Art and Religion

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Does art hold up the mirror to its period? Or does every period hold up the mirror to its art?

Does the artist follow or lead? Or does he walk alone, heeding only the categorical imperatives of his talent and the inner logic of the tradition within which he works?

Is he the representative of his epoch? Or does he stand for a constituency no wider than that particular class of talented persons—his predecessors, contemporaries and successors—to which, by the predestination of his heredity, he happens to belong?

All these questions can be correctly answered now in the affirmative, now in the negative, now with a simultaneous yes and no. There are no general rules; there are only particular cases; and most of these cases exist, so far as we are concerned, in a thick night of ignorance.

Here, for example, is the case that presents itself to every tourist who goes to Rome—the fascinatingly enigmatic case of baroque art and seventeenth-century Catholicism. In what way were the two related? What was the nature of the connection between the art forms of the period and the religious experiences of those who lived through it?

Three hundred years after the event all that we know for certain is that the personages represented in baroque religious art are all in a state of chronic emotional excitement. They wave their arms, roll their eyes, press hands to palpitating bosoms, sometimes, in an excess of feeling, swoon away into unconsciousness. We look at them with a mixture of aesthetic admiration and moral distaste, then start to speculate about the men and women who were contemporary with them. Was their religious life as wildly agitated as the life of these creatures of the painters' and sculptors' imagination? And, if so, had the art been modelled on their agitation, or was their agitation due to familiarity with an art that had become agitated for purely aesthetic reasons? Or, finally, was there no agitation in the real world corresponding to that prevailing in the worlds of painting and sculpture? Baroque artists were tired of doing what their predeces-

sors had done and were committed by the inner logic of their tradition to an exploration of the inordinate; therefore the figures above the altars had to gesticulate in a studied frenzy. But the religious life of the people who worshipped at those altars—had that become significantly different from the religious life of the men and women of other periods? Were there not then, as always, a few ardent contemplatives and actives, imperfectly leavening a great lump of the legalistic and the corybantic, the time-serving and the luke-warm?

I myself incline to the last alternative. Environment is never the sole determinant, and heredity is always at work, producing every variety of physique and temperament at every period of history. All the potentialities of human nature exist at all times, and at all times (in spite of an environment which may be unfavorable to some of them) practically all the potentialities are to some extent actualized. One has only to read Salimbene's *Chronicle* and Law's *Serious Call* in order to realize that there were as many irreligious people in the ages of faith as there were pietists in the ages of reason. The Byzantines who went mad about trinitarian theology were the same Byzantines who went mad about the chariot races. And our own age of atomic physics is also a notable age of astrology and numerology. At every period there exists, not a synthesis, but a mere brute collocation of opposites and incompatibles. And yet at any given epoch there is only one prevailing style of art, in terms of which painters and sculptors treat of a strictly limited number of subjects. Art may be defined, in this context, as a process of selection and transformation, whereby an unmanageable multiplicity is reduced to a semblance, at least, of unity. Consequently we must never expect to find in art a reflection of contemporary reality as it is actually experienced by human beings in all their congenital and acquired variety. Thus, from a study of the restrained and formalized art of the Italian *trecento* who could infer the existence of those wild religious revivals, which were so characteristic a feature of the period? And, conversely, who from the frenzies of the baroque could infer the facts of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century mysticism? Looking at a Carlo Dolci Magdalen, who could guess what St. John of the Cross had said about true Charity—that it is a matter, not of feeling, but of the will? Or who, with Bernini's St. Teresa before his eyes, would ever suspect that Bernini's contemporary, Charles de Condren, had deplored the weakness which caused ecstatics to receive God *si animalement*? The

truth would seem to be that while the great masses of the people remained, as ever, indifferent or fitfully superstitious, and while the masters of the spiritual life preached a worship of the Spirit in spirit, the artists of the time chose to glorify a Christianity of thrills and visceral yearnings, now violent, now cloyingly sentimental. And they chose to do so for reasons connected, not with the problems of life, but with those of art. Their painting and sculpture did not, and indeed could not, reflect the manifold religious experience of the time, nor did the religious experience of most of their contemporaries reflect the prevailing art. Art and religious life went their separate ways, the artists using religion as their opportunity for developing a baroque expressionism, and the religious using this art as an instrument for achieving the various kinds of experience for which their temperaments had fitted them. And precisely the same relations between religion and art had existed when the 'Primitives' were using a multiform Catholicism as an opportunity for creating one particular kind of static composition, and when the religious were using these works as instruments for the practice now of revivalism, now of contemplation, now of magic.

From Rome and the baroque let us pass for a moment to Tuscany and the rococo. A few miles from Siena there stands among the vineyards a large Carthusian monastery, called Pontignano, now inhabited by a score of peasant families. In the old days each of the monks occupied an apartment of three rooms—a kitchen, a bedroom and a tiny oratory. The front doors of these apartments give on to the cloisters and at the back are little walled gardens, where a man could grow vegetables and dig his own grave. Every brother lived indepedently of all the rest, a solitary in a community of solitaries, a mute among the silent. Most of the buildings at Pontignano date from the fourteenth century, but were re-furbished by an interior decorator of the eighteenth. Under his direction the church was adorned with an enormous high altar of wood, painted to look like marble, and the little oratories, in which the monks said their private prayers, were stuccoed over with rococo twiddles, till they looked like the boudoirs of so many provincial Pompadours. To us, with our incorrigible sense of history, this conjunction of St. Bruno and Louis XV seems deliriously incongruous. But how did it strike the monks who actually prayed in those oratories? Did they suddenly start to think, feel and behave like those libertine *abbes*, whom we

associate with that kind of decoration? Surely not. "Never reformed, because never deformed," the Carthusian order held on its way regardless of changes in aesthetic fashion. In their newly plastered oratories the brethren meditated on death, just as their predecessors had meditated when the decorations were baroque or renaissance, Gothic or Romanesque. Styles change, empires rise and fall; but death remains itself, a brute fact, sooner or later, of every individual's experience—a fact that has no history and to which, in consequence, all historical changes, whether political or economic, scientific or artistic, are completely irrelevant. The Pompadourish art in the Pontignano oratories tells us nothing whatever about contemporary Carthusian religion, which was centered, as ever, upon the contemplation of death. All we learn from it is that, when eighteenth-century monks found it necessary to restore ancient buildings, the only restorers available, in an age that was still innocent of pastiche and antiquarian forgery, were men brought up in the current tradition of art.

In our own days the religious are worse off than were the monks of Pontignano. Not living rococo, but the bogus-medieval, or some atrocious piece of mass-produced *bandieuserie* is all that they can find for their purposes. And yet, in spite of the nullity of modern religious art, religion, in all its aspects from the fetishistic to the contemplative, continues to flourish and to produce its good or evil fruits. Man is a whole and so, perhaps, is society; but they are wholes divided, like ships, into watertight compartments. On one side of a bulkhead is art, on the other religion. There may be good wine in one compartment, bilge-water in the other. The connection between the two is not by pipe or omosis, but only from above, only for the intellect that looks down and can see both simultaneously and recognize them as belonging (by juxtaposition rather than by fusion) to the same individual or social whole.