

THE EMBODIED ACT

HOW BECOMING A (BAD) ARTIST CAN REVITALIZE THE ARTS

Mark T. Mitchell

Conservatives often lament the deplorable state of the arts and express a longing for a revitalization of artistic expression as a means of revitalizing the culture as a whole. It seems appropriate, as we consider the means by which art can be revitalized, to develop first a working definition of art itself. This business of defining is no small task; however, it seems to be a necessary first step in grounding the set of cursory ruminations that will come next.

So what is art? I want to suggest that art, properly conceived, is an embodied enactment toward transcendent originality. Now what does that mean?

First, art is an embodied act. Art is not simply the imagination at work, although imagination would seem to be an indispensable part. Art requires bodies acting in space and time. Human creatures are a fusion of

spirit and body, and art is a result of this unique conjunction. As an embodied act, art is performative in its essence. There is, in other words, a perhaps infinite distance between an artistic act and discussing, describing, or interpreting an artistic act. The story is told that the composer Schumann was once asked to explain a difficult etude and in response he simply played it again (the same is true of a poem, a painting, a film, or a novel). To explain it is to reduce it and, in reducing it, something of its essence inevitably slips away. In our enthusiasm for explanation, we too often miss this essential meaning of art in our attempt to analyze it, and thereby reduce it to mere propositions or intentions or readily grasped meanings. Wordsworth was on to this temptation of our age when he lamented that “we murder to dissect.”

Second, the artist is an actor who, whether

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knowingly or not, strives toward a reality that transcends the mundane world of appearances. Of the transcendentals, art strives, most obviously, toward the beautiful. Beauty is a proper object of love, for it is, perhaps more clearly than anything else, rooted in grace. It is a sheer gift that has no intrinsic usefulness if we consider the matter only in baldly pragmatic terms. Nevertheless, beauty seems worth dying for. Or to put it in other words, a world bereft of beauty would seem unworthy of affection or even of life itself. But in striving toward beauty, art also traffics in the realm of the true, for in beauty there is no falseness, for falseness is a blight on the purity of beauty. As humans we are naturally drawn to the beautiful and naturally recoil from the ugly, and to prefer the ugly over the beautiful would suggest a disorder that manifests itself in moral terms. To prefer the beautiful is good and to despise or attempt to deface or desecrate that which is beautiful is evil. We see here that the artistic act is intrinsically tied up with categories that are both moral and ultimately spiritual. In other words, in pointing toward a reality that transcends the merely mundane, in positing beauty, truth, and goodness as part of the essential nature of the artistic endeavor, we find that the concept of God is virtually impossible to avoid.

Yet, in making such a claim, a person is stepping out on a limb, and this is the third point: the artistic act entails an act of personal commitment. At its heart, an artistic act is an affirmation that is an embodied risk, which nonetheless implies personal responsibility to act in a way that moves toward reality in all its complex, infinite richness. To be sure, it is T.S. Eliot who reminds us that “human kind / Cannot bear very much reality.”¹ However, art is the means by which we touch the hem of reality’s garment, if you will. It is an agent of healing even as we often

draw back from the full implications of the reality to which the artistic act aspires.

Finally, an artistic act is a movement toward transcendent reality in its originality. The original creative act is seen in the utterance of God, an utterance that, in its essence, is an affirmation, an original speaking forth of the Logos into the chaos: “Let there be.” The Logos brought something out of nothing, and then brought order out of chaos. The artist is, fundamentally, an imitator, for the artist seeks to imitate this original creative moment, this original enactment. He is drawn “by this love,” by “the voice of this calling” (“Little Gidding,” V, 208) and thus the artist is a lover, an amateur. The artist is a lover of originality, which is to say a lover of that which was at the beginning. Artists are lovers who seek to return to origins, which is the source of originality.

This notion of art is suggestive of Joseph Pieper’s understanding of tradition, in its purest sense, as hearkening back to an original utterance of God.² Tradition is, properly speaking, that which has been handed down from an original source. Tradition, in this sense then, is not simply a set of practices, or that which is tried and true. These notions of tradition are derivative of the more precise sense whose authority rests not on its durability nor on trial and error but on the original source. Tradition is original, for its content and authority are tied to its origin as a divine transmission. Thus, those who originally received the divine utterance (the ancients, in Plato’s terms) are the authorities, who derive their authority not from any merit of their own but simply by virtue of the fact that they stand nearer the original transmission than we do. In a very real sense, “the communication of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living” (I, 201). We submit to the authority of the masters, who are the ancients, who have

handed the content of the tradition down to us.

