

## AQUINAS AFTER JOYCE: THOMIST AESTHETICS IN LIGHT OF CONTEMPORARY ART

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According to the Irish novelist James Joyce, Thomas Aquinas's well-known formal trilogy from the *Summa Theologiae* is central to understanding beauty: *proportio*, *claritas*, and *integritas*. Joyce in fact formulated a youthful aesthetic based on Aquinas in his novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). Despite Joyce's ontological misunderstanding of Thomas, this article resumes several interpretations of Thomist aesthetics (i.e., J. Maritain, U. Ecco, and F. J. Kovach) and strives to renew an understanding of contemporary art with regard to its relationship to the good/true and the possible rejection of this relationship.

*You know what Aquinas says: the three things requisite for beauty are integrity, a wholeness, symmetry and radiance. Some day I will expand that sentence into a treatise.*<sup>1</sup>

With these words, written around one hundred years ago in an early draft of the novel *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the Irish author James Joyce embodied the twentieth century beginning of a search for a clear definition of beauty. The artist, whether painter, novelist, sculptor, or composer was then, at the very least, fascinated with a conception of beauty.<sup>2</sup> Is it the case, then, that in the last one hundred years,

<sup>1</sup> J. Joyce: *Stephen Hero*, New York: New Directions, 1963 : 212.

<sup>2</sup> The equally interesting question of *ars*, or the making of art (or craft), will not be approached in this article.

the question of beauty has been eclipsed? Who speaks now of a beautiful late twentieth century painting, novel, sculpture, building, or film? More precisely, what artist is presently concerned with making beautiful works of art? Although the question of whether in fact there is such an eclipse could be disputed, the relation of Joyce's vehemently "modern" interest in Thomas Aquinas's view of beauty should nevertheless at least be fascinating. If one were now to ask whether the historical view of beauty has anything at all to do with "modern" art, or whether the mediaeval philosopher who writes a few sentences on beauty still has anything to teach the modern (or post-modern) after seven hundred and fifty years, some such as Joyce might say "Yes"! The "treatise" on Thomas's sentence, mentioned by Joyce in the quote above, has never yet been written. Many commentators in the last one hundred years have written collectively many books and articles over Thomas's view of beauty or aesthetics, but most have remained within a mediaeval historical framework in discussing Thomas's writings regarding beauty.<sup>3</sup>

This paper will not then be concerned with the setting of Aquinas's "aesthetics" in the mediaeval period, since Aquinas himself would never have attempted to ground or consider purely "aesthetic" questions as autonomous. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore something of the mediaeval philosophical background in relation to Joyce's interpretation of Aquinas. Certainly Joyce tries to interpret a kind of Thomist aesthetics in light of the contemporary art and thought of his day, but does he succeed? This paper will try to show both the relevance of relating Thomas and Joyce and question this comparison.<sup>4</sup> Can Joyce enable us to deepen further Thomas's writings on beauty, and if so, how might

<sup>3</sup> Some of these commentators include M. De Wulf, 'Les théories esthétiques propres à Saint Thomas', *Revue néoscholastique* 1-2, 1894-1895: 188-205, 341-357, 117-142; J. Maritain: *Art and Scholasticism*, trans. J. W. Evans, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962, orig. publ. 1921; F. J. Kovach: *Die Aesthetik des Thomas von Aquin*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 1961; C. Barrett: 'The Aesthetics of St Thomas Re-Examined', *Philosophical Studies* 12, 1963: 107-124; A. Maurer: *About Beauty*, Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1983; J. A. Aertsen (see footnote 5); P. Dasseleer: 'L'être et la beauté selon Saint Thomas d'Aquin', in: J. Follon and J. McEvoy (eds.): *Actualité de la pensée médiévale*, Paris: Edition Peeters, 1994, and 'Esthétique "thomiste" ou esthétique "thomasiennne"', *Revue Philosophique de Louvain* 97, 1999: 312-335. Umberto Eco's works, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Hugh Bredin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), *Art and Beauty of the Middle Ages*, trans. Hugh Bredin (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), and *The Middle Ages of James Joyce: the aesthetics of Chaosmos*, trans. Ellen Esrock (London: Hutchinson, 1989), especially the latter, have attempted a similar goal of making mediaeval thought relevant to contemporary art and thought.

