

# THE MOON PRINCE AND THE ANGEL OF REALITY

By JOHN McDADE

*Infant, it is enough in life  
To speak of what you see. But wait  
Until sight awakens the sleepy eye  
And pierces the physical fix of things*  
Wallace Stevens, 'The red fern'<sup>1</sup>.

**T**HERE ARE few more fascinating texts than those which, as they say, disclose us to ourselves. Enjoy this one from Iris Murdoch:

The psyche is a historically determined individual relentlessly looking after itself . . . One of its main pastimes is day-dreaming. It is reluctant to face unpleasant realities. Its consciousness is not normally a transparent glass through which it views the world, but a cloud of more or less fantastic reverie designed to protect the psyche from pain. It constantly seeks consolation, either through imagined inflation of the self or through fictions of a theological nature. I think we can all recognize ourselves in this rather depressing description.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed we can, and there is more than enough material here for a fashionable 'examination of consciousness'. Iris Murdoch goes on to describe us as 'anxiety-ridden animals' whose 'minds are constantly active, fabricating an anxious, self-preoccupied, often falsifying *veil* which partially conceals the world'.<sup>3</sup> Her account challenges—accurately, I would judge—the presumption that human beings are naturally creatures of 'realism'. Instinctively, we may rather be creatures of immense self-preoccupation, whose maturation, if it occurs, consists in our being able to minimize the self-centredness of our vision of the world, and thus be able to act more accurately and generously. For very good reasons, the New Testament proposes that the critical standard of love—that most delusive of attitudes—is encountered solely when we act for those

who cannot contribute to our self-esteem. As Simone Weil puts it, love is a direction, and not a state of the soul: it seeks the true good of the other person, and does not absorb him/her into the inner atmosphere of my self-regard.

*In and out of the rat-run*

Before we become too involved in a cycle of introspective analysis, let me make it clear that Iris Murdoch touches on these psychological and moral considerations as part of her description of the mysterious quality of *good art* which she distinguishes from the forms of bad art,

the recognizable and familiar rat-runs of selfish day-dream. Good art shows us how difficult it is to be objective by showing us how differently the world looks to an objective vision. We are presented with a truthful image of the human condition in a form which can be steadily contemplated; and indeed this is the only context in which many of us are capable of contemplating it at all.<sup>4</sup>

The function of 'good' art, like that rare commodity 'good' spirituality, is to enable us to deal with 'what is real': art can provide a fresh experience of the world in which, within the domain of the senses, there is a transcending of self-centred perception. It is common experience that there are few things more difficult than the act of undivided attention to what we see, hear and witness: the inner dialogue, which we conduct with ourselves most of the time, constantly threatens to insert itself, as both commentator and interpreter, between us and our sensual experience. But the stimulus of the senses, which art brings at its highest achievement, is nothing less than an intense experience of what true listening, seeing and feeling can be: when this occurs, we have ceased to enact the familiar pattern of self-centred living, and have begun to experience the world with an objective attentiveness which normally eludes us. Jacques Maritain, in a playful, but deeply serious image, compares the authority of artistic truth with the arrival of a 'moon prince' who comes into the midst of our intellectual hierarchies, an unexpected and embarrassing guest, whom we do not know how to acknowledge, but whose significance for our dealings with reality is profound.<sup>5</sup>

The mystery is that the detachment from the self which art can bring—poetically described as 'rapture' or 'ecstasy'—is at the

same time an intense experience of authentic selfhood. 'Ec-stasis' (standing outside myself) is mysteriously the moment of deepest self-presence: I experience my identity most truly when I am able to be caught up in a truthful attentiveness to what is real. I am most fully myself when I am able to experience a truthful engagement with 'what is there'—hence the deeply unsatisfying character of experiences which do no more than confirm me in the 'rat-runs of selfish day-dream'. It would be a troubled and distrustful spirituality which banished this sensual experience of profound selfhood to a forbidden realm: the Empire of the Senses has a way of striking back when its authority is not acknowledged. In a fascinating essay on the human body, Gonzalez-Crussi, a professor of pathology, comments that 'our body, in so far as its coincidence with our being is absolute, is unfelt. At every angle, at every point of their contour, the coincidence between being and body is perfect'.<sup>6</sup> Precisely so: I do not experience my body as external to my being. Rather, what happens to my body happens to me, and my consciousness of selfhood is inseparable from my bodiliness. The transcendence which art brings is not an escape from the boundaries of bodily existence, but is rather a more profound entry into reality experienced by the senses than our psyche normally permits: it is this which points to a significant connection between the objectivity of what we experience and the depth of authentic selfhood.

