Jan Białostocki

Art's Humility and Irreverence vis-à-vis the *Sacrum*[1]

In 1984, a Polish artist described the relationship between art and the *sacrum* thus: "It is difficult to ignore the fact that, for many civilizational reasons, an enormous chasm has developed between the world of art (however we define it) and the world of the *sacrum*. Without going into the details of this state of affairs (this would require a separate treatment), I would like to focus on this chasm and to assert my belief that, despite the powerful attraction between the two, it cannot be bridged with an artistic concept or an aesthetic invention. The reason why art cannot return to the territory of the *sacrum* via the contemporary artistic order is precisely because the crisis – I would prefer to call it demise – of this order has revived our thirst for deeper spiritual motivation in art. The *sacrum* seen from the intellectual perspective of today's artist and art seen from the perspective of the sacred are not, so to speak, equal categories. Their inviolable unity lies in the distant past."[2]

Of course, in the civilizations of yore, art's attitude towards the *sacrum* was different: it was meek. Art carried out tasks that were subordinated to religion's demands. This was the case in the civilizations of the ancient Near East, in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece and Rome. But as Christianity spread, things became complicated, and the earliest Christian thinkers expressed doubts whether art should be legitimized by its relationship with the *sacrum*. It is true that at the same time people acknowledged that architects and decorators were creating works of art capable of expressing at least a dash of holiness. A description by Procopius of Caesarea of the church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople reads: "But who could fittingly describe the galleries

[1] This is Jan Białostocki's last text, dated 1988, which is being published for the first time here. It was written in French since the Professor intended to deliver it at a colloquium in Bern on 30 September of that year. As he fell ill and could not attend the meeting, Philippe Junod, an art historian at the University of Lausanne, read it for him. The papers from the colloquium were never published. The editors of the *Journal* would like to thank Philippe Junod for helping them to pin down the circumstances in which the text was written and delivered. The typewritten French original includes footnote numbers written in Białostocki's hand, but the footnotes themselves have regrettably not survived. In translating this text into Polish, the editors have made every attempt to add bibliographic references as well as they could. This translation into English is based on the Polish version.

[2] Henryk Waniek, "Glosa o ziemi," in *Sacrum i sztuka. Materiały z konferencji zorganizowanej przez Sekcję Historii Sztuki Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, Rogóźno 18–20 października 1984 roku. Kościół a sztuka współczesna*, Nawojka Cieślińska, ed. (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Znak, 1989), p. 161.

(*hyperôa*) of the women's side (*gynaikonitis*), or enumerate the many colonnades and the colonnaded aisles (*peristyloi aulai*) by means of which the church is surrounded? Or who could recount the beauty of the columns (*kiones*) and the stones with which the church is adorned? One might imagine that he had come upon a meadow with its flowers in full bloom. For he would surely marvel at the purple of some, the green tint of others, and at those on which the crimson glows and those from which the white flashes, and again at those which Nature, like some painter, varies with the most contrasting colours. And whenever anyone enters this church to pray, he understands at once that it is not by any human power or skill, but by the influence of God, that this work has been so finely turned. And so his mind is lifted up toward God and exalted, feeling that He cannot be far away, but must especially love to dwell in this place which He has chosen"[3] (**fig. 1**).

Then, people sensed that architecture, tasked with creating a holy place for the Christian religion, knew how to express the inexpressible by allowing forms to touch human souls directly. Should painting reproduce God's image? We know that this question gave rise to many doubts, at least beginning in the era in which such attempts were made. In the fourth century, in a letter to Constance, Constantine the Great's daughter, Eusebius of Caesarea remembers Christ's Transfiguration on Mount Tabor and the impression it had made on the pupils unable to grasp the nature of God: "[...] when His visage shone like the sun, and his robes glowed like light. So who would know how to represent the emanation of such dignity and glory that glistens, is full of radiance, by using dead paints and inanimate lines, when even His superhuman pupils were unable to look at him in this form and prostrated themselves thus admitting that they could not suffer this view?"[4] (**fig. 2**).

