

THE MAGIC OF INTUITION

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Philosophy, just as society at large, has been captivated by the cult of reason. It can be argued that the prevailing world view promotes reason as that faculty of the human soul which affords us access to objective reality and which, furthermore, provides true knowledge of the way things actually are. The natural and mathematical sciences are praised for their achievements and the progress of technology seems to give further credibility to the beneficial powers of the intellect. But what if this belief were not wholly correct? What if reason did not give us human beings a true account of reality, but instead distorted the picture of life which we would want so dearly to be untainted? This is a hunch that Jacques Maritain entertained, a statement that should bother anybody who is familiar with Maritain's writings. The staunch Thomist who places the intellect at the centre of his philosophical vision and who is so concerned with championing the indispensable role of reason in philosophy and life in general cannot possibly be the same person who pushes reason aside and castigates it for driving us towards unbelief and despair? Or can it?

In the first half of his philosophical career Maritain portrayed himself as an orthodox Thomist and committed intellectualist. Although he never abandoned his Thomistic persuasion, when we survey the later years Maritain surprisingly tempers his intellectualist stance and pays more attention to the pivotal role of intuition. This shift in outlook can be detected in works dating back to the 1920's, such as *Art and Scholasticism*, but it especially reaches a climax in his Mellon lectures *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*¹ published in 1953.² What

¹ Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1953.

² A useful comparison of *Art and Scholasticism* and *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*

I intend to do in this paper is explore Maritain's concept of intuition, particularly against the backdrop of his critique of the modern uses of human intelligence, and to show why he considered intuition to be of such importance for a proper understanding of nature, the human being and ultimately God.³

1. The Modern Retreat of Intelligence from Reality

Maritain's critique of and opposition to modern philosophy and modernism in general is a well-known fact and it is expressed in sundry ways. It is generally said of Maritain that he frowned upon the privileging of epistemology over and against metaphysics and that this was his chief source of complaint against modernity. I would like to argue, on the other hand, that what bothered Maritain most about modern philosophy, if we can subsume his criticism under one umbrella idea, is the human being's loss of a full and adequate relation with objective reality or being. This separation from authentic being and the establishment of an barren ontology can be discerned in the way in which modern philosophy has come to understand the uses of human intelligence. Aristotle and later on his devoted disciple, St. Thomas, taught that the first object grasped by the intellect is being which gave the human mind and hence the human person its connection with reality. Yet with the revolutionary turn of events in modernity in figures such as Descartes, Kant and Hegel, to mention but a few, intelligence ceased to grasp being, but instead turned inwards to analyze itself which is, of course, the origin of modern philosophy's preoccupation with epistemology. This movement from objective being to subjective analysis is the primary reason, in my present exposition, why Maritain considered human intelligence to have been perverted and set off course from its true mission.

The inward turn, as it is described, is a very old and entrenched position in philosophy, having been born in the weighty corpus of St. Augustine and continued in modern times by Descartes. Charles Taylor, in this book *Sources of the Self*, has given central place to this phenomenon, calling it "the inwardness of radical reflexivity,"⁴ which has essentially shaped our modern conception of

can be found in John A. Trapani, Jr., "'Radiance': The Metaphysical Foundations of Maritain's Aesthetics," in *Beauty, Art, and the Polis*, Alice Ramos (ed.), Washington, DC: American Maritain Association, 2000, pp. 11-19.

³ For a detailed and comprehensive study of Maritain's notion of intuition and its many senses see Laura Fraga de Almeida Sampaio, *L'intuition dans la philosophie de Jacques Maritain*, Paris: Vrin, 1963.

⁴ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989, pp. 130 ff.

the human self. By retreating from the world and by seeking refuge in the interiority of subjectivity, philosophers have put forward a notion that the human person achieves completeness in self-reflection. This stance naturally leads to the much bandied-about view that the fundamental essence of the human being is self-consciousness, a relation of the self with itself in the form of cognition. This knowledge of the self is, therefore, a purely self-absorbed and self-centered knowledge and consequently lacks an orientation to objective being. To be referred to oneself is, logically speaking, not to be referred to an other.

