

THE POLAR BEAR AND THE BEATIFIC VISION

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I couldn't take my eyes off the polar bear. Granted, the Musée d'Orsay is a strange place to meet a polar bear, but there are other ways in which the encounter was strange. The stand next to the polar bear gave me information about the artist and the work: it was sculpted by Francois Pompon and first exhibited in 1922. Pompon's stated aim in his animal sculptures is to display "the very essence of the animal." Fine, but this neither added to nor detracted from my encounter with the polar bear. More information about Pompon's artistic process—"I first do the animal with almost all its trappings. Then I gradually eliminate them."

With previous works in the Museum, I had happily passed by after taking in facts like this. The polar bear was different. Even after finding out about the sculpture, I did not yet feel that I could move on to the next exhibit. My eyes were still hungry. I was not thinking about the technique of the artist or forming any opinions about the work itself; in fact, I wasn't thinking at all. My usually hyperactive mind had been stilled. The polar bear did what no prayer manual or spiritual director has been able to do: it made me contemplate.

Around the corner from our priory here in Dublin is the Hugh Lane Gallery, which houses the municipal collection of modern art, including several works of the Anglo-Irish painter Francis Bacon. Standing in front of one of these paintings is a radically different experience, full of human figures with distorted limbs or suggestions of limbs, red lines suggesting blood, and the shocking blandness of violence. When faced with one of these big canvases, I look away as soon as possible. Yet Bacon's images have haunted me and, more importantly, have made me ask questions: Why are



FRANÇOIS POMPON - POLAR BEAR

images of half-formed bodies so disturbing? Why would an artist produce such ugly work? Should an artist want to shock or disturb the viewer?

These two experiences are instructive, and they highlight an important distinction between works of art that make you *think*, on the one hand, and works of art that only make you want to *look*. This is a distinction that cuts across other, perhaps more superficial, distinctions between figurative and abstract art, or between ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ art.

Art-that-makes-you-think includes much ‘conceptual art’ of course, from Tracey Emin’s *My Bed* to Damien Hirst’s formaldehyde sharks. In these famous cases, the viewer is compelled to ask, “What is the artist saying?” This response is not elicited only by conceptual art, though. Think of allegorical works, where the main drive of the work is to refer to some *allos*, some *other* idea or narrative. In this case, when we know something about the other

to which the piece refers, our appreciation of it is enriched: the lightbulb flicks on.

Art-that-makes-you-look, however, includes any work of art that stands in no need of discursive explanation, the appreciation of which is not improved by any discourse. To use a word coined by Coleridge, such art is ‘tautegorical’: instead of referring us to some other, it refers us only to itself. For me it was the polar bear, but any art-lover will be able to list paintings and sculptures that have drawn them in, silencing their minds with a simple command: ‘Look.’ The distinction between art-that-makes-you-think and art-that-makes-you-look is vague, and by no means objective, but perhaps the reader will allow me the broad brushstrokes of an Impressionist in this short essay.

These artistic categories mirror St. Thomas’ distinction between *ratio* and *intellectus* (which distinction rests on a deeper differentiation between rest and movement, or time and eternity). *Ratio* is step-by-step thought; because our intellect is shaped by space and time, it “necessarily compares one thing with another by composition or division; and from one composition and division it proceeds to another, which is the process of reasoning [*ratiocinari*]” (*Summa Theologica* I, q.85, a.5).

Intellectus, however, isn’t a process; it involves having “the entire knowledge of a thing at once and perfectly.” God and the angels do not know by *ratio*, but by *intellectus*, whereas humans know by *ratio* in this present world, but are called ultimately to know as the angels know: by ‘vision.’ The mind cannot attain to the perfectly simple God by way of *ratio*’s composition and division. God can only be known simply, by the ‘vision’ of *intellectus*. In the words of St. Paul, “now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face” (1 Cor 13:12).

