

The Collegium Institute
presents

A

FATH & REASON SERIES

Can Beauty SAVE the World?

The Process, Experience & Soul of Art

READER



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Session I

**THE EDGE OF THE INFINITE:
OUR EXPERIENTIAL ENCOUNTER WITH BEAUTY**

excerpts from

The Weight of Glory,

Letters to Olga,



*'Frivolous' Humanities Helped Prisoners Survive in Communist Romania:
Covertly Studying Language and Literature Connected Captives and Freed
Their Minds*

“The human soul needs actual beauty more than bread.”

-D.H. LAWRENCE

Session I

I | C.S. Lewis “Rustling with the Rumour” Excerpt from “The Weight of Glory” (1949)

“We do not want merely to see beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words—to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it.

That is why we have peopled air and earth and water with gods and goddesses and nymphs and elves—that, though we cannot, yet these projections can, enjoy in themselves that beauty grace, and power of which Nature is the image. That is why the poets tell us such lovely falsehoods. They talk as if the west wind could really sweep into a human soul; but it can’t. They tell us that ‘beauty born of murmuring sound’ will pass into a human face; but it won’t. Or not yet.

For if we take the imagery of Scripture seriously, if we believe that God will one day give us the Morning Star and cause us to put on the splendour of the sun, then we may surmise that both the ancient myths and the modern poetry, so false as history, may be very near the truth as prophecy.

At present we are on the outside of the world, the wrong side of the door. We discern the freshness and purity of morning, but they do not make us fresh and pure. We cannot mingle with the splendours we see. But all the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumour that it will not always be so. Someday, God willing, we shall get in.”

Session I

II | Václav Havel Excerpt from *Letters to Olga* (1983)

Again, I call to mind that distant moment in [the prison at] Hermanice when on a hot, cloudless summer day, I sat on a pile of rusty iron and gazed into the crown of an enormous tree that stretched, with dignified repose, up and over all the fences, wires, bars and watchtowers that separated me from it. As I watched the imperceptible trembling of its leaves against an endless sky, I was overcome by a sensation that is difficult to describe: all at once, I seemed to rise above all the coordinates of my momentary existence in the world into a kind of state outside time in which all beautiful things I have ever seen and experienced existed in a total “co-present”; I felt a sense of reconciliation, indeed of an almost gentle assent to the inevitable course of events as revealed to me now, and this combined with a carefree determination to face what had to be faced. A profound amazement at the sovereignty of Being became a dizzy sensation of tumbling endlessly into the abyss of its mystery; an unbounded joy at being alive, at having been given the chance to live through all I have lived through, and at the fact that everything has a deep and obvious meaning—this joy formed a strange alliance in me with a vague horror at the incomprehensibility and unattainability of everything I was so close to in that moment, standing at the very “edge of the infinite”; I was flooded with a sense of ultimate happiness and harmony with the world and myself, with that moment, with all the moments I could call up, and with everything invisible that lies behind it and has meaning. I would even say that I was somehow “struck by love”, though I don’t know precisely for whom or what.

III | Irina Dumitrescu “‘Frivolous’ Humanities Helped Prisoners Survive in Communist Romania: Covertly Studying Language and Literature Connected Captives and Freed Their Minds” (2016)

In a recent *New York Times* article on the movement to promote university majors promising higher employment and income, Anthony Carnevale, a professor at Georgetown University, sums up the utilitarian view of education in one snappy phrase: “You can’t be a lifelong learner if you’re not a lifelong earner.”

Things often sound true when they rhyme. Growing up in Canada, I would have agreed with Carnevale. I would have even agreed with politicians like the governor of North Carolina, Patrick McCrory, who sees university primarily as job training. I had a Romanian immigrant’s relentless pragmatism, having been raised to think that medicine and law were the only acceptable career options in life. Although I was a bookish teenager, I never thought I could study literature or history or philosophy. At some level I felt these topics were pleasant but useless fluff, nice as hobbies but not worth thousands of dollars in tuition and four years of my life.

At the University of Toronto I fell in love, against my better judgment, with English literature, and switched majors. I felt like a rebel reading *Paradise Lost* and learning Old English grammar instead of doing something that would earn me a job after graduation. But although I made the switch to the liberal arts, I couldn’t help but feel that the humanities were still somewhat superfluous. This opinion began to change the summer when I was 20 years old. In search of my roots, I went to Bucharest and worked at the Canadian embassy there. That job was the beginning of a practical education in the importance of the humanities.

I learned, for example, how much depends on a word. One of my tasks was to translate interviews with Romanians who wanted to marry Canadians. The immigration agent needed to know if the couple was in love or if the relationship was faked. It was essential that I be scrupulous, adding nothing and taking nothing away. Liars, I learned, often make up romantic stories about their betrothed but cannot bring themselves to say “love.” One

woman was allowed to emigrate because, pressed to explain why she wanted to marry her middle-aged, average-looking fiancé, she said merely that he was a good man and she loved him.

During another interview with a prospective fiancée, the Canadian agent pushed a pile of letters and cards towards me and said, “Look over these and see if they seem romantic to you.” My critiques of Romantic poetry in university had made no difference to those long-gone poets, but now the woman whose future I would help to decide watched me as I read over her correspondence with her boyfriend. “It isn’t particularly romantic,” I declared, with all my 20 years of life experience behind me, “but they seem to know each other well.” Her visa was approved.

The more important lesson, though, I learned secondhand. One day, as I was running background checks and doing paperwork, my co-worker told me the story of her in-laws’ marriage. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the communist government of Romania carried out a massive program of re-education and extermination of the country’s cultural elites. Artists, intellectuals, lawyers, politicians, and priests were put in political prisons and work camps. In a notorious experiment at the Pitești prison, prisoners—many of them university students in the humanities—were “re-educated” using physical as well as psychological torture. Guards beat and subjected them to extreme cold and hunger. They were made to eat their own excrement, and, worst of all, to torture each other. My colleague’s father-in-law, then a student of literature, was one such prisoner.

In order to maintain his sanity, the young man turned to his education. He knew French, his cellmate knew English, so they spent their captivity teaching one another their foreign languages. After his release, the student was forced to work in a factory, where he met a woman who had also studied literature and been imprisoned as a result. Neither could marry people with clean records for fear of ruining their “files” with the government, so they married each other. Their apartment in Bucharest became a kind of salon, with artists and writers always coming and going. This man, who had learned English in a jail cell, ultimately became a literary translator of English poetry.

When I heard this story, I understood that the stereotype of the fluffy, useless liberal arts was a lie. If the study of literature or history were really that pointless, a government trying to control the minds of its subjects would not go to the trouble of putting humanities students and professors in jail. For educated prisoners, the love of language, art, and scholarship was no mere hobby. It was a lifeline, sometimes the only thread tying them to their identities, their dignity, their shredded sense of humanity. Nothing could be more practical.

Years later, when a new wave of cutbacks in higher education led to reports of another humanities “crisis,” I decided to find out how much of the oral history I heard at the embassy had been written down. I read a dozen Romanian prison memoirs, all of them published after the 1989 revolution. Each one testified to the power of the liberal arts—

especially literature and foreign languages—to help individuals maintain sanity and a sense of self in conditions designed to destroy them.

The memoirs taught me how common it was for prisoners to teach each other languages. Constantin Giurescu, a historian, learned Hungarian from one prisoner and taught it to another; meanwhile, he practiced his English, German, and French. The mathematician and Holocaust survivor Egon Balas held language sessions during captivity to practice English, Russian, French, and German. In prison, Arnold Schwefelberg recalled the Hebrew he had previously learned to the point where he could think in it fluently. Dan Brătianu and his fellow prisoners were tormented by lice, for which they received DDT in glass bottles, so they covered the bottles in spit, rubbed them with soap, and sprinkled the DDT on top. They could scratch up to four hundred words on this makeshift writing surface, which they used to teach each other foreign vocabulary. Later, some of the prisoners who had learned English from Brătianu became professional translators.

Many prisoners survived by recalling poetry they had learned in school or by writing their own. The artist Lena Constante learned French prosody by remembering lines of poetry, scanning and analyzing them, and then composing her own verse in French. Schwefelberg “wrote” 50 to 60 poems and a play, some of which he committed to paper after release. Inmates used Morse or other tapping codes to compose poems, often finishing each other’s lines. They also communicated essential information by quoting poetry, guessing that the guards would miss the point. Prisoners formed study groups, recalling the plots of novels and teaching each other history from memory. Forced into a program of “re-education,” they created their own university instead.

Being an immigrant once made it difficult for me to imagine studying the humanities. Going home to Romania—both physically and through books—helped me understand the value of the liberal arts, one that goes far beyond job prospects and starting salaries after graduation. We have been taught to think of the liberal arts as unnecessary and wasteful, or in Ronald Reagan’s words, “intellectual luxuries that perhaps we could do without.” Memoirs of the Romanian gulag showed me what a dangerous lie this is. Educated political prisoners drew on rich inner resources to preserve their sanity and their spirits. They used their knowledge to help their fellow inmates survive as well. Their experiences reveal what the attack on the humanities really is. It is an attack on the ability to think, criticize, and endure in crisis, and its virulence betrays how vital the liberal arts are. The political rhetoric against the humanities exposes what is most important in our education, even as it attempts to destroy it.

Session II

**THE SOUL OF BEAUTY:
WHAT IS IT & WHY DO WE SEEK IT?**

excerpts from

Beauty: A Short Introduction,

No Man Is an Island,

&

Concerning the Spiritual in Art

“Without music life would be a mistake.”

-FRIEDRICH NIETZCHE

Session II

I | Roger Scruton Excerpts from *Beauty: A Very Short Introduction* (2011)

Preface

Beauty can be consoling, disturbing, sacred, profane; it can be exhilarating, appealing, inspiring, chilling. It can affect us in an unlimited variety of ways. Yet it is never viewed with indifference: beauty demands to be noticed; it speaks to us directly like the voice of an intimate friend. If there are people who are indifferent to beauty, then it is surely because they do not perceive it.

Yet judgements of beauty concern matters of taste, and maybe taste has no rational foundation. If so, how do we explain the exalted place of beauty in our lives, and why should we lament the fact-if fact it is-that beauty is vanishing from our world? And is it the case, as so many writers and artists since Baudelaire and Nietzsche have suggested, that beauty and goodness may diverge, so that a thing can be beautiful precisely in respect of its immorality?

Moreover, since it is in the nature of tastes to differ, how can a standard erected by one person's taste be used to cast judgement on another's? How, for example, can we pretend that one type of music is superior or inferior to another when comparative judgements merely reflect the taste of the one who makes them?

That familiar relativism has led some people to dismiss judgments of beauty as purely 'subjective'. No tastes can be criticized, they argue, since to criticize one taste is simply to give voice to another; hence there is nothing to learn or to teach that could conceivably deserve the name of 'criticism'. This attitude has put in question many of the traditional disciplines in the humanities. The studies of art, music, literature and architecture, freed from the discipline of aesthetic judgement, seem to lack the firm anchor in tradition and technique that enabled our predecessors to regard them as central to the curriculum. Hence the current 'crisis in the humanities': is there any point in studying our artistic and cultural inheritance, when the judgement of its beauty has no rational grounds? Or if we do study it, should this not be in a sceptical spirit, by way of questioning its claims to objective authority, and deconstructing its posture of transcendence?