In a very audacious move Maritain takes this long and hallowed tradition of interior self-reflection to task. If the human being attains the state of authenticity by contemplating his or her own self, then we are forced to the conclusion that knowledge becomes genuine only in self-knowledge. This would not be such a controversial statement if it were not the case that this kind of self-knowledge was not steeped in a narcissistic and egoistic admiration of one's mental life that basically ignored the deeper and more valuable aspects of human nature. True self-knowledge is not to be obtained by focusing narrowly on one's mind in self-reflection because this method ultimately misses the true, substantial essence of the human being and winds up furnishing an empty picture of man, a barren cipher. For it was Maritain's firm conviction that modernity had made philosophy and human thought in general bereft of a genuine ontological content, that is, a sure grasp of being.

Undoubtedly, the reason why human subjectivity – which Maritain calls “the substantial totality of the human person”⁵ – simply cannot be apprehended with utter clarity and certainty by the intellect is twofold. First, the intellect was not created to turn inwards unto itself in self-reflection, but tends naturally towards the apprehension of objective being. To use the intellect for any other purpose than to know objective reality is to misuse it. And second, the error of modern philosophy was to think that human subjectivity is conceptualizable, that we can actually come to certain knowledge about our own essence via the intellect. As if echoing the words of Nietzsche, Maritain affirms that the ground of human subjectivity is a dark, impenetrable abyss, a deep chasm that cannot be climbed into with impunity. Indeed, subjectivity cannot be grasped cognitively the way objects are apprehended by the intellect. However, although Maritain maintains the dark source of subjectivity, he does not at the same time rule out the possibility of knowing subjectivity. Such knowledge, understandably, would be of a kind dramatically different from a rational knowledge. In fact, the way to know the self is through the faculty of intuition, and furthermore, this is not done

⁵ Maritain, *Creative Intuition*, p. 113.

through an act of directly intuiting the self, but rather in the very act of intuiting being. Maritain sums up this view in the following passage from *The Range of Reason*:

Self-knowledge as a mere psychological analysis of more or less superficial phenomena, a wandering through images and memories, is but an egotistic awareness, however valuable it may be. But when it becomes ontological, then knowledge of the Self is transfigured, implying the intuition of Being and the discovery of the actual abyss of Subjectivity.⁶

I believe that we are now in a position to draw some important conclusions from what I have been discussing and from what Maritain is saying. From the beginning of this presentation I have made a connection between knowledge and self-knowledge, that is, between the cognitive use of the intellect and the path towards knowing human subjectivity. It is wrong, according to Maritain, to follow the modern route in using the intellect in a self-reflective manner in order to gain self-knowledge. The result of modern philosophy's attempt to grasp the self by means of the intellect was an empty, lifeless and distorted image of the human being. In other words, for Maritain not only do we misconstrue what the true essence of the human being is, but we also lack a true apprehension of being. Self-reflection, therefore, because it uses the intellect to turn inwards as opposed to outwards, is not the path to tread in our pursuit of being. However, what also becomes evident in this analysis is that it is not the intellect, strictly speaking, that connects with being, that has a natural relation with being. As Maritain points out, it is an intuition of being that makes self-knowledge ontological and that reveals the genuine ground of human subjectivity. There is something in intuition that can solve the riddle as to how self-knowledge and the knowledge of objective being are related.

2. The Intuition of Being in Art and Poetry

Intuition finds its home in art and the artistic process. It is precisely in the creative expressions of art that intuition best reveals itself and shows us why it is such an important element in life. But before we turn to the manner in which intuition participates in poetic activity, it would be most helpful if we first examine the structure of the human mind as Maritain envisages it.⁷ The origin and first stage of all creativity is intuition which resides in a preconceptual or non-conceptual realm of the soul. Maritain calls this the spiritual or musical

⁶ Jacques Maritain, *The Range of Reason*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1942, p. 91.

