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about Ireland



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Johannes Scottus Eriugena

In the twentieth century art has reached a pinnacle of self-consciousness. The major art developments are accompanied by theoretical statements *about* art, definitions of "ideal" art, or theories relating the art-event to the perceiver's own world. In the case of some schools, notably Abstract Expressionism, the theory from which the work arises, or towards which it aspires, is actually more important than the mere instance of that theory — the work itself. There are many reasons offered for this shift in emphasis, all of which, in one way or another, describe a situation in which art is apprehended first by the intellect, and only secondly, by the senses and emotions. That art should no longer grasp us immediately and intuitively seems to go against our common-sense experience of art; seems to indicate in fact that art in the modern age is dead.

Hegel recognised this shift in the comprehension of art when he wrote:

The peculiar manner of the production of art and its works no longer completely fill our highest need; we have progressed too far to still be able to venerate and pray to works of art; the impression they make on us is of a more reflective kind, and what they arouse in us still requires a higher touchstone and has to prove itself in a different manner. Thought and reflection have overtaken the fine arts.

(G.W.F. Hegel *Lectures on the Aesthetics* XII, 30, 31)

The contemporary art student, then, needs to be aware of the theoretical problems surrounding art, the difficulties involved in seeing art as a form of truth, a means of communication, a sacred celebration, or a pleasurable ornament. Unfortunately, Irish art-schools lag far behind their European and American contemporaries in this respect. Art-theory and aesthetics are only minor parts of the normal curriculum. It is argued that the basics must be taught, that teachers are more concerned to develop their students' technique, their skills, rather than to engage in seemingly interminable arguments about the validity of the art-process itself. Moreover, art-history,

the history of European painting for example, is considered to be the repository of all theoretical statements about art — certainly all the statements the student needs to know.

Irish students will require far more training in aesthetics if their art is to develop as a contending force in the art-world today. In this essay, I want to argue that such aesthetic theorising need not seem to be a foreign element imported and imposed on spontaneous creativity, but in fact can provide a rich source for creativity itself.

* * *

There has been a huge revival of interest in Celtic art in the past ten years. The Exhibition of Irish Art toured America accompanied by a luxurious catalogue. Irish designers and craft-workers incorporate Celtic motifs in their work. Leather-workers study the spirals of the *Book of Kells* for shapes and patterns. Yet how much agreement is there as to what Celtic art is about? How much is known about the principles on which the anonymous artists of the seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries were operating? The spirals on the entrance stone at Newgrange remain — after hundreds of years of speculation — opaque, if fascinating, symbols. The revolving three-spoked circles of the Chi-Rho page of the *Book of Kells* may indicate that the logos and the Trinity run through all things, but how many people have actually attempted to relate this page with the Christian cosmologies of the Early Medieval era? Despite the huge popularity of the Celtic past, it is still being appropriated merely as something past — not as being a rich artistic statement in itself. There is not much awareness of the aesthetic gap which separates our technological world from the sacred cosmos in which the early Irish artists worked and lived. Irish aesthetics can develop out of a timely meditation on the gap which separates these two worlds. How must we begin?

It is fitting that one of the figures revived in this renewal of Celtic art — John Scotus Eriugena — should himself be an extremely important source for

medieval aesthetics and cosmology. He appears twice in our everyday world: once on the five punt note and once on the eleven pence stamp. These two portraits are entirely different — one is a fattish Friar Tuck with an enormous hairy cloak, the other is a thinnish more cerebral figure with a beard. Neither attempt at portraiture bears any resemblance to the one medieval impression we have of him — the curly-headed and smiling noble-man on the title page of the *Clavis Physicae* of Honorius Augustiniensis, itself a marvellous source of medieval cosmogonic schemata. Though many people were displeased at the lopsided portrait of our national philosopher on the five punt note, few would have recognised that Eriugena's own art-theories would have justified the dissimilarity of the image used to represent him. For Scotus Eriugena, the dissimilar image is more apt than the similar in representation, because the dissimilar image brings with it the recognition that the image is indeed only an image, and not an adequate substitution for the object. It is clear that we have left behind the aesthetic of realism in our first encounter with this thinker.

