

CONTEMPLATION AND THE ARTIST

By ROBERT F. McGOVERN

STRONG LIGHT rushes through my studio windows, revealing the unfinished condition of my carvings of the Saints Brigid and Brendan. Tools are all about the floor, while outside snow is on the ground. In my studio, as in the world, light illuminates all that it falls upon. It is the welcoming companion for myself and those who enter my studio. My contemplations usually begin with it or one of its attributes. For instance, its ability to pass through transparent materials. Light is the agent of tenacity when it encounters openness. In this regard I think how splendid are the wordless shapes of stained glass. Modern fabrication with concrete and epoxy has replaced only some of the leading. These light images have not changed much over hundreds of years. So authentic an experience was had over the centuries that some authors called the stained glass windows of churches and their surrounding images of stone, wood and paint *The bible of the people*. Artists are honoured to serve as such a surrogate bible but are disappointed that this view implies that these wordless forms are for the unread. This can and does lead to lost integration and missed opportunities for contemplation.

The forms of the visual arts have lived happily in their world of shapes, colours, textures, lines and illusions for more years than history can write of. Give or take a nuclear holocaust they will probably continue. Meanwhile, too many people who strive for deeper contemplation still see these forms as temporary events awaiting replacement by articles, books and learned exegesis. A regrettable view which is not that of the artist or my studio.

The foundation for the view held by artists and a possible key to bring together the wordful and the wordless is visual thinking. It takes place when sight is confronted and becomes attentive to forms or shapes that in turn trigger networks of related images in our sense-memory. These are other than word concepts. Now, computers have employed some aspects of visual thinking to assist in their systematic ends, usually through charts and schematics.

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Christ of the Tree of Life



But the visual thinking of the artist is much deeper. The imprinting is more indelible than electric currents. The intertwining of the elemental energy is so elaborate that easy explanations pale before the weight of the pending mystery.

Once in this zone of mind, the human spirit finds participation and involvement with contemplation. Only music is the equal of this power to trigger such responses. It is no wonder then that the religions of the world have used visual and sound components for their liturgies.

This network of the mind can only be talked about in translation. The generative powers are written in their own language system and must be experienced in that context. The circuits will unfold connections, shape to shape, silhouettes to forms, forms to space, lines to tensions, the co-mingling of warm to cool temperatures, the tactile responses of touch and surface, plus the qualities that the human mind finds in light waves called colours. All stake out a place for the spirit to live and dwell.

The visual worker is habitually slipping into this dwelling. It is a dwelling of reveries. A place of thresholds with space and vistas. Amusingly, parents and teachers try their best to beat back the fledgling artist from this kingdom of the day-dream. For the artist there are more than day-dreams here, there is sight and touch. There are the places of potential being, yet not the milieu for a secret life of a Walter Mitty. Entrance to this world is gained with reveries that, of their nature, promise the artist to labour.

In our garden is a small tree that I can see from my studio window. I have noted it in all its changing moods and seasons. I have made drawings of it in many of these phases. At first I accepted the tree as it was, asking nothing of it. I drew it as I saw it, a wild cherry tree.

Through reveries it shifted into other networks of associations. At the time I had been reading from the *Book of Revelations*. A theme from chapter twenty-two,¹ the tree of life, absorbed my interest. I had no wish to illustrate the theme. The two notions started to melt together. The tree in my garden was undergoing a metamorphosis. I could see it as a healing tree, demonstrating growth and the promise of even more. Very soon in my mind's eye I could see Christ there in a radiant victory. Thus it went on to a new amalgam. I tried to capture all of this in a woodcut print in an effort at making it permanent and to share the fruit of the tree (see page 69).

Disposition, the unseen lines of grace and the will to persist delineate the depth, breadth and navigations of the artist's contemplation. Prayer can still be defined as lifting the heart and mind to God. Without wanting to canonize all visual workers, it is nonetheless important to note the seemingly essential involvement they have with the process of lifting their hearts and minds to transcendence, if not God.