Chapter 1: Judging Beauty

We discern beauty in concrete objects and abstract ideas, in works of nature and works of art, in things, animals and people, in objects, qualities and actions. As the list expands to take in just about every ontological category (there are beautiful propositions as well as beautiful worlds, beautiful proofs as well as beautiful snails, even beautiful diseases and beautiful deaths), it becomes obvious that we are not describing a property like shape, size or colour, uncontroversially present to all who can find their way around the physical world. For one thing: how could there be a single property exhibited by so many disparate types of thing?

Well, why not? After all, we describe songs, landscapes, moods, scents and souls as blue: does this not illustrate the way in which a single property can occur under many categories? No, is the answer. For while there is a sense in which all those things can be blue, they cannot be blue in the way that my coat is blue. In referring to so many types of thing as blue, we are using a metaphor—one that requires a leap of the imagination if it is to be rightly understood. Metaphors make connections which are not contained in the fabric of reality but created by our own associative powers. The important question about a metaphor is not what property it stands for, but what experience it suggests.

But in none of its normal uses is 'beautiful' a metaphor, even if, like many a metaphor, it ranges over indefinitely many categories of object. So why do we call things beautiful? What point are we making, and what state of mind does our judgement express?

The true, the good, and the beautiful

There is an appealing idea about beauty which goes back to Plato and Plotinus, and which became incorporated by various routes into Christian theological thinking. According to this idea beauty is an ultimate value—something that we pursue for its own sake and for the pursuit of which no further reason need be given. Beauty should therefore be compared to truth and goodness, one member of a trio of ultimate values which justify our rational inclinations. Why believe *p*? Because it is true. Why want *x*? Because it is good. Why look at *y*? Because it is beautiful. In some way, philosophers have argued, those answers are on a par: each brings a state of mind into the ambit of reason, by connecting it to something that it is in our nature, as rational beings, to pursue. Someone "ho asked 'why believe what is true?' or 'why want what is good?'. has failed to understand the nature of reasoning. He doesn't see that, if we are to justify our beliefs and desires at all, then our reasons must be anchored in the true and the good.

Does the same go for beauty? If someone asks me why are you interested in *x*? is 'because it is beautiful' a final answer—one that is immune to counter-argument, like the answers 'because it is good', and 'because it is true'? To say as much is to overlook the subversive nature of beauty. Someone charmed by a myth may be tempted to believe it: and in this case beauty is the enemy of truth. (Cf. Pindar: 'Beauty, which gives the myths acceptance, renders

the incredible credible', *First Olympian Ode*.) A man attracted to a woman may be tempted to condone her vices: and in this case beauty is the enemy of goodness. (Cf. L'Abbe Prevost, *Manon Lescaut*, which describes the moral ruin of the Chevalier des Grieux by the beautiful Manon.) Goodness and truth never compete, we assume, and the pursuit of the one is always compatible with a proper respect for the other. The pursuit of beauty, however, is far more questionable. From Kierkegaard to Wilde the 'aesthetic' way of life, in which beauty is pursued as the supreme value, has been opposed to the life of virtue. The love of myths, stories and rituals, the need for consolation and harmony, the deep desire for order all have drawn people to religious beliefs regardless of whether those beliefs are true. The prose of Flaubert, the imagery of Baudelaire, the harmonies of Wagner, the sensuous forms of Canova have all been accused of immorality, by those who believe that they paint wickedness in alluring colours.

We don't have to agree with such judgements in order to acknowledge their point. The status of beauty as an ultimate value is questionable, in the way that the status of truth and goodness are not. Let us at least say that this particular path to the understanding of beauty is not easily available to a modern thinker. The confidence with which philosophers once trod it is due to an assumption, made explicit already in the *Enneads* of Plotinus, that truth, beauty and goodness are attributes of the deity, ways in which the divine unity makes itself known to the human soul. That theological vision was edited for Christian use by St Thomas Aquinas, and embedded in the subtle and comprehensive reasoning for which that philosopher is justly famous. But it is not a vision that we can assume, and I propose for the time being to set it to one side, considering the concept of beauty without making any theological claims.

Aquinas's own view of the matter is worth noting, however, since it touches on a deep difficulty in the philosophy of beauty. Aquinas regarded truth, goodness and unity as 'transcendentals'—features of reality possessed by all things, since they are aspects of being, ways in which the supreme gift of being is made manifest to the understanding. His views on beauty are more implied than stated; nevertheless he wrote as though beauty too is such a transcendental (which is one way of explaining the point already made, that beauty belongs to every category). He also thought that beauty and goodness are, in the end, identical, being separate ways in which a single positive reality is rationally apprehended. If that is so, however, what is ugliness, and why do we flee from it? And how can there be dangerous beauties, corrupting beauties, and immoral beauties? Or, if such things are impossible, why are they impossible, and what is it that misleads us into thinking the opposite? I don't say that Aquinas has no answer to those questions. But they illustrate the difficulties encountered by any philosophy that places beauty on the same metaphysical plane as truth, so as to plant it in the heart of being as such. The natural response is to say that beauty is a matter of appearance, not of being; and perhaps also that in exploring beauty we are investigating the sentiments of people, rather than the deep structure of the world.

II | Thomas Merton
No Man Is an Island (1955)
Excerpt from Chapter 3: “Conscience,
Freedom, and Prayer”

5. One of the most important functions of the life of prayer is to deepen and strengthen and develop our moral conscience. The growth of our psychological conscience, although secondary, is not without importance also. The psychological conscience has its place in our prayer, but prayer is not the place for its proper development. When we look inward and examine our psychological conscience our vision ends in ourselves. We become aware of our feelings, our inward activity, our thoughts, our judgments, and our desires. It is not healthy to be too constantly aware of all these things. Perpetual self examination gives an overanxious attention to movements that should remain instinctive and unobserved. When we attend too much to ourselves, our activity becomes cramped and stumbling. We get so much in our own way that we soon paralyze ourselves completely and become unable to act like normal human beings.

It is best, therefore, to let the psychological conscience alone when we are at prayer. The less we tinker with it the better. The reason why so many religious people believe they cannot meditate is that they think meditation consists in having religious emotions, thoughts, or affections of which one is, oneself, acutely aware. As soon as they start to meditate, they begin to look into the psychological conscience to find out if they are experiencing anything worthwhile. They find little or nothing. They either strain themselves to produce some interior experience, or else they give up in disgust.

6. The psychological conscience is most useful to us when it is allowed to act instinctively and without too much deliberate reflection on our own part. We should be able to see through our consciousness without seeing it at all. When the consciousness acts properly it is very valuable in prayer because it lends tone and quality to the action of the moral conscience, which is actually central in prayer.

At times the psychological conscience quickly gets paralyzed under the stress of futile introspection. But there is another spiritual activity that develops and liberates its hidden powers of action: the perception of beauty. I do not mean by this that we must expect our consciousness to respond to beauty as an effete and esoteric thing. We ought to be alive enough to reality to see beauty all around us. Beauty is simply reality itself, perceived in a

special way that gives it a resplendent value of its own. Everything that is, is beautiful insofar as it is real—though the associations which they may have acquired for men may not always make things beautiful to us. Snakes are beautiful, but not to us.

One of the most important-and most neglected elements in the beginnings of the interior life is the ability to respond to reality, to see the value and the beauty in ordinary things, to come alive to the splendor that is all around us in the creatures of God. We do not see these things because we have withdrawn from them. In a way we have to. In modern life our senses are so constantly bombarded with stimulation from every side that unless we developed a kind of protective insensibility we would go crazy trying to respond to *all* the advertisements at the same time!

The first step in the interior life, nowadays, is not, as some might imagine, learning not to see and taste and hear and feel things. On the contrary, what we must do is begin by unlearning our wrong ways of seeing, tasting, feeling, and so forth, and acquire a few of the right ones.

For asceticism is not merely a matter of renouncing television, cigarettes, and gin. Before we can begin to be ascetics, we first have to learn to see life as if it were something more than a hypnotizing telecast. And we must be able to taste something besides tobacco and alcohol: we must perhaps even be able to taste these luxuries themselves as if they too were good.

How can our conscience tell us whether or not we are renouncing things unless it first of all tells us that we know how to use them properly? For renunciation is not an end in itself: it helps us to use things better. It helps us to give them away. If reality revolts us, if we merely turn away from it in disgust, to whom shall we sacrifice it? How shall we consecrate it? How shall we make of it a gift to God and to men?

In an aesthetic experience, in the creation or the contemplation of a work of art, the psychological conscience is able to attain some of its highest and most perfect fulfillments. Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time. The mind that responds to the intellectual and spiritual values that lie hidden in a poem, a painting, or a piece of music, discovers a spiritual vitality that lifts it above itself, takes it out of itself, and makes it present to itself on a level of being that it did not know it could ever achieve.

7. The soul that picks and pries at itself in the isolation of its own dull self-analysis arrives at a self-consciousness that is a torment and a disfigurement of our whole personality. But the spirit that finds itself above itself in the intensity and cleanness of its reaction to a work of art is “self-conscious” in a way that is productive as well as sublime. Such a one finds in himself totally new capacities for thought and vision and moral action. Without a moment of self-analysis he has discovered himself in discovering his capacity to respond to a value that lifts him above his normal level. His very response makes him better and different. He is conscious of a new life and new powers, and it is not strange that he should proceed to develop them.

It is important, in the life of prayer, to be able to respond to such flashes of aesthetic intuition. Art and prayer have never been conceived by the Church as enemies, and where the Church has been austere it has only been because she meant to insist on the essential difference between art and entertainment. The austerity, gravity, sobriety, and strength of Gregorian chant, of twelfth-century Cistercian architecture, of Carolingian minuscule script, have much to say about the life of prayer, and they have had much to do, in the past, with forming the prayer and the religious consciousness of saints. They have always done so in proportion as they have freed souls from concentration upon themselves, as well as from mere speculation about technical values in the arts and in asceticism. One can be at the same time a technical expert in chant and a man of prayer, but the moments of prayer and of technical criticism do not usually coincide.

If the Church has emphasized the function of art in her public prayer, it has been because she knew that a true and valid aesthetic formation was necessary for the wholeness of Christian living and worship. The liturgy and the chant of the Church are all supposed to form and spiritualize man's consciousness, to give him a tone and a maturity without which his prayer cannot normally be either very deep or very wide or very pure.

There is only one reason why this is completely true: art is not an end in itself. It introduces the soul into a higher spiritual order, which it expresses and in some sense explains. Music and art and poetry attune the soul to God because they induce a kind of contact with the Creator and Ruler of the Universe. The genius of the artist finds its way by the affinity of creative sympathy, or conaturality, into the living law that rules the universe. This law is nothing but the secret gravitation that draws all things to God as to their center. Since all true art lays bare the action of this same law in the depths of our own nature, it makes us alive to the tremendous mystery of being, in which we ourselves, together with all other living and existing things, come forth from the depths of God and return again to Him. An art that does not produce something of this is not worthy of its name.

