

CHAPTER VI

Towards a Concept of the Poet: Thomas Aquinas & St. Augustine

In following the trajectory from the fifth to the fifteenth century, one encounters a rigorous asceticism that was fear-struck rather than wonder struck by art. Art was relegated to the languishing backburner. Gradually, under a welcome shift in emphasis, the creator's ways were acknowledged and these blossomed into a theory of art and aesthetics. The groundswell of knowledge ushered the wind of change over the prevalent point of view towards 'art' as one finds art being deemed as a means of contemplation (*dhyilamba*) and contemplation, under a gradual progress, leads to the bliss of beatitude. Nothing of substance exists to formulate what one would safely appellate as medieval aesthetics. Aesthetics was treated as a branch of logic or theology. Rhetoric took precedence over aesthetic. Art in the Middle Ages meant either (1) the "mechanical" or "servile" arts, that is practical technology or (2) the "liberal art" (the trivium: grammar, rhetoric, dialectic; the quadrivium: music, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy); or (3) the "theological arts". Painting and architecture belonged among the mechanical arts, poetry with rhetoric in the trivium, music in the quadrivium, and the problem of beauty was part of theology. (Beardsley 1966: 105). For the medieval mind, beauty was the attractive power of truth and perfection. That is why medieval art was a kind of knowledge, an intellectual virtue, and a feast of reason rather than a breakfast of sensations. Also it belonged to the practical order, as distinguished from the speculative.

Emmanuel Chapman quite convincingly disagrees with Gilbert and Kuhn about the existence of esthetics threatened fatally by the Christian moral opposition in theology. He believes that Augustine never turned increasingly away from beauty as he advanced in his Christian faith. Rather the Augustinian^{nian} mind reconciled happily the claims of beauty and morality. "We Catholics worship God, the principle of all good great or little, the principle of all beauty great or little, the principle of all order great and little. The more measure beauty and order shine out in created things, the more are

they good, the less the shining out of measure, beauty and order, the less are they good. Measure, beauty and order are the three general goods that we find in all created things whether spiritual or material.” (Chapman 1941: 47-8). So in the holistic concept of beauty, St Augustine, for whom unlike Plotinus there is no absolute ugliness, beauty and the very ontology of object are integrally related (*De Immortalitate Animae*: viii). His dialectical conception of beauty is consummated in the ‘opposition of contraries’. (*City of God*. XI, xviii) To the Augustinian mind the aesthetic object is an illumination of *congruentia partium* in number, form, unity and order which are also expressional, shining out in beauty; and the beautiful is a ‘synthesis of the formal aesthetic elements, illumination and expression’. In *De Vera Religione* XXX 55 and *De Genesis ad Litteram*, there is complexity in the unity that results from heterogeneity. In a composite of unrelated plurality, art looks for a ‘higher unity’ symbolised in the harmonisation or the orchestration in multiplicity. However, the emphasis on *number* ‘did not fall into the error of reducing all the aesthetic constituents to formal numerical relations, the kind of reduction which has tempted those who have tried to find in art geometrical laws, the golden section etc’. (Chapman 1941:49-50). For him, number as a principle marks the arrangement of parts, be it equal and unequal, with the teleology of concordance and integration (*City of God* XIX, xiii; one can also refer to *De Ordine* II, xv, 42). The *order* due to a thing is the guiding principle in the premises of beauty. And this cognition of order has reason as the principle to justify it. In the nature of judgement, Augustine brings the *a priori* standard, the presupposition of an ideal order, which the artist aspires to reach and the critic, in a normative approach, uses as a touchstone. In the Augustinian aesthetic, there is not just the search for the harmony of parts but harmony in object endowed with life. Here is the intensity that is rooted in life,

The splendor of light, the magnificence of the sun, moon and stars, the sombre beauties of forest, the colour and perfumes of flowers, the multitude of birds differing in song and plumage, the infinite diversity of animals among which some of the smallest are the most admirable, the works of a worm or a bee which seem more surprising than the gigantic body of a whale, the sea which provides such a great spectacle with the

different colours clothing it like so many different costumes, sometimes green and at other times blue and purple (what pleasure this is in seeing the sea raging and storming if one is safe from its waves), the multitude of vestment furnished by trees and animals and so many other things which can hardly be listed let alone describe, so much time would it take to include them all. (Chapman 1941: 50)