⁷ See Maritain, *Creative Intuition*, pp. 91 ff. and 310 ff.

unconscious, in contrast to an automatic, deaf, Freudian or animal unconscious.⁸ The second stage through which the intuitive visions travel on their way to expression is the imagination which shapes and connects these inchoate voices. The third and final stage is that of the intellect that adds a conceptual structure to the expression and hence makes it rationally comprehensible, that is, it bears upon how clear or obscure the finished artistic product proves to be. To be sure, Maritain emphasizes that we are dealing with the practical intellect or what he also calls “the Illuminating Intellect” (the agent intellect, *nous poetikos*) in this case which is oriented towards making and doing.⁹ The tripartite structure of intuition, imagination and intellect, in their strict order of progression, underscores the idea that the intellect is actually grounded in and is dependent on intuition for its content. Such an epistemology helps us to see more clearly why in the final analysis it is not the intellect that is responsible for our rootedness in being, but rather intuition.

The primary characteristic of intuition is that it by its very nature tends towards productivity. Intuition is fundamentally creative and it is oriented towards objectivity and externality. This explains why Maritain usually refers to intuition as creative or poetic intuition, if only to emphasize the process of generation and engendering inherent in intuition.¹⁰ By way of clarification, according to Maritain’s use of the term, poetry does not refer narrowly to written verse, but rather has a holistic and universal meaning that implies the free creativity of spirit as such. As a matter of fact, poetry transcends art since it is not restricted solely to art.¹¹ In order for it to be poetic, therefore, intuition must be free and spiritual.¹² What this means is that intuition cannot be tied down or constrained by rigid concepts or by a logic that is more appropriate to the realm of the intellect or reason. Instead, poetic intuition must be free to operate on its own terms and according to its own nature. And as already mentioned, the proper nature of intuition is to produce and create.

Nonetheless, although intuition is primarily a power of creation, it also has a cognitive dimension.¹³ Such intuitive knowledge is not in the form of concepts and reason, but instead through inclination, an intentionality that is directed

⁸ Maritain, *Creative Intuition*, pp. 91 f.

⁹ Maritain, *Creative Intuition*, pp. 92 ff. See Donald Haggarty, “The Agent Intellect and the Energies of Intelligence,” in *Beauty, Art and the Polis*, pp. 20-33.

¹⁰ See Maritain, *Creative Intuition*, p. 55: “The intellect in us strives to engender.”

¹¹ Maritain, *Creative Intuition*, pp. 137, 236 ff.

¹² Maritain, *Creative Intuition*, pp. 138, 393.

¹³ Maritain, *Creative Intuition*, pp. 112, 118 ff.

towards objective being. At the root of the human soul is a relatedness to being which is experienced through intuition as it silently beckons the human being to step out of the original interiority of subjectivity and to commingle with the things of the world. This creative, intentional knowledge is undergirded by emotion and feeling, the secret inkling of a wider world in the depths of human selfhood. The knowledge that intuition contains is actually derived from the soul's connaturality with objective being, a very old idea that has unfortunately fallen into oblivion in modern times.

Maritain's view of intuition, therefore, differs substantially from some of his modern predecessors' notions. Kant conceived of intuition as being aligned with sensibility and as having nothing to do with knowledge, whereas Maritain does attribute knowledge to intuition, no doubt an inheritance of the Thomistic view that regards intuition as intimately linked to the intellect. Moreover, a thinker such as Schelling, a founding member of German Idealism which Maritain lambastes as gnosticism, developed the idea of an intellectual intuition, the human mind's immediate grasp of rational principles of being, the highest of which is the Absolute. To be certain, in contrast to Schelling Maritain clearly distinguishes intuition from the intellect and is careful not to make intuition into yet another organ of logical or rational thought. This clear separation of intuition and the intellect is certainly an influence from Henri Bergson who depicted intuition as a faculty that is attuned to non-conceptual human realities. So at once we have here a very unique conception of intuition that is not intellectual, yet which does possess knowledge, albeit of the poetic or creative kind.

