communication* (Dubuque, Iowa, 1958), p. 279.

of contemplation. The Beatific Vision, for example, is a contemplation; it is the highest type, and we should keep it in mind as the measure of all other contemplation. We shall find it significant to recall that the Beatific Vision has been described as a "seeing of God face to face." Artistic contemplation will be an interesting image of this, for in works of art we see ourselves face to face.

In general, any contemplation is a resting of the mind in the knowledge it attains of some object. The truths we attain in philosophy or in any science, precisely as we grasp them, are contemplative in character. Philosophical contemplation, for example, is directed principally to the grasping of truths about man, the universe and God, arrived at as conclusions terminating a reasoning process. Through such contemplation we know what is universal as abstracted from the singular; our knowledge is primarily discursive rather than intuitive; it is abstract rather than concrete. Though originating in sense knowledge, philosophical contemplation departs as much as possible from what we know through the senses, and we would like to disengage concepts from sense images to the extent that we can.

Artistic contemplation is a distinct kind of knowledge. So far as it can be summarized in general,⁷ it is a knowledge of what need not be rather than of what is necessarily, although a work of art has its self-contained inevitability; it is an imaginative reconstruction of some aspect of reality and human life we are familiar with; it is more intuitive than discursive; it bears on the singular but in such a way that something universal is realized in it; and it is both concrete and abstract. It is the sort of knowledge that is especially appropriate for the human way of knowing: an intimate union of sense and intellect, image and concept, imagination and understanding. Therein lies the source of the special delight which accompanies this sort of contemplation, a delight which springs from both sense and intellectual appetite. There is the initial sense delight which accompanies

⁷ Contemplation is realized proportionately in the different arts, and the common, though analogous, meaning of the word can be gathered from the way we appreciate and understand a play, a motion picture, a poem, a painting, a work of sculpture, and a musical composition. I have developed more fully the notion of such contemplation in "Art and Contemplation," *The Thomist*, XXII, (1959), 443-59.

the grasp of sense qualities of color, tone, line and sound. There is a proper intellectual delight which follows upon a grasping of the order which shapes the rhythmic, melodic and harmonic structure of a musical composition, the visual elements in a painting, or the dramatic elements of a play. Most of all, however, such delight arises from seeing in a work of art a creative representation more expressly formed and, as to us, more intelligible than some original referent is. Thus the dramatic action of the play or motion picture is more intelligible and more significant than human action ordinarily is; the sound of music is better formed and more discerning than the sound of the human voice as normally expressive of passion. Artistic contemplation, constantly fluctuating between the creative representation and some original, never exhausts the significance set in motion by the initial experience of the work of art. The unterminating character of this contemplation is the principal reason we enjoy beholding or hearing over and over again the same work, for new significance and vitality always emerge in enduring works of art, tantalizing the mind with promises of hidden meaning waiting to be uncovered.

Since contemplation of any kind is directed to knowing what is true in some way, we need to consider briefly what truth is in an artistic or poetic sense.⁸ In the ordinary sense of the term, we speak of truth as a conforming of the mind to what is. Poetic truth, a derived meaning, is the conforming of the human mind to a universe interpreted and reconstructed according to what human understanding grasps as artistically plausible. A passing remark by Aristotle is helpful for understanding this meaning of truth. To those who say that a poetic work of art is open to criticism if it is not true to fact, Aristotle replies, in the name of Sophocles, that poets should draw men as they "ought to be."⁹ This artistic *ought to be* is the artist's imaginative understanding of what could or should be, as distinct from what *de facto* is. It is an ideal reconstruction (in the artistic sense of the term) by means of a creative image. By means of it, the

⁸ Artistic truth, like artistic contemplation, will not only differ from truth in a philosophical sense (as artistic contemplation differs from philosophical contemplation) but will also be realized proportionately in the different fine arts.

⁹ *Poetics* 25, (1460b 33).

artist expresses his impassioned understanding of how things, events, human action and passion should be realized. By sharing his vision, we as beholders come to understand human action and passion more intelligibly and more convincingly than our ordinary experience of reality reveals. Such art is not mere entertainment.

Poetic truth is not mere fiction; it is, rather, a semblance of truth. We share with the artist the familiar world of our experience. The artist presents to us a new and fresh look at the familiar world. He produces an image of this world, or some significant aspect of it, as it might be, with all the imaginative latitude this phrase suggests. Poetic truth thus consists in seeing a work of art as an intelligible and revealing interpretation of what could be the case but is not actually so. In appreciating a good work of art, where every element has its significance, we escape the obscurity and seeming incoherence we find often in our daily lives. The artistic vision we enjoy humanizes our understanding of reality by making it over into our own image. Poetic truth, therefore, is a truth about reality as subject to human creative interpretation, not a truth about reality itself. Such truth and knowledge qualifies as a fit object for artistic contemplation. It was Sir Herbert Read who remarked that "the real function of art is to express feeling and transmit understanding."¹⁰ I take this to be equivalent to speaking about the cathartic and contemplative ends of fine art, neither of which can be absent if artistic enjoyment is to be fully realized. The worth of art is realized primarily in such catharsis and understanding or, to ally them as they should be, in cathartic understanding.

Upon such worth of art rests the great appeal fine art has for man. For the enjoyment of fine art and the sort of knowledge we gain in appreciating the work of art is thoroughly human.

