

# The quest for form

*John O'Donohue*

**T**HE BARE FORM IS BLEAK TO THE EYE. The colour and texture of form awakens the affections of the eye and stirs the dreaming of the imagination. In the smallest particle of experience there is a play of difference to endlessly enthrall the mind. The form is how the differences assemble that makes an object unique. We are always surprised by the panorama of difference that is the world. Yet we seldom sense how different and strange we might seem to the world. Imagine if the world could focus in single, selective subjectivity and truly see us, what would it think? Would it feel poignancy at the infinity helplessly awake in us and the devastating individuality of what we feel and see? Would the world pine at the doors of the senses and long to enter the mind?

Consciousness is the secret that makes the human person an infinite, intimate and autonomous world. But consciousness also makes us lonely and strange in the world. We are at once the nearest and the most distant ones. Like an absolute magnet, consciousness attracts every difference. The longing at the heart of this attracting is a desire to know. Something deep in us seems to believe that when we know we find meaning and come home.

## *Primal selfhood: exile and gift*

In the beginning, when we broke forth from the unitive world of animal being, our first human act was a fall: the fall into the separation of the act of knowing. No longer could data loosely and lyrically shimmer around us like leaves in a forest. Now space had become distance. We had fallen out of the ancient seamlessness. Each was marooned in his distinctive aloneness. The data of awareness were slipping into relentless order. Our seeing changed utterly. We could no longer see what we knew before. What we now saw had changed too. We started to see everything through the new lenses called 'thoughts'. We had become strangers in a different world. The old places were still there but now they seemed hesitant and different. Our native sureness of ground was broken. For the first time the shadow of doubt began to appear behind each thing, making a silhouette that nothing could erase.

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The new humans had entered narrative. No more could there be a purely momentary experience. Their brains became sore with consciousness which they could not stop. Each thing began to fall inevitably into sequence. The humans had become both subjects and observers of their own experience. The new distance made them engage their experience as if they were taking possession of their lives. And indeed, nearing their own experience was now the only way to enter into presence. Experience had become the arena of the Self. First-selfhood did not just slip gently from the seamlessness of Being. There must have been breakage and grief. First-selfhood must have been hugely ambivalent: on the one hand, the mirage of infinity was beginning to clarify in the mirror of thought. The simple perception of an object could hearken such intensity and divinity now. Perception was the awakening of an affinity and intimacy. Yet the very elusiveness of First-selfhood must have brought great poignancy. First-selfhood was in a sense the primal and ultimate act of exile. It would no longer be possible to be at home in the world in the old way. This was the primal moment when consciousness broke forth in Being. Though this was the slightest of fractures, it would forever implicate consciousness in an ultimate quest for knowing and meaning.

This primal moment of first consciousness changed time and space. Their lyrical seamlessness broke. Time became charged with sequence. Space became distance. Their new intensity became especially explicit in the act of perception. The mind started on its path in quest of meaning. Even the simplest objects of sense perception stirred questions. And consciousness began to distinguish appearance from reality. Things took on names; and identity became a question that brought knowing to the edge of mystery. The new multiplicity would have smothered consciousness were it not for the space perception maintained between self and world. The world hesitated, holding back its multiplicity of things until thought would approach. In turn, things were integrated into consciousness in the form of thought.

### *To search behind the imprint of individuality*

With the birth of consciousness, experience focused in the individuality of the act of awareness and knowing. No two individuals perceived exactly the same world. Each dwelt somewhere new ultimately out of reach of the Other. Individuality was no longer the simple separateness or difference of an empirical object. Identity was no longer side by side thereness; it had withdrawn inward to autonomy. Identity was now

conscious difference that was also self-conscious. Individuality was now aware of itself as unique form. In its act of knowing, it endeavoured to elicit the form of a thing in order to approach its identity. It endeavoured to search deeper, behind the imprint of individuality. The world rises towards the self through the form and filter of individual thought. Experience exhibited a relentless multiplicity. Perception did not so much confer order on the multiplicity. Rather it attempted to decipher the subtle and latent order in the self-presentation of difference. Consciousness had won through into the definition of its permanent tension: to awaken the individuality of difference, yet disclose the embrace of affinity which holds all differentiation.