Session II

III | Wassily Kandinsky Excerpt from *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1912)

Every work of art is the child of its age and, in many cases, the mother of our emotions. It follows that each period of culture produces an art of its own which can never be repeated. Efforts to revive the art-principles of the past will at best produce an art that is still-born. It is impossible for us to live and feel, as did the ancient Greeks. In the same way those who strive to follow the Greek methods in sculpture achieve only a similarity of form, the work remaining soulless for all time. Such imitation is mere aping. Externally the monkey completely resembles a human being; he will sit holding a book in front of his nose, and turn over the pages with a thoughtful aspect, but his actions have for him no real meaning.

There is, however, in art another kind of external similarity which is founded on a fundamental truth. When there is a similarity of inner tendency in the whole moral and spiritual atmosphere, a similarity of ideals, at first closely pursued but later lost to sight, a similarity in the inner feeling of any one period to that of another, the logical result will be a revival of the external forms which served to express those inner feelings in an earlier age. An example of this today is our sympathy, our spiritual relationship, with the Primitives. Like ourselves, these artists sought to express in their work only internal truths, renouncing in consequence all consideration of external form.

This all-important spark of inner life today is at present only a spark. Our minds, which are even now only just awakening after years of materialism, are infected with the despair of unbelief, of lack of purpose and ideal. The nightmare of materialism, which has turned the life of the universe into an evil, useless game, is not yet past; it holds the awakening soul still in its grip. Only a feeble light glimmers like a tiny star in a vast gulf of darkness. This feeble light is but a presentiment, and the soul, when it sees it, trembles in doubt whether the light is not a dream, and the gulf of darkness reality. This doubt, and the still harsh tyranny of the materialistic philosophy, divide our soul sharply from that of the Primitives. Our soul rings cracked when we seek to play upon it, as does a costly vase, long buried in the earth, which is found to have a flaw when it is dug up once more. For this reason, the Primitive phase, through which we are now passing, with its temporary similarity of form, can only be of short duration.

These two possible resemblances between the art forms of today and those of the past will be at once recognized as diametrically opposed to one another. The first, being purely

external, has no future. The second, being internal, contains the seed of the future within itself. After the period of materialist effort, which held the soul in check until it was shaken off as evil, the soul is emerging, purged by trials and sufferings. Shapeless emotions such as fear, joy, grief, etc., which belonged to this time of effort, will no longer greatly attract the artist. He will endeavour to awake subtler emotions, as yet unnamed. Living himself a complicated and comparatively subtle life, his work will give to those observers capable of feeling them lofty emotions beyond the reach of words.

The observer of today, however, is seldom capable of feeling such emotions. He seeks in a work of art a mere imitation of nature which can serve some definite purpose (for example a portrait in the ordinary sense) or a presentment of nature according to a certain convention ("impressionist" painting), or some inner feeling expressed in terms of natural form (as we say—a picture with *Stimmung*¹). All those varieties of picture, when they are really art, fulfill their purpose and feed the spirit. Though this applies to the first case, it applies more strongly to the third where the spectator does feel a corresponding thrill in himself. Such harmony or even contrast of emotions cannot be superficial or worthless; indeed the *Stimmung* of a picture can deepen and purify that of the spectator. Such works of art at least preserve the soul from coarseness; they "key it up," so to speak, to a certain height, as a tuning-key the strings of a musical instrument. But purification, and extension in duration and size of this sympathy of soul, remain one-sided, and the possibilities of their influence of art are not exerted to their utmost.

Imagine a building divided into many rooms. The building may be large or small. Every wall of every room is covered with pictures of various sizes; perhaps they number many thousands. They represent in color bits of nature—animals in sunlight or shadow, drinking or standing in water, lying on the grass; near to, a Crucifixion by a painter who does not believe in Christ; flowers; human figures sitting, standing, walking; often they are naked; many naked women, seen foreshortened from behind; apples and silver dishes; protract of Councillor So and So; sunset; lady in red; flying duck; portrait of Lady X; flying geese; lady in white; calves in shadow flecked with brilliant yellow sunlight; portrait of Prince Y; lady in green. All this carefully printed in a book—name of artist—name of picture. People with these books in their hands go from wall to wall, turning over pages, reading the names. Then they go away, neither richer nor poorer than when they came, and are absorbed at once in their business, which has nothing to do with art. Why did they come? In each picture a whole lifetime is imprisoned, a whole lifetime of fears, doubts, hopes, and joys.

Whither is this lifetime tending? What is the message of the competent artist? "To send light into the darkness of men's hearts—such is the duty of the artist," said Schumann. "An artist is a man who can draw and paint everything," said Tolstoi.

¹ Editor's note: *Stimmung* is almost untranslatable. It is almost "sentiment" in the best sense, and almost "feeling." Many of Corot's twilight landscapes are full of beautiful "*Stimmung*." Kandinsky uses the word later on to mean the "essential spirit" of nature.

Of these two definitions of the artist's activity we must choose the second, if we think of the exhibition just described. On one canvas is a huddle of objects painted with varying degrees of skill, virtuosity and vigor, harshly or smoothly. To harmonize the whole is the task of art. With cold eyes and indifferent mind the spectators regard the work. Connoisseurs admire the "skill" (as one admires a tightrope walker), enjoy the "quality of painting" (as one enjoys a pasty). But hungry souls go hungry away.

The vulgar herd stroll through the rooms and pronounce the pictures "nice" or "splendid." Those who could speak have said nothing, those who could hear have heard nothing. This condition of art is called "art for art's sake." This neglect of inner meanings, which is the life of colours, this vain squandering of artistic powers is called "art for art's sake."

The artist seeks material reward for his dexterity, his power of vision and experience. His purpose becomes the satisfaction of vanity and greed. In place of the steady co-operation of artists is a scramble for good things. There are complaints of excessive competition, of over-production. Hatred, partisanship, cliques, jealousy, intrigues are the natural consequences for this aimless, materialist art.

The onlooker turns away from the artist who has higher ideals and who cannot see his life purpose in an art without aims.

Sympathy is the education of the spectator from the point of view for the artist. It has been said above that art is the child of its age. Such an art can only create an artistic feeling which is clearly felt. This art, which has no power for the future, which is only a child of the age and cannot become a mother of the future, is a barren art. She is transitory and to all intent dies the moment the atmosphere alters which nourished her.

The other art that which is capable of educating further, springs equally from contemporary feeling, but is at the same time not only echo and mirror of it, but also has a deep and powerful prophetic strength.

The spiritual life, to which art belongs and of which she is one of the mightiest elements, is a complicated but definite and easily definable movement forwards and upwards. This movement is the movement of experience. It may take different forms, but it holds at bottom to the same inner thought and purpose.

Veiled in obscurity are the causes of this need to move ever upwards and forwards, by sweat of the brow, through sufferings and fears. When one stage has been accomplished, and many evil stones cleared from the road, some unseen and wicked hand scatters new obstacles in the way, so that the path often seems blocked and totally obliterated. But there never fails to come to the rescue some human being, like ourselves in everything except that he has in him a secret power of vision.

He sees and points the way. The power to do this he would sometimes fain lay aside, for it is a bitter cross to bear. But he cannot do so. Scorned and hated, he drags after him over the stones the heavy chariot of a divided humanity, ever forwards and upwards.

Often, many years after his body has vanished from the earth, men try by every means to recreate his body in marble, iron, bronze, or stone, on an enormous scale. As if there were any intrinsic value in the bodily existence of such divine martyrs and servants of humanity, who despised the flesh and lived only for the spirit! But at least such setting up of marble is a proof that a great number of men have reached the point where once the being they would now honour, stood alone.

Session III

**STIR THEM TO WONDER:
THE SEARCH FOR & CREATION OF BEAUTY**

excerpts from

*Only the Lover Sings: Art & Contemplation,
Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith & Art,*

&

“Letter to Artists”

“Beauty is vanishing from our world because we live as though it did not matter; and we live that way because we have lost the habit of sacrifice and are striving always to avoid it.”

-ROGER SCRUTON

Session III

I | Josef Pieper *Only the Lover Sings: Art and Contemplation* (1988) Excerpt from Chapter 2: “Learning How to See Again”

Man’s ability to *see* is in decline. Those who nowadays concern themselves with culture and education will experience this fact again and again. We do not mean here, of course, the physiological sensitivity of the human eye. We mean the spiritual capacity to perceive the visible reality as it truly is.

To be sure, no human being has ever really *seen* everything that lies visibly in front of his eyes. The world, including its tangible side, is unfathomable. Who would ever have perfectly perceived the countless shapes and shades of just one wave swelling and ebbing in the ocean! And yet, there are degrees of perception. Going below a certain bottom line quite obviously will endanger the integrity of man as a spiritual being. It seems that nowadays we have arrived at this bottom line.

I am writing this on my return from Canada, aboard a ship sailing from New York to Rotterdam. Most of the other passengers have spent quite some time in the United States, many for one reason only: to visit and see the New World with their own eyes. *With their own eyes*: in this lies the difficulty.

During the various conversations on deck and at the dinner table I am always amazed at hearing almost without exception rather generalized statements and pronouncements that are plainly the common fare of travel guides. It turns out that hardly anybody has noticed those frequent small signs in the streets of New York that indicate public fallout shelters. And visiting New York University, who would have noticed those stone-hewn chess tables in front of it, placed in Washington Square by a caring city administration for the Italian chess enthusiasts of that area?!

Or again, at table I had mentioned those magnificent fluorescent sea creatures whirled up to the surface by the hundreds in our ship's bow wake. The next day it was casually mentioned that "last night there was nothing to be seen." Indeed, for no body had the patience to let the eyes adapt to the darkness. To repeat, then; man's ability to see is in decline.

Searching for the reasons, we could point to various things: modern man's restlessness and stress, quite sufficiently denounced by now, or his total absorption and enslavement by practical goals and purposes. Yet one reason must not be overlooked either: the average person of our time loses the ability to see because *there is too much to see!*

There does exist something like "visual noise," which just like the acoustical counterpart makes clear perception impossible. One might perhaps presume that TV watchers, tabloid readers, and movie goers exercise and sharpen their eyes. But the opposite is true. The ancient sages knew exactly why they called the "concupiscence of the eyes" a "destroyer". The restoration of man's inner eyes can hardly be expected in this day and age—unless, first of all, one were willing and determined simply to exclude from one's realm of life all those inane and contrived but titillating illusions incessantly generated by the entertainment industry.

You may argue, perhaps: true, our capacity to see has diminished, but such loss is merely the price all higher cultures have to pay. We have lost, no doubt, the American Indian's keen sense of smell, but we also no longer need it since we have binoculars, compass, and radar. Let me repeat: in this obviously continuing process there exists a limit below which human nature itself is threatened, and the very integrity of human existence is directly endangered. Therefore such ultimate danger can no longer be averted with technology alone. At stake here is this: How can man be saved from becoming a totally passive consumer of mass-produced goods and a subservient follower beholden to every slogan the managers may proclaim? The question really is: How can man preserve and safeguard the foundation of his spiritual dimension and an uncorrupted relationship to reality?

The capacity to perceive the visible world "with our own eyes" is indeed an essential constituent of human nature. We are talking here about man's essential inner richness—or, should the threat prevail, man's most abject inner poverty. And why so? To *see* things is the first step toward that primordial and basic mental grasping of reality, which constitutes the essence of man as a spiritual being.