The implications of this for art are interesting. The artist, in this sense, seeks originality by striving to reconstitute that which was at the beginning. To the extent that he captures the essence of origins, he is original. Surprisingly, then, originality and imitation go hand in hand. In articulating that which is beautiful, true, and good, the artist recaptures that which was, is, and ever will be. Or as the poet puts it, “the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time / Through the unknown, remembered gate / When the last of earth left to discover / Is that which was the beginning” (V, 208). Indeed, the individual talent goes astray when dissociated from tradition. This is another way of speaking of a counterfeit originality. When an artist fails to submit to that which is original, he necessarily falls into the trap of novelty, which ultimately represents a misuse of freedom in service of a pseudo-art.

We Americans are especially tempted by this false path. Here’s what I mean: Americans (and Tocqueville observed this almost two centuries ago) are lovers of equality, of immanence, and of the future. When an affection for equality runs beyond its proper sphere, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between the beautiful and the ugly, between the true and the false, between the good and the vile. In other words, it becomes difficult to distinguish between art and pseudo-art. The American taste for immanence makes an explicit striving for transcendence an unlikely endeavor, and art without a transcendent element is simply a counterfeit. Finally, an undue affection for the future undermines the possibility of receiving the truth, embodied in tradition, from the past, from that original utterance

of God. The result of these false assumptions is a confused notion of freedom as it relates to the essence of art. A proper understanding of freedom is the exercise of creativity toward embodying reality in terms of originality. Thus, true art is freedom rightly expressed. An improper understanding of freedom is autonomous expression without concern for (or even hostility toward) the original, which is really another way of defining novelty.

Novelty is pseudo-art rooted in a pseudo-freedom that ultimately undoes itself. Consider in this light current conceptions of sexuality, and we can better grasp the point by analogy. Freedom in sexuality is the freedom to conform to that which is original. Pseudo-freedom ignores or denigrates that which is original and strives toward autonomy, which is to say, toward novelty. The social repercussions of this false conception of freedom are legion.

Freedom, rightly understood, is directed toward transcendent reality, which is of a whole. It is, in other words, an integrating act toward that which is ultimately integrated. Art, then, employs symbols, which point to an integrated reality beyond themselves. Pseudo-freedom, along with its offspring pseudo-art, is an act directed toward immanence, which is to say toward the autonomous self, which is necessarily disintegrative.

When framed in these terms, the sacramental nature of art is hard to avoid, and once again we are pushed to consider the religious aspects that seem to reside at the very core of the artistic endeavor, which is “the still point of the turning world” (“Burnt Norton,” II, 177), which is to say, the annunciation presages that which comes: as the poet puts it, “The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation (“Dry Salvages,” V, 199). The artistic act is an embodied act, which incarnates that which has been Incarnated at the still point of history,

the meeting of time and eternity. The created and the creator meet in the moment of Incarnation, and only in these terms does the artistic endeavor make sense. Herein, the universal and the particular meet and the enigma of this philosophical conundrum is resolved in mystery. In a person. In Logos.

Pieper argues that an essential feature of festivity is art, but the festive only makes sense in terms of a religious context.³ For the Christian, Sunday represents the weekly celebration of the creation (having incorporated the Sabbath) but also situates this weekly celebration, as well as the entire year, around the Easter Resurrection, which looks forward to the eternal festival. But ours is an age hostile to festival even as we strive to work harder and longer so we can escape the “grind” in order to play. Our play is decidedly nonreligious, which is to say nonfestive. But remove the religious festival, Pieper argues, and art itself goes homeless. Homeless art is readily politicized, and rather than being characterized by striving toward the transcendent, politicized art (which is a form of pseudo-art) is subject to appropriation by whatever political power or social movement is currently in fashion.

We live today with unparalleled access to art. Music is ubiquitous. Famous paintings are available to us with the click of a mouse. Film is a vibrant and exciting art form. More books are published than ever before. This is at best a double-edged sword, however. True, we can access more reproductions of art than ever before, but is enjoying the re-production the same as enjoying the production? Through technological reproduction the immediacy of the embodied act is potentially lost and replaced with a disembodied nonact. Or at the very least a gulf emerges between the initial act and reproduction of the act.