With such an attitude, delicacy of feeling and proximity to the phenomenal world of beauty that pulsates with life, Augustine integrates the 'lights of noetic order' and the 'order of making' with an 'illumination'. This 'illumination' vouchsafes for his apathetic treatment of plastic arts, the mimetic art and his ranking of music or architecture over painting or sculpture. However, he never denies the compulsive relation between art and imagination. Imitation, for him, is invention.

Therefore it is possible for the mind, by taking away, as has been said, some things from objects which the senses have brought within its knowledge, and by adding some things, to produce in the exercise of imagination that which, as a whole, was never within the observation of any of the senses; but the parts of it had all been within such observation, though found in a variety of different things: e.g., when we were boys, born and brought up in an inland district, we could already form some idea of the sea, after we had seen water even in a small cup; (Beardsley 1966:98)

If a small cup of water helps one to imagine a sea, the *invention* in poetry – mimesis in the sense of an act that is beyond mere copying – could be mendacious poetry, could be a lie which does not wish to deceive, but aims to delight in the way a joke is a lie but evokes a laugh. The artist never chooses to be 'fallacious'; he is not being able to be true just in the way in which the image in the mirror wants to be the object it reflects. The bent oar in the water is illusory, but what the artist represents is necessitated by his will, a creative transcription of objects and in the transcreation his art is non-illusory

for, its falseness is due to its inability to be what it ought to be. The artist, without being fallacious, can evoke pleasure through beauty that is harmonised with due regard to proportion, measure and unity.

In fact beauty is synonymous with totality. The whole (*totum*) is always greater than the sum of the parts. The pleasure from the unity in the *whole* is far greater than what we experience from the *part*. This is the major premise in his aesthetics. (*De Genesi Contra Manichaeos* I, xxi). So more the unity, the more is the *being* in a thing (*De Vera Religione* vii, 13). Under the notion that all material objects are potentially divisible, Augustine's unified aesthetics or the integralism of his mind assumes an obvious prominence. With the aesthetic constituents in place, the mind of the artist rises from 'rhythm in sense' to the 'immortal rhythm' which is Divine Ground. There is a strict allegiance to harmony and unity; there is the aspiration for the state of *monas* and a freedom from *duas*. This gets amply justified in *De Quantitate Animae* (I ix) which reasons out an equilateral triangle as better than a scalene, a square as more *beautiful* than the equilateral triangle and the circle as the most beautiful of all, for it is the most unified and organic. So Augustinian aesthetic is a quest for symmetry and 'Augustine is able to countenance something very much like an artistic theory of harmony *through* contrast, beauty *in* variety'. (Wimsatt, Brooks 1957:125). Beauty, rightly, cannot be scrutinised in isolation and despite diversity, disunity, and disproportion, beauty rises to a state of 'illumination'. It is the other name of 'the rational and well-ordered concord of diverse sounds in harmonious variety'. (*City of God*, XVII, xiv) In *Confessions*, he emphasises 'mutual fitness' (*aptum*) of the part, the agreeableness of the parts with the whole, the fitness of the shoe with a foot (IV, xiii), which is a clear indication of a bold accent on 'symmetry', the *congruentia partium*. In *De Vera Religione* (xxxii, 59) Augustine looks into the second arch constructed over the first arch as a *correspondence* between the two units. This correspondence is strengthened by the demands of *fitness* and the pleasure from beauty derived therefrom owes to the *congruentia partium* which is the power of the one harmonious whole. There is the quest for circumscribing a unity among individual objects as separate units by comparison and repetition (*De Libero Arbitrio*, II, viii, 22). The degree of unity hinges on the degree of equality and inequality which is significant with respect to its

potentiality as a source that can see proportion, measure and number emanate (*De Musica* VI, xvii, 56):

St. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae* [(1-11), 57, 4c] defines art as *recta ratio factibilium* which, in fact, points to the right judgement and the precise knowledge of 'manufacture'. It is the epistemology of creation which is bound to the principles of making and judging – *ars est principium faciendi et cogitandi quae sunt facienda*. As with art so with the artist using his prudence and the principles of logic and rhetoric. With art as cognitive and productive, the emphasis is not on 'doing' but 'making'; it is a strive for excellence which the Greek called *arete*. Art, being a very broad concept, included technology and craft and it would be quite appropriate to say that the theory of art is in the first instance a theory of craftsmanship. Man, born naked, helpless and defenceless against nature, could only observe the works of nature and imitate them. His observations are important, as every work is either the work of the creator or the work of an artificer imitating nature.

However, the poet or the artist in man does not 'imitate' slavishly; rather, it involves invention and reworking – the creative labours work in conjunction and disjunction in an 'operative' referentiality to the object. The *creative operations in nature* are 'imitated' by the artist in his operation with the phenomenal world – *ars imitatur naturum in sue operatione phantasia* – and in Aquinas, it is one of the four internal powers of the sensitive part of man, and can be identified as the imagination. The other three powers are common sense, estimative power (which in human beings is cognitive) and memory. *Quasi thesaurus quidam formarum per sensum acceptarum* – the imagination can be said to be the kind of storehouse of forms received by sense. Imagination, for the poet, plays the role of simple apprehension. Once an object has been perceived by the senses, imagination features as a passive faculty upon which the phantasm is imprinted. Here we can quote Aquinas:

Thus it is part of the concept of the stone, that it should be instantiated in a particular horse, and so on; so the nature of a stone or of any material thing cannot be completely and truly known unless it is known as

existing in the particular; but the particular is apprehended by the senses and the imagination. Consequently, in order to have actual understanding of its proper object, the intellect must turn to phantasm to study the universal nature existing in the particular. (Kenny 1969: 289-90)

Focussing on the 'phantasia', Kretzthaman points out that it produces and preserves the sensory data that are indispensable for the use of the intellect. 'In intellect itself Aquinas distinguishes two Aristotelian "powers": "agent [i.e., essentially active or productive] intellect" which acts on the phantasms in a way that produces "intelligible species", which constitute the primary contents of the mind stored in "possible [i.e., essentially receptive] intellect"'. (1993: 139) The phantasm is an image of a thing, and the imagination is thus a receptacle for images; it qualifies to be the sole way by which the intellect can know things in their individuality. Phantasm, in fact, has an accentuated contribution towards the acquisition of concepts and in their application. It is impossible for the poet's intellect to perform any actual exercise of understanding except by attending to phantasm. The nature of a stone or of any material thing cannot be completely and truly known unless it is known as existing in the particular. But the particular is apprehended by the senses and the imagination. So the intellect of the poet has to turn to phantasm to study the universal nature existing in the particular, to have the actual understanding of its proper object. As a cognitive faculty of the artist, it underscores an uninhibited rearranging of the elements in experience – a composition that does not believe (similar to the principles of Avicenna) in dividing and uniting, in decomposing and recomposing. It enables it to form and reform under the principle of 'likeness'. It is the productive operations of the poet in relation to the question of those ideas in God's mind which are exemplary causes of things; the combinatory or aggregatory function is highlighted which has a bearing on proportion, measure, *consonantia* and the artistic form. Angels, both good and bad, can influence the imagination of a person.