I am well aware that there are realities we can come to know through "hearing" alone. All the same, it remains a fact that only through seeing, indeed through seeing with our own eyes, is our inner autonomy established. Those no longer able to see reality with their own eyes are equally unable to hear correctly. It is specifically the man thus impoverished who inevitably falls prey to the demagogical spells of any powers that be. "Inevitably", because such a person is utterly deprived even of the potential to keep a critical distance (and here we recognize the direct political relevance of our topic).

The diagnosis is indispensable yet only a first step. What, then, may be proposed; what can be done?

We already mentioned simple abstention, a regimen of fasting and abstinence, by which we would try to keep the visual noise of daily inanities at a distance. Such an approach seems to

me indeed an indispensable first step but, all the same, no more than the removal, say, of a roadblock.

A better and more immediately effective remedy is this: *to be active oneself in artistic creation, producing shapes and forms for the eye to see.*

Nobody has to observe and study the visible mystery of a human face more than the one who sets out to sculpt it in a tangible medium. And this holds true not only for a manually formed image. The verbal "image" as well can thrive only when it springs from a higher level of visual perception. We sense the intensity of observation required simply to say, "The girl's eyes were gleaming like wet currants" (Tolstoy). Before you can express anything in tangible form, you first need eyes to see. The mere attempt, therefore, to create an artistic form compels the artist to take a fresh look at the visible reality; it requires authentic and personal observation. Long before a creation is completed, the artist has gained for himself another and more intimate achievement: a deeper and more receptive vision, a more intense awareness, a sharper and more discerning understanding, a more patient openness for all things quiet and inconspicuous, an eye for things previously overlooked. In short: the artist will be able to perceive with new eyes the abundant wealth of all visible reality, and, thus challenged, additionally acquires the inner capacity to absorb into his mind such an exceedingly rich harvest. The capacity to *see* increases.

Session III

II | Madeleine L'Engle excerpts from *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith & Art* (1980)

Wounds. By his wounds we are healed. But they are our wounds, too, and until we have been healed we do not know what wholeness is. The discipline of creation, be it to paint, compose, write, is an effort towards wholeness. (p. 61)

The Christian holiday which is easiest for us is Christmas because it touches on what is familiar; and the story of the young man and woman who are turned away from the inn and had a baby in a stable, surrounded by gentle animals, is one we have always known. I doubt if many two- or three-year-olds are told at their mother's knee about the Transfiguration or the Annunciation. And so, because the story of Christmas is part of our folklore, we pay more attention to its recognizableness than to the fact that the tiny baby in the manger contained power which created the galaxies and set the stars in their courses.

We are not taught much about the wilder aspects of Christianity. But these are what artists have wrestled with throughout the years. The Annunciation has been a favorite subject of painters and poets because gestation and birthgiving are basic to any form of creation. All of us who have given birth to a baby, to a story, know that it is ultimately mystery, closely knit to God's own creative activities, which did not stop at the beginning of the universe. God is constantly creating, in us, through us, with us, and to co-create with God is our human calling. It is the calling for all of us, his creatures, but it is perhaps more conscious with the artist—or should I say the Christian artist? (p. 71)

Kairos. Real time. God's time. That time which breaks through *chronos* with a shock of joy, that time we do not recognize while we are experiencing it, but only afterwards, because *kairos* has nothing to do with chronological time. In *kairos* we are completely unself-conscious and yet paradoxically far more real than we can ever be when we are constantly checking our watches for chronological time. The saint in contemplation, lost (discovered) to self in the mind of God is in *kairos*. The artist at work is in *kairos*. The child at play, totally

thrown outside of himself in the game, be it building a sandcastle or making a daisy chain, is in *kairos*. In *kairos* we become what we are called to be as human beings, cocreators with God, touching on the wonder of creation. This calling should not be limited to artists—or saints—but it is a fearful calling. (p. 88)

III | Letter of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to Artists (1999)

**To all who are passionately dedicated
to the search for new “epiphanies” of beauty
so that through their creative work as artists
they may offer these as gifts to the world.**

“God saw all that he had made, and it was very good” (Gn 1:31)

The artist, image of God the Creator

1. None can sense more deeply than you artists, ingenious creators of beauty that you are, something of the pathos with which God at the dawn of creation looked upon the work of his hands. A glimmer of that feeling has shone so often in your eyes when—like the artists of every age—captivated by the hidden power of sounds and words, colours and shapes, you have admired the work of your inspiration, sensing in it some echo of the mystery of creation with which God, the sole creator of all things, has wished in some way to associate you.

That is why it seems to me that there are no better words than the text of Genesis with which to begin my Letter to you, to whom I feel closely linked by experiences reaching far back in time and which have indelibly marked my life. In writing this Letter, I intend to follow the path of the fruitful dialogue between the Church and artists which has gone on unbroken through two thousand years of history, and which still, at the threshold of the Third Millennium, offers rich promise for the future.

In fact, this dialogue is not dictated merely by historical accident or practical need, but is rooted in the very essence of both religious experience and artistic creativity. The opening page of the Bible presents God as a kind of exemplar of everyone who produces a work: the human craftsman mirrors the image of God as Creator. This relationship is particularly clear in the Polish language because of the lexical link between the words *stwórca* (creator) and *twórca* (craftsman).

What is the difference between “creator” and “craftsman”? The one who creates bestows being itself, he brings something out of nothing—*ex nihilo sui et subiecti*, as the Latin puts it—and this, in the strict sense, is a mode of operation which belongs to the Almighty alone. The craftsman, by contrast, uses something that already exists, to which he gives form and meaning. This is the mode of operation peculiar to man as made in the image of God. In fact, after saying that God created man and woman “in his image” (cf. Gn 1:27), the Bible

adds that he entrusted to them the task of dominating the earth (cf. Gn 1:28). This was the last day of creation (cf. Gn 1:28-31). On the previous days, marking as it were the rhythm of the birth of the cosmos, Yahweh had created the universe. Finally he created the human being, the noblest fruit of his design, to whom he subjected the visible world as a vast field in which human inventiveness might assert itself.

God therefore called man into existence, committing to him the craftsman's task. Through his "artistic creativity" man appears more than ever "in the image of God", and he accomplishes this task above all in shaping the wondrous "material" of his own humanity and then exercising creative dominion over the universe which surrounds him. With loving regard, the divine Artist passes on to the human artist a spark of his own surpassing wisdom, calling him to share in his creative power. Obviously, this is a sharing which leaves intact the infinite distance between the Creator and the creature, as Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa made clear: "Creative art, which it is the soul's good fortune to entertain, is not to be identified with that essential art which is God himself, but is only a communication of it and a share in it".(1)

That is why artists, the more conscious they are of their "gift", are led all the more to see themselves and the whole of creation with eyes able to contemplate and give thanks, and to raise to God a hymn of praise. This is the only way for them to come to a full understanding of themselves, their vocation and their mission.

The special vocation of the artist

2. Not all are called to be artists in the specific sense of the term. Yet, as Genesis has it, all men and women are entrusted with the task of crafting their own life: in a certain sense, they are to make of it a work of art, a masterpiece.

It is important to recognize the distinction, but also the connection, between these two aspects of human activity. The distinction is clear. It is one thing for human beings to be the authors of their own acts, with responsibility for their moral value; it is another to be an artist, able, that is, to respond to the demands of art and faithfully to accept art's specific dictates.(2) This is what makes the artist capable of producing objects, but it says nothing as yet of his moral character. We are speaking not of moulding oneself, of forming one's own personality, but simply of actualizing one's productive capacities, giving aesthetic form to ideas conceived in the mind.

The distinction between the moral and artistic aspects is fundamental, but no less important is the connection between them. Each conditions the other in a profound way. In producing a work, artists express themselves to the point where their work becomes a unique disclosure of their own being, of what they are and of how they are what they are. And there are endless examples of this in human history. In shaping a masterpiece, the artist not only summons his work into being, but also in some way reveals his own personality by means of it. For him art offers both a new dimension and an exceptional mode of expression for his spiritual growth. Through his works, the artist speaks to others and communicates with them. The history of art, therefore, is not only a story of works produced but also a story of

men and women. Works of art speak of their authors; they enable us to know their inner life, and they reveal the original contribution which artists offer to the history of culture.

The artistic vocation in the service of beauty

3. A noted Polish poet, Cyprian Norwid, wrote that “beauty is to enthuse us for work, and work is to raise us up”.(3)

The theme of beauty is decisive for a discourse on art. It was already present when I stressed God's delighted gaze upon creation. In perceiving that all he had created was good, God saw that it was beautiful as well.(4) The link between good and beautiful stirs fruitful reflection. In a certain sense, beauty is the visible form of the good, just as the good is the metaphysical condition of beauty. This was well understood by the Greeks who, by fusing the two concepts, coined a term which embraces both: kalokagathía, or beauty-goodness. On this point Plato writes: “The power of the Good has taken refuge in the nature of the Beautiful”.(5)

It is in living and acting that man establishes his relationship with being, with the truth and with the good. The artist has a special relationship to beauty. In a very true sense it can be said that beauty is the vocation bestowed on him by the Creator in the gift of “artistic talent”. And, certainly, this too is a talent which ought to be made to bear fruit, in keeping with the sense of the Gospel parable of the talents (cf. Mt 25:14-30).

Here we touch on an essential point. Those who perceive in themselves this kind of divine spark which is the artistic vocation—as poet, writer, sculptor, architect, musician, actor and so on—feel at the same time the obligation not to waste this talent but to develop it, in order to put it at the service of their neighbour and of humanity as a whole.

The artist and the common good

4. Society needs artists, just as it needs scientists, technicians, workers, professional people, witnesses of the faith, teachers, fathers and mothers, who ensure the growth of the person and the development of the community by means of that supreme art form which is “the art of education”. Within the vast cultural panorama of each nation, artists have their unique place. Obedient to their inspiration in creating works both worthwhile and beautiful, they not only enrich the cultural heritage of each nation and of all humanity, but they also render an exceptional social service in favour of the common good.

The particular vocation of individual artists decides the arena in which they serve and points as well to the tasks they must assume, the hard work they must endure and the responsibility they must accept. Artists who are conscious of all this know too that they must labour without allowing themselves to be driven by the search for empty glory or the craving for cheap popularity, and still less by the calculation of some possible profit for themselves.

There is therefore an ethic, even a “spirituality” of artistic service, which contributes in its way to the life and renewal of a people. It is precisely this to which Cyprian Norwid seems to allude in declaring that “beauty is to enthuse us for work, and work is to raise us up”.

Art and the mystery of the Word made flesh

5. The Law of the Old Testament explicitly forbids representation of the invisible and ineffable God by means of “graven or molten image” (Dt 27:15), because God transcends every material representation: “I am who I am” (Ex 3:14). Yet in the mystery of the Incarnation, the Son of God becomes visible in person: “When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son born of woman” (Gal 4:4). God became man in Jesus Christ, who thus becomes “the central point of reference for an understanding of the enigma of human existence, the created world and God himself”.(6)

This prime epiphany of “God who is Mystery” is both an encouragement and a challenge to Christians, also at the level of artistic creativity. From it has come a flowering of beauty which has drawn its sap precisely from the mystery of the Incarnation. In becoming man, the Son of God has introduced into human history all the evangelical wealth of the true and the good, and with this he has also unveiled a new dimension of beauty, of which the Gospel message is filled to the brim.