Consider the typical consequence. What is ubiquitous is taken for granted. We attend differently to that which is rare or fleeting or obtained with difficulty. Prior to recording technology, for instance, a musical performance was a one-time affair. Once the last note faded away, it was gone forever. People had a powerful incentive to pay attention. So too when a painting is located in one place, or when a book is painstakingly copied from an original. With our various technologies we can easily (and cheaply) take a great performance for granted. We can reduce a singular performance to an easily repeated (and therefore easily ignored) commodity—like Andy Warhol’s pop art. And when art is commodified, the transcendent essence is easily lost in the numbing repetition. If, as Tocqueville suggested, “the habit of inattention is the greatest vice of the democratic mind,” then the impulse to reproduction and a corresponding diminishment must be an easy corollary.⁴

I am by no means suggesting that we abolish our reproductive technologies as if that were possible. I am suggesting, however, that we must be aware of the pitfalls of our age if we are to revitalize a proper understanding of art. And in closing, here is a suggestion.

Be an artist. Now, I can already hear the objections. “But I’m not an artistic sort.” “I’m not gifted in that area.” Nevertheless, I think the admonition of Chesterton is apropos in this context: “If a thing’s worth doing, it’s worth doing badly.” An embodied enactment that strives toward transcendent originality is surely one of the highest of human endeavors and, as such, humans should seek out opportunities to practice that which is so uniquely human. Learning to play an instrument, even badly, is a step in the right direction. Paint a sunset. Even if done badly, one will necessarily need to pay careful attention to the reality of that

fleeting event. Memorize a poem and recite it. The specifics of the performance may not be anything of note, but the act itself represents a specifically human vocation of the highest sort. We do well in this context to recall George Steiner's warning: "The catastrophic decline of memorization... is one of the crucial, though as yet little understood, symptoms of an after-culture."⁵ Memorization (and the subsequent performance) of a poem or a piece of music serves to internalize and furnish the soul in a way that nothing else can.

Real consequences will follow. First, one will become better equipped to appreciate the master performance. For example, have you ever watched, say, golf or bowling on television? If you have never tried these activities, watching is torturous. However, if you endeavor to learn the basics of the activity, if you attempt to hit a long ball off the tee or sink a thirty-foot putt, you will suddenly gain an appreciation for the golf pro whose performance reveals a level of mastery nearing perfection. So too with art.

Second, engaging in the artistic act will lead one to greater awareness of and sensitivity to the transcendentals, especially beauty. As David Bentley Hart puts it, "In the beautiful God's glory is revealed as something communicable and intrinsically delightful, as including the creature in its ends, as

completely worthy of love; what God's glory necessitates and commands, beauty shows also to be gracious and inviting; glory calls not only for awe and penitence, but also for rejoicing."⁶ In coming to better grasp the highest things, we come better to grasp a proper order of our loves, for love moves all action, and art is a product of rightly ordered loves even as pseudo-art is the product of loves badly ordered. And so we see an upward spiral: an encounter with art helps us to order our loves even as well-ordered loves makes art more purely itself.

Finally, we may come to recognize that art is ultimately rooted in divine gift, which is to say, in grace. For in the affirmation of the artistic act, we witness the contingent nature of our own existence and the gratuitous spirit that animates and sustains the very ground of our being. The proper response to this recognition is gratitude and humility, two rare dispositions in our confused and unartistic age, but the necessary route to wisdom. Nevertheless, despite these dark and prosaic times, we can recognize through the artistic eyes of properly ordered loves that "All shall be well, and / All manner of thing shall be well / When the tongues of flame and enfolded / Into the crowned knot of fire / And the fire and the rose are one" ("Little Gidding," V, 209). †

1 "Burnt Norton," I, *Four Quartets*, T.S. Eliot: *Collected Poems* (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), 118. All further quotations from Eliot's poems will be taken from this edition and cited parenthetically in the text.

2 Joseph Pieper, *Tradition: Concept and Claim*, trans. E. Christian Kopff (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2008).

3 Joseph Pieper, *In Tune with the World: A Theory of Festivity*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 1999).

4 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 584.

5 George Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle: Some Notes Towards the Redefinition of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), 107.

6 David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), 17–18.