An angel causing an imaginative vision [*aliquam imaginariam visionem*], sometimes enlightens the intellect at the same time, so that it knows what these images signify; and then there is no deception. But sometimes by the angelic operation the similitudes of things only appear in the imagination; but neither then is deception caused by the angel, but by the defect in the intellect of him to whom such things appear. (Bundy 1927:221)

The poet is expected to be devoid of this defect. He needs to come under the ministrations of the good angels which also directs the phantasms to the knowledge of future events. For Aquinas, it is the free play of imagination that needs to be feared for it may result in the creation of distorted phantasms. The poet's mind must guard itself against the agency of demons which can expose it to the possibility of deception and error. In a typical medieval attitude, Aquinas wants his poet to have a distrust of imagination. The operating intellect of the poet, while preconceiving the form of what is made, has an idea; this idea is the very form of the thing that the poet chooses to imitate. So the 'idea' is not the *form* as an object of perception but the *form* of the substance that the poet selects in his mimetic operation. However, the point to be noted is that in the Thomistic conception of art, the ontological value of artistic form cannot excel the natural form. Aquinas believes that artistic form is ontologically dependent. The poet imitates nature insofar as he is able to, operating upon the materials which nature provides. Importantly, the composition, not creation, is the indispensable principle in the medieval theory of art.

In this *composition*, the 'idea' corresponds to the entire composite – the idea that causes the whole, both its form and its matter. The poet proceeds with the 'constructive' endeavour he has in his mind - an idea of the object he is making. The beauty of the poet's composition does not consist only in its correspondence with the objective canons of proportion; it consists also in its proportionate correspondence with its exemplary form. Aquinas maintains that God confers beauty on things in that He is the cause of consonance and clarity in everything. So we call a man beautiful on account of his being well proportioned in his dimensions and surroundings, and because of his

having a clear and bright complexion. Indeed Thomistic poetics rests on these principles. These are related to form (analogous to Aristotle's 'entelechy') which is the natural basis, both ontologically and psychologically, of the conditions that are constitutive of aesthetic value. If an object is to be experienced as beautiful, it must be considered from the point of view of its formal cause; the aesthetic value is connected with formal causality. Form is determined by means of measure in its material and efficient principles (that is, its *modus*) by means of number that is the composite proportion of its constitutive elements. Form is restricted to a particular species and because of its inclination, or weight, it has a certain *ordo* towards its proper end. The perfection of the poet is in the complete realisation of the form. A proper knowledge in this regard, is *sine qua non* to the production of art. The poet's knowledge of the 'sustenance' is significant for it takes care of the organisation, the selection and the configuration of the work before him.

In this context, it may be mentioned that the part played by the senses in the perception of beauty is indispensable as the poet's mind is said to work under conditions of 'abstracting and discoursing'. The knowledge derived through the senses possesses fully the intuitivity necessary for the perception of beautiful. Maritain writes, 'A certain splendour is indeed according to all the Ancients the essential character of beauty, - *claritas est de ratione pulchritudinis* (50), *lux pulchrificat, quia sine luce omnia sunt turpia* (51), - but it is a splendour of intelligibility: *splendour veri*, said the Platonists, *splendor ordinis*, said St. Augustine, adding that "unity is the form of all beauty" (52)' [1930 :20].

Firmly fixed in the intuition of sense, the mind, like the stag at the spring of running water, drinks the clarity of being. The mind apprehends the intelligible light not *sub ratione veri*, but rather *sub ratione delectabilis*. Of the instinct for beauty the poet says that it is the immortal instinct for the beautiful which makes us consider the world and its pageants as a glimpse of a correspondence with Heaven. The poet under the Thomistic aesthetics, should acknowledge that every form is a certain irradiation proceeding from the first brightness - *Ex divina pulchritudine esse omnium derivatur*. The poet by his art recreates a lively thirst for everything 'beyond' which the soul perceives what 'splendours' shine beyond the tomb. Here, one should note that the poet