Sacred Scripture has thus become a sort of “immense vocabulary” (Paul Claudel) and “iconographic atlas” (Marc Chagall), from which both Christian culture and art have drawn. The Old Testament, read in the light of the New, has provided endless streams of inspiration. From the stories of the Creation and sin, the Flood, the cycle of the Patriarchs, the events of the Exodus to so many other episodes and characters in the history of salvation, the biblical text has fired the imagination of painters, poets, musicians, playwrights and film-makers. A figure like Job, to take but one example, with his searing and ever relevant question of suffering, still arouses an interest which is not just philosophical but literary and artistic as well. And what should we say of the New Testament? From the Nativity to Golgotha, from the Transfiguration to the Resurrection, from the miracles to the teachings of Christ, and on to the events recounted in the Acts of the Apostles or foreseen by the Apocalypse in an eschatological key, on countless occasions the biblical word has become image, music and poetry, evoking the mystery of “the Word made flesh” in the language of art.

In the history of human culture, all of this is a rich chapter of faith and beauty. Believers above all have gained from it in their experience of prayer and Christian living. Indeed for many of them, in times when few could read or write, representations of the Bible were a concrete mode of catechesis.(7) But for everyone, believers or not, the works of art inspired by Scripture remain a reflection of the unfathomable mystery which engulfs and inhabits the world.

A fruitful alliance between the Gospel and art

6. Every genuine artistic intuition goes beyond what the senses perceive and, reaching beneath reality's surface, strives to interpret its hidden mystery. The intuition itself springs from the depths of the human soul, where the desire to give meaning to one's own life is joined by the fleeting vision of beauty and of the mysterious unity of things. All artists experience the unbridgeable gap which lies between the work of their hands, however successful it may be, and the dazzling perfection of the beauty glimpsed in the ardour of the creative moment: what they manage to express in their painting, their sculpting, their creating is no more than a glimmer of the splendour which flared for a moment before the eyes of their spirit.

Believers find nothing strange in this: they know that they have had a momentary glimpse of the abyss of light which has its original wellspring in God. Is it in any way surprising that this leaves the spirit overwhelmed as it were, so that it can only stammer in reply? True artists above all are ready to acknowledge their limits and to make their own the words of the Apostle Paul, according to whom "God does not dwell in shrines made by human hands" so that "we ought not to think that the Deity is like gold or silver or stone, a representation by human art and imagination" (Acts 17:24, 29). If the intimate reality of things is always "beyond" the powers of human perception, how much more so is God in the depths of his unfathomable mystery!

The knowledge conferred by faith is of a different kind: it presupposes a personal encounter with God in Jesus Christ. Yet this knowledge too can be enriched by artistic intuition. An eloquent example of aesthetic contemplation sublimated in faith are, for example, the works of Fra Angelico. No less notable in this regard is the ecstatic lauda, which Saint Francis of Assisi twice repeats in the chartula which he composed after receiving the stigmata of Christ on the mountain of La Verna: "You are beauty... You are beauty!".(8) Saint Bonaventure comments: "In things of beauty, he contemplated the One who is supremely beautiful, and, led by the footprints he found in creatures, he followed the Beloved everywhere".(9) A corresponding approach is found in Eastern spirituality where Christ is described as "the supremely Beautiful, possessed of a beauty above all the children of earth".(10) Macarius the Great speaks of the transfiguring and liberating beauty of the Risen Lord in these terms: "The soul which has been fully illumined by the unspeakable beauty of the glory shining on the countenance of Christ overflows with the Holy Spirit... it is all eye, all light, all countenance".(11)

Every genuine art form in its own way is a path to the inmost reality of man and of the world. It is therefore a wholly valid approach to the realm of faith, which gives human experience its ultimate meaning. That is why the Gospel fullness of truth was bound from the beginning to stir the interest of artists, who by their very nature are alert to every "epiphany" of the inner beauty of things.

[*The origins*

7. The art which Christianity encountered in its early days was the ripe fruit of the classical world, articulating its aesthetic canons and embodying its values. Not only in their way of living and thinking, but also in the field of art,

faith obliged Christians to a discernment which did not allow an uncritical acceptance of this heritage. Art of Christian inspiration began therefore in a minor key, strictly tied to the need for believers to contrive Scripture-based signs to express both the mysteries of faith and a “symbolic code” by which they could distinguish and identify themselves, especially in the difficult times of persecution. Who does not recall the symbols which marked the first appearance of an art both pictorial and plastic? The fish, the loaves, the shepherd: in evoking the mystery, they became almost imperceptibly the first traces of a new art.

When the Edict of Constantine allowed Christians to declare themselves in full freedom, art became a privileged means for the expression of faith. Majestic basilicas began to appear, and in them the architectural canons of the pagan world were reproduced and at the same time modified to meet the demands of the new form of worship. How can we fail to recall at least the old Saint Peter's Basilica and the Basilica of Saint John Lateran, both funded by Constantine himself? Or Constantinople's Hagia Sophia built by Justinian, with its splendours of Byzantine art?

While architecture designed the space for worship, gradually the need to contemplate the mystery and to present it explicitly to the simple people led to the early forms of painting and sculpture. There appeared as well the first elements of art in word and sound. Among the many themes treated by Augustine we find De Musica; and Hilary of Poitiers, Ambrose, Prudentius, Ephrem the Syrian, Gregory of Nazianzus and Paulinus of Nola, to mention but a few, promoted a Christian poetry which was often of high quality not just as theology but also as literature. Their poetic work valued forms inherited from the classical authors, but was nourished by the pure sap of the Gospel, as Paulinus of Nola put it succinctly: “Our only art is faith and our music Christ”.(12) A little later, Gregory the Great compiled the Antiphonarium and thus laid the ground for the organic development of that most original sacred music which takes its name from him. Gregorian chant, with its inspired modulations, was to become down the centuries the music of the Church's faith in the liturgical celebration of the sacred mysteries. The “beautiful” was thus wedded to the “true”, so that through art too souls might be lifted up from the world of the senses to the eternal.

Along this path there were troubled moments. Precisely on the issue of depicting the Christian mystery, there arose in the early centuries a bitter controversy known to history as “the iconoclast crisis”. Sacred images, which were already widely used in Christian devotion, became the object of violent contention. The Council held at Nicaea in 787, which decreed the legitimacy of images and their veneration, was a historic event not just for the faith but for culture itself. The decisive argument to which the Bishops appealed in order to settle the controversy was the mystery of the Incarnation: if the Son of God had come into the world of visible realities—his humanity building a bridge between the visible and the invisible— then, by analogy, a representation of the mystery could be used, within the logic of signs, as a sensory evocation of the mystery. The icon is venerated not for its own sake, but points beyond to the subject which it represents.(13)

The Middle Ages

8. The succeeding centuries saw a great development of Christian art. In the East, the art of the icon continued to flourish, obeying theological and aesthetic norms charged with meaning and sustained by the conviction that, in a sense, the icon is a sacrament. By analogy with what occurs in the sacraments, the icon makes present the mystery of the Incarnation in one or other of its aspects. That is why the beauty of the icon can be best appreciated in a church where in the shadows burning lamps stir infinite flickerings of light. As Pavel Florensky has written: “By the flat light of day, gold is crude, heavy, useless, but by the tremulous light of a lamp or candle it springs to life and glitters in sparks beyond counting—now here, now there, evoking the sense of other lights, not of this earth, which fill the space of heaven”.(14)

In the West, artists start from the most varied viewpoints, depending also on the underlying convictions of the cultural world of their time. The artistic heritage built up over the centuries includes a vast array of sacred works of great inspiration, which still today leave the observer full of admiration. In the first place, there are the great buildings for worship, in which the functional is always wedded to the creative impulse inspired by a sense of the beautiful and an

intuition of the mystery. From here came the various styles well known in the history of art. The strength and simplicity of the Romanesque, expressed in cathedrals and abbeys, slowly evolved into the soaring splendours of the Gothic. These forms portray not only the genius of an artist but the soul of a people. In the play of light and shadow, in forms at times massive, at times delicate, structural considerations certainly come into play, but so too do the tensions peculiar to the experience of God, the mystery both “awesome” and “alluring”. How is one to summarize with a few brief references to each of the many different art forms, the creative power of the centuries of the Christian Middle Ages? An entire culture, albeit with the inescapable limits of all that is human, had become imbued with the Gospel; and where theology produced the Summa of Saint Thomas, church art moulded matter in a way which led to adoration of the mystery, and a wonderful poet like Dante Alighieri could compose “the sacred poem, to which both heaven and earth have turned their hand”,(15) as he himself described the Divine Comedy.

Humanism and the Renaissance

9. The favourable cultural climate that produced the extraordinary artistic flowering of Humanism and the Renaissance also had a significant impact on the way in which the artists of the period approached the religious theme. Naturally, their inspiration, like their style, varied greatly, at least among the best of them. But I do not intend to repeat things which you, as artists, know well. Writing from this Apostolic Palace, which is a mine of masterpieces perhaps unique in the world, I would rather give voice to the supreme artists who in this place lavished the wealth of their genius, often charged with great spiritual depth. From here can be heard the voice of Michelangelo who in the Sistine Chapel has presented the drama and mystery of the world from the Creation to the Last Judgement, giving a face to God the Father, to Christ the Judge, and to man on his arduous journey from the dawn to the consummation of history. Here speaks the delicate and profound genius of Raphael, highlighting in the array of his paintings, and especially in the “Dispute” in the Room of the Signatura, the mystery of the revelation of the Triune God, who in the Eucharist befriends man and sheds light on the questions and expectations of human intelligence. From this place, from the majestic Basilica dedicated to the Prince of the Apostles, from the Colonnade which spreads out from it like two arms open to welcome the whole human family, we still hear Bramante, Bernini, Borromini, Maderno, to name only the more important artists, all rendering visible the perception of the mystery which makes of the Church a universally hospitable community, mother and travelling companion to all men and women in their search for God.

This extraordinary complex is a remarkably powerful expression of sacred art, rising to heights of imperishable aesthetic and religious excellence. What has characterized sacred art more and more, under the impulse of Humanism and the Renaissance, and then of successive cultural and scientific trends, is a growing interest in everything human, in the world, and in the reality of history. In itself, such a concern is not at all a danger for Christian faith, centred on the mystery of the Incarnation and therefore on God's valuing of the human being. The great artists mentioned above are a demonstration of this. Suffice it to think of the way in which Michelangelo represents the beauty of the human body in his painting and sculpture.(16)

Even in the changed climate of more recent centuries, when a part of society seems to have become indifferent to faith, religious art has continued on its way. This can be more widely appreciated if we look beyond the figurative arts to the great development of sacred music through this same period, either composed for the liturgy or simply treating religious themes. Apart from the many artists who made sacred music their chief concern—how can we forget Pier Luigi da Palestrina, Orlando di Lasso, Tomás Luis de Victoria?—it is also true that many of the great composers—from Handel to Bach, from Mozart to Schubert, from Beethoven to Berlioz, from Liszt to Verdi—have given us works of the highest inspiration in this field.]