This traditional distinction easily maps onto the distinction between art-that-makes-you-think and art-that-makes-you-look: what we might call ‘*ratio*-art’ invites and promotes discourse and the application of reason, while ‘*intellectus*-art’ invites simple

vision that is undivided and simultaneous. We might also say that just as *ratio* is essentially tied to *this* world, in that it is necessitated by the world of space and time, so *ratio*-art is ‘this-worldly’ art. Because its meaning can be translated into words and actions, it can provoke radical questioning about the social order, undermine our complacent assumptions, or even address us with Rilke’s Apollonian imperative: “You must change your life.”

‘*Intellectus*-art,’ on the other hand, seems to mirror heavenly ways of knowing as understood in the Christian tradition. As tautegorical, it has no meaning other than itself, and so is untranslatable and irreducible. The irreducibility of the beatific vision to the language of this world is the principal concern of the climax of Dante’s *Comedy*, the final canto of the *Paradiso*:

O how pale now is language and how paltry
 For my conception! And for what I saw
 My words are not enough to call them meagre.
 (*Paradiso*, Canto XXXIII)

By contrast, Damien Hirst’s piece *For the Love of God*, a human skull encrusted with hundreds of diamonds valuing \$20 million, is eminently translatable. What is the artist saying? Perhaps he is pointing out that the art world is flush with cash, and questioning this influence, or relishing in it? Perhaps he is referencing the inevitability of death, and suggesting, in absurdist mode, that the only possible response is to make glitzy this grim truth? Perhaps it’s a comment on our neglect of fellow humans—thousands will queue to see the skull *post mortem*, many of whom would have ignored the owner of the skull when he was alive.

Many interpretations are possible, but one thing is certain: the piece must be interpreted. It is a work of art that demands to be talked about and debated. And so it was, in the media, academic journals and common rooms, and even, bizarrely, in a single by the easy-listening Scots-Gaelic band Na Gathan, called *Claigeann*

Damien Hirst. In this respect Damien Hirst's work achieved the goal of *ratio*-art.

Contrast with this any icon of the Mother and Child, which simply demands that we look at it, rather than debate it or theorize about it. The merciful eyes of the Mother do not turn our eyes away in search of an interlocutor; rather, they hold our gaze. The power of *intellectus*-art lies not in provocation, but in peace.

Although the two epistemic modes of *ratio* and *intellectus* represent the extreme poles of human knowing, they should not be thought of in exclusive, binary terms, as if the transition from earthly life to heavenly life involved the flick of a switch from *ratio* to *intellectus*. Dionysius the Areopagite, a pseudonymous fifth- or sixth-century, gave a very full and influential account of our gradual journey from *ratio* to *intellectus*. He says that our "taking flight" towards the deity involves *aphairesis*, the "clearing aside" of "everything perceived and understood, everything perceptible and understandable." The multiple activities of the mind and their endlessly multiplied ideas about God and the world are, in the Dionysian scheme, gradually abandoned in our journey home to God through Scripture and the Sacraments. The taking-root of *intellectus* and the shedding of *ratio* can thus begin already in this life.

Let your minds be remade, and your whole nature thus transformed" (Rom 12:2). Perhaps works of art that silence the chug-chug-chug of our reason and invite our settled gaze can in fact begin to "remake our minds" in preparation for the vision of God. At the very least, the simple knowledge-by-sight in which we participate by viewing certain works of art can awaken the mind to a way of knowing beyond composition and division.

Of course, it is somewhat ironic that this essay—an exercise in rational discourse—was provoked by an experience that I have said silences *ratio*'s discourse and enables *intellectus*. This irony reminds us that we are still *in statu viatoris*, still on the way, and *ratio* is still an essential tool of communication for us. But because we are still on the way, our life is not static or self-contained; we

are being aided in our journey and cheered on by the Church, by the saints and angels, by Christ who has gone before us, and even by encounters with the polar bear in the Musée d'Orsay, to run the road that is set before us, and someday to rest our fretful minds in the peace of the vision of God.

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