### *Absorption in 'Adultery'*

One of the exhilarations of art at its best is the heightened sense of the truth about ourselves and the world which it brings: an intense experience of 'what things are really like'. It always brings with it a sense of having 'understood' in a more profound way, of having 'seen' or having 'heard' more acutely, or having been involved in the world's story more deeply. An example of this experience is found in a short story by André Dubus, called *Adultery*, which deals with the marriage of a young American couple, Edith and Hank. At this point in the story, Edith is faced with the truth of her husband's infidelity. They go together to a Judy Collins concert, and the novelist focuses on Edith:

The concert hall was filled and darkened and she sat in the sensate, audible silence of listening people and watched Judy under the spotlight in a long lavender gown, her hair falling over one

shoulder as she lowered her face over the guitar. Soon Edith could not hear the words of the songs. Sadly she gazed at Judy's face, and listened to the voice and thought of the voice going out to the ears of all those people, all those strangers and she thought how ephemeral was a human voice, and how death not only absorbed the words in the air, and absorbed as well the act of making the words, and the time it took to say them . . . Staring at the face above the lavender gown she strained to receive the words and notes into her body.<sup>7</sup>

Edith's response to the music is entirely self-absorbed (how else would she listen, given her husband's behaviour?) but through the music, that narrow focus becomes a deep experience of mortality and wordless insight. She listens to the music with an intensity which opens for her the horizon and blessed emptiness of death: in that vacuum, she strains to bring the music, physically and erotically, into her body. Edith's response to the music is offered to the reader as an instance of compassionate empathy which takes us more deeply into what people can, and do experience. It is, for me, a compelling moment of human urgency which acts, not as an escape, but as a deeper insight into my own life. Good fiction takes us always back to truth. (The finest study of 'escapist reading'—the opposite of what I have described—is in the character of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* whose emotional experience is defined and determined by the categories of romantic fiction; the result is, predictably, tragic and pathetic.)

#### *Undulant rhetoric*

Does the magic of art always work? Of course not. I have been more bored by 'good' art than anyone else I know. I can walk through a whole room of London's National Gallery with a tedium which matches my response to Wagner at his most blasphemous. Equally, like Edith, there are times when the banality of country and western music is just what I need, or when Cagney and Bogart in *The roaring twenties* seem the height of emotional expressiveness. In all these instances, however, the self-absorbed self needs cuddling, and the art which fits the mood is more likely to be Judy Collins than Josquin.

Being a keen but, I hope, perceptive consumer of art which panders to the 'rat-runs of selfish day-dream' I have the consumer's right to comment that there are many areas of popular culture which recall the planet described in Doris Lessing's novel, *The*

*sentimental agents*: there, society is controlled, not by force, but by the power of the 'undulant rhetoric' which numbs the minds of the inhabitants and imprisons them within a political and spiritual landscape of fraudulent experience. Art, like religious discourse, can be used as the *undulant rhetoric of the senses* which inhibits the disclosure of truthful experience. Plato knew this, and wanted to banish artists from the ideal republic, but such totalitarian legislation ignores the connection which can exist between art and the morally and spiritually real.

*The angel of reality*

I want, briefly, to point to the ways in which, in the poetry of Wallace Stevens and in the paintings of Mark Rothko, this connection is explored. In the work of both artists, I find a concern which is close to the religious tradition of the *via negativa*: it can be described as the movement of the self towards 'what is real', beyond words and images. The 'goal' envisaged by both artists is the experience of full, authentic selfhood through contact with a reality whose impact on us cannot be expressed in words.

The nature of the relationship between art and 'reality' forms the substance of the poetry of Wallace Stevens. The *leitmotif* of his work is the relationship of thoughts, images, fictions—especially 'theological' fictions—to 'the real', the tangible, the physical. He presents the work of artistic imagination as the epiphany of the concrete particulars of the world, the manifestation of 'the poem of pure reality', which, if it can be attained, is the fulfilment of authentic 'vision' (existence).

In his poem, *Angel surrounded by paysans*, Stevens imagines the presence of an angel, 'the angel of reality', in whose presence we are led to see again:

Yet I am the necessary angel of earth,  
 Since, in my sight, you see the earth again,  
 Cleared of its stiff and stubborn, man-locked set,  
 And, in my hearing, you hear its tragic drone  
 Rise liquidly in liquid lingerings  
 Like watery words awash . . .<sup>8</sup>

Stevens's 'angel of reality' and Maritain's 'moon prince' are personifications of the insight and vision which art brings to our experience of reality and selfhood: they personify the movement

from deluded and self-centred vision to an experience of objective truth. It is customary to interpret Stevens's poems as agnostic in character, but his poetry seems to me to be closer to an apophatic tradition: it is the search for a reality, glimpsed through images and fictions—the 'angel' is, after all, the 'necessary' angel—but which is essentially wordless and imageless, beyond the mediation of symbolic forms, and in whose presence we discover our deepest capacity for 'vision' and truthful existence. The ancient prohibition in Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions against employing images of the divine is prompted by a sense that divine invisibility and ineffability are not deficiencies in the mode of divine presence, but are, rather, positive factors in drawing us beyond images to the mystery which discloses our authentic identity. Stevens finds his way back to this insight: for him, human beings seek nothing less than 'the poem of pure reality': direct contact with 'what is', without the deviation of reflective thought and its interpretative symbols:

