Maritain and Gilson on Painting[1]

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The two French philosophers, Jacques Maritain and Étienne Gilson, were not only contemporaries and friends, but both were eminent Thomists. This being the case, they took the same side in various scholastic disputes (e.g., "Christian philosophy," "act of existing in Thomistic metaphysics"). Maritain was a metaphysician, epistemologist, philosopher of science, moralist, political philosopher, and philosopher of art. He was also a great personal friend of Rouault, Chagall, and Gino Severini. He was the author of *Art and Scholasticism*, *Art and Poetry*, *Art and Faith*, and *Situation in Poetry*, and is noted in aesthetic circles for his book *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (the A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, 1952).[2] Gilson was primarily a historian of philosophy, concerning himself with Descartes and the medieval sources of Descartes. He wrote works on Augustine, Abelard, Bernard, Bonaventure, Aquinas, Dante, and Scotus, as well as general histories of medieval thought. His most famous lectures were: *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*[3] and *The Unity of Philosophical Experi-*

[1] The first version of this paper was presented in 1958 at a meeting of the California Aesthetics Society in Santa Barbara. Later in 1981 at a meeting of the American Maritain Association in St. Louis, Professor Robert McLaughlin of St. John Fisher College, Rochester, and I presented papers studying the same issue: whether or not Gilson's Mellon lectures were in part a criticism of Maritain's lectures three years before. Laurence Shook, C.S.B., Gilson's biographer, who was the commentator for our session, confirmed that we were correct. Professor McLaughlin's paper "Nature in Art: Maritain versus Gilson" was published in Marquette University's *Renascence* 34, no. 4 (Summer 1982). Here I am returning to the topic but this time with more attention to *abstract expressionism* which as a movement was peaking in the mid-1950s in the work of Jackson Pollack and Mark Rothke, for example.

[2] Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, Bollingen Series 35.1 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953).

[3] Étienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, The Gifford Lectures, University of Aberdeen, 1930–31 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936).

ence.[4] In 1955 Gilson gave the A. W. Mellon Lectures in Fine Arts, and these lectures were published as *Painting and Reality*.[5] In addition to this work, *The Arts of the Beautiful*[6] presented some of his further reflections on art and beauty.

While Maritain's writings on art go back to the early 1920s, it is the work of his mature years, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, to which I shall refer in this essay. Let's look first at Maritain's reflections on painting and representation in the chapter "Beauty and Modern Painting." Maritain begins by suggesting that the painter is less likely than the poet or writer to be deceived by "the myth of the artist as a hero."[7] He justifies his remark by saying that the painter is less able to shift toward the glorification of the ego, because he is bound, without choice, to the world of visible matter and corporeal being. Maritain speaks of difficulties for modern painters in this respect, and of the "obligation to recast the visible fabric of things in order to make them an expression of creative subjectivity"[8]—an obligation which entails drawbacks, failures, and produces victims.

Maritain illustrates his thought by referring to the human figure, and then to the human face, indicating that in his judgement the development of painting from the nineteenth century into the twentieth century has had the effect of deforming the human shape of both the face and the body:

> The impotency of modern art to engender in beauty at the expense of the human figure. . . , [an impotency] which can be found, to one degree or another, in all great contemporary painters, cannot be considered a slight defect. The fact was, no doubt, inevitable: precisely because the human figure carries the intrinsic exigencies of natural beauty to a supreme degree of integration, it is particularly difficult to

[4] Étienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, The William James Lectures, Harvard University, 1936–37 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937). It takes a philosopher to be a successful historian of philosophy, but in the epistemological controversies within Thomism in the 1930s Gilson emerged as a metaphysician/epistemologist in his own right; this culminated in the historical, metaphysical analysis one finds in *Being and Some Philosophers* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1952). Cf. Desmond J. FitzGerald, "Étienne Gilson: From Historian to Philosopher," in *Thomistic Studies* II (Houston, Texas: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1986).

[5] Étienne Gilson, *Painting and Reality*, Bollingen Series 36.4 (New York: Pantheon, 1957).

[6] Étienne Gilson, *The Arts of the Beautiful* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965).

[7] Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, p. 209.

[8] Ibid.