<sup>4</sup> For this same comparison from the point of view of an English professor, see W. T. Noon, *Joyce and Aquinas*, London: Yale University Press, 1957.

this research of Joyce's "enlighten" and renew our view of beauty in light of modernity? Joyce, who may be seen as a prophet for what further developed in twentieth century forms of art and literature, is perched at a crossroads of beautiful (i.e., mimetic or representational) and "modern" (i.e., abstract or non-representational) art. Is it the fact that in modernity art no longer need be beautiful, good, or true? The first section of this paper will ask these questions of Joyce's early writings. The second section will reconstruct a formal Thomist aesthetic theory in light of contemporary forms of art and thinking. Thirdly, this paper critically assesses one particular artistic material, namely, the fifth chapter of Joyce's novel *Portrait*. Joyce makes extensive use of Thomas in this chapter. Lastly, the conclusion returns to the question of the beautiful, the good, and the true as related to contemporary art. Artists and spectators who regard these questions as relevant to present day discussions of art are, in a sense, reviving the historical "transcendental" power of beauty.<sup>5</sup>

### I. JOYCE'S AQUINAS: AN INTRODUCTION

*"Your argument is not so conclusive as it seems," said the President after a short pause. "However I am glad to see that your attitude towards your subject is so genuinely serious. At the same time you must admit that this theory you have—if pushed to its logical conclusion—would emancipate the poet from all moral laws [..]"*

*[Stephen Dedalus:] "I have only pushed to its logical conclusion the definition Aquinas has given of the beautiful: Pulchra sunt quae visa placent."<sup>6</sup>*

Modernity has a great deal to do with pushing theories to their logical conclusions. What would Thomas look like pushed to his logical conclusion? The conversation between the protagonist autobiographical Joycean character, Stephen Dedalus, and the president of the Jesuit

<sup>5</sup> Most critics and commentators have asked whether beauty is a transcendental in Thomas. For the view that beauty is not a transcendental as such and that it is not separate from the good except through formal or logical means, see J. A. Aertsen, 'Beauty in the Middle Ages: A Forgotten Transcendental?', *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 1, 1991 : 68–97, and his re-writing of this same article in his book, *The Medieval Doctrine of Transcendentals: The Case of Thomas Aquinas*, Leiden: Brill, 1996 : ch. 8. The question of whether beauty is a transcendental category in the work of Thomas is not a topic of which this paper will be concerned.

<sup>6</sup> *Stephen Hero*, *op.cit.* : 95. Cf. Aquinas, *Summa theol.*, Ia, q.5, art. 4, ad. 1 (Dominican Fathers translation).

college where Dedalus attends, quoted above, explicitly asks a central question of aesthetics: should the poet be emancipated from moral laws? In other words, what has aesthetics to do with ethics? What are the restraints on a view of beauty considering the fact that the beautiful, according to the quote from Thomas above, is “that which pleases when seen” [*quae visa placent*]? Beginning with a journal entry of Joyce’s in 1904 (when he was in his early 20’s), it is possible to learn from Joyce what he believed to be his Thomist inspired interpretation of beauty. If humans have a form of desire or appetite for some particular good, the good is thus its *telos*. This *telos* is of two kinds: the beautiful and the true. Writing in a notebook, Joyce interprets Aquinas in the following way:

The good is *that towards* the possession of which an appetite tends: the good is the desirable. The true and the beautiful are the most persistent orders of the desirable. Truth is desired by the intellectual appetite which is appeased by the most satisfying relations of the intelligible; beauty is desired by the aesthetic appetite which is appeased by the most satisfying relations of the sensible. The true and the beautiful are spiritually possessed; the true by intellection, the beautiful by apprehension, and the appetites which desire to possess them, the intellectual and aesthetic appetites, are therefore spiritual appetites. . . .<sup>7</sup>

In this journal entry, Joyce is attempting to understand the essence of Thomism in light of his interest in the question of beauty. The separation of the good as that which desire wishes to possess and the truth that appeals to our intellect is somehow bridged by beauty. Since beauty appeals to our desires and our intellect, there is something special in the human being, which Joyce calls an “aesthetic appetite”. This is Joyce’s transformation of Thomist thinking: beauty, the bridge between the good and the true, is recognised by the human being by means of the aesthetic, within which modernity then abandons the good and the true.

Another theme that is altogether central in the oeuvre of Joyce (and in this quotation) is that human desire is not divorced from the sensible object. Whereas truth is “desired by the intellectual appetite”, there is an additional appetite within us, that of “the most satisfying relations of the sensible.” If this appetite of ours requires a particular physicality, then this appetite may not be equivalent with the good that we desire.

<sup>7</sup> E. Mason and R. Ellman (eds.): *The Critical Writings of James Joyce*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989: 146f (emphases added but the ellipses are in the original). See section 2 of this paper for the similarities with what Thomas says regarding beauty and the good.

For example