Artists rarely see themselves in this lofty pattern of closeness to the Spirit. They are too ready to accept the external and erroneous idea some others have of them, as being the wild and prayerless. In this can be seen the artist's child-likeness with a strong need for acceptance by society, even if it means having a negative reputation. The psychotherapist, R. D. Laing, has the concept of the politics of the family; this is the politics of the soul. Some learned therapists, spiritual directors and writer philosophers have tried to bring remedies to the erroneous views—Marshall McLuhan, Carl Jung, Father Régamey, to name a few. I recall Daniel Berrigan S.J. on an occasion speaking to a group about race relations and the hardships of liberations. In his remarks he was willing to group artists with blacks and the downtrodden people of the world. Perhaps when taken together all of these could be referred to as the wordless masses, sharing their as yet unleashed power of contemplation upon a world looking elsewhere for prayer.

There is a spectrum of contemplative efforts. Because of the individuality of the soul we have as many points of view on transcendent involvement as there are people. Mix all of this together, personal disposition and the readiness of grace, and the result is a nightmare for a quality control expert. Contemplation for the artist is much about quality and a great deal less about control. The one often puts to flight the other. If you think of this as an old Taoist you could say 'Those who speak of quality control do not have it. Those who are silent live it'.

Little is guaranteed in prayer except a simultaneous mix. Providence is the steward of the mix. Humility for the contemplative artist is essential to call forth the best from providence. How else can the high or low of the awakening with the seeming fruitfulness or barrenness be accepted? For the artist, the effort is to get heaven and earth into the mix, while still grappling with a shabby disposition. Yet all the while hoping for a real awakening to break the sleep of mediocrity, to put distance between ourselves and the lethargic hum of the times we live in.

Father Régamey points out that only Christ has the right to curse a barren fig tree.² It is our fate, if necessity requires it, to make soup from the barren tree's bark.

Though little is guaranteed; the simultaneous mix itself demonstrates hope in action. Mix implies more than one isolated entity. At the very start of the physical human process of seeing, the mix occurs. The sense experience is binocular. We see with two eyes and have one idea from the dialogue of the eyes. The different sight angles enrich the sense of depth. Difference is not feared, it is welcomed.

High on the list of welcomed elements of the mix is the unknown mind of the viewer. For the goal of the artist is not only contemplating and creating forms, but sending on to the viewer the discoveries from his world of contemplation. Contact is not always made. Yet there is courage enough for the sorties which are gestures of peace-making. The artist makes an initial peace with his own sense data, all the while searching for a larger human bonding, a cosmos of human knowing and the belief that others are not unlike himself.

New shapes and visions make their bid for life within a challenging psychologic armature—you can only see what you expect to see. The artist and the viewer both have expectation patterns. The creative worker strives to evolve new expectations from his or her reflections. The viewer in turn shares in these discoveries through the same process. Neither shaper nor viewer can partake of the new without a contrast break in the patterns of expectation. A status quo exists for all and contrast alone can bring change.

The greatest contrast framework is birth—and death. Both events have legal certificates issued in their name. It is necessary to see birth and death as more than starts and finishes. Together they echo through our days, becoming hinges of knowing, collaborating in their contrast to push us to wakefulness. The serious artist keeps this contrast meeting well in view, finding in it a stillness—a point of it, a still point—that continues to move. Within the arrival at earthly life and departure at earthly death there are experiential universes shuffling back and forth, at first a large universe and small life and then the reverse. William Blake—the painter, printmaker, poet summed it up:

To see a world in a grain of sand
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour.³

This reveals much of the manner in which the artist touches the still point with his mind-hand.

The touching is not exclusively from the conscious or unconscious parts of the mind because it is usually in union with a tool. To the very brink of birth he goes—pencil or pen to paper, brush to canvas, needle to fabric, chisel to stone, knife to wood. Poised tool in hand, the creative mind finds an eternity there. Clock-oriented time does not readily exist at this juncture. Even outside sounds, including music, pause at the ear. Understood in the work-process the still point is practical. It is a locating and centring phenomenon. As a sense measurement it is the indivisible unit. In this a fulcrum for grace and insight is set up. For the artist there is one immediate outcome—action. When the poised pencil is brought to paper it makes a dot. Each hand held tool makes its own sign as contemplation emerges from hiding. The edge of a cosmos is thus marked.

How easy it would be not to venture beyond this stage. The paper, canvas, wood and so on are handsome in their unblemished state. But the will and action cannot reside indefinitely pregnant, in the still pointed condition, without loss of their shaping energy.

