

determine than the difference between a robot and a living thing, but it is possible to determine it.

I hope I have succeeded in showing that, however difficult it may be to do it rightly, we can judge other people, because only when we realize that it *can* be done do we understand the *command* not to do it. We then realize that slander and detraction are not eliminated by the employment of such qualifications as ‘. . . of course I’m not impugning his motives’ or ‘No doubt he is innocent before God, but . . .’ any more than they are eliminated by the prefix ‘It seems to me that . . .’. There are certain clearly defined situations in which we have to pass moral judgment upon other men, and in which it would be wrong not to do so; outside such situations it is forbidden not by logicians but by God.



ART AND THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION¹

HUGH DINWIDDY

ART is the servant of beauty and beauty is God, ‘Beauty’s self and Beauty’s giver’, and it is only when beauty is seen by the artist and by those who study his work as in no way reflecting God that art becomes an end in itself. We know, of course, the fame of the Church as patron of the Arts; yet her direct influence upon the kind of painting done began to slip late in the fifteenth century.

‘In the minds of many’, writes Berensen, ‘painting, although a very familiar art, was too much connected with solemn religious rites and with state ceremonies to be used at once for ends of personal pleasure. So landscape had to slide in under the patronage of St Jerome, while romantic biblical episodes, like the “Finding of Moses”, or the “Judgment of Solomon”, gave an excuse for

¹ The text of a paper read at the Newman Association Summer School, 1956.

genre, and the portrait crept in under the mantle of a patron saint.'

It is, then, at the time of the Renaissance that the passion for beauty, natural grace and personal pleasure in art began to run counter to man's awareness of God, but it was not until the Romantic Movement that the rift was finally made, and beauty became isolated—a visionary idea to be courted by the yearnings and idealisms and terrors that were then released. Melancholy 'dwells with Beauty . . . and it is a Beauty that must die'. There is indeed a Keatsian sadness pervading the air that may find a way back to God through the questioning human heart, but which does not do so through the art that is the expression of its deepest feeling. For it is the particular function of art within the Christian tradition, or within any religious tradition, to express the presence of God in his manifold qualities, to portray, as Oswald Siren writes when describing certain Buddha and Bodhisattva postures, 'the consciousness or symbolic indications of the successive stages by which the human nature approaches the divine'. Yet it is for the most part true to say that, from the Romantic movement onwards, it has been the moralist who has looked after man's approaches to the divine, and the artist who has served beauty, and they have met in friendship on but rare occasions.

To speak, then, of a tradition in Christian art is to speak of an art which accepts the transcendent truth that God is beauty. And this is its contemplative centre, the inner life of its activity, the richness of all its symbolism and its imagery. And, as Thomas Merton has written recently:

'May my bones burn and ravens eat my flesh
If I forget thee, contemplation!'

And this live centre of the tradition which we are to consider is common to the art of all religions. Yet we find today that art, which is an intellectual activity, has been codified, museumized, and in the modern sense, 'intellectualized'. The centre has gone, the contemplative spirit out of which this activity can spring, and we find that it is the museum and *not* the Church which is the patron of the arts.

'The museum is a confrontation, a parade', writes André Malraux. 'It is a source of pleasure and a source of historical information. The Far-Easterner wants something that the

museum denies him: the right of private contemplation; and the Chinaman feels about the museum as we would feel about a non-stop concert in which innumerable pieces followed each other without a break. By the mere fact that works of art are thus set up against each other, all art is intellectualized. . . . Painting is now associated less with contemplation or pleasure than with its underlying implications.'

'Put down on the wall what has been seen in contemplation', says an Indian text of instruction to painters; and the 'what', necessarily a symbol or representative image, or more frequently a blend of the two, has to be met by the onlooker in the spirit in which it was made. And of traditional religious art, whether it be theological, liturgical, or narrative in inspiration, it may be said that, in so far as it moves away from the symbolic, so does it move away from the centre of its own tradition. The movement begins by being one towards the literal, and is made in the name of 'realism' and, perhaps, in the name of the freedom of expression of the artist. In contrast, the artist who is centred in a religious tradition of making beautiful things is one who bows before his transcendent subject in humility. He is not a man in search of a subject. His problem is to reconcile perfection of observation with perfection of the symbol. It can be claimed, as Frithjof Shum claims, that 'Christian art unduly despised nature and thus no doubt also despised a certain aspect of intelligence, and so the naturalism of late Gothic statuary, and particularly of Renaissance statuary, was able to appear superior in the eyes of men who no longer understood the spiritual value of such art as that of Autun, or Vezelay or Moissac. In principle Christian art could have combined with its wholly symbolic spirituality a deeper observation of nature.'