Despite the disputes of Byzantium, the West's Christian art played the role assigned it by the Church for the long period of the Middle Ages, that of representing the most prominent figures in the Christian religion and transferring theological and moral doctrine to paintings, which made it understandable to the populace.

At the same time, as it invented architectural forms and introduced beautiful furnishings, splendid textiles and precious stones, art helped to create the sacred place. We know the famous quote from Sugerius's *De administratione*: "The noble work is bright, but, being nobly bright, the work / Should brighten the minds, allowing them to travel through the lights / To the true light, where Christ is the true door. / The golden door defines how it is imminent in these things. / The dull mind rises to the truth through material things, / And is resurrected from its former submersion when the light is seen."[5] And he continues: "Thus sometimes when, because of my delight in the beauty of the house of God, the multicolor loveliness of the gems has called me away from external cares, and worthy meditation, transporting me from material to immaterial things, has persuaded me to examine the diversity of holy virtues, then I seem to see myself existing on some level, as it were, beyond our earthly one, neither completely in the

[3] *Procopius*, Henry Bronson Dewing, trans., vol. 7: *Buildings* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press; London: W. Heinemann, 1940), p. 27. Loeb Classical Library, no. 343.

[4] H.G. Thümmel, *Eusebios' Brief an Kaiserin Konstantia* in *Commission Intern. d'Hist. Ecclesiastique comparée*. Congrès à Varsovie 1978, Sect. I, pp. 57–60.

[5] Abbot Suger, *On What Was Done in His Administration*, "XXVII. Concerning the Cast and Gilded Doors," *Medieval Sourcebook. Abbot Suger. Internet Medieval Sourcebook* [online], Paul Halsall, ORB sources editor, The Internet Medieval Sourcebook is located at the Fordham University Center for Medieval Studies [retrieved: 25 September 2013], at: <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/sugar.html>.

slime of earth nor completely in the purity of heaven. By the gift of God I can be transported in an anagogical manner from this inferior level to that superior one."[6]

Sugerius represented the trend in medieval thought that saw the way to divine beauty leading through the external beauty of the senses. Others criticized this point of view, thinking like Saint Bernard that internal beauty is greater than all external beauty. Already Saint Augustine saw eternal beauty in God, and he referred to it thus: "Too late loved I Thee, O Thou Beauty of ancient days, yet ever new! Too late I loved Thee! And behold, Thou wert within, and I abroad, and there I searched for Thee; deformed I, plunging amid those fair forms which Thou hadst made. Thou wert with me, but I was not with Thee. Things held me far from Thee, which, unless they were in Thee, were not at all. Thou calledst, and shoutedst, and burstest my deafness. Thou flashedst, shonest, and scatteredst my blindness. Thou breathedst odours, and I drew in breath and panted for Thee. I tasted, and hunger and thirst. Thou touchedst me, and I burned for Thy peace."[7]

This dispute has persisted throughout the history of the Christian civilization in Europe, pitting those who believe that art serves the man who wants to come closer to the *sacrum* against those who deny art the power to lead to sanctity. Even the mystical philosopher Saint John of the Cross, who studied painting and sculpture and should have been interested in visual forms, describes his spiritual road to God as dark and devoid of images. To reach the highest truth, a person must cross *la noche oscura*: the soul, dazzled by divine light, blinded, sees nothing, no earthly beauty.

Of course, those who see the path of visible beauty leading to the *sacrum* understand beauty differently. For the people of the Middle Ages, beauty was the brightness of the light seeping into Gothic choirs, the lustre of stones and the gold of reliquaries, the glowing, dazzling beauty emanating from matter or infusing it. For the people of the Renaissance, it was the beauty of the forms erected on a central plan, disciplined and well-proportioned. The soul's native sense, without analysing it rationally, tells people that behind all matter they can see the image of the vital force: of God himself. *Deus est sphaera infinita, cuius centrum est ubique, circumferentia nullibi* – wrote Nicolaus Cusius, and it is the most perfect kind of architecture on a central plan that is ideal for giving the *sacrum* architectural form.

The idea that God is the essence of perfection and harmony, and that perfection and harmony can be expressed through the beauty of visible geometric forms, has given architects and all other artists a special role in bringing man into contact with the *sacrum*.

In the fifteenth century, the creative function, which had earlier been reserved for God, was assigned to the artist. Marsilio Ficino writes: "And who can deny man close to the same genius as that of the Creator of the universe [...] and the ability to shape the universe as long as he is given the tools and the matter of which it is made? Indeed, is he not shaping it in his own way, out of different matter, but according to the same principles?"[8] Ficino argues that "human power is more or less similar to divine nature,"[9] while Alberti, in his treatise *On Painting*, contends that "Therefore, painting contains within itself this virtue that any master

[6] Ibid., "XXXII. Concerning the Golden Cross."

[7] Saint Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Christian Classics Ethereal Library), p. 240 (X 27).

[8] After: André Chastel, *Marsile Ficin et l'art* (Geneva: Librairie Droz; Lille: Librairie R. Giard, 1954), p. 59. Travaux d'Humanisme et Renaissance, 14.

[9] Ibid., p. 60.

painter who sees his works adored will feel himself considered another god."[10] Leonardo da Vinci succinctly expresses the similarity between God and the artist: "The painter is lord of all types of people and of all things. If the painter wishes to see beauties that charm him it lies in his power to create them, and if he wishes to see monstrosities that are frightful, buffoonish or ridiculous, or pitiable he can be lord and god thereof."[11] And even more explicitly: "The divinity which is the science of painting transmutes the painter's mind into a resemblance of the divine mind. With free power it reasons concerning the generation of the diverse natures of the various animals, plants, fruits, landscapes, fields, landslides in the mountains, places fearful and frightful, which bring terror to those who view them; and also pleasant places, soft and delightful with flowery meadows in various colours."[12]

Nicolaus Cusanus in his *De beryllo* quotes Hermes Trismegistus, who considers man a second God. Man uses the power of reason to create works and objects that emanate from his mind. They are similar to his mind, to the models (ideas) that form inside it, just as the creatures God creates resemble divine reason.

Dürer painted a self-portrait in c. 1500 (presently in Munich), in which he represented himself according to the visual Christ type (**fig. 3**). But we do not know whether to interpret this canvas, and the 1522 drawing in which Dürer presents himself as *Vir dolorum*, as an expression of his humble imitation of Christ or, on the contrary, as an audacious self-identification with Christ. After all, in a note written in 1512, the German master compared great artists to God because of their creative power.

In the fifteenth century, the adjective *divino* was used to describe the extraordinary artist Michelangelo. Then, an aura of divinity enveloped the entire art world. At the turn of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Federico Zuccaro coined a theory of the divinity of drawing. In his writings, *disegno* becomes *Segno di Dio*, which allows the artist, who is carrying out God's will, to be admitted into the sphere of holiness. This is the apogee of the artist's career in the service of the *sacrum*.

The nineteenth century in many areas, especially art, is thought to have been an era of secularization. Religious contents were removed from traditional themes, standard subjects, but they did retain the sacred quality that had once made them glow. Lay subjects thus took on the quality that had once been the exclusive domain of religious subjects. Now, images borrowed from the iconography of the Passion illustrated the deaths of heroes, patriotic or national, social or political. The holy nature of the Lamentation or of the Deposition of Christ influenced the representation of *The Death of General Wolfe* in Benjamin West's painting and of the worker in Daumier's lithograph *La Rue Transnonain*. Thus, in the nineteenth century, art and the artist continued to derive benefits from the holy meaning of the *sacrum*. "Art itself is religion" (*Die Kunst selbst ist Religion*), wrote Karl Friedrich Schinkel. To Schelling, art is evidence that God exists, since it is His sole existing, lasting revelation. To Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder, God speaks to man in two wonderful languages, nature and art. To the Romantics, art became God's language, and the artist expressed divine ideas. Now, the world of art and of aesthetic values

[10] Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. with Introduction and Notes by John Richard Spencer (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 64.

[11] Leonardo da Vinci, *Notebooks*, Oxford World's Classics, Thereza Wells, ed., introduction and notes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 185.

[12] *Treatice on Painting (Codex Urbinas Latinus 1270) by Leonardo da Vinci*, A. Phillip McMahon, ed. and trans., vol. 2 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1956), p. 280.

began to replace the world of the *sacrum* and of religious values. The sacred place took on the form of the museum, of the concert hall, of the library. Their buildings were embellished with statues of the anointed: artists, scholars, writers, all those whose creative powers turned them into the bearers of holiness, which had once been attributed solely to God. A pilgrimage to a museum, the act of attending a concert or an opera replaced Mass. The new liturgy, whose purpose was to worship man's artistic or scientific creation, allowed the man in the street to become distracted from his daily material needs and to touch a world of values outside the norms of his practical everyday life. It gave him a sense of purification, access to the sphere that evaded the world of the uninitiated, which belonged to the *sacrum*. In art, the formulas of lay iconography take on religious forms. *The Apotheosis of Homer* (1826–27) by Ingres (**fig. 4**), Franz Pforr's allegorical composition, which presents the adoration of art in themselves by two great masters from north and south, Raphael and Dürer (**fig. 5**), scenes from the life of the artist, especially by Albrecht Dürer, modelled on the cycle of scenes from Christ's life, painted on the 300th anniversary of Dürer's death – these are examples of artists' and poets' invasions of the domain of the *sacrum*. In 1841 Paul Delaroche decorated the amphitheatre of the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris with an adoration of an artistic Trinity, in which the roles of the divine persons went to Apelles, Phidias and Iktinos (**fig. 6**). The figure of the artist himself or his studio became pilgrimage destinations. Many studios became museums, sites for the cult of an artist. This was the case with the ateliers of Makart, Wiertz, Delacroix and Rodin. In a painting by Carl Gustav Carus, the painter's professional attributes, his easels, tools, palette and brushes deposited in the solitude of an empty room, in darkness lit up by pale moonlight coming in through the window, acquire a symbolic, almost mythical, meaning. We have been permitted to enter the very heart of the *sacrum* emanating from the art made by humans.

In the nineteenth century, social changes in the wake of revolutions caused the lone artist to look down on the new bourgeois society, which lacked education and an understanding of artistic creation. Not wanting to serve this new class, the artist invented a faith in the art world's absolute values and proclaimed that only art is worthy of being served. Instead of art for God and art for man, with some artists leaning towards them, people now believed in "art for art's sake." Instead of serving the *sacrum* outside art, they discovered an innate goal and declared that it was the *sacrum* of art that needed to be served. The great masters of contemporary art thus became gloried saints, and every piece of paper bearing traces of their handiwork, even scrawls, became a relic. Happenings and other contemporary forms of activity in the visual arts replaced service to God. In this world, which became increasingly foreign to him, art replaced the highest. At the same time, as people looked at older art, they noticed areas of sacredness in the great masterpieces created by the Old Masters, the saints of the art world. Art critics, including André Malraux, detected distinct values in it. Walter Benjamin wrote about a work's special atmosphere, its "aura."

To illustrate this thinking, let me quote Maurice Nédoncelle's analysis of the aesthetic structure of Jan van Eyck's *The Arnolfini Portrait*: "The Romans marked out a piece of the sky to read prophesies in it. Similarly, the artist painting a canvas creates a *templum*, and his action has something sacred in it. Thanks to the artist's eyes and brushes, we enter an astonishing and intimidating world. We have been promised mystery, so the voices of the humdrum world, in which our life thrashes about, die out instantly. A sacredness of an aesthetic nature emanates from the painting as if it were a person [...]. Many other types of sacredness can be found in aesthetic sacredness [...]. The image of the Arnolfinis [...] simultaneously offers many orders for meditation; we can say that it uses the painter's holiness to express the holiness of

matrimony, the Flemish townspeople's worship, the mystery of life and a certain religious transcendence"[13] (**fig. 7**).

The concept of the *sacrum* as it is used here, may of course lead to enormous chaos. Especially because aesthetic *sacrum* appears in it first, and a "certain religious transcendence" appears at the end, at the very end. In fact, next to aesthetic sacredness there are also "many other types of sacredness."

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as new crises arose in art and in civilization, and science and industry witnessed new developments, artists adopted new positions. Dangers and misfortunes introduced by man into the world of nature brought on a crisis in rationalism and again made people look towards the sphere of irrationality, religion, yoga, narcotics and escape from the industrial society, both capitalist and socialist.

And so sacred subjects again began to appear in art: Chagall's stained glass windows (**fig. 8**), Matisse's decorations, Stravinsky's Symphony of Psalms, Penderecki's Saint Luke Passion, Manzù's The Door of Death in Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome. They are great, or at least important, works usually stemming from an artistically sovereign position, made almost exclusively of the artist's free will. But they are all works in which the artist demonstrates his power and which are as distant as they possibly can be from the old humility. The artist approaches the *sacrum* with all his irreverence, which developed in the long period when "art itself was religion."

The artist who is a believer, who is humble, who only wishes to become intimate with the sphere of the *sacrum*, feels that his art is disappearing and becoming insignificant, unneeded, expendable. Having committed the original sin, today's artist, unlike the anonymous medieval master, is incapable of serving meekly.

In his book *The Ascent to Truth*, Thomas Merton clearly demonstrates the irreconcilability of the domains of art and holiness, and the separateness of the experiences of mystics and artists, even if one can be both a mystic and an artist.[14] The Polish art historian and critic Wiesław Juszczak summarizes the difference between the experience of someone trying to approach the *sacrum* and someone who focuses on the world of visual forms: "You cannot see Mount Carmel from the top of Parnassus. And you can see nothing at all from the top of Mount Carmel."[15] What happens in visible space cannot relate to what happens in the holy sphere, in which mystical experiences are possible. For Mircea Eliade, sacrality is an integral and autonomous experience that does not translate into any other province, and therefore also not into art. Let us recall Saint Augustine's words: "The eyes love fair and varied forms, and bright and soft colours. Let not these occupy my soul; let God rather occupy it, who made these things, very good indeed, yet is He my good, not they."[16] To attain holiness today, the artist must abandon being an artist because he has lost his innocence. The master who could in the old days create in competition with God and whose works were worshipped because they formed a sovereign and autonomous sacredness, today is incapable of returning to his old meekness. Humility and haughtiness are irreconcilable.

[13] Maurice Nédoncelle, "La structure esthétique du « Portrait des Arnolfini » de Jean van Eyck," *Revue d'Esthétique*, vol. 10 (1957), pp. 145–6.

[14] Thomas Merton, *The Ascent to Truth* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1951).

[15] Wiesław Juszczak, "Czy istnieje mistyczna sztuka?" in *Sacrum i sztuka...*, op. cit., p. 150.

[16] Saint Augustine, op. cit., p. 248 (X, 34).

In his once celebrated book, *Das Heilige*, published in 1917, Rudolf Otto credited the *sacrum* with the power to evoke feelings of rapture and terror in humans.[17] To him, the primaeval ancient *sacrum* was steeped in the mysteries of fascination and of fear and appeared only in their presence. If these *misterium fascinans* and *misterium tremendum* come to be experienced again and are conveyed by the works of a great master, then we will have the right to say that art has again gone into the service of the *sacrum*. But today it would seem that the domain of the *sacrum* remains inaccessible to the art of our time.

Translated from the Polish by Maja Łatyńska

[17] Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958).