The role of connaturality in the soul's relation with being cannot be overstated in this regard because it tells us why intuition is so central a faculty in our grasp of being and simultaneously in our quest for self-knowledge. The concept of connaturality, so dear it is to Thomas's thought, refers to a knowledge that is obtained through affective inclinations and the dispositions of the will and does not connote a knowledge through the conceptual, logical and discursive exercise of reason.¹⁴ Poetic intuition experiences objective reality in a most primordial sense as being at one with the things of the world. This intuition of being is nothing other than a knowledge of the way things are and the grasp of

¹⁴ Maritain, *Creative Intuition* pp. 117 ff., 123-126, 187 f., 212 ff. Two articles that are valuable in explaining the Aristotelian-Thomistic background of Maritain's notions of connaturality and poetic creation are "Art and Connaturality," pp. 137-156 and "Maritain and Poetic Knowledge," pp. 157-173 contained in Ralph McInerny, *Art and Prudence. Studies in the Thought of Jacques Maritain*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988.

the inner meaning of reality. Even though it is not a lucid, conceptual knowledge of being, intuition does certainly offer us a direct glimpse into the unseen fabric of the universe in which we live. Once this vision has taken place, a stirring and prodding are inevitably felt within that pull us along the path of creativity and expression. To produce a work of art, therefore, can be interpreted as a response to the intuition of being that has taken place in the inner depths of our souls. The artist attempts to communicate through the media of a particular art form something which he or she has seen and experienced about the world through intuition that is basically inarticulate. To articulate this feeling and knowledge is what poetry is all about.

It would be misleading, however, to conceive poetry as simply the communication of “some-thing,” that is, a desire to describe a facet of objective being without any reference to the creator. For what Maritain stringently maintains in his Mellon lectures is the view that art is fundamentally the voice of the artist and as such reveals who the artist is.¹⁵ In other words, the creation of an artwork not only conveys an object that can be scrutinized in a critical and detached manner, but more significantly manifests the essence of the person who created. We can state unambiguously then that the intuition of being, which is the root cause and motivator for poetic production, is at the same time the source of human subjectivity for the very reason that it is the cause of human expression and, by extension, of personal development.

Maritain is insightful in linking the intuition of being and the essence of the human self through the mediation of the concept of poetry or creativity, that is, free and spiritual production. For as I mentioned earlier, poetic intuition, which is poetry itself, is by its very nature intentional and tends towards giving birth to external expression. The intentional nature of intuition leads us to the ineluctable conclusion that intuition is not the essence of the human person, strictly speaking, but rather *reveals* subjectivity. Human selfhood or subjectivity should not be thought of as a static, immutable essence, but as a process or activity of self-expression through the medium of poetic intuition. One could almost say that the human self *reveals* itself through what it produces, not that it *is* what it makes. Concisely put, the emphasis should be on process as opposed to state.

Maritain’s notion, as I have been expounding it, that subjectivity gains its proper essence only in self-externalization by means of creative expression and

¹⁵ Maritain, *Creative Intuition*, pp. 31-34, 113-115, 124, 130, 145. On page 188 Maritain describes poetry as “the revelation in a work of art of the spiritual depths of the human subjectivity awakened to the world by intuitive emotion.”

that this act is simultaneously an apprehension of objective being explains a great deal about the difference of opinion that Maritain has with modernity's conception of self-knowledge. We can now see why human subjectivity cannot be known by self-reflection, as modern philosophers have been accustomed to argue, because for the human mind to recoil from the world into its interiority has the deleterious effect of stifling the very development of subjectivity. That is to say, human subjectivity, according to Maritain, only comes to be in the free activity of poetic production which is always focused towards the external world. Self-reflection cannot provide viable results because the human mind as a whole naturally tends towards creative expression.