We can speak of the attempt to observe nature more deeply as a 'release of the image', the representing image. And the transition from the art of the symbol to that of the image in this context is always an exciting and expansive one in the soul of the artist. In its extreme form this excitement (and the consequent romantic fear and deflation) is expressed by Lord Byron as Childe Harold gazes upon the Alps:

'All that expands the spirit, yet appals,
Gather around these summits, as to show
How Earth may pierce to Heaven, yet leave vain man below.'

This upward thrust of glory that the image of mountains carried for him, or, in contrast to Byron, that the heaven-piercing nobility of man carried for Michelangelo, is the power that extends the art of the image to the furthest bound of possibility within the tradition that says God is Beauty.

'Good painting', writes Michelangelo, 'is nothing but a copy of the perfections of God and a recollection of his painting: it is a music and a melody which only intellect can understand, and that with difficulty. . . .' And so by an image here we mean 'a copy of the perfection of God', and sometimes the copy has the mark of a 'real presence' in it, and it is the desire to create a reality within the image, more or less profound, that leads the artist on the one hand to the gentle and transcendent glory of Michelangelo's David and on the other to the timid, shiny, sentimental literalness of the proverbial pious art of our day.

The more literal and the more conscientiously 'simple' and unintellectual an art is, the more woolly, unliturgical and, as we have said, the more unsymbolic does it become. And the story of Christian art since the Renaissance is the story of the triumph and decline of the art of the 'image', at first blended with symbolic religious meaning, and of the corresponding inability of the artist and his critics and educated persons in general to think metaphysically and, hence, to understand a symbol. Rather pathetically now, artists, starved of the traditional symbols, create their own, and this is a sign of a need for a return to an attitude towards making that has been dissipated, in which feelings have drooped into sentimental attitudes for lack of true contemplative refreshment.

It is interesting to note instances of the art of symbol and the art of the image standing side by side. In the early Buddhist caves of India the central object of worship is the 'stupa', or relic monument, an ancient emblem signifying the Nirvana of Buddha, where, perhaps, his ashes were enshrined, and which is a kind of cenotaph. This was replaced in importance by the image of the Buddha, in about the second century B.C., in which his many perfections are symbolized. Both stupa and image stand near each other in the Bagh Caves of Central India. It is hardly necessary to say that the need felt for the creation of the Buddha image was the cause of a great change in Indian art, an expansion was called for in the artist, and this is comparable with the growth

of Christian art from that of the symbol to the free creation of images. And here we may, with profit, quote Fr Gervase Mathew, O.P.:

'Few terms have been so misused as that of "Christian" art', for as he shows in an all too brief article in *Dominican Studies* of 1953, the symbols of the fish, the supper, the wine, the bread, the grapes, the sheep and the shepherd and many more besides are pre-Christian symbols and were preserved and taken up into Christianity with new meaning. It is important to note, for instance, what he writes about the 'fish' symbol:

'It has become apparent that the fish symbol is no more specifically Christian than the representation of the symposion. It, too, is a commonplace in the third-century imperial hellenistic art. It may have been often used purely as a decorative motif, yet often, especially in popular art, it seems to possess some esoteric religious association—the fish god in Lower Egypt or the sacred fish of Atargatis or Anaitis. Still there remains sufficient literary and epigraphic evidence to prove that when used by Christians it was given a new meaning. As often in Christian symbolism this meaning would seem to be doubled. The fish was Christ, the very word was his sign manual (Jesus Christ Son of God Saviour), but it was also the baptized Christian soul, called to be an *alter Christus*, swimming in the baptismal waters of the new life, dying when removed from it, the *pisciculus* of Tertullian. Perhaps, too, by association it could represent the fact and mystery of baptism. Possibly all these ideas were present together each with its own setting. The fish that is Christ is partaken of by the brotherhood on earth at their common meal and the souls of the Christian dead partake of the great fish at the table of their Father. The great fish comes to the banquet of the faithful with the bread and wine; the great fish bears on his back the bread of life. The fish that is the Christian soul bears with it the bread of life as it swims in the waters of baptism. Yet again perhaps the fish and the bread linked together are baptism and the eucharist linked together, two parts of the central Christian Mystery.'