> recast its visible fabric except in deforming it. Will this difficulty be overcome someday?[9]

In commenting on this question, Maritain indicates his approval of the recasting of the human figure accomplished by El Greco, but shows a disapproval for those whom he considers to be the illegitimate progeny of the great contemporary artist Picasso: "They have found in his lesson a means of releasing the resentments of a boorish soul and of getting at little cost the admiration of an idiot public."[10]

The context shows that Maritain had in mind cubism, and in particular, the work of Marcel Duchamp. His comments here are not unfavorable, but neither are they approving: "Such an attempt was logically conceivable. It had an exceptional theoretical interest. It was indeed an attempt at the impossible. For the entire process runs against the nature of our spiritual faculties."[11]

Thus, Maritain's epistemological approach to art is indicated. The artist is a knower who is receptive to the being of things; a knower who is passive in the first stage; a knower who is informed by the forms of things, but who, in expressing this information, recasts it according to the creative intuition of his artistry. He takes in "intelligibility"; what he puts forth should reflect, in his own way, according to his vision, something of the intelligibility he took in. This is not the case, however, with recent painting, and because it is contrary to the natural process of knowing—the intellect being informed by sense perception—there is something unnatural about it. According to Maritain,

> Creative intuition and imagination do not proceed in an angelic or demonic manner. They are human, bound to the alertness of sense perception. They grasp a certain transapparent reality through the instrumentality of the eye and of certain natural appearances, recreated, recast, transposed of course, not cast aside and totally replaced by other appearances proper to another realm of Things in the world of visible Being. . . . The Thing within which creative intuition has caught its diamond is not illuminated, it is killed. The other Thing which has been conjured up does not suggest it, it absorbs it, and expresses it only in secret cipher. The process cuts off in human art the intellect from its inescapable connection with sense perception. It is unnatural in itself.[12]

[9] Ibid., p. 210.
[10] Ibid., pp. 210–11.
[11] Ibid., p. 214.
[12] Ibid.

In a section titled "Nonrepresentative Beauty," Maritain presents his reflections on abstract painting. He recognizes that it is the intention of the abstract artist to "renounce the existential world of Nature," but not to repudiate beauty, and so he says:

> If it divorces itself from the things of Nature, it is with a view of being more fully true to the free creativity of the spirit, that is, to poetry, in a manner more faithful to the infinite amplitude of beauty. That's why I would say in this connection nonrepresentative or nonfigurative beauty as well as nonrepresentative or nonfigurative art.[13]

Maritain appreciates certain features of what he calls nonfigurative art, and he judges that by getting clear of the human figure, there has been a deliverance from ugliness and stupidity in representing the form of man. He says that he is grateful to Mondrian and Kandinsky for providing perfect and restful balance, and he sees in abstract art an element of contemplation which gives repose to the soul, like the contemplation of a Platonic ideal.[14]

There is, however, a certain ambivalence in Maritain's attitude toward abstract painting. He does not want to be too systematic, for he sees the possibility that poetry may penetrate anything and anywhere. Maritain insists that the painter's experience with things remains unconsciously in his soul and appears in his work as the product of the spiritual *élan* of poetic intuition. Yet he adds: ". . . such possibilities remain exceptional—and in the last analysis, very limited; . . . one cannot try to develop therefore a specific form of art without pushing painting farther and farther away from the very source of poetic intuition and creative emotion."[15]

Although Maritain reacts negatively to abstract art, he recognizes that many of its practitioners are technically skillful in what they do and that something has been gained from the movement. He acknowledges that the practice of abstract art has contributed to the development of modern painting and that it represents "a necessary moment in the individual painter's self-education [and that] with regard to the general evolution of painting, it was an unavoidable moment."[16] Yet on reflection, Maritain suggests that it represents a period of stagnation or regression.

