

ARS MUSICA

INTERDISZIPLINÄRE STUDIEN  
Herausgegeben von Elżbieta Szczurko und Tadeusz Guz

# LOGOS ET MUSICA

IN HONOREM SUMMI ROMANI  
PONTIFICIS BENEDICTI XVI

Elżbieta Szczurko  
Tadeusz Guz  
Horst Seidl  
(Hrsg./eds.)



PETER LANG

Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften

# To Educate a Sense of Beauty

Rev. Georges Card. Cottier OP

## Anthropology

The soul, the form of the body is the principle of unity of the human subject that is a person; this truth lies in the centre of the anthropology of Aquinas. I would like to develop several consequences flowing from this that are relevant for our perception of beauty.

I begin with a few reminders. The composition of the soul and the body has a significance that extends beyond human existence. It distinguishes living beings from others beings of the physical universe. Living beings are set in a hierarchy of three orders that can be recognized in their proper activities. Thus the vegetative, the sensitive that is the animal and the rational orders are distinguished. This hierarchy is not to be interpreted as if in the highest living being, in man, the “rational animal” there are three layers of spheres of vital activity. In fact, the one and unique subject of activities, the rational soul assumes and integrates the vegetative and animal activities. This means that the faculties, being immediate principles of their specific activities all proceed from a unique subject. In this they follow a certain order that may be viewed in a dual perspective: genetically or according to the perfection of their object<sup>1</sup>. This implies their interdependence and the fact that depending on the case they offer a contribution to their specific activities. In this sense, the unity of the subject imprints its mark on the totality of the activities. This synergy is essential for the cognitive and affective activities of man. The entire edifice of the moral life is built on the rectitude of the relationship between the practical reason and that of the passions, assured by the virtues. Vice implies a perversion of this order. But it is not this aspect that is fundamental, which is to draw our attention here.

The questioning of the subordination of the passions, the emotions, to the practical reason and the will entails immediately the proposition of a different conception of human nature, in which it loses its specificity. For an author like Nietzsche the human animal is a being that is essentially moved by the passions which are bodily movements that have become what they are due to a long taming. The reason is then presented as a sort of organ that is totally in the service of the instincts.

Aquinas, while insisting upon the spiritual nature of the human person, was careful to add that the intellectuality of man does not make of him a species that

---

1 Cf. *STh*, I, q. 77.

like the angel belongs to the order of pure spirits. This is so, because the human soul being the form of the body composes with it such a unity that the activities which are proper for it require the contribution of the body.

For this reason in man, the sensate faculties, which exist also in the higher animals, receive a particular perfection from their affinity and proximity with the reason and its universality. In this there is a certain reflux (*refluentia*) on them of the spiritual order<sup>2</sup>. It is this aspect that needs to be elucidated. If in our analysis there is a preference for the reason, this is not because we ignore the major importance of the affective and volitive dimensions, but this is because the will itself, being a rational *appetitus* that is rooted in the mind is in a certain way involved in what we are to discuss. The same goes for the practical reason that is the reason as it is subjected to the attraction of the action that is about to be undertaken.

The first objects that present themselves to the human intellect are the beings of nature which surround us and to which we belong. We say therefore that their object is the quiddity of material beings, the term quiddity referring to the nature or essence. It is through the senses that we have the first direct contact with beings.

The data of the five external senses are gathered, related to one another and remembered by the internal senses, and this is noted already in the psychic world of the higher animals. The internal senses work out the images (*phantasmata*). It is from these images that in man the reason draws its knowledge of things. This means that in the world of images that in themselves presuppose the previous activity of the external senses there is contained in potency the richness of the intelligibility that shall be received by the intellect<sup>3</sup>. This receptivity is not a pure passivity: it requires the input of abstraction. Our mind knows the quiddity of things primarily as they are separated and visualized due to abstraction. Abstraction consists in the extraction of the essence of things from sensate data so as to place it in the light of one's own mind. In this operation two poles need to be considered: that which is separated from the object and which concerns sensation itself, that is the singularity, and the status of universality that the object acquires as it is elevated to the level of intelligibility. In other words, abstraction allows one to know the thing in that which is intelligibly constitutive for it, while in reality things exist in the limits of their individuality. There is therefore a different mode of being of beings in their real existence and a different mode of being that is their intellectual cognition. The senses know only the singularly existing things and only the mind knows, in its universality, what is it that makes that a thing is what it is.

Abstraction is only the first moment of the process of cognition of material beings. In no way can this be equaled with the escape into the realm of ideas. If one would be content to separate the essence of things from the individual characteristics that they possess in their concrete existence this would involve their impoverishment.

---

2 Cf. *STh*, I, q. 78, a. 4, ad 5.

3 I treat here the reason and the intellect as interchangeable terms, even though the first term refers to the discursive aspect of the human mind, while the second focuses on the intuitive.

The knowledge of things arrives at its fulfillment only at the end of a second moment, that of the *conversio ad phantasmata*, the return to the images. The mind, having separated the essence brings it back to the status of concrete singularity that is appropriate for it in its real existence. Thanks to the return to the initial image, the direct object of the internal senses, it finds itself encompassed and elevated in the light of the mind. Singularity, which was set aside in the initial stage, is brought back in the second, in which it finds itself as if permeated with meaning for the mind. This is possible because the intelligible is contained in potency within the object of sensate cognition.