And just as landscape, genre and portrait painting, as we have seen, 'slid in' under the sleeve of the already acceptable religious painting at the Renaissance, so did art with Christian purpose slide in, in the early centuries, under the guise of pre-Christian symbols and pre-Christian taste. The principle of adoption is the

controlling principle in this and it continues to be so—though it has not always been used—whenever the Christian tradition meets and mingles with another religious tradition in the process of conversion. The mission of the Church is not to destroy but to fulfil. The urbane Sacheverell Sitwell bears witness to this when writing of the baroque in Mexico:

‘The numerous Church *festas* were organized by the priests in such a way that the Indians found their own simple and childish delight in music, in bright colour and in flowers changed from an amiable weakness into a religious duty. These very safe indulgences were not likely to find a recusant, for returning to the old pagan times meant worship combined with danger, and the fires of the *auto-da-fe* confined themselves in Mexico to those Indians of the far backwoods who were too stupid to seize at the bargain that the Jesuits dangled before their eyes.’

Now ‘the simple and childish delight in music, in bright colour and in flowers’ described here as ‘an amiable weakness’, are lit with symbolic significance for people untainted by the outward trimmings of a culture. And the symbolic in any art, just as myth and any religious rite, is always a revelation of man in his *ultimate* situation, not in his historical situation, and it is because we have become so literal-minded, so localized and so earth-bound and grooved in historical lines of thinking that we cannot accept a symbol in all its seriousness. We are closed to its meaning and left, at the best perhaps, with the bare aesthetics, or with the patronizing words ‘quaint’ or ‘primitive’ upon our lips, or with the pompous assertion that ‘I don’t know anything about art, but I know what I like’, which as Coomaraswamy observes is the same as saying, in a matter of conduct, ‘I do not know what is right, but I know what I like doing’, or, in speculation, as when a man says, ‘I do not know what is true, but I know what I like to think’. Now a symbol in art points to the reality behind it and out of which it springs, it is not the reality itself, it is not, however great as a work of art, self-sufficient in meaning though it says something that cannot be said in any other way. Indeed to treat art as if it were self-sufficient is to deprive it of meaning in that it is severed from participation in God, in the First Cause, which makes all things beautiful. Ten years before his death Michelangelo sent a sonnet to his great admirer, Vasari, in which he points to the danger of the idolizing of art as he had felt it in his

own life:

‘The course of my long life has reached at last,
 In fragile bark o’er a tempestuous sea,
 The common harbour, where must rendered be
 Account of all the actions of the past.
 The impassioned phantasy, that, vague and vast,
 Made art an idol and a king to me,
 Was an illusion, and but vanity
 Were the desires that lured me and harassed.’

This is, perhaps, the ultimate act of contrition that the artist makes consciously. Yet it is always in spite of himself that he works and gives praise; and it is in spite of himself, too, that his work will be misunderstood, treated as an idol, a fetish, even as the tradition in which he has been nurtured and which has imparted much of the accepted meaning to his work fades from the consciousness of his successors.

The feeling then that lies behind outbursts of iconoclasm in the Christian tradition, or which has prevented the making of anthropomorphic images at one time or another in the history of the great religions of the world, is the fear that the image shall come to be more important than the reality of which it is a reflection. ‘Honour is paid not to the colours or the art, but to the prototype’, wrote St Basil in the fourth century. This is a pressure exercised more or less strongly throughout the history of religious art and which would keep art essentially symbolic and which prevents its free, independent, and, therefore, secular development. And we must prepare to face the line of thinking that runs counter to that of Michelangelo, and which can be traced to Dionysius the Areopagite which holds that divine truths should be portrayed in images of a less rather than a more noble type in themselves. . . . ‘For then it is clear’, as St Thomas writes in the *Summa*, following Dionysius, ‘that these things are not literal descriptions of divine truths, which might have been open to doubt had they been expressed under the figure of nobler bodies, especially for those who could think of no thing nobler than bodies.’

Here is the crux of the matter for post-Renaissance man whose interpretation of life has become exclusively humanistic and who may see, in the incarnate representation of Christian or Buddhist tradition, nothing but the man. It was to guard against this

meaningless naturalism in religious painting that the rigid iconography of Byzantine art was formulated. In this, as in all emphatically symbolic art, the onlooker is as one who is transported rather than merely pleased. He contemplates the Holy Family rather than sees an image of it, with all its distracting variety that may, or may not, increase his understanding of the subject. He is one who penetrates to the meaning, and we would probably say, with disapproval, one who pays no conscious attention to the quality of the art that led him there.