John Scotus Eriugena, or Johannes Scottus Eriugena as he is more properly named, was born in Ireland in the early part of the ninth century. His education was formed by the monastic schools. The first Danish raids were at that time beginning to disrupt life in Ireland, and Eriugena left to teach and study at the court of Charles the Bald in France. He entered a rich and cultured court. Art history books give a high place to the painting, architecture and book-illustration which came from this period — the so-called First and Second Bibles of Charles the Bald, the "Adoration of the Lamb" from the *Codex Aureus* of St. Emmeran of Regensburg, and the Bamberg Bible. These are strange figurative works to us. Imagery and symbols are linked together in a pattern which mirrors the overall cosmos. Much of the symbolism is devoted to the idea of the King who rules his land as God rules His creation. Political and social ideas combine in a celebration which appears to have little to do with representation or depiction.

When we think of the aesthetic of medieval art in general, we think of the realistic and humanistic art of the High Medieval period; thirteenth and fourteenth century religious figures executed with care and proportion. We think too of the aesthetic principles of Thomas Aquinas known to us in the distortion of Stephen Dedalus — the beautiful is that which, when seen, pleases. A work must have *claritas, integritas, consonantia*. It takes a careful reading of De Bruyne's three-volume study *Etudes d'esthétique médiévale* (1946) to show how narrow this understanding of medieval art is.

Eriugena is important to medieval aesthetic theory because of his accurate formulation and recovery of the Eastern tradition of Dionysius the Areopagite. Dionysius' notion of beauty is markedly different from the Augustinian-Thomistic understanding. Dionysius is concerned not merely with the surface appearance of things but with their symbolic power. In so far as things are or appear beautiful, they must lift the mind to understand the immaterial beauty of which they are

the material symbols. If however only the surface beauty is attended to, or if we merely apply the rules of consonance, clarity and integrity to the work in isolation of its symbolic meaning, we remain on the merely sensible or carnal level, and do not approach the true intelligible meaning. For Dionysius and for Eriugena, what is most beautiful is that which is hidden. Revealed beauty must be understood against the background of what it obscures and hides. Art is conceived of as a means of leading the mind on a certain path. It is by no means concerned with reproducing or calling to attention the surface structures of things, its purpose is to allow the mind to think the truly spiritual world it occupies. This does not mean that artistic realism has been abandoned for a surrealist play of imagination. The link between art and the imagination does not really exist in the Middle Ages. Still less is there the idea that art is a form of play or of arbitrary construction. Art in the Early Medieval world has the clear function of relating the individual mind to the sacred world which it pre-

sents as a unified inner harmony in contrast to the exterior multiplicity of nature. Nothing in the world is merely there. For Eriugena, the things of the world are signs, images, symbols of the true spiritual and immaterial world. The painting of an artist is a material entity made up of colour but the meaning of the painting is contained in the way in which it points beyond itself to the world of light and colour in itself — that is to "immaterial" light and colour. The aim of the artist, as of the priest, is to rid the minds of humans of their attachment to materiality: they must begin to see things as intelligible immaterial lights, they must realise that their bodies are merely the figurative expression of their inner selves. Art, then, on this view, is important in the development of the spiritual life of the perceiver, its whole point is that art does not belong to the material world at all, but is a meditation beyond it.

Dionysius was adopted as the patron saint of France and the Cathedral of Saint Denis was an instantiation of Dionysian and Eriugenian principles. The Cathedral is the prototype of the gothic cathedral, designed by Abbot Suger who has left us an account of his theories. Here we find set out very clearly the basic principle of Dionysian aesthetics — that the material and the visible are only the starting point for the meditation of the immaterial and invisible world of the mind, and of God. We may quote Suger's poem about the central west portal of the Cathedral:

A noble work shines, but the work which shines nobly should enlighten the spirit, so that it may be led by true lights to the True Light, to which Christ is the true door. The portal shows how strongly the True Light shines in these lights — the dull spirit lifts itself towards the truth by means of the material . . .

The structure of the gothic cathedral with its slender columns and high arches, its impression of lightness, of being suspended in mid-air, is a deliberate artifice to convey the meaning of the world as matter illuminated by intelligence and informed by divine presence. The windows and doorways of these gothic structures become all important — they feature symbolically in the journey of the mind towards its spiritual home. Eriugena's philosophy, following from Dionysius, develops this point. All things are lights (*lumina*), the mind is a created light which reflects the divine light.