Towards a renewed dialogue

10. It is true nevertheless that, in the modern era, alongside this Christian humanism which has continued to produce important works of culture and art, another kind of humanism, marked by the absence of God and often by opposition to God, has gradually asserted itself.

Such an atmosphere has sometimes led to a separation of the world of art and the world of faith, at least in the sense that many artists have a diminished interest in religious themes.

You know, however, that the Church has not ceased to nurture great appreciation for the value of art as such. Even beyond its typically religious expressions, true art has a close affinity with the world of faith, so that, even in situations where culture and the Church are far apart, art remains a kind of bridge to religious experience. In so far as it seeks the beautiful, fruit of an imagination which rises above the everyday, art is by its nature a kind of appeal to the mystery. Even when they explore the darkest depths of the soul or the most unsettling aspects of evil, artists give voice in a way to the universal desire for redemption.

It is clear, therefore, why the Church is especially concerned for the dialogue with art and is keen that in our own time there be a new alliance with artists, as called for by my revered predecessor Paul VI in his vibrant speech to artists during a special meeting he had with them in the Sistine Chapel on 7 May 1964.⁽¹⁷⁾ From such cooperation the Church hopes for a renewed “epiphany” of beauty in our time and apt responses to the particular needs of the Christian community.

In the spirit of the Second Vatican Council

11. The Second Vatican Council laid the foundation for a renewed relationship between the Church and culture, with immediate implications for the world of art. This is a relationship offered in friendship, openness and dialogue. In the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, the Fathers of the Council stressed “the great importance” of literature and the arts in human life: “They seek to probe the true nature of man, his problems and experiences, as he strives to know and perfect himself and the world, to discover his place in history and the universe, to portray his miseries and joys, his needs and strengths, with a view to a better future”.⁽¹⁸⁾

On this basis, at the end of the Council the Fathers addressed a greeting and an appeal to artists: “This world—they said—in which we live needs beauty in order not to sink into despair. Beauty, like truth, brings joy to the human heart and is that precious fruit which resists the erosion of time, which unites generations and enables them to be one in admiration!”.⁽¹⁹⁾ In this spirit of profound respect for beauty, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* recalled the historic friendliness of the Church towards art and, referring more specifically to sacred art, the “summit” of religious art, did not hesitate to consider artists as having “a noble ministry” when their works reflect in some way the infinite beauty of God and raise people's minds to him.⁽²⁰⁾ Thanks also to the help of artists “the knowledge of God can be better revealed and the preaching of the Gospel can become clearer to the human mind”.⁽²¹⁾ In this light, it comes as no surprise when Father Marie Dominique Chenu claims that the work of the historian of theology would be incomplete if he failed to give due attention to works of art, both literary and figurative, which are in their own way “not only aesthetic representations, but genuine 'sources' of theology”.⁽²²⁾

The Church needs art

12. In order to communicate the message entrusted to her by Christ, the Church needs art. Art must make perceptible, and as far as possible attractive, the world of the spirit, of the invisible, of God. It must therefore translate into meaningful terms that which is in itself ineffable. Art has a unique capacity to take one or other facet of the message and translate it into colours, shapes and sounds which nourish the intuition of those who look or listen. It does so without emptying the message itself of its transcendent value and its aura of mystery.

The Church has need especially of those who can do this on the literary and figurative level, using the endless possibilities of images and their symbolic force. Christ himself made extensive use of images in his preaching, fully in keeping with his willingness to become, in the Incarnation, the icon of the unseen God.

The Church also needs musicians. How many sacred works have been composed through the centuries by people deeply imbued with the sense of the mystery! The faith of countless believers has been nourished by melodies flowing from the hearts of other believers, either introduced into the liturgy or used as an aid to dignified worship. In song, faith is experienced as vibrant joy, love, and confident expectation of the saving intervention of God.

The Church needs architects, because she needs spaces to bring the Christian people together and celebrate the mysteries of salvation. After the terrible destruction of the last World War and the growth of great cities, a new generation of architects showed themselves adept at responding to the exigencies of Christian worship, confirming that the religious theme can still inspire architectural design in our own day. Not infrequently these architects have constructed churches which are both places of prayer and true works of art.

Does art need the Church?

13. The Church therefore needs art. But can it also be said that art needs the Church? The question may seem like a provocation. Yet, rightly understood, it is both legitimate and profound. Artists are constantly in search of the hidden meaning of things, and their torment is to succeed in expressing the world of the ineffable. How then can we fail to see what a great source of inspiration is offered by that kind of homeland of the soul that is religion? Is it not perhaps within the realm of religion that the most vital personal questions are posed, and answers both concrete and definitive are sought?

In fact, the religious theme has been among those most frequently treated by artists in every age. The Church has always appealed to their creative powers in interpreting the Gospel message and discerning its precise application in the life of the Christian community. This partnership has been a source of mutual spiritual enrichment. Ultimately, it has been a great boon for an understanding of man, of the authentic image and truth of the person. The special bond between art and Christian revelation has also become evident. This does not mean that human genius has not found inspiration in other religious contexts. It is enough to recall the art of the ancient world, especially Greek and Roman art, or the art which still

flourishes in the very ancient civilizations of the East. It remains true, however, that because of its central doctrine of the Incarnation of the Word of God, Christianity offers artists a horizon especially rich in inspiration. What an impoverishment it would be for art to abandon the inexhaustible mine of the Gospel!

An appeal to artists

14. With this Letter, I turn to you, the artists of the world, to assure you of my esteem and to help consolidate a more constructive partnership between art and the Church. Mine is an invitation to rediscover the depth of the spiritual and religious dimension which has been typical of art in its noblest forms in every age. It is with this in mind that I appeal to you, artists of the written and spoken word, of the theatre and music, of the plastic arts and the most recent technologies in the field of communication. I appeal especially to you, Christian artists: I wish to remind each of you that, beyond functional considerations, the close alliance that has always existed between the Gospel and art means that you are invited to use your creative intuition to enter into the heart of the mystery of the Incarnate God and at the same time into the mystery of man.

Human beings, in a certain sense, are unknown to themselves. Jesus Christ not only reveals God, but “fully reveals man to man”.⁽²³⁾ In Christ, God has reconciled the world to himself. All believers are called to bear witness to this; but it is up to you, men and women who have given your lives to art, to declare with all the wealth of your ingenuity that in Christ the world is redeemed: the human person is redeemed, the human body is redeemed, and the whole creation which, according to Saint Paul, “awaits impatiently the revelation of the children of God” (Rom 8:19), is redeemed. The creation awaits the revelation of the children of God also through art and in art. This is your task. Humanity in every age, and even today, looks to works of art to shed light upon its path and its destiny.

The Creator Spirit and artistic inspiration

15. Often in the Church there resounds the invocation to the Holy Spirit: *Veni, Creator Spiritus...* – “Come, O Creator Spirit, visit our minds, fill with your grace the hearts you have created”.⁽²⁴⁾

The Holy Spirit, “the Breath” (*ruah*), is the One referred to already in the Book of Genesis: “The earth was without form and void, and darkness was on the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters” (1:2). What affinity between the words “breath - breathing” and “inspiration”! The Spirit is the mysterious Artist of the universe. Looking to the Third Millennium, I would hope that all artists might receive in abundance the gift of that creative inspiration which is the starting-point of every true work of art.

Dear artists, you well know that there are many impulses which, either from within or from without, can inspire your talent. Every genuine inspiration, however, contains some tremor of that “breath” with which the Creator Spirit suffused the work of creation from the very beginning. Overseeing the mysterious laws governing the universe, the divine breath of the Creator Spirit reaches out to human genius and stirs its creative power. He touches it with a

kind of inner illumination which brings together the sense of the good and the beautiful, and he awakens energies of mind and heart which enable it to conceive an idea and give it form in a work of art. It is right then to speak, even if only analogically, of “moments of grace”, because the human being is able to experience in some way the Absolute who is utterly beyond.

The “Beauty” that saves

16. On the threshold of the Third Millennium, my hope for all of you who are artists is that you will have an especially intense experience of creative inspiration. May the beauty which you pass on to generations still to come be such that it will stir them to wonder! Faced with the sacredness of life and of the human person, and before the marvels of the universe, wonder is the only appropriate attitude.

From this wonder there can come that enthusiasm of which Norwid spoke in the poem to which I referred earlier. People of today and tomorrow need this enthusiasm if they are to meet and master the crucial challenges which stand before us. Thanks to this enthusiasm, humanity, every time it loses its way, will be able to lift itself up and set out again on the right path. In this sense it has been said with profound insight that “beauty will save the world”.
(25)

Beauty is a key to the mystery and a call to transcendence. It is an invitation to savour life and to dream of the future. That is why the beauty of created things can never fully satisfy. It stirs that hidden nostalgia for God which a lover of beauty like Saint Augustine could express in incomparable terms: “Late have I loved you, beauty so old and so new: late have I loved you!”.(26)

Artists of the world, may your many different paths all lead to that infinite Ocean of beauty where wonder becomes awe, exhilaration, unspeakable joy.

May you be guided and inspired by the mystery of the Risen Christ, whom the Church in these days contemplates with joy.

May the Blessed Virgin Mary be with you always: she is the “tota pulchra” portrayed by countless artists, whom Dante contemplates among the splendours of Paradise as “beauty that was joy in the eyes of all the other saints”.(27)

“From chaos there rises the world of the spirit”. These words of Adam Mickiewicz, written at a time of great hardship for his Polish homeland,(28) prompt my hope for you: may your art help to affirm that true beauty which, as a glimmer of the Spirit of God, will transfigure matter, opening the human soul to the sense of the eternal.

With my heartfelt good wishes!

From the Vatican, 4 April 1999, Easter Sunday.

(1) *Dialogus de Ludo Globi*, lib. II: Philosophisch-Theologische Schriften, Vienna 1967, III, p. 332.