## Imagination

As distinct from animals, the internal sense, termed *cogitativa* is capable of sketching a judgment (*collatio*) concerning individual perceptions (*intentiones*). The memory not only touches upon sudden recollections of past things; it is a reminiscence that sketches a sort of reasoning (*sylogistice*), making inquiries into the past things which were grasped in their individuality<sup>4</sup>. The joint contribution of the senses and of the mind in cognition is constitutive for the human psyche.

On the level of the lived-out experience, however, this is not without difficulties. Moralists and spiritual writers have drawn our attention to this fact. The imagination,—“the madman in the house” as Theresa of Avila called it—knows how to dodge the control of reason, from which it constantly tries to escape, causing thereby harmful distraction in the life of prayer. For this reason asceticism and methods are needed to assure the positive integration of the activity of the imagination in prayer.

In a general sense, to allow oneself to have the senses and the heart invaded by images means handing oneself over to the power of temptation. Christian wisdom has treasured ascetical rules on this subject, which are as relevant today as ever. This is so, not because of the nature of the imagination, but because of the heritage of sin that affects the human condition. But it is not in this ethical perspective that the matter is addressed here.

Viewed in the perspective of culture, some forms of rationalism maintain a mistrust towards the imagination. This is as if the awareness of the greatness of the cognition of reason needs to be protected by such a mistrust, with the imagination being a source of confusion that is opposed to the clarity of concepts, the objects of the philosophical thought. It is sufficient to mention Spinoza here. The consequence of such ideas for culture is far from insignificant. They have generated a contrary reaction: as a result the imagination has been exalted; sometimes it has been placed above the reason; a creative force has been attributed to its irrational

---

4 Cf. *ibidem*, a. 4c.

character; life has been identified with wild spontaneity, freed from all constraint and all “domestication” to which education was reduced.

None of these avenues are correct, because they do not respect the truth about man. They all fail to recognize the importance of the *refluentia*, the flowing out of the light of the mind on the senses, from which it draws its knowledge.

Thus, the imagination has an essential place in our appreciation of beauty. Finally, I have to say a word about this.

## The experience of beauty

Spontaneously, by virtue of his nature, being the image of God, man aspires to join his transcendent source that is supreme truth, infinite and beatifying goodness. One of the primary cultural tasks that face us is the liberation of this call to transcendence that is written into our being and is suffocated by the socio-cultural phenomenon called secularization.

The aspiration for beauty also belongs to the summit of the fundamental aspirations of the *humanum*. In fact, contact with beauty awakens in the soul a fresh joy bringing also to life the wound of nostalgia, which is a call for the absolute. That is why the encounter with beauty offers a privileged access to the awakening of the vocation of man for transcendence.

This characteristic that is proper to beauty is a consequence of the fact that to be appreciated it requires the active collaboration of the senses and of the imagination. Nothing similar can be found in respect to the other transcendentals. A view, a work of art, sight and hearing are directly involved here. One knows the misunderstanding to which the erroneous translation of Aristotle’s phrase “art imitates nature” has led. To work of art was said to consist in the copying of nature and this became a canon of academism. What Aristotle in fact said was that the artist creates his works in the manner of nature in its creative gushing out in the sense that they have only one end that is to make us participate in the joyful contemplation of beauty. The productions of beautiful works by the artist does not belong to the order of utility as the implementations of technology, (even though it happens that useful objects are beautiful and the concern that what is useful be also beautiful is a sign of culture).

In the production of a work, craftsmanship and the artisan’s capacity are considerable. The underlying talent of certain achievements can be admired. But talent, which is necessary, of itself does not produce works of art. Art, musical compositions, paintings or sculptures are works of art when they are carriers of the communicative vibration of poetic emotion that springs from the depths of the artist’s soul. In encountering beauty we participate in this emotion as it is generated. If this emotion moves the subjectivity, it does not stop; it is like a window that opens up towards beauty which signifies the whole set of transcendentals. The encounter

with beauty is a true spiritual experience. If it is a perception within the order of intuition, the complexity or elaboration of the work requires effort and reflection on the part of whoever enjoys it. The perception of the beautiful moves us in the depth of the spirit, but for it to exercise its entire power an education of taste and of discernment is necessary. The cultural milieu in which we live is conducive to it in a greater or lesser extent.

This aspect of the problem cannot leave us indifferent. Traumas experienced in childhood and suffered brutalities throw an impenetrable veil of darkness on existences. Some neighborhoods in cities offer their inhabitants a daily horizon of ugliness and sadness. The civilization of the masses exudes a sort of anti-culture. It is enough to consider the surge of sly or violent images and sensations with which it floods us and which are aimed at the infra-rational instinctive reflexes of our psyche.

It is thinking about the new evangelization addressed to secularized societies, in which many have lost the sense of God that I propose the above reflections. They refer to the cultural preparations for the reception of the message of faith. Certainly, among the required preliminaries the openness of the spirit for beauty represents a privileged avenue. A particular pedagogical effort needs therefore to be made in view of this opening and of esthetic education.