Because consciousness first awakened at a frontier, it has continued to maintain and manifest frontier characteristics. On this side of its frontier, it presents reality grasped and articulated in the structures of thought and word. As it thematizes experience, it unearths endless structures. This is one of the fascinating characteristics of reality as presented in thought. Though consciousness can discern and suggest the frontier line at the edge of the formless, it cannot penetrate much further there. This is the Midas touch of consciousness: everything it touches sooner or later exhibits structure. This is a deep desire in the human heart to get beyond structure. Somehow to step outside the labyrinth of our own configurations and constructions and linger for a while in the formless. This is seldom possible. Everything we encounter or engage is already in emergent form or formed.

Consciousness itself is always active in constructing the world. Here is the outward thrust of a presence that is always simultaneously reaching inwards; it is in permanent conversation with itself and continually active in the construction of itself. This is the ineluctable reflexivity of consciousness. In other words, it is the rhythm of selfhood. In this primal, epistemological rhythm, consciousness exhibits a narrative structure. It is always adding to the harvest of memory and awakening the seam of possibility concealed in the future. It is the narrative of reflective knowing and being known – almost a double helix structure constructed from the threshold where reality and consciousness engage. Ironically, the more consciousness becomes aware of its exquisite capacity for configuration, the deeper the desire becomes to encounter the formless. This is evident in the history of philosophy. Whenever the geography of Being achieves extensive description, the neighbourhood of Nothingness inevitably comes into view. Wherever the Self or subjectivity emerges as the focus of thought, otherness and the idea of the Other comes strongly forth. And when

thought seems to make the Divine more luminous, the apophatic and the incomprehensible nature of the Divine assert themselves. It seems the more imaginative and luminous the form, the more tersely the formless asserts its darkness. Or perhaps, the more luminous the form, the deeper we are afforded a glimpse into the dark riches of the unknown.

*The unknown: where the edifice of presence grounds*

The unknown has always both fascinated and frightened us. This is an ancient experience for the human being. At the very beginning, at the dawn of human consciousness, there was literally nothing but the unknown. Despite the huge history of deciphering that consciousness has achieved, the unknown still has not relinquished its force and fascination. The membrane of consciousness remains extremely slight. It is fascinating that a frontier so slight can hold back the tide of the unknown to ensure that the nest of selfhood is not dissolved and lost. Not only does consciousness hold its ground against the swell of the unknown, it lets the unknown in. Why is consciousness not smothered and overwhelmed? In some primal sense, consciousness is completely unafraid of the unknown. It desires to engage the unknown almost as an equal. This intensity of openness to the unknown can only be maintained because consciousness trusts in the faithfulness of its own configurational capacity and that ultimately the unknown is not dissembling chaos. Consciousness must somehow sense in the unknown some inchoate longing to emerge into form. Furthermore, this form is genuinely emergent from the encounter; it is not pre-given. Nor is it simply the desperate projection of a frontier force that depends for its survival on its incessant projections into nothingness.<sup>1</sup> Consciousness senses that it may indeed be sought out by the unknown as the only threshold where its huge latent bank of knowing might enter into reflection, namely achieve the visibility of thought and word where experience becomes recognition. Considered in this way, consciousness is the theatre where the unknown trusts itself into figure and form.

It was Nietzsche who most clearly saw how deeply society conspires to dull the unknown, how it develops the most subtle strategies to create a climate of amnesia. The unknown is forgotten. Yet on every side, externally and internally, human identity borders on the unknown. In temporal terms, the duration of narrative that constitutes a human life is like a bridge between unknown and unknown: each of us unexpectedly emerges from the unknown and, on an unspecifiable day, will surrender

form to depart into the unknown forever. We live in the neighbourhood of the unknown. However, we become so absorbed in the actuality and unfolding of identity that we forget its ultimate origin and arrival point, which is the unknown at each terminus. Even the origin of our thoughts is the unknown. It is as if the whole edifice of presence is but a moment by moment luminosity, flickering in the formless dark of the unknown. The passion of the light only suggests the depth and range of the darkness.