‘O ye who have sane intellects mark the doctrine which
conceals itself beneath the veil of the strange verses . . .’

writes Dante in the *Inferno* in an urgent appeal for penetration towards meaning. Yet we are not to disdain the image, but rather to absorb it, and in its rhythmic, musical or colourful penetration of us discover in ourselves the original vision of the artist. We cannot look God, the vision of Beauty, in the face, nor do we, for the most part, engage in imageless thinking. We need the symbol and the image, in other words we need art, simply because we need a veil between us and truth, and though we naturally seek truth we need to be invited, drawn towards it, for we are frail and tire easily in our search. As St Paul writes to the Corinthians: ‘And when I preached to you, I had to approach you as men with natural not with spiritual thoughts. You were little in Christ’s nursery, and I gave you milk not meat; you were not strong enough for it.’ And this is the central principle of patient method of the teaching Church throughout history. It is matched by the responsibility she has to protect the truth entrusted to her. With strong assurance St Thomas writes when considering the use of metaphor in Holy Scripture:

‘The very hiding of truth in figures is useful for the exercise of thoughtful minds, and as a defence against the ridicule of the impious, according to the words, “Give not that which is holy to dogs”.’

This kind of thought is entirely foreign to our own unmetaphorical, free-for-all approach to truth, to what amounts so frequently to the unilluminated fact, or to the inchoate striving after psychological ‘truth’. Indeed, whether or not we understand the truth hidden in figures there is a kind of indifference in all artistic languages, and although they are primarily inviting us to be led to their meaning they are also saying ‘leave me . . .’

We do not need you.'

If, on the other hand, we accept the invitation to explore the meaning of the art of the symbol, we have to remember that it is primarily adapted to contemplative uses. It is an art which knows a truth and which invites participation in it as one who shares a mystery or is confronted by a revelation. It is a consecrated art, and the intention is a theological or a liturgical one. The art of the representing image is primarily an art which evokes a religious emotion and which teaches, perhaps explicitly, in narrative form. It is akin to discursive prayer rather than to contemplation. It is, of course, this art which responds to the need for the development of the human figure in plastic form which began to make itself felt again in Europe in the twelfth century. There had been a flowering of Hellenistic influence in Byzantium in the tenth century to which religious painters had to adapt themselves. And, as Professor Swarzenski observes—

'It remains the great historical achievement of the Byzantine tradition that, for all its venerable age, it transmitted to the West the concept of plastic, organic representation of the human form. The superior values inherent in the Byzantine monumental style, which must have come as a chastening revelation to the powerful drive of emotionalism in Northern arts, suddenly around the year 1140, gained universal recognition. Now for the first time it is possible to speak of a truly international, European style: Sculpture and painting in Sicily, Pisa and Venice, in Burgundy and Salzburg, in England, Northern France and Flanders, seized eagerly upon the same Byzantine forms and compositions, which were probably spread chiefly by means of sketch-books. The close economic and political ties between East and West favoured this development in the arts.'

We know what happened to the anthropomorphic image from then on to the Renaissance. We can speak, in this context, of the release of the image, and we must bear in mind that the history of painting from the twelfth century onwards in Italy up to Raphael was a history of discoveries—of how to paint velvet, of how to foreshorten a figure, of how to use *chiaroscuro*, but behind this is a need to express a new and gradually dawning vision of man.

'Masaccio', writes André Malraux, 'did not make his subjects more life-like than Giotto's because he was anxious to

create an illusion of life, but because the place of man in the world he wished to body forth was not the same as the place of man in Giotto's world. The underlying motives urging him to liberate his figures were the same as those which led Giotto to liberate his figures both from the Gothic dominance and the Byzantine. . . .'

In looking back from the praise that he gives to this increasingly man-centred art, Malraux, like many others, speaks of its release from the 'thrall of Byzantine symbolism'. And this emphasis is in sympathy with the recurring impulse of the artist, so frequently felt, to destroy the art which gave him birth. We cannot, because of this tendency, look for any convenient evolutionary historical process in the development of the art of the Christian tradition, but rather for a rhythmic movement from the stylized to the naturalistic and from the naturalistic to the stylized. Nor is this movement peculiar to the Christian tradition, but is indeed common to all art from the earliest times. Thus we find El Greco stylizing his figures and wresting them violently from their liberation, and today the discipline of aesthetic theory, in place of a religious tradition, draws art back towards abstraction.