¹⁰ *Meaning of Art* (London, 1931), p. 189. The whole relevant passage reads: "I would say that the function of art is not to transmit *feeling* so that others may experience the same *feeling*. That is only the function of the crudest forms of art—'programme music,' melodrama, sentimental fiction and the like. The real function of art is to express *feeling* and transmit *understanding*. That is what the Greeks so perfectly realized and that is what, I think, Aristotle meant when he said that the purpose of drama was to purge our emotions. We come to the work of art already charged with emotional complexes; we find in the genuine work of art, not an excitation of these emotions, but peace, repose, equanimity."

The work of art can be rightly regarded as an appropriate image of human nature, for we find realized in it that intimate union of sense and intellectual knowing as well as sense and intellectual delight which represents so aptly the union of body and soul, flesh and spirit, passion and understanding as found in man himself. Art mirrors man rather than nature. It is this distinctively human aspect of art that accounts for the great influence art exerts over man. The scientist, the philosopher and the theologian all make notable contributions to the culture of our times, but the writers of novels, plays and films, the actors who move us by their representation—to mention only the poetic artists—mold our attitudes and beliefs more effectively and convincingly. The reason why human belief, attitude and conduct is affected so much by art reduces to this: the worth of art is simply the worth of man himself seen in his creative expressions, and this is what we are contemplating when we enjoy art. The work of art, in the last analysis, is human action and passion rendered intelligible as shaped by the beauty of artistic form, and the experiencing of this is delightfully rewarding to man.

It follows from all the foregoing that the fine arts are primarily ordered to the good of the intellect, to a delightful contemplation of truth *as represented*. This view opposes, to some extent, a reading of Aristotle's *Poetics* which would make catharsis itself the primary end of artistic enjoyment. It is a view which opposes also a prevailing trend in aesthetics which sees art as ordered primarily to the practical, rather than the speculative, intellect. Such a view places the emphasis on art as pure creativity, on creative knowledge rather than contemplation as the distinctive type of knowing attained in fine art. This view, philosophically rooted in various ways in Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, stresses the dominance of the virtues of the practical intellect at the expense of the speculative intellect; it tends to put human creativity on a par with the work of God as creator. The position I am urging, while acknowledging fully the cathartic aspect of art and its creative dimension, directs both to the contemplative end of art. It also relates art more directly to the whole human cultural endeavor, for by means of the artistic image, at once representative and creative, we are enabled to grasp order in material creation, and this in turn

serves to aid the intellect in its effort to comprehend what it can of the world as we inhabit it.

Hence it also follows that the good of contemplation as achieved in the appreciation of a work of art, eminently worth while though it is, is not the unqualified good of man, nor is artistic contemplation the highest kind. Though art has its own end, and in this respect can be sought and loved for its own sake, yet we can never forget that it is still referrable to more ultimate ends, otherwise we fall into the common error of idolizing art, which means idolizing ourselves in our own works. The contemplation we attain of real objects, as we achieve it in theology, philosophy and the various sciences, is higher, though not always as satisfying. Such contemplation is more worth while both in itself and because such knowledge leads us to the source of all knowledge and art as well, God, even though our knowledge of Him remains imperfect for us now.

During the Middle Ages, Richard of St. Victor distinguished six grades of contemplation.¹¹ The first grade is according to the imagination only, whereby we grasp merely what is revealed by the senses. The second consists of what is in the imagination according to reason; we thus consider sensible things according to a certain order and disposition. The third consists in what is in reason according to the imagination, and we thus discern what is sensible insofar as it is intelligible. The fourth grade of contemplation is found in reason according to reason; though we are dependent upon what is perceived, we attain knowledge of what is proper to reason itself. The fifth grade attains a consideration of what is above reason, and thus we know from divine revelation what reason alone cannot comprehend. Finally, we shall reach a consideration of what is above reason and, even in a sense, opposed to reason: the mysteries concerning the divine life itself. In this the Beatific Vision primarily consists.

Through this gradation, human contemplation rises to the eventual contemplation of God Himself, and thus the Beatific Vision is the term, the summation of all contemplation. It is for this we finally know and love whatever we love. Let us be clear, therefore, that the Beatific Vision is not an aesthetic vision or

¹¹ St. Thomas, with reference to Richard of St. Victor, summarizes these grades of contemplation in *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 180, a. 4.

contemplation nor, for that matter, is it philosophical contemplation. Philosophical contemplation would be found in the fourth grade, the grasping of what is in reason according to reason while artistic contemplation, it appears, is in the grade below, the grasping of what is intelligible by contemplating imaginatively the sensible and the visible. Let us acknowledge that it is a lower grade but, at the same time, a very human way of contemplating.

It would therefore be wrong, in a sense monstrous, to confuse the Beatific Vision, even though our awareness of it now is only dim, with aesthetic contemplation and delight. They differ wholly. It is only in the Beatific Vision that we have complete and perfect joy in the truth, intuitively grasped without even the intermediary of a concept, and this experience is strictly supernatural. Nevertheless, nothing prevents our seeing in the delightful contemplation of a work of art an image of the Beatific Vision—no more than this, but no less either. In this way, and as a distinct grade of contemplation, art initiates the spirit of contemplation. It moves us to know the true and love the good by means of beauty; in so doing, it also initiates the delight in us that is consummated only in a truth and a good and a beauty that are not of our own making. It is in this perspective that we appreciate the ultimate worth of art, worthy of itself but worthy also as moving us on to know and love God. In this venture art and philosophy join hands. And at the same time we can still appreciate the work of art on its own terms and heartily endorse Homer when he says:

All men owe honor to the poets—honor and awe, for they are dearest to the Muse who puts upon their lips the ways of life.¹²

JOHN A. OESTERLE

President

*University of Notre Dame
Notre Dame, Indiana*

¹² *The Odyssey of Homer*, Book VIII, translated by Robert Fitzgerald (New York, 1963), p. 139.