*The threshold: where formless and form converse*

The question is about the place where the unknown becomes articulate in us. The true question has no answer. The true question is a lantern toward which the depths of the unknown strain in order to be glimpsed and achieve form. Yet there must be some profound sense in which the unknown senses that it will not be diminished in entering visibility through the forms of consciousness. The beauty of consciousness is the tension of its ceaseless creativity. Though the world seems so solid to the senses, each form is emergent. Reality is where the desire of consciousness and the longing of the unknown achieve visible form as threshold. This threshold is sustained by the tension of each force. The so called empirical 'givenness' of reality is created rather than fixed. The classical theological notion of 'creatio continua' captures the exact ambivalence: the world is absolutely there, yet always only provisionally given. The true question is always a quest.

The grounding of this tension between form and formlessness is the very condition of the possibility of experience. It also suggests that experience is not direct possession of reality. The inner nature of experience is mystery. It is thoroughly ironic that we can consider experience normal and familiar, yet the whole time experience trembles on the most tenuous of thresholds. Experience is strange by nature. So many forces come together out of nowhere to configure even the simplest experience. Given this epistemological tension at the heart of experience, it is no wonder that experience is always in quest of its own meaning. Though we have attempted in a discursive way to elucidate the form that grounds the possibility of experience, it is clear that experience itself is spontaneous. Experience simply happens. The huge archive of memory that accrues to each person is comprised mainly of pre-reflective lived experience. Experience is lived first and reflected on later. Holderlin put this incisively: 'Reflection always arrives too late.' Yet reflection enjoys such endless play with experience precisely

because of the concealed depths. When reflection engages experience, it always discovers new regions under-surface. This movement of reflection towards experience is reminiscent of the movement of consciousness towards the unknown which firstly makes experience possible. It would be false to attempt to put this in sequential order. In many instances both could happen simultaneously. Experience is always open-ended, thus the question of meaning arises naturally. Meaning is the art of unearthing and deciphering the forms concealed in experience. The quest for meaning is the quest for form.

Another huge threshold where the unknown comes alive for consciousness is the unconscious. The unknown as unconscious surfaces when consciousness closes down at night. The language of this unknown is dream. Dream exhibits a fascinating subtlety of form in its narrative depth. Dream is drama. A theatre of figures and narratives in which the sleeping self is an absolute participant. The slightest fissure on the surface of daily experience: a glimpse, a hesitation, a doorway subliminally registered, can become the aperture into an abyss stirring with forms. The nature of dream casts interesting light on the epistemology of the unknown. In the vulnerability of sleep the unknown has absolute access to consciousness. Indeed, consciousness turns into a theatre of the unknown. Yet the unknown does not become a torrent of darkness that blots out consciousness. The unknown takes on the aesthetic form of deep narrative where the deeper meaning is well concealed and demands skilled acts of discovery before it clarifies. The form mediates the meaning, holding it off until the subject is ready and willing to see. Of course, it is not as if the unknown deposits ready made stories in a region called the subconscious. Such fixed spatial metaphors would misrepresent how the form of dream emerges from the threshold where the unknown and the oblique creativity of the subconscious engage each other.

*Form in art: 'imagination as the fire in the form'*

The concept of form grounds the narrative that emerges from the ceaseless encounter of the unknown with knowing. Our exposition has concentrated on this as a question of principle, a necessary first condition to ground the possibility of experience. Naturally this opens onto an arena where the diversity of possible forms is immense: forms of consciousness, forms of the unknown and forms of individuality. Art is one area where the notion of form itself is central and illuminating. A reflection on the epistemology of the imagination shows how the

imagination works with such patience and rigour in order to achieve the true form in a work. In contrast to perception which strives after definition, description and analytical knowing, the imagination approaches the unknown in a different way.<sup>2</sup> A poem, for instance, is never a description of an experience. A poem is an intricately crafted force-field of suggestion.

A poem is a force-field of words weighted and sequenced in a form which draws the reader into a space of suggestion enabling the reader to enter the source experience which drew the poet to write the poem. Unlike philosophical conceptualization, the poem never seeks to be a finished object. It is precisely its deliberately unfinished nature that generously invites the reader in, not as external observer but as inner, individual participant in the experience. The form sustains the open tension between the thereness of the poem and the live possibility that gleams from its word-dance. The form is how the differences assemble within the object so as to become seamless. The form is the unique shape of the poem, the way it is cut into time and space. A poem is pure threshold. The words cut into the silence to make the notation to bring forth unique music. In terms of the unknown-knowing dialectic, the sound of the true poem neither diminishes nor dulls the silence; in fact, it allows the unheard music of the silence to become audible. Again form here is neither barrier nor frame; it is vital threshold. 'Imagination is the fire in the form.'<sup>3</sup>