However, Maritain's belief is that the abstract painter cannot really escape from his life experience. Try as he may, there appears in his paintings some echo of what he has seen transformed by his creative intuition, and this bears some likeness to the reality he had experienced. "Condensed and

[13] Ibid., p. 216.
[14] Ibid., p. 217.
[15] Ibid., pp. 219–20.
[16] Ibid., p. 221.

simplified as they may be, natural appearances are there. Through them the existential world of Nature is there. . . . Such painting, which is, it seems to me, characteristic of the effort of some contemporary painters still designated as abstract painters, is in reality no more purely abstract art than cubism was."[17]

As was said before, Maritain's approach to the philosophy of painting is that of an epistemologist or psychologist. He views the artist as a knower, who has taken in the intelligibility of things and who is reflecting this intuited intelligibility in his work; this reflected intelligibility will not be an imitation-copy of reality for it will be transformed in the light of the artist's creative intuition, but it will still have in it something of the shining splendor of the original form.

Unlike Maritain, Gilson's approach to the philosophy of painting is that of a metaphysician. His interest lies in the being of the painting—the painting as an existing thing—rather than in the cognitive processes of the artist. He studies these too, but where Maritain eulogizes a certain passivity before the object, the significant element in Gilson's analysis is the free creative activity of the artist who brings about new forms in the colors of the painting he chooses to make. If one might be permitted an over-simplification here, Maritain's philosophy of painting centers around "intellect," whereas Gilson's centers around "will and appetite." The resulting contrast is to be seen in Maritain's consideration of abstract painting as a legitimate experiment, but one which is a "blind alley," whereas Gilson regards this recent and contemporary movement as one wherein painting has achieved its emancipation from the obligation of imitation. By freeing itself of this burden, painting has come into its own. Gilson says:

> Paintings are physical beings—more precisely, solid bodies—endowed with an individuality of their own. . . . [E]ach painting . . . is a completely self-sufficient system of internal relations regulated by its own laws. In this sense, paintings are mutually irreducible beings, each of which needs to be understood and judged from the point of view of its own structure. . . . [T]o the extent that it succeeds in achieving its own mode of artistic existence, a painting is justified in being exactly what it actually is.[18]

Against Maritain's point that the painter starts with the experience of reality, Gilson counters: "[A] true painter does not borrow his subject from reality; he does not even content himself with arranging the material pro-

[17] Ibid., p. 222.
[18] Gilson, *Painting and Reality*, pp. 132–33.

vided by reality so as to make it acceptable to the eye. His starting point is fantasy, imagination, fiction, and all the elements of reality that do not agree with the creature imagined by the painter have to be ruthlessly eliminated."[19] According to Gilson, the painter through his art gives rise to a new being. Gilson is thus captivated by the reality of a painting as a being; it does not have to say anything; it just exists. Of course, it can be judged as a beautiful thing, or a less beautiful thing, or an ugly thing, but it is not evaluated in terms of some truth content. A painting involves knowledge, but it is not judged as knowledge is judged or criticized.

Where Maritain worried about the progressive deformation of faces and figures which has characterized recent painting, Gilson welcomed the trend which he regarded as the emancipation of the artist from the burden of imitation. "Reduced to its simplest expression, the function of modern art has been to restore painting to its primitive and true function, which is to continue through man the creative activity of nature."[20]

But what of the dominant trend of painting from the fifteenth to the late nineteenth century to be representative? What of its illustrations of myths, landscapes, religious scenes, its portraits and its records of historical events? Gilson classifies these works as "pictures" rather than "paintings."

> In virtue of its own nature, painting is inextricably enmeshed in another art, for which there is no name, and for which it is hard to find a name because, so far, it has called itself "picturing"—that is, the art of doing pictures. Why, and how, should it be distinguished from the art of painting?
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> If there is such an art, its very essence is to represent, or imitate, and whatever can make imitation more nearly perfect can be considered as serving the very end and purpose of this art. Deception is not necessarily its most perfect expression, but there is no ground on which it could be rejected as foreign to the essence of picturing.[21]

In the section "Imitation and Creation" in his *Painting and Reality*, Gilson speaks of those who live under the spell of the doctrine stemming from the Italian Renaissance, according to which painting is an essentially representational art. While rejecting this view, Gilson says that he is by no means criticizing or belittling the art of the Renaissance, but he claims that the Renaissance conceived painting as a sort of language in which it told stories: "They say, by means of images, what a writer could say by means of words . . . in short, even if it were true to say that painting and represen-

[19] Ibid., pp. 130–31.
[20] Ibid., p. 285.
[21] Ibid., p. 260.