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Creation is an illumination in the darkness of non-being. But Eriugena is careful that we understand that this is metaphorical and symbolic thinking. God is Light and Beauty but more importantly God is beyond all our finite conceptions of beauty and of illumination. He is the *Darkness, the Absence, the Nothingness* of which our own world speaks in its negative way. It is for this reason that the monstrous and horrible images of painters can be accepted along with the beautiful. The monstrous images of God, as a beast or a dragon, the strange mythical creatures that we find everywhere in medieval illumination, these are images to shock our mind into recognising what is material and gross in our thought.

Eriugena had worked out very carefully a theory of images and their relation to what they portray. The pleasant images of God such as are found in High Medieval and Renaissance painting are ranked in second place to the grotesque images which point to the very metaphor which is often hidden in the more "realistic" depictions. Such uncovering of the hidden metaphors and resemblances in thought is a foremost quality of contemporary aesthetic theory — the work of Derrida for example. Once we accept this, we can look again at Early Medieval — and particularly Celtic — art. The principles of art as Eriugena outlines them are all to be found instantiated in medieval practice. The work of art is an object of meditation. Form and shape are used to express and symbolise a "formless" intellectual truth. It is not simply a question of allegory: the Chi-Rho page of the *Book of Kells* is not an allegory, it is instead a symbolic representation of an intellectual grasp of the world. The details and the spirals are necessary both to symbolise the superfluity and abundance of this world and also to show how everything is controlled and ordered by the Word which extends through the four directions of creation. (Chi = X)

E. Gombrich, the art critic, has outlined the different approaches to images in the Dionysian and in the Latin traditions. These differences have a long history in the arguments of the Iconoclasts and their opponents which were closely debated at the Carolingian court. These are not merely obscure episodes in Church history but represent an important turning point in the conception of art. For the medievals a work of art is an image. It is a representation of the real,

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which derives its truth from the real. The debate then centres around the manner in which the image portrays its archetype:— is it merely the occasion which stimulates thought about the object? Or is it a detailed copy of what it represents? Dionysius and Eriugena managed to sidestep the more difficult aspects of this argument by presenting a case for both similar and dissimilar images. There are good images and bad. Good images are those which immediately show not only what they depict but also the inadequacy of their depiction. Bad images are illusions; they trick the senses into believing they are what they represent. Conceived in this way, not only art, but also nature is a repository of "images" — natural things are symbols of the world from which they are derived — the perfect prelapsarian Eden.

* * *

We have been describing in very rough outline the aesthetics of John Scottus Eriugena. We can develop from this base in two ways. First we can find out the exact influence which Eriugena had on the painters and architects of the middle ages. Secondly, we can start to think about his theories and see whether or not they provide a framework for understanding contemporary art, or, more accurately, for accommodating the re-appropriation of Celtic art to the

strict demands of contemporary aesthetics. In the first instance, Eriugena's influence cannot be traced exactly but can be seen in much of the cosmological illustrations which are collected in the books of Joachim of Fiore or Honorius Augustuniensis. We can see Eriugena's imagery and thought in tapestries and in cathedrals. But his influence can also be found in the work of Hieronymus Bosch. According to Fraenger in his book *The Millennium of Hieronymus Bosch* the influence of Eriugena is clearly to be found — both in his theory of musical harmony and in his theory of sexuality. I would suggest a third area — perhaps some of the grotesque figures in Bosch and Bruegel can be understood in terms of Eriugena's theory of dissimilar or monstrous images. Much of the ambiguity surrounding Bosch's portrait of the heavenly delights could be dispelled by seeing the vulgar images as deliberate attempts to show the artificiality of the painted paradise.

* * *

The contemporary aesthetics which takes its departure from an idea or from an intellectual consideration of things is not so far removed from medieval practice as we might have thought. Art history, concerned as it is with making distinctions, and following the linear flow of time, may actually deceive us about the relation between different

(Cont. on page 29)

saw the establishment of Night Adult Classes in these creativities. The classes were brought to an end for this year with the holding of a highly successful Exhibition of Student Paintings and Woodcarvings in Wicklow's Grand Hotel.