Of course, the kind of self-knowledge that Maritain is entertaining here is not of a logical or conceptual kind, since it pertains to the sphere of connaturality, namely, the soul's intimate relation with objective being. To convey this multifaceted idea, Maritain refers to the *magic of intuition*.¹⁶ By the term magic, Maritain does not mean the world of witches and alchemy, even though this is the normal connotation of the word.¹⁷ Instead, he wants to stress two points in the operation of intuition. First, poetic intuition experiences being and has an affinity with objective reality in a manner analogous to magicians who are traditionally understood to wield control over nature through a special esoteric knowledge. Magic, therefore, contains the idea of a direct relation to the concrete things of the world in their ontological foundation. But perhaps more importantly, magic also has the meaning of the dark, inscrutable and mysterious origins of being that are only half-felt and half-heard in the soul.¹⁸ This magic cannot be caught or seized and always remains free and independent. The point that Maritain wants to make here is that poetic intuition and accordingly human

¹⁶ See Maritain, *Creative Intuition*, pp. 401-404.

¹⁷ Maritain actually distinguishes between a good and bad magic. The negative connotation of magic refers to the desire in art, such as in the movement of Surrealism, to subject poetry to a purely cognitive dimension that stamps out the intuitive side of creation. This can be seen, for example, in the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé. There is a further description of this negative magic in relation to Maritain's criticism of Arthur Rimbaud's effacement of the self. In this case magic is interpreted as one's absolute identification with another, essentially the negation of one's own self in the process of invading the being of the object. The explanation of the positive or good version of magic is what follows. See Maritain, *Creative Intuition*, pp. 188, 230 f.

¹⁸ It is in this sense that Maritain justifies his use of the term magic. See Maritain, *Creative Intuition*, p. 404: "It is because the work is thus endowed with greater power, born in night and operating in night, that the word magic seems appropriate, despite its ambiguity."

subjectivity are by their very essence unconceptualizable since they originate in the preconscious part of the soul. Hence any attempt to seize subjectivity by means of reason amounts to sheer folly and is doomed to failure.

The magic of intuition also indicates a surplus or overflow of creative intuition, a superabundance of emotion and feeling in the production of a work of beauty. The human soul is filled up with an inexhaustible intuitive emotion that propels one to creation. Although poetic intuition normally carries with it the raptures of emotion and feeling, by incorporating the idea of magic in this regard Maritain wants to be more specific and to portray intuition as partaking in a separate poetry or what he calls “an alien spirit” that is the ultimate source of all inspiration. In other words, for there to be magic in intuition there must be evidence of an extra or additional infusion into the poetry from a foreign domain that is not used up exhaustively in the work produced. For the work that ensues from the inspiration does not imprison its source, but on the contrary the so-called alien spirit uses the poetry as an instrument to affect us. The magic speaks to us through the artwork and floods the poetry to the point that the intuition gushes forth with a overpowering radiance.

Albeit controversial and open to debate, Maritain offers some examples of artists who both possess and lack magic. Of those not exhibiting magic Maritain mentions Bach, Wagner, Beethoven, Byron and Goethe for the simple fact that their works do not point to anything beyond themselves and that the creative intuition is fused with their works. On the other hand, Schubert, Chopin, Dante, Keats, Pushkin, and Baudelaire exemplify the magic of intuition because the creative source of their works remains free and independent of the works themselves. The magic is not caught in the poetry, but always hovers above it in its unapproachable light. With this second group of artists, the works of art, according to Maritain, possess a vibrancy and exuberance that can be sensed, but not captured; felt, but not known. When magic is present one gets the impression there is something more than the sights and sounds on display, in short, something that is truly spiritual.

It would be foolhardy, Maritain suggests, to believe that human beings could conjure up this magic by their own efforts. Indeed, magic cannot be pursued and obtained by merely human means; it can only be given and received. Maritain describes magic as a gift and as grace, words that strongly resonate with theological connotations. In fact, poetic intuition is often referred to by Maritain as God-given.¹⁹ It is undeniable that Maritain conceives poetic intuition as a divine gift that human beings should welcome and respect. In light of this

¹⁹ See Maritain, *Creative Intuition*, pp. 62, 138, 404.

affirmation, then, learning to be receptive to poetic intuition should become the chief task of every human being.