tation are always given together, it would be likewise true to say that representationality is not the essence of painting."[22]

Gilson presents some reflections on the use of the laws of perspective in traditional art, and these lead him to consider the question of deception in imitational or representative painting:

> All painters feel insulted if they are told that deception is the end of their art. Yet, if its end is imitation, why should it not be deception, which, after all, is the perfection of imitation? At any rate since there is no clearly defined boundary between imitation and deception, one should recognize at least the possibility of an art of painting that, in order completely to eliminate deception, would completely eliminate imitation.[23]

Against the suggestion that the object of their painting was imitation, Gilson quotes da Vinci and Reynolds to the effect that their painting was a poetry not copying nature in a servile way, but creating "it anew in a state of higher perfection." Here Gilson goes on to say:

> Now, creation is the very reverse of imitation, and since art cannot be both, at one and the same time, painting is bound to follow this new road to its very end, once it enters it for any reason whatsoever. Just as *trompe-l'oeil* is the logical term for representative art, so abstraction, or nonrepresentation, is the logical term for that notion of the art of painting that identifies it with poetry.[24]

As soon as they became aware of the true nature of the problem, modern painters discovered the principle that commanded its solution—namely, to eliminate from paintings all the merely representational elements and to exclusively preserve the poetic elements. This rule, more or less clearly conceived by a succession of great artists, became the driving force behind the evolution of modern painting. "Obviously, the intensity of the effect produced by a painting should increase in proportion to the plastic purity of its structure. Why not, then, eliminate all that, being merely representational, has no plastic value, and constitute a new type of painting containing nothing else than pure plastic elements?"[25]

Gilson reviews the history of the development of modern painting from Delacroix up to the recent past. It is a development out of representational painting, rather than a deformation. He says: "Far from resulting from an unexplainable aberration of the human mind, nonrepresentational art offers

[22] Ibid., p. 244.
[23] Ibid., p. 247.
[24] Ibid., p. 250.
[25] Ibid., p. 252.

itself to our study as rooted in the very nature of representational art."[26] His point is that the representational artist felt obliged "to make sacrifices," to omit creatively in order to change the nature he was portraying. Hence, this process of "abstracting," in the sense of "leaving out," entails the consequence of further and further "abstractions" until one has nonrepresentational painting. How far can this go?

It surprised me that Gilson, at the apex of abstract expressionism in 1955, goes no further in mentioning names than to refer in this connection to Mondrian's *Victory Boogie-Woogie* (1944):

> Where should one stop in making sacrifices? The answer is now known. Piet Mondrian seems to have gone the whole way, in this sense, that, if everything must be sacrificed to the pure plastic form, the sacrifice at least has now been made. By the same token, since to sacrifice the rest to preserve a certain element in its purity is to abstract this element from the rest, the art of Mondrian marks the *terminus ad quem* of the long pilgrimage of painting on the road to total abstraction.[27]

Without mentioning names, he does refer to others who seek "absolute formlessness." But I continue to be puzzled that Pollack and Rothko, for example, are not mentioned, given that these lectures date from the 1950s.

Interestingly enough, Gilson's remarks in this context seem to indicate that he may be closer to Maritain in his personal evaluation of abstract expressionism than his statement of the principles of painting would lead one to believe. He seems to find such painting "monotonous"; and after commenting on the freedom of nonrepresentational art, he speaks of the problem of contemporary painting as: "Where to go from here?"

> Countless paintings . . . look like so many plastic symbolizations of what the philosophers used to call "prime matter": something that is ceaselessly striving to be but never quite makes the grade; a "near nothingness," or, in Augustine's own words, an "It is and it isn't." The only objection to prime matter is that it is rather monotonous. . . . The victory of abstractionism has been so complete that it now takes much more courage and independence for a painter to be more or less representational than to follow the crowd of those who find it more profitable to exploit, at their own profit, the facilities of shapelessness. There is no denying the fact: painting is now free. There no longer remains any career to be made by fighting for its complete liberation.
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> To the question, what use should painters make of their liberty? The

[26] Ibid., p. 256.
[27] Ibid., p. 257.