We keep coming back and coming back  
 To the real: to the hotel instead of the hymns  
 That fall upon it out of the wind. We seek  
 The poem of pure reality, untouched  
 By trope or deviation, straight to the word.  
 Straight to the transfixing object, to the object  
 At the exactest point of which it is itself  
 Transfixing by being purely what it is,  
 A view of New Haven, say, through the certain eye,  
 The eye made clear of uncertainty, with the sight  
 Of simple seeing, without reflection. We seek  
 Nothing beyond reality . . .<sup>9</sup>

In this poem, *An ordinary evening in New Haven*, Stevens introduces a fictional character, Professor Eucalyptus, who says, 'The search/ For reality is as momentous as/ The search for god'<sup>10</sup>: the search for authentic and truthful presence in the world and the search for the divine may be, in some measure, identical. Aquinas's designation of God as *ipsum esse subsistens*, or Pure Act, presents God as the ineffable reality in whose presence we are brought to the fullness of authentic selfhood. The image which, in Judaeo-Christian and European philosophical traditions, designates the association of *reality* and *authentic selfhood* is that of vision: it is the irreplaceable

metaphor which signals a perfected response to the true and the real. 'Seeing' stands as a metaphor for authentic contact with what is real; it is no accident that, in the Christian tradition, the metaphor of the Beatific Vision, in which the fragmentariness of human existence will be removed by our complete attentiveness to the divine reality, designates the completion of human life.

### *Compelling presences*

Stevens's search for 'the poem of pure reality', the non-iconic and wordless access to the divine, is echoed in the paintings of the Abstract Expressionist artist, Mark Rothko. His canvases, largely massive blocks of colours which present themselves powerfully and silently, without figurative delineation, have been described as 'icons of the absence of God', as 'cosmic allegories', as paintings which provide an 'authentic religious experience in a modern world of doubt'.<sup>11</sup> But they defy articulation. Robert Rosenblum says of them: 'it is as if the entire context of Western religious art were finally devoid of its narrative complexities and corporeal imagery, leaving us with these dark, compelling presences'.<sup>12</sup> Rothko thought that his paintings were capable of offering the viewer an experience of transcendence, but, significantly, he himself did not think that he had a language adequate to describe his paintings, even to himself. He feared that if he wrote about his paintings, it would lead to a 'paralysis of the mind and the imagination' in the spectator and, one presumes, also in himself. He considered that the task was that of 'finding the most exact rhetoric for these specific pictures',<sup>13</sup> but the implication is that what is conveyed by these paintings is beyond the boundaries of speech. Words are secondary instruments of interpretation in his visual art and also in the search for the divine: presence and vision are primary.

Before his paintings there is a sense of silent mystery. I find myself powerfully drawn to them, but like Rothko, and unlike many of his commentators, I find it impossible to express the attraction in an appropriate rhetoric. They are, for me, instances of attentive vision, when I feel most strongly the power of the metaphor of *vision as perfected existence*.

### *Vision and truth*

Both the poems of Stevens and the paintings of Rothko present the visual as the central metaphor for authentic existence reached apophatically, beyond what can be expressed in words and images.

Both communicate in their art a sense of wordless mystery, consonant with deep aspirations in our nature. They point us towards the ineffability of human selfhood in its search for 'what is real', and they seem to me to touch upon a central quality of the human spirit in its response to the invisible and ineffable God. Art, when it is able to touch on this dimension, expresses a spirituality which is profound in its scope and intensity, and exhibits a sure grasp of the mysterious character of humanity's dealings with God, and of God's dealings with us.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Stevens, Wallace: *Collected poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), p 365.

<sup>2</sup> Murdoch, Iris: *The sovereignty of good* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), pp 78-9.

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*, p 84.

<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp 86-7.

<sup>5</sup> Maritain, Jacques: *Art and faith: letters between Jacques Maritain and Jean Cocteau* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1948), pp 116-7.

<sup>6</sup> Gonzalez-Crussi, F.: *Three forms of sudden death and other reflections on the grandeur and misery of the human body* (Picador, 1987), pp 119-20.

<sup>7</sup> Dubus, André: 'Adultery', in *We don't live here anymore: the novellas of André Dubus* (Picador, 1984), p 184.

<sup>8</sup> Stevens, Wallace: *op. cit.*, pp 496-7.

<sup>9</sup> 'An ordinary evening in New Haven', *op. cit.*, p 471.

<sup>10</sup> *Op. cit.*, p 481.

<sup>11</sup> Rosenblum, Robert: *Modern painting and the northern romantic tradition: Friedrich to Rothko* (Thames and Hudson, 1975), p 216. (An excellent survey of the interpretation of Christianity in the development of modern art.)

<sup>12</sup> *Op. cit.*, p 218.

<sup>13</sup> *Mark Rothko 1903-1970* (The Tate Gallery, 1987), p 58.