Often, the more natural the form, the more invisible it remains. We have argued that form is central to the act of human identity: the emergent threshold of the unknown and the known. And form is central to consciousness. Yet we often fail to notice that consciousness and language are sisters. Thought and word are not to be separated. This is an ancient recognition, thematized as early as the Pre-Socratics and the Stoics. Language is as natural to us as breath. Nevertheless, language in itself constitutes one of the most intricate and subtle systems of forms. The poet always recognizes that the language knows more than she does. It is as if the language is a presence more ancient than human perception. Here is a depth of knowing that has achieved eternal refinement in the silence of the earth. Experience seems to delight in the true words of expression. Worlds are crossed in words. Reflection of the form of the words inevitably reveals the nature of the experience. The Word is born at the threshold of the Unknown; it is the musical shape from the Great Silence. Heidegger sums this up wonderfully: 'Language itself is poetry in the essential sense.'<sup>4</sup>

In its consideration of objects, the philosophy of perception inevitably tends to concentrate on the intellectual form and meaning of the object. The sensuous nature of the object is subsumed into epistemological strategy. Yet the sensuous form of the object is its vital and lyrical expression in the world; this is how and where it engages the senses. Faithfulness to the sensuous is more the province of the imagination. The sensuous form is at the heart of imaginative art; this is how the imagination creates its world. The sensuous form is not clothing for an idea nor the frame for an essence; it is incarnated and individuated presence. Texture and depth reinforce and define each other. Through finely crafted imaginative presentation, the sensuous achieves devastating expression and penetrating force. The imagination's fascination with sensuous presence reflects a profound respect for the unitive presence that is creation. It avoids the dualism that would separate idea from image. The imagination strives towards the evocation of presence. Without the vitality and feeling of sensuous form, presence remains an idea and cannot become an experience. The justice of the imagination demands wholeness of form.

Imaginative form slows down the immediacy of the work until something more than a lyrical first encounter is mediated. It delays and subverts the desired gratification of eye, ear, touch or mind in order for something else to come through. Why this slowing? The work implicates the person in its own vital and restless probings. In a certain sense there is nothing as alive as a work of art, though externally it resembles an object and is thereby deemed lifeless. Its form implicates the observer in an experience of transfiguration: the observer enters its world and becomes a participant. The space between the observer and the work becomes fluent. One flows into the other. The form of the work is cut so as to respect, recognize and engage the individuality of the observer. This can be a deeply intimate encounter both enriching the sensibility of the one and deepening the resonance of the other. With alert patience and rigorous skill, art excavates the unknown until finally a unique form emerges, something utterly individual. There are no repetitions in art. Ironically, it is the pure individuality of the work of art that achieves the universality of resonance. It somehow awakens and engages the lost, repressed or forgotten individuality of the reader, listener or viewer. Epistemologically, art reveals that individuality is both an expression of Being and that all individuality is grounded in an ontology of subtle and intensive affinity.

*The theology of form*

Given that form is creative and critical presence, what valency might it enjoy theologically? There has been an astounding lack of attention to the imagination in the Christian theological tradition. There was an overbearing reflection on the Divine Will and the Divine Intellect. There was practically no consideration of the Divine Imagination. The notion of God as creator was always central. But the conceptual analysis of the creator and creation was explored along the lines of linear intentionality. The inner rhythm and content of the process of creation, even when considered, rarely included the role of the imagination as creative force. The classical suspicion of image may also have contributed to this avoidance of the imagination. Furthermore, the empiricist understanding of revelation as propositional suggested that revelation was the passive reception of finished divine data. This view bracketed out the role of the imagination in the discovery and articulation of revelation. Without imagination there would be no revelation. Revelation is an imaginative form of divine self-disclosure and human self-discovery. Without the Divine Imagination, there would have been no creation.