Now this new and gradually dawning vision of man has, as its centre, the figure of Christ, not in the symbol of the fish, but in his divine humanity. And, according to whether his divinity or his humanity is stressed so does the artist react to the needs of his time. For the best part of the first twelve centuries the emphasis was on the divinity of Christ. This, as we have seen, resulted in a symbolic art which depended for its comprehension upon a contemplative attitude of mind whose key-notion was rebirth into newness of life and into another world, this world being, as Fr Gervase Mathew writes, 'considered not merely as consecutive on this one but primarily as coincident with it'. Man was more aware of this than of himself, being, shall we say, from a later viewpoint, only potentially a personality. 'The same scene could convey', the same writer continues, 'in symbol, the eucharist on earth as the feast of the new brotherhood and the heavenly banquet in the Father's house linked by the sharing of the bread of life at both.'

This awareness of heaven and of the divinity of Christ is indeed the very *form* of the art that it brings forth. 'To be properly expressed', writes Eckhart, 'a thing must proceed from within.

moved by its form; it must come not in from without, but out from within.' And it is the being in a tradition of this kind, treating it as the very air one breathes, that enables the artist to create whole and genuine works. We cannot say that a Victorian Gothic church is outside the Christian tradition in art, but we can say that, with the exception of Pugin's work, it is not an inward expression of Christian awareness. The nineteenth-century architect was not a Gothic man and the form was not in him. His work is an externalized copy of an idea. Similarly, as Coomaraswamy writes, 'a like defect is perceived when the sacrificial music of the Church is performed not as such but by secular choirs as "music", or when the Bible or the *Divine Comedy* are taught as literature'.

What we have called the release of the image, centred in the love of Christ's humanity, culminates at the Renaissance in the glory of man, as of one who anticipates his reward in this life. He has become like a god. St Thomas, following St Augustine, expresses with approval the great Christian promise to man that God became man so that man might become a god, but this is written within the form of other-worldly awareness. The artist has as it were a between-worlds position. Robert Sencourt in his book *The Consecration of Genius* writes finely of the age of Giotto and Dante, of what he calls 'the three uses of genius which gave that age religious art: the combination of passionate feeling, of acute thought not only about the world, but about a man's particular business in the world, and so strong an interest in his own personal form of creation as to wish to raise it to a new excellence'.

We are all the time trying to recognize the central core of the tradition of Christian art, into which all revivals, imitations, and external traditions from all parts of the world are through the course of time continually being drawn. Christ is the informing principle of this tradition, and we know that he reveals himself in accordance with the nature of those who perceive him, and it is the artist's humble duty to extend the knowledge of that revelation to those ready to discern the meaning behind the veil. We know that Christ is in us,

'for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his. . . .'

And it is the artist with Christian purpose who can make incarnate the beauty and splendour of redeemed humanity, no matter what is its earthly plight. His is a metaphysic of hope. And his task is now to embody this hope, to transcend the sensuous with spiritual purpose, to restore some part of our world to its possible perfection. Yet the last generally accepted tradition in Christian art was the Baroque, which is a glorious meeting of symbol and image in the attempt to transport the world of the Renaissance with all its discoveries into the other world of Heaven. This is a release of the image towards its true end, towards an expansiveness that needs to sublimate the massiveness of individuality in the greater glory of God. And, in this tradition, and indeed at all times, in happiness and in travail, the Christian artist can say, with St Paul, 'I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision'.



MR JONES

PEREGRINE WALKER

IT was said that Mr Jones had never seen the sea and that he believed the earth to be flat. I never knew his geographical views at first hand, and I would scarcely have dared to discover. For he was a formidable man, occasional of speech and always infallible. He spent his seventy years in one place, nearly all in one house indeed (apart from the irrelevant years of childhood, which in Mr Jones you could hardly believe had ever happened). He began as hall-boy in The Court in 1890, or thereabouts, with a wasp waistcoat and a proper respect for the protocol of place in a household of thirty servants. He lived to see much change, and when he died in 1952 the family he had served so long had moved to a much smaller house, The Court had become a school, and there were even council houses in the village.

But Mr Jones was more than a family retainer who had lived on into a world he could never really understand. He was fashioned, certainly, by the circumstances of time and place: the old General was the law and prophets for him, and there could