- (2) The moral virtues, and among them prudence in particular, allow the subject to act in harmony with the criterion of moral good and evil: according to *recta ratio agibilium* (the right criterion of action). Art, however, is defined by philosophy as *recta ratio factibilium* (the right criterion of production).
- (3) Promethidion, Bogumil, vv. 185-186: *Pisma wybrane*, Warsaw 1968, vol. 2, p. 216.
- (4) The Greek translation of the Septuagint expresses this well in rendering the Hebrew term *t(o-)b* (good) as *kalón* (beautiful).
- (5) Philebus, 65 A.
- (6) JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio* (14 September 1998), 80: AAS 91 (1999), 67.
- (7) This pedagogical principle was given authoritative formulation by Saint Gregory the Great in a letter of 599 to Serenus, Bishop of Marseilles: "Painting is employed in churches so that those who cannot read or write may at least read on the walls what they cannot decipher on the page", *Epistulae*, IX, 209: CCL 140A, 1714.
- (8) *Lodi di Dio Altissimo*, vv. 7 and 10: *Fonti Francescane*, No. 261, Padua 1982, p. 177.
- (9) *Legenda Maior*, IX, 1: *Fonti Francescane*, No. 1162, loc. cit., p. 911.
- (10) Enkomia of the Orthós of the Holy and Great Saturday.
- (11) Homily I, 2: PG 34, 451.
- (12) "At nobis ars una fides et musica Christus": *Carmen* 20, 31: CCL 203, 144.
- (13) Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Duodecimum Saeculum* (4 December 1987), 8-9: AAS 80 (1988), pp. 247-249.
- (14) *La prospettiva rovesciata ed altri scritti*, Rome 1984, p. 63.
- (15) *Paradiso* XXV, 1-2.
- (16) Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Homily at the Mass for the Conclusion of the Restoration of Michelangelo's Frescoes in the Sistine Chapel, 8 April 1994: *Insegnamenti*, XVII, 1 (1994), 899-904.
- (17) Cf. AAS 56 (1964), 438-444.
- (18) No. 62.
- (19) Message to Artists, 8 December 1965: AAS 58 (1966), 13.
- (20) Cf. No. 122.
- (21) SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 62.
- (22) *La teologia nel XII secolo*, Milan 1992, p. 9.
- (23) SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 22.
- (24) Hymn at Vespers on Pentecost.
- (25) F. DOSTOYEVSKY, *The Idiot*, Part III, chap. 5.
- (26) *Sero te amavi! Pulchritudo tam antiqua et tam nova, sero te amavi! Confessions*, 10, 27: CCL 27, 251.
- (27) *Paradiso* XXXI, 134-135.
- (28) *Oda do mlodosci*, v. 69: *Wybór poezji*, Wrocław 1986, vol. 1, p. 63.

Session IV

**MORE THAN BREAD:
FAITH, BEAUTY & EVERYDAY LIVING**

excerpts from

Our Town: A Play in Three Acts,

Culture Care: Reconnecting with Beauty for our Common Life,

&

“Listening for the Mystery: Poet Maurice Manning on the Wonder of Language, the Value of Form, & the Legacy He Hopes to Leave”

*“To practice any art, no matter how well or badly,
is a way to make your soul grow.*

So do it.”

-KURT VONNEGUT

Session IV

I | Thornton Wilder
Excerpt from *Our Town: A Play in Three Acts* (1938)

Lady in a Box: Oh, Mr. Webb? Mr. Webb, is there any culture or love of beauty in Grover's Corners?

Mr. Webb: Well, ma'am, there ain't much—not in the sense you mean. Come to think of it, there's some girls that play the piano at High School Commencement; but they ain't happy about it. No, ma'am, there isn't much culture; but maybe this is the place to tell you that we've got a lot of pleasures of a kind here: we like the sun comin' up over the mountain in the morning, and we all notice a good deal about the birds. We pay a lot of attention to them. And we watch the change of the seasons; yes, everybody knows about them. But those other things—you're right, ma'am,—there ain't much.—*Robinson Crusoe* and the Bible; and Handel's "Largo," we all know that; and Whistler's "Mother"—those are just about as far as we go.

Lady in a Box: So I thought. Thank you, Mr. Webb.

Stage Manager: Thank you, Mr. Webb.

Mr. Webb *retires.*

II | Makoto Fujimura
*Culture Care: Reconnecting with Beauty for
our Common Life* (2017)
Excerpts from Chapter 1: “On
Becoming Generative”

Bringing Beauty Into Our Lives

As a newlywed couple, my wife and I began our journey with very little. After Judy and I got married in the summer of 1983, after college, we moved to Connecticut for Judy to pursue her master's degree in marriage counseling. I taught at a special education school and painted at home. We had a tight budget and often had to ration our food (lots of tuna cans!) just to get through the week.

One evening I was sitting alone, waiting for Judy to come home to our small apartment, worried about how we were going to afford the rent and pay for necessities over the weekend. Our refrigerator was empty and I had no cash left.

Then Judy walked in, and she had brought home a bouquet of flowers. I got really upset.

"How could you think of buying flowers if we can't even eat!" I remember saying, frustrated.

Judy's reply has been etched in my heart for over thirty years now. "*We need to feed our souls, too.*"

The irony is that I am an artist. I am the one, supposedly, feeding people's souls. But in worrying for tomorrow, in the stoic responsibility I felt to make ends meet, to survive, I failed to be the artist. Judy was the artist: she brought home a bouquet.

I do not remember what we ended up eating that day, or that month (probably tuna fish). But I do remember that particular bouquet of flowers. I painted them.

"*We need to feed our souls, too.*" Those words still resonate with me today.

Is Judy still right? Do we, as human beings, need more than food and shelter? Do we need beauty in our lives? Given our limited resources, how do we cultivate and care for our souls? And how do these questions apply to the larger culture?

Bringing home a bouquet of flowers created a *genesis moment* for me. Judy's small act fed my soul. It renewed my conviction as an artist. It gave me new perspective. It challenged me to deliberately focus on endeavors in which I could truly be an artist of the soul. That moment engendered many more genesis moments in the year that followed, contributing to decisions small and large that have redefined my life and provided inspiration for myself, my family, and my communities.

Genesis moments like this often include elements of the great story told in the beginning of the biblical book of Genesis: creativity, growth—and failure. Two of these elements are common in discussions about arts and culture. God create and calls his creatures to fruitfulness. Adam exercises his own creativity in naming what has been created. But the story also runs into failure and finitude.

Generative thinking often starts out with a failure, like my failure to think and act as an artist. I have discovered that something is awakened through failure, tragedy, and disappointment. It is a place of learning and potential creativity. In such moments you can get lost in despair or denial, or you can recognize the failure and run toward the hope of something new.

The key to recognizing genesis moments is to assume that every moment is fresh. Creativity applied in a moment of weakness and vulnerability can turn failure into enduring conversation, opening new vistas of inspiration and incarnation. To remember what Judy did, to speak of it with others, to value her care—all this is generative, as her act can be honored and become a touchpoint for others, leading to the birth of ideas and actions, artifacts and relationships that would not otherwise have been.

The bouquet was also an emblem of *generosity*. Judy's generous heart—more generous than mine at that moment—valued beauty over the day-to-day worries that had so nearly narrowed my focus. Generative thinking is fueled by generosity because it so often must work against a mindset that has survival and utility in the foreground. In a culture dominated by this mindset, generosity has an unexpectedness that can set the context for the renewal of our hearts. An encounter with generosity can remind us that life always overflows our attempts to reduce it to a commodity or a transaction—because it is a gift. Life and beauty are gratuitous in the best senses of that word

Session IV

III | “Listening for the Mystery: Poet Maurice Manning on the Wonder of Language, the Value of Form, & the Legacy He Hopes to Leave,” Interview by David Kern (2019)

The house is old.

Built before the Civil War, it’s a classic southern farmhouse: white, with tall narrow windows and a large front porch, reached via three handmade stone steps. The yellow front door, peeking from behind the screen, offers a pop of color, while two hanging swings and two wooden rockers, one on either side, balance the entryway like a neighborly chiasm. It’s the kind of house today’s *au courant* bungalows might imitate. But Maurice Manning’s Kentucky farmhouse is original in the truest sense.

Manning bought the house nearly two decades ago and restored it himself, making it livable according to his then-bachelor standards. Today, however, he shares it with his family—wife, Amanda, a screenwriter, painter, and children’s book author; daughter, Lillian, three years old and a delightful chat; and two aging lab mixes, strays that appeared over the years. Their home is full of books (stored on handmade shelves and stacked every-which-way) and artwork (much of it by Amanda) and toy trains and dolls. End tables and coffee tables are buried under books and magazines and newspapers, and virtually every window-adjacent surface hosts a plant. There’s an old wood-burning stove and the stone of an ancient fireplace and a great cushioned deep-red recliner, perfect for lounging with a book or a manuscript that needs to be edited. It’s the sort of home in which you would hope to find a poet. In recent years, the Mannings added a kitchen and a bedroom to the back of the house, a more modern space that is nonetheless as welcoming and cozy as the rest of the place.

Manning has written each collection of his poetry in this home—the seventh of which, *Railsplitter*, is due out in October—and it’s no surprise that a poet who takes so much pride in the place that he’s from also takes great pride in the place where he lives.

Just as their home is a creative, living monument to a simpler (although not simplistic) way of life, the rest of their twenty-acre farm is similarly curated. That is not to say that they’ve tamed the ground they live on. Far from it. Instead, Manning and his family have shaped

their land's wildness into a dreamscape. It's a poet's playground. Manning has mowed nearly three-miles-worth of paths into the wooded acreage, including little coves for contemplation and rest, complete with large flat rocks for seating. He's preserved the centuries-old stone wall that borders the property and an old tobacco barn which sits across the driveway. He doesn't seem particularly interested in using the land so much as delighting in it. He's not a farmer in the usual sense of the word (although he does garden), but he does engage in conservation and husbandry.

Manning's commitment to preservation is further revealed in *Railsplitter*, that forthcoming collection, which Copper Canyon will be releasing this fall. A series of poems from the point-of-view of Abraham Lincoln after he has been assassinated, it seems consumed with legend and legacy, memory and tradition. Manning's Lincoln is, unsurprisingly, a melancholy ghost, burdened not just by the facts of his death, but by the *meaning* of his death, and by the drama of the times in which he lived his life and the story he left behind. There's joy in these lines, but there's also regret and sadness, and, occasionally, shame. *Railsplitter* is a collection about remembering and being remembered. In the wrong poet's hands it might have descended into cynicism or sentimentality, and the fact that it works is proof that Manning is one of our best living poets.

Recently, Manning spoke with *FORMA* about his approach to writing poetry, the legacy he wants to leave behind, and the mystery that is a poem. We sat on that welcoming front porch while the birds sang and the old lab enjoyed the shade and talked about the way the poet plays.

* * *

So when you have an idea, the seed of a poem, is that more often an opening line or an image or a concept, as in *Railsplitter*?

Well, over the last few days I have been thinking about the sound of a screen door slapping against its frame. It's a very particular sound, especially an old wooden-frame screen door. So that was an image, a sound image, that I wanted to think about. And I let it percolate. Eventually, I remembered an old tradition in which people would lie old screen doors across a pair of sawhorses and then set beans from gardens on the screen door to dry and dehydrate for storage. Months later they would soak the dried beans in water and cook them that way. That's called shucky beans. So I started trying to connect these little things together and I got the first couple of lines and they were, "I'll tell you one thing you can do if you have an old screen door with the slap gone out of it is lay it across a pair of sawhorses and spread your shucky beans on the screen and let the sun take it from there." As I usually do, I organized all of that into four-beat lines.

Do you vary from that meter? It seemed like you did quite a bit in *Railsplitter*.

Oh yeah, that book is metrically diverse. I've got couplets of five/four beats alternating and four/three and sonnets and villanelle and rhyme-royale—all kinds of different forms.

* * *

So do you recommend that younger poets identify a couple of forms that appeal to them and internalize those forms so that they guide their work? Or do you think that they ought to be working more broadly?

