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## Passages and Epiphanies

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Joseph W. Goetz

I.

When asked a few months ago to say a few words of introduction for the Presentations of the Covenant Players, I was more than a little diffident about doing so. The *bête noire* for many performing artists as for painters and poets is over-explanation. If a piece needs a great deal of interpretation before and after, it tends to lose its primary impact which should be direct and immediate. As an occasional and very amateur painter I now something of the frustration attendant upon the question: "What are you trying to say?" I have been tempted to round on the questioner with the brusque response: "What I have been trying to say is this picture."

But it does seem to me that there are a number of matters needing clarification within the context of this conference, dealing as it does with the sacrament of confirmation. My brief remarks are concerned primarily with the relationship between religion and art, but I make no excuses for that simply because it seems to me inevitable that any sort of sacramental interpretation of the world around us is bound to demand a theological aesthetic. To my mind, creation itself is the outward sign of God's inner reality, which is love; that is to say, the world can be thought of as somehow a "sacrament."

II.

Let me begin boldly by stating a fundamental conviction: there is an intimate connection between the affirmation of faith and aesthetic experience. It seems to me that there is a kind of analogy linking the person who says, "I believe in the God of love!" and the person who says of a poem or play or picture, "That's beautiful!" Both such individuals are allowing themselves to be captivated by a reality beyond themselves. Both will find it hard to convey in any kind of easily analyzable way precisely what it is that has so transformed, even for a moment, life itself. For myself, I want to take a stand with the great Swiss theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar, who begins his monumental work, *Herrlichkeit*, with the single word, "beauty." For Urs von Balthasar, beauty, together with truth and goodness, has necessarily a central place in Christian theology, and the loss of the aesthetic dimension in Christianity has been a disastrous one. When the Christian Gospel broke upon the classical world, the notion of beauty was at the heart of that world's myths, philosophy and literature. This was, if you will, baptized by the Fathers, in their concern to illuminate the biblical notions of *kabod* ("honor") and *doxa* ("glory"), as in Psalm 79:9, "For the glory of thy name: and deliver us. . ." or in Luke 2:9, "And the glory of the Lord shone round about. . ." But with the waning of the Middle Ages this insight into the nature of reality was lost, indeed radically rejected by the Reformers and radically distorted by the counter-Reformation. Let me simply sum this up by saying that in my view—using scholastic terminology—beauty is a *transcendental*, a fundamental determination of being, that just as all things partake of truth and goodness, so do they of beauty. In the words of the charming children's song of a few years' ago: "Everything is beautiful, in its own way."

Having expressed that shattering truism, let me say that when I use the term "art," I am using it in the widest sense possible so that I should want to include

the so-called literary arts (novels, poetry, plays), and the musical and performing arts (dance, theatre, music itself). To put it very simply, by art I mean any human fabrication or enterprise that can potentially evoke in us an aesthetic response.

Thematically there is very little religious art in the traditional sense of the word today. There is of course quite a lot of religious kitsch and a fair amount of what I would call sacred propaganda which passes itself off as sacred art. I refer you for examples to your television set on Sunday mornings or to certain kinds of denominational journalism. But it is my conviction that one cannot experience a serious artistic enterprise, however explicitly and self-confessedly secular it may be, without being brought into the moral-theological order, whether one likes it or not. I would claim that a Christian who reads a poem by Philip Larkin, looks at a painting by Francis Bacon, listens to a piece of serial music by John Cage, is present at a performance of a play by Samuel Beckett, or goes to see Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* is, willy-nilly, confronted by a more or less powerful aesthetic event which demands of him or her a response that cannot but have implications for that person's faith. For example, both Philip Larkin and Francis Bacon are self-described as atheists, and yet I cannot read Larkin's quietly nihilistic poems or look at Bacon's powerfully disturbing paintings, without finding my faith in some way challenged, disturbed, enhanced, refined, weakened, and even, paradoxically, strengthened. It is of course a commonplace to say that today's philosophers and theologians infrequently turn to the novel or the play or the poem to express their deepest convictions about what it is to be human or, in old-fashioned language, what is the nature of things. I am thinking not only of Sartre and Camus, nor indeed of the present Pope, who in addition to having published a volume of poems is a playwright, but of the American writer, Frederick Buechner (whose book on preaching, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy-Tale*, is simply the best apologetic I have read in the last ten years). Buechner's novels are stunning literary works and provocative theology. And the clue as to why such thinkers resort to these forms is that the experience of beauty, not just the natural beauty of, say, a mountain or a forest of redwoods, but the terrible beauty of Hector's farewell in the *Iliad*, or the hilarious beauty of Papageno in *The Magic Flute*, or the tranquil beauty of a scroll by the seventeenth century painter, Chu Ta, serve as mirrors of the ultimate. Picasso once said, "Art is a lie which tells the truth." There need be nothing explicitly religious about the work; indeed, it may be explicitly areligious. Whatever else it may be, if it is an authentic work of art, it will partake of what the Greeks called *Aletheia* and which we rather mildly translate as "truth" but which means literally, "an unveiling." And what is unveiled will somehow connect us with the mystery of God.

Let me speak practically for just a moment. The person who never visits an art gallery, attends a concert, goes to a play, reads a novel or sees a movie may be an exemplary Christian, but is decidedly one-dimensional, perhaps even in his or her faith. I am sure that it is not necessary for me to urge upon you a frequent exercise of your aesthetic faculty. It is true of course even if you watch nothing more than Starsky and Hutch on television that you are being stirred aesthetically. But that is a diet of Big-Macs and Pepsi when you compare it with the substantial fare of concert halls and films and theatres and art galleries. If you are like me, many of the significant points of passage in your life



have been marked by a sudden moment of aesthetic appreciation, a confirmation of who you are and what you are about because great art holds up a mirror not simply to the world around you but is as often as not a vehicle for self-discovery and self-definition. May I suggest to you as you watch this evening's presentation by the Covenant Players that with the right disposition and attitude you will discover that your faith has been enhanced, your insight deepened.

"The right disposition and attitude. . ." That is the kind of language used in connection with prayer and worship. We speak of being disposed to worship and of assuming an attitude of prayer. The person who stands before a great master's painting with gratitude and humility is not so far from the simple believer, whatever his or her personal beliefs may be. Buechner, to whom I referred a moment ago, speaks in one of his novels of the sight of a friend and neighbor, an aggressive non-believer, singing in an amateur performance of Mozart's Requiem. The words, *Kyrie eleison*, "Lord, have mercy." come rolling off his tongue because he has allowed himself to be captured by the transcendent power of a masterpiece. It seems to me plain that however important one's critical faculty may be in the aesthetic experience, what I shall call the Archie Bunker school of artistic criticism with its assertive "I know what I like and I sure don't like that!" can have no place if one is to be truly open to the power of art. Denis de Rougemont once said: "Art is a trap for meditation." The greatest of art will move us to something akin to prayer whether we recognize the underlying determinant or not.

Both great art and contemplation, or the highest kind of prayer, have the gift of transforming *kronos*, ordinary time, into *kairos*, the acceptable time. And here both art and prayer are closely related to play, for all three have the power to liberate us from what Doctor Johnson called "the tyranny of the present." Just as children who have stayed-out after dark excuse themselves by saying that they "lost track of the time," so the music-lover and the mystic find themselves so caught up that consciousness of the passage of time ceases. For myself, I believe it is one and the same reality which is the ground of both experiences, the one reality of whom Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote: "He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change: praise him!"

**The Church of the Holy Angels  
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