3. At the Intersection of Ontology, Anthropology and Theology

The genius of Maritain's doctrine of poetic intuition is that it combines into one the three disciplines of ontology, anthropology, and theology. As regards ontology, the human being in modernity has lost his grasp of objective being which is concomitant with his apotheosis of instrumental reasoning. When one absolutizes reason in daily life and asphyxiates one's poetic intuition, a fuller understanding of existence is lost and all our talk and action gradually become glib and meaningless. One of the great tragedies of modern intellectual life is the hold that nominalism has taken that has had effect of making our words and ideas free-floating signs without an anchor in anything solid or substantial. The rise of nominalism and the emptying-out of our concepts have been caused primarily by the refusal of human beings to listen to their poetic intuition, and more importantly, to act in accordance with its injunctions. An ontology worthy of its name can be resurrected only on the basis of intuition that grounds us solidly in being.

Make no mistake about it, Maritain is a staunch advocate of a practical philosophy that pictures the human being as a producer and maker, in contrast to a thinker and knower. This may sound like a very odd statement considering that Maritain was a philosopher who devoted most of his life to rational inquiry and contemplation. Nonetheless, throughout his philosophical career, but particularly in his later writings, Maritain has consistently argued for the intellectual's and human being's active participation in history and society. Whether it be in politics, business, sports, or academia, people must act from the conscience that moves them and shape the world at large. Poetic intuition can be exercised in every sphere in life, not just in art, and Maritain implores us to act when our intuition speaks to us, instead of ignoring the call.²⁰ It is precisely when the human being acts and is creative in the world that he or she defeats the solipsistic and atomistic conception of the self that so predominates modern life. Instead of remaining closed-off within oneself in idle ratiocination, we ought to realize our genuine selfhood through creative self-expression. There is no doubt that the intuitional anthropology that Maritain develops stands in diametrical opposition to modernity's evacuated concept of the self.

The theological dimension of poetic intuition leaps forth at us when we understand that intuition is not inculcated by human means, but is a God-given

²⁰ See Maritain, *Creative Intuition*, pp. 237 f.

element. Grace is the primary ingredient in all inspiration, and this is no less the case with the nascent stirrings of intuition. A recurring theme in Maritain's corpus is the widespread secularization of society that has displaced the Christian image of the world.²¹ More and more, human beings focus too much on themselves and on what they can do solely on the strength of their own initiative, an attitude which has paved the way for the worship of the virtues of self-reliance and independence. Such an anthropocentric humanism must be replaced by a theocentric humanism in which human beings act from out of a concentrated focus on God, not on themselves. When we endeavour to put our own self-centered needs aside and to listen to the voice of the other in our poetic intuition, that is when a more devotional attitude makes itself felt in the world. Increasingly human beings are losing a sense of transcendence that only a genuine intuition of being can offer. In his late book *The Peasant of the Garonne*, Maritain bemoaned the general denial of the transcendent that has been taking place in human society, but particularly in modern theology, and which in his opinion crept into Vatican II.²² For as Richard John Neuhaus explains: "The abandonment of the intuition of being, and of Being, resulted in a philosophy and theology wholly collapsed into, and captive to, the immanent."²³ Learning to live in accordance with and out of the depth of our intuition is what we are called to do in this life. Indeed, there is a lot of truth to Friedrich Hölderlin's words which I am sure Maritain would wholeheartedly support: "Poetically dwells man upon this earth (*Dichterisch wohnet der Mensch auf dieser Erde*)."

²¹ See, for example, Maritain, *The Range of Reason*, pp. 185 ff.

²² See Richard John Neuhaus, "Jacques Maritain and Vatican Council II," *First Things* 129, January 2003, pp. 76-82.

²³ Neuhaus, "Jacques Maritain," p. 80.