William Blake called Christ 'the Imagination'. The Incarnation is the absolute heart of revelation. The Incarnation is the place where all the hints, glimpses and beliefs of the preceding tradition crystalize not just into an integral narrative or vision, but rather become a person. The Incarnation is the living form in which God comes to visibility on earth. The Ground-Presence, the most invisible force of all becomes visible in the form of this human individual. The totally Unseen emerges into physical form. The Incarnation is absolute threshold: the indissoluble and unique union of divinity and humanity in one person. The Unknown, the source of all that is, emerges as a person. The secret of the Incarnation is its form. The struggle to articulate accurately that form took some of the greatest minds of classical antiquity almost four centuries. Finally the ground rules of articulation were set in the Council of Chalcedon in 451. The wonder of the Incarnation is how divinity and humanity do not simply co-exist in this man; they do not subsist side by side. They are one in union, yet also distinct.

The Incarnation lives from the dialectical tension of divinity and humanity. The origin, evolution and definition of the Incarnation demanded self-expression. The dialectical tension of divinity and humanity is also a narrative which speaks from the depths of divine silence. Jesus is after all the Word. The form of the Incarnation sustains

the intensity of its inner creative tension. It endures as threshold along the breath-line of an unknown man in a desert, a man who has to learn who he is and bring that knowing out in imaginative expression to the heart of history. Jesus did not know from the beginning that he was God. It dawned slowly in him. In this sense, the imagination of Jesus was decisive in recognizing, grounding and living out the Incarnation. The form of the Incarnation is where the Ground of Being emerges as an existential subjectivity. And it is precisely the epistemology of Jesus that unearths the living nexus of Being and Existence as the heart of his own individuality. In him absolute depth and visible existence find expression as self. Put colloquially, in the Incarnation the absolute ontological insider, the first Other ever, emerges as an individual, perceivable form.

The Incarnation does not remain a merely sublime ontological or aesthetic form; it is also a living and effective life-form that changes cultural, religious and human history. The Incarnation is an ontological form that becomes and remains existentially active. Our reflections have suggested that the more sublime the form, the deeper the light it casts on the unknown and, furthermore, the greater the inner intensity with which the differences within the form itself become active. In the Incarnation this dialectic achieves unimaginable extremity. The Crucifixion of Jesus is the point of furthest loss within the Incarnation. Ultimately, the Crucifixion is the abyss in the Trinity. Here all form becomes formless. The Resurrection is the return of individual form, transfigured now and immune to transience and the ravages of time and space. The irony is: at the point of no-return all that is lost returns transfigured, now forever beyond loss.

The Incarnation is also 'the window on the Trinity'. From the perspective of form, the Trinity is a wondrous construct of Divine Being. The Trinity attempts to show multiplicity and absolute unity alive in the one fluent form. It is at once a form where the most sublime abstraction and paradox are harmonized and also a lyrical triad of faces that look out from infinite depths at us 'their' beloved children. There is sublime imaginative depth to the Trinity. It is an amazing attempt to bring together all that is within the rigour and generosity of the one form: the most unthinkable datum of all, divine originlessness, the generation of Otherness, the intimacy that is full enough to go beyond relationality to become a distinct individuality, the inner narrative of dialectic between them; the place of belonging – their oneness, nowness, where 'they' are 'one' with no dialectic ripples, the *perichoresis* of divine imagining and becoming, the protrusion into visibility and history in the Incarnation,

the return of the Son to the Unseen and the 'emergence' of the unseen Spirit. In the history of religions, the Trinity is the form of deity which somehow holds absolute expanse and focused individuality in the fluency of one rhythm of Being and Becoming. All is somehow one. One is all.

Form is the threshold where essence and existence activate as individuality. It is a seminal concept whose exploration would enable us to articulate a new epistemology and ontology. Dualism in all its forms could be avoided and the imaginative potential of duality could be mined for its treasures. Theologically, this could ground a new mystical aesthetic of what sacraments intend. Form is the heart of all creativity. To be human is to be formed in the image and likeness of the Divine Imagination. When we create, we enter the Holy. The bare form is bleak to the eye. The living form is where the imagination dances and the Divine approaches.

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#### NOTES

1 This is the frontier where the bleak mystical imagination of Beckett works. The intensity of the bleakness charts the poignant glory of human passion.

2 I have recently explored this theme in a talk to the Merriman Summer School in Lisdoonvarna, Summer 2001 on 'The Epistemology of the Imagination'.

3 This phrase is from the Australian writer Diana James.

4 Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, language and thought* (New York: 1971), p 74.