In recent years I've tended to steer students toward traditional forms. The simplest is blank verse, writing in four/five-beat lines without intentional rhyme. I suggest blank verse or metrical lines to students because it means that they're writing with their ear rather than *only* their mind. I think it helps them appreciate that poetry has an oral character. Not that I'm opposed to an interior sort of metaphysical poetry. I'm not at all. But I think the poetic tradition, going back thousands of years, has an oral quality *and* an aural quality. In the old days people sat around reciting verse. And if the lines didn't have rhythm, then the recitation was probably going to be flat.

So the music of the verse is a guide for the relationship between the poet and the reader?

It can be. I'm writing to give the reader something to listen to, for sure. And hopefully there's something beyond that, something to ponder.

To linger over.

Yes. It's just the way I'm wired. I'm a person who listens and that's long been my habit. I much prefer listening to the sounds in the world than talking or making my own sounds. And I prefer sensing the rhythms of the natural world. Right now the katydids are chirping to their particular rhythm. And I love feeling that in the world. It exists in its rhythm and its sense of sound. Whenever I want to make my own sounds with words, that is what I draw from.

Earlier you mentioned the old wooden screen door slamming against the wooden frame. You mentioned this kind of aural image might be the beginning of your poem. Are you looking for words that *represent* that sound (as in onomatopoeia) or are you trying to figure out what the *meaning* in that sound is? What does the sound represent?

Well the word that appears in this particular poem more than once is "slap." So that's the onomatopoeia language that I associate with the sound of the screen door slapping against the wooden frame. It might not be the most accurate word—"thwack" comes to mind, or "spank." "Clap" might work. All of those words are Anglo-Saxon and so they are bodily vocabulary. And this is something that I've been thinking about a lot in recent years. The language of a poem can tie it to the world, so I've been interested in utilizing words that have a sonic character. And it so happens that most of those words that have a sonic character come to us from Anglo-Saxon and Germanic roots. You have to get your mouth physically involved in pronouncing those languages, whereas Romance languages are much softer sounding. The words that we use in English that come from Latin and Greek tend to be softer. And they tend to refer to our interior states, our moods, our feelings, our ideas.

Words like “spank,” “clap,” “punch,” “hammer,” “thwack,” “hack,” and “chop” are heavy on the consonants, and to pronounce the word you have to vocalize them very purposefully.

There’s a sort of poetry in the word itself.

Yes. And the poetry that I tend to respond to and the poetry that I’ve wanted to try writing myself certainly is interested in interior states and moods and contemplation. But I want to use that hard worldly language to get hold of a particular mood or a contemplative point. It’s ironic that we can get to our deepest sense of passion and grief and love using “unpretty” language.

Consider William Carlos Williams’ “Red Wheelbarrow,” which I often cite to my students. “So much depends / upon . . .” That’s almost throw away language. There’s nothing poetic about those words. There’s nothing sonically appealing about that phrase. But then the poem continues, “a red wheel / barrow / glazed with rain / water / beside the white / chickens.” The poem really just kind blossoms once you get to the “red wheelbarrow” (Anglo-Saxon words), “glazed,” (Anglo-Saxon), “with rain water.” Suddenly the poem solidifies and the language reflects that. And the verb there, “glazed,” makes the entire poem. It causes the reader to *see* the image and it informs the reader that it has been raining but it is not raining anymore and for the wheelbarrow to have a glazed appearance suggests that the sun has come out or the rain has stopped. It’s a very economical use of language.

That is a poem in which the lines are broken in very specific ways. When you’re not working in some much more strict metrical form how do you decide where your lines are going to end?

Well, I cannot not write in meter.

It doesn’t feel right?

It doesn’t feel right. It’s just my way, it’s the instinct that I follow. I can’t write free verse. I certainly admire free verse, but I think that it’s actually really hard to do well because you don’t want to abandon rhythm. But if you’re not leaning on meter then you’ve got to draw your rhythm from somewhere else. And, as I often say to students (which is kind of ridiculous because I’m in the position of recommending something that I don’t do myself), the tension in free verse comes between the syntax and enjambment and/or line break. You want the line to be its own thing. And then if it continues to the next line, you want that continuation to be a little bit of a surprise.

* * *

So you have this line or this image and then are you going to sit on it for awhile—for example, this screen door. Do you write it down right away? Do you begin working on it? Is there a specific pattern that you follow once you have that image?

It depends. Sometimes something will sort of pop into mind with a bit of an urgency and I get to my notebook as quickly as I can.

So you're not necessarily one of those people who says, "If I forget about it later, it didn't matter"?

If something is going to matter, I keep it in mind, so far. My mental faculties are not diminished, yet. It's sort of like a stray dog. Something will kind of hang around and if it's going to become a poem it keeps coming around and gets friendlier.

And then you start petting it, then you feed it.

Then I'm on the hook.

How do you know when a poem is done? You're finishing up a collection right now and you've been editing and revising it. But how do you know a poem has been kept around long enough and that you have got to set it free now?

Well Yeats said a poem is never finished. He famously revised poems well after they were originally published. I don't have that attachment. A poem feels finished the way you finish a meal. "Okay, that's enough. I'm full."

Do you mean that you feel full of the poem or the poem itself feels full?

The poem feels full itself.

Like it's a guest that you've fed and who sits back from the table.

Yes. I write and revise simultaneously, up to a point. I will always go back and revise when I'm trying to put a book together or send something out to publish. And some poems just have their own character. There was a poem that I worked on for five or six years before it felt right. For a long time I knew it wasn't right. And some of that was just organizing the dramatic material because I often work with narrative. There's a character or there's an event. There's an action that has to be presented in a plausible dramatic way and getting all of that balanced and focused and with a line running through it to hold it together. Those are the things that I'm thinking about as I'm writing and then I'm able, usually, to see "okay, well this piece is not connected well with that piece," so I revise as I go and make the connection a little better. Then there'll be times when I know there's a gap, there's something missing.

Like there's an idea that incomplete ?

Yes, exactly. And I'll go back and add. This might be days, weeks, months down the line.

So, in the new book you talk (or your character does) about the idea of creating something that will last long after you're gone. This is an idea that your version of

Lincoln returns to. As a poet is that something you're thinking about? Is that something you set out to do, that is the goal of your work?

I do think about it, increasingly. That's something that I value, that I observed when I was growing up. It is a value that I somehow understood early on and it's certainly something that I've had reinforced by Wendell Berry. I remember one day when I was a student at the University of Kentucky I stopped by his office and I said, "What have you been up to?" And he said, "Well I've been planting walnut trees." He had planted something like two hundred trees. And he said, "Yeah I hope to pay for my great-grandchildren's college education." And he might not live to see his great-grandchildren become college age. That really impressed me. And so here we plant as many trees as we can. I'm a member of an organization called Kentucky Writers and Artists for Reforestation. We go down to abandoned strip mine sights and plant trees by the thousands. And we're planting saplings, two feet tall, and most of us won't be alive in fifty years but those trees will be mature and they stand a chance of living two or three hundred years. And to know that you've done something in the world that will make a difference after you're gone is a very gratifying thing.

Do you view writing a poem like planting a tree?

Yes. It has that quality, especially with the gravity of having a three-and-a-half year-old daughter born when I was forty-nine and my wife was forty-six. The gravity of knowing that she might not know me when she's an adult. I might not be here. But she may know me through the things that I've written. I think a lot about that.

Do you feel like you have to reveal something about yourself in the work?

If anything it's a manner, a way of regarding the world and what's in the world. How we ought to belong to the world. I think about that a lot, especially in our present age when so much of human experience seems to be about *not* belonging, about being individuals. I don't think that's the way we're supposed to be. I think we're supposed to live with a sense of belonging to this world and being stewards of it. And the only way we can become real individuals is by recognizing what we're connected to and what we belong to: to each other, to the trees, to the rivers, to the air. You know. Not jobs, or bank account, or possessions.

In "John Brown's Baby Had a Cold" in the new book, the character of Abraham Lincoln writes about the idea of poetry "being in the air" in 1859 and 1860. I was taken by that line, that image. Do you think that is always true? Is poetry *always* in the air and it's your vocation to harness or discover or reveal it, or was it specific to his time and his imagination?

I've come to believe that the poem belongs to the world. I increasingly don't think of myself as the person who's *creating* a poem. I think of myself as the person who has the task of *finding* the poem that's already there and giving it a form that makes it available to others. Or of giving it a form that isolates it, if briefly, for me to understand.

Is that the job of every poet? Is that what being a poet is, in your opinion?

I can't make a claim for others. It's the way I approach it.

Would you call that vocation? Do you see that as *your* vocation?

Yes, I do. It's taken me years to accept that and to characterize it in such terms. Early on I was concerned with learning the craft, and eventually the craft became intuitive enough that I began to think less consciously about it. And then you can have a different perspective on what you're doing. I don't want to sound overly mystical about this, but there's an element where I don't feel like I'm in charge of doing this. I feel like it's already there and I am the person picking the beans or shucking the corn.

We were out in your woods earlier talking about how you pick black raspberries with a bucket as you walk along the paths . . .

Yes. They're there. I'm not responsible for them. But I can pick them.

So if we're following this rabbit trail, so to speak, is it too much to say that maybe each blackberry is like a line or an idea that takes you somewhere? Or is the blackberry the completed poem itself?

Well I think it can be both. The raspberry or the blackberry could be the individual poem or it could be the line, or symbolic of the line, or symbolic of the whole poem.

Maybe I'm just hungry, maybe the poem is the cobbler. You write on sketchbooks it appears. Do you have specific pens you like to use?

This is a pen that was given to me by the late Claudia Emerson, who was a very dear friend of mine, a wonderful poet who died way too young. We were at the Sewanee's Writer's Conference in the summer of 2014. And she and I were sitting beside each other while someone was giving a lecture and I was taking notes and I had some kind of cheap drug store pen and she nudged me and said, "Don't you think you should use a more serious writing instrument?" I said, "What do you mean?" And she said, "You need to have a real ink pen to do what you do. Take it seriously." And I thought "Wow, she's right about that." And it triggered this bizarre memory of when I was a little boy and I couldn't read or write. I was staying with my great-grandmother, which I often did at the time, and she had an old chest of drawers that had one drawer that was basically junk, and she had an old dried up fountain pen in there. And I used to take it out and take the cap off and scratch around on paper pretending to write. I liked the sound of the nib scratching the paper. And as soon as Claudia told me that I needed a serious writing instrument I suddenly remembered that little thing that I did when I was three or four. When that grandmother died I got that fountain pen and I kept it somewhere. So after the Sewanee conference in 2014, Claudia sent me this pen that I have now. And I thought, "Wow that looks very familiar." So I went to my mother's house where I still have some belongings and I rummaged around and I found the pen that had been my great-grandmother's and it's the exact same pen. Same brand.

Wow. Who makes it?

Pelikan. And it's even the same color. Turquoise, pearl, and black tip. Black cap. It was eerie—the pen that had been my grandmother's and is at least eighty years old. So there's this real continuity symbolized by this gift from my friend Claudia.

When I interviewed Wendell Berry a couple years ago he talked about how he writes longhand on a yellow legal pad with a pencil. For him there's value in actually writing it physically as opposed to doing so on a typewriter (let alone a computer).

Yes. I like to have my hands on. I happen to prefer unlined paper of a certain thickness because it is more tactile. It just makes the experience of writing lines of poetry more bodily. I can hear the lines.