Becoming and the gradients of hope are driven by a centrifugal force from within the contemplation. The phenomenon of forming takes on an organic quality. Types of forms beget more in their own lineage. Generations of forms emerge. The spirit and hand of the artist share in creation. Seemingly unseen forms are now seen. That which did not exist now can. The contrast alternates. Life and death vie for attention. The still point gives birth to the lights of insight.

These lights are in the light of time. The day, with its phases, envelops the tools and their deeds. The metal blades glisten. Brushes are both silken and coarse. The stone and wood show the compression of light years of growth and the labour of geological centuries. Respect with wonder comes forth for the time outside oneself. Quick methods and time-saving gadgets may be a help. Surely they grab our attention but they are, in turn, held in suspicion.

Tools become such a part of the light that they possess a rite. There is a way for their use. Testimony for this comes to us from both the East and West, through the history of our collected arts and crafts. To gain a better rhythm the brush is best pulled in a particular direction. The wood can be cut more smoothly when the grain and growth are noted. The tools interact with the materials—each celebrates the others' limitations. Nothing short of a dense involvement with the materialities of the artist's vocation

will do, for without it form cannot exist. Materialism in our day is especially strong with its allurements. The antidote used by the artist is to push on with contemplation of the rite of the tools and materials until they are elevated to a small liturgy.

We partake of a visual communion when reflecting on the works of Rembrandt or Cézanne, Riemenschneider or Barlach. Discoveries are seen in their works that are in conformity with the small liturgies. The tools were taken up within their light. A transcendence is there for all to commune with.

Endurance for the rites of the tools and materials is in no way like the endurance of a written law. No spirit of prohibition presents itself to the reflected mind. Will and instinct are coupled in their grasp of this way. End goals are not always clear. Discoveries are grafted to our existing awareness of the rite. In this situation the spirit speaks to the artist about new possibilities for images and identities. Georges Rouault is reported to have said that with his painting he could make the queen a scrub woman, and the scrub woman a queen. Because of this kind of freedom of images, the wordless arts are feared by thought controlling powers. Our century has had too many tales of suppression of art forms. Nazism labelled modern art forms as degenerate and officially destroyed large quantities of paintings and sculptures. They went so far as even to forbid certain artists from working. Fugitives in their own land, these artists worked in secret. To this day totalitarian governments try to block out these quiet agents of freedom. There is something lucid about this madness of censorship. The prohibitor and the creative worker both see revolution, freedom and justice echoing from every brush stroke or chisel cut. Both know that all are invited to partake of the ideas and forms of art. Through the free arts, the downtrodden of the world have escape-hatches to a greater freedom and dreams of what could be. For the artist the embrace of materials, tools and transcending mind-vistas is but the first of an endless series of embraces. On all sides, it is a redeemed humanity we seek to confirm. If the artist does not follow the obligations of riteful discoveries a betrayal takes place.

For those in a monastery, a Holy Rule requires prayer. For the artist the shabby rites of his or her vocation demand no less. At times in my studio I feel a closeness to those in monasteries. I am in their world and they are in mine. The processions into my

studio-sanctuary are not retreatants but wife, children, friends and patrons.

The psalms indeed nourish and are relied upon, while at work in my studio a chant comes to my lips, 'this too is prayer!' At other times, 'this too is prayer?' For the artist, it is not so much the words of the chant, but its tone that evokes the meaning. The contrast is always with us.

The light that passes through the studio window is that way. Evening is coming on, pulling away the light's warmth and brightness. The details of forms are lessened in importance. So now the tall unfinished carvings of Brigid and Brendan are clothed in the completeness of their silhouettes. Saint Brigid holds her symbolic sundisc cross. Saint Brendan is carved as turning around, reminding me of possible navigations of still undiscovered worlds. Evening is close in now. The snow outside the studio windows has ceased melting. The chisels are dull. Little light is reflected. The chant is heard—'this too is prayer'.

NOTES

¹ Revelations 22, v 2.

² Régamey, Pie-Raymond: *Religious art in the twentieth century* (Herder and Herder, 1963), p 129.

³ Kazin, Alfred (arr): *The portable Blake* (Viking Press, 1946), p 150.