> painters themselves must find an answer. A philosopher can contribute nothing to the debate beyond the clarification of notions whose obscurity adds to the natural difficulty of the problem.[28]

Whereas Maritain is concerned with the psychological sources of artistic production, as indicated by the title of his book *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, Gilson's concern is with the metaphysics—the being—of the painting. The interests, of course, overlap, as we have noted in constructing a debate over representative elements in painting. They overlap again insofar as Gilson must treat the processes of "making sacrifices," of "eliminating" or "abstracting." Here Gilson's analysis is not unlike Maritain's, and while there are differences of emphasis, something of the "intelligibility" with which Maritain was concerned reappears in Gilson's language as "the germinal form" in the mind of the painter:

> All true painters have always agreed on the necessity of making sacrifices, but they seem also to have been in the dark as to the precise nature of what they had to sacrifice. . . . [A]bstraction essentially consists in the elimination of whatever is not required for the actual realization, under the form of painting, of the germinal form present in the mind of the painter.[29]

This "germinal form" reminds one of the reality which, according to Maritain, the painter takes in and refashions in his work of art. For Gilson the activity of the artist is comparable to solving a problem, which is the very painting he is working on. He says: "Painting is not good because it is representational, but not to be representational does not suffice to make it good. . . . Representational or not, a painting is a true work of art to the extent that it 'abstracts' from all the elements that are not compatible with, or required for the embodiment of the germinal form conceived by the painter. . . . [A]bstraction is creation."[30]

However, despite this apparent agreement concerning the form known by the artist, the basic differences between Maritain and Gilson still exist. Something of this difference is expressed in Gilson's working distinction between a "picture" and a "painting." "A painting has its own rule, its own justification within itself. A picture has its criterion outside itself, in the ex-

[28] Ibid., pp. 257–58. In conversation with Armand Maurer in 1997, he recalled that Gilson did not have much to say to him on abstract expressionism but he did remember that Gilson showed little enthusiasm for Andy Warhol's pop art. Maurer's *About Beauty* (Houston, Texas: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1983) is a valuable source for insights contrasting the aesthetics of Maritain and Gilson.

[29] Ibid., p. 258.

[30] Ibid.

ternal reality it imitates."[31] Gilson takes note that some critics of nonrepresentational art have argued that since this type of art is unrelated to any external reality, it has no criterion by which it can be judged. Gilson concedes that the objection would be valid if the art of painting were the art of picturing. "As it is, all judgements and appreciations of painting founded upon their relation to an external model are irrelevant to painting."[32]

While Maritain and Gilson affirm the same Thomistic philosophical principles, they can obviously differ widely in their evaluation of the trend of recent painting. The fundamental difference seems to lie in their view of the artist. Maritain tends to regard the painter as a knower who expresses his knowledge in painting. Gilson regards the painter as a maker who expresses his freedom through the creation of form in painting. With Gilson it is a matter of liberty rather than truth.

> An artist somewhat resembles a man who, before making a decision of vital importance, collects all the facts relevant to the case, weighs the various decisions that are possible, calculates their probable consequences, and still does not know how he will ultimately decide. These are the classical moments of the philosophical description of a free act. Just as previsibility attends determination, imprevisibility attends liberty. The true meaning of the word "creation" in the writings of painters is practically the same as that of the word "liberty" when it is understood in this sense. As Eric Gill once said, the artist does not create *de nihilo*, but he does create *de novo*.[33]

I believe it is evident that Gilson was criticizing Maritain, or correcting him, lest Maritain's views be taken as some doctrinal statement of Thomistic philosophy of art.

One further interesting point is the paradox that Maritain—despite his negative statements on abstract art—seems to be in practice, according to the illustrations he chose for his book, more open and receptive to what was being done by the abstract expressionists; whereas Gilson, despite his principles, fails at a crucial moment to document his analysis with illustrations of the work of such individuals, as might appear in Seuphor's *Dictionary of Abstract Painting*. Is this an indication of how fundamental are the conflicts and disagreements which characterize aesthetics?

[31] Ibid., p. 265. Edward A. Synan in an article "Gilson Remembered" in *The Catholic Writer* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), p. 56, confirms this analysis. I did not come across this reference until this paper was being edited for publication.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid., p. 288.