This new dimension in the spread of adult education in the Wicklow area has been monitored by a few dedicated instructors amongst whom Liam Tracy, Larry Ryan and Vivian Hammond made the most helpful contribution. These classes received invaluable encouragement from experienced local artists such as Rev. Stanley Pettigrew, Rev. A. Cannon Crinion, Dr. Wolsey Sloan and Sister Prisca of the Dominican Convent.

There is a bright future for the arts in education in Wicklow. The community has its own Music, Choral, Drama and Photography Societies. Why not a local Art Gallery as part of the proposed Museum? The immediate development of education in the visual arts offers a fertile field guaranteeing a rich harvest for community.

Society today demands more leisure time. What better way of preparing to use these hours fruitfully than by educating our people in the visual arts, music, drama, dance, literature and film?

William McNamara,
Principal

VISUAL ARTS BURSARIES 1979

The Arts Council (July 3rd) announced awards to individuals in visual arts, at a press reception in their offices, to a total value of £20,000. As a result of the exceptionally high level of the applications in 1979 the total sum awarded has been doubled from its original level of £10,000.

Thirteen artists will receive grants ranging in value from £400 to £2,500 to assist them with a wide variety of projects — studio construction, special materials and processes, travel grants and so on.

The Macauley Fellowship in Sculpture valued at £2,500 was awarded to Micheal Warren from Gorey, Co. Wexford. Mr. Warren is 29 years old and studied Sculpture at the Accademia di Brera, Milan, under the Sculpture Luciano Minguzzi, and the Art Historian and critic Guido Ballo. He has exhibited in many group exhibitions and has carried out several major commissions including University College Galway, and, very recently for R.T.E. He is currently living and working in Wexford.

A major bursary went to Andrew Folan, a young artist from Donegal, who was awarded £6,000 (to be paid over two years). Mr. Folan is a printmaker who has just qualified from the National College of Art and Design and it enables him to do a two year post-graduate course at the Slade in London.

Margaret Gillan from Galway was also awarded £3,000 (to be paid over two years) to take up a post-graduate place in the Slade in experimental art studies.

Seamus Coleman, the internationally renowned artist, was awarded £2,000 to enable him to carry out two separate installations for two provincial locations in Ireland.

Four awards of £1,000 each went to two painters and two sculptors, Camille Souter, Micheal Coleman, Frank Flood and Eilis O'Connell. Camille Souter will take a studio in the Shannon area and paint there for a year. Micheal Coleman and Frank Flood were awarded bursaries to allow them to acquire proper studio facilities and to purchase materials. Eilis O'Connell from Cork was awarded a bursary to enable her to purchase equipment for her metal sculpture including steel sheet, welding rods, oxygen and acetylene and so on.

Micheal O'Sullivan the sculptor was awarded £750 to enable him to continue a major experimental project entitled "Immra agus Eachtra", based on three cities and three rivers in Ireland, Scandinavia and the United States.

An award of £600 was made to Bob Mulcahy, a Limerick sculptor. This award will cover his travel to Tokyo where he will participate in a Japanese Sculpture Seminar.

John Carson was awarded a bursary of £500 to allow him to complete a photo

graphic project called "The 40 shades of Green" which involves him in walking from Cork to Larne seeking the 40 shades.

Two final awards of £400 were made to the painters Ciaran Lennon and Micheal Ashur. Mr. Lennon will use the award to set up a dark room in his studio and to travel abroad. Mr. Ashur will use the award to purchase materials.

The award winners attended a reception in the Council offices where the announcement was made (3rd July at 5.30 p.m.).

(Cont. from page 27)

historical periods. We said earlier that aesthetics can begin by contemplating the gap which separates the medieval and modern worlds, we may conclude by recognising that the gap can be bridged by a combination of intellect, will and imagination. Art has a flexibility over history and over life in that it can make connections where none were thought to exist. The fact that contemporary Irish artists are making connections with the Celtic heritage is sufficient to justify an intellectual exploration of the same area in an attempt to uncover the aesthetic principles which underlie the practice. Such a move would bring Irish art into the contemporary debate over theory without surrendering the rich sources of inspiration for an academically-oriented problem-posing art such as now reigns in Europe and the United States.

Dermot Moran