is not the supreme artist. Aristotle admits that the old poets were right in their proposition that to the Divinity alone is reserved the possession of wisdom as His true property. It is indeed true that the ultimate reference in medieval aesthetics is always to the divine essence and creation. So medieval art is oriented towards the divine principle or essence of unity and harmony. The medievalists saw it steadily and whole in a sense more than the Greeks: more than the Greek sense because, to them, the whole was always set off or ringed with splendour, the splendour of form and truth, *splendor formae*, *splendor verae*. No wonder, then that words meaning light – *claritas*, *splendor*, *fulgor*, *lux*, *lumen*, *illumino*, *lucidus*, *illustro* – are common in most medieval discourses. In its context, the word does not mean physical light, but form. *Forma est lumen purum*, form is pure light a formative and informative energy. So God's production of beauty or Form excels that of the poet. The poet cannot match His range and spectrum. The condition of the artist is less exalted and more human and more discordant for his activities operate beyond the pure immanence of spiritual operations. Compared to the divine, he falters to enjoy the substance and piece of wisdom and the speculative and contemplative life is condemned to the misery of temporal practice and production. The poet's art may encompass all the light of the sky and the grace of the first garden, yet he falls short of the workmanship of the divine artificer. Even if the artist were to know every reason susceptible of comprehension and every virtue of being, the perfect joy would elude him for his wisdom is human. So the poet, hungering for beatitude, and asking of Art the mystic fullness which God alone can give, can find his only outlet in *Signe l' abime*. The aesthetic format clearly cannot provide the 'joy' and 'rest' for the human heart and the poet; if he is not to shatter his art or his soul, he must simply be what art would ask him to be – a good workman.

Thomistic poetics is analogous to classical poetic with the preponderance of precision and condensation. The poet cannot see the collapse of a worldview owing to the paucity of inspiration under a theological secularisation of the natural world. However, in Aquinas's *modus of poeticus*, the poet can never be deficient of mystical drives. Poetry in Aquinas's view is a semiotic phenomenon that has no other end than to have meaning. The meaning is referred to as literal. This claim seems too crude, for Aquinas, himself a poet, knew very well that poets employ rhetorical figures and allegory. But

poetical second sense is a subspecies of the literal sense, and Aquinas calls it “parabolic”. This brings about a distinctively different attitude to poetic language for the poet’s introspective and investigative imitations are confirmed in the allegorical meaning. Poets, for Aquinas know what they want to say and what they are saying. The medieval perspective that hailed the pleasure of poetry as a subtle play of intellect which brought in its comprehension mystical correspondences, was given lesser importance. What Aquinas hailed was the poet’s instantaneous understanding that gave birth to pleasure. It was a correspondence with the ‘exact’, for Aquinas was a trained and adroit poet himself, knowing the proportion between words, their literal meaning and between literal and parabolic meaning. The poet uses figurative expressions owing to a deficiency in truth (*propter defectum veritatis*) and religious ceremony makes an *imagistic representation of the divine owing to an excess of truth (propter excedentem veritatem)*. And the use of similitudes and metaphors are distinctive of poetry. Aquinas conceives of poetic art as a *ratio factibilium* – way of making something. So the maker has to have knowledge – the powers of invention and exposition of facts, events, feelings and thoughts – and be laborious. So the knowledge of the laws of composition of poetry is significant. Even in the beginning of *Summa*, poetic knowledge is compared with sacred knowledge. Aquinas’s reference to poetry as *infima doctrina* has nothing to do with *perceptio confusa*. For him, whatever is poetic is referred to the ‘imagined’, the ‘invented’ and the ‘fictive’, rendering pleasure. The poet endeavours to present the ‘unknown’ and the ‘inconceivable’. This inconceivability is not a reality that is beyond conceptualisation. It is a reality that could have a deficiency of truth which comes from representation. The poet uses his imagination to recreate the form. It is the ability and genius of the poet that decide his grasp of the *form*; here the degree of his success works correspondingly with the degree of ‘deficiency of truth’ which can be attributed to his theoretical limit. Aquinas believes that just as mysteries of religion require similitude for they belie our understanding, so also, the poet allegorises to help grasp the ‘unreality’ or ‘space’ that separates it from empirical reality.

The servile or mechanical arts were so called because they required for their operation unyielding base of matter. The free mind, unadulterated, is the concern of the noble person. *Sapiente est ordinare*, the wise man creates order. For those who can

see, both the past and its presentness, can also measure the loss and the chaos. In fact all objects of our sensuous experience, in art as in nature, are brought back to the Divine Ground, the creative centre. By the miracle of symbolic transformation, the sensible world melts into the ghostly and the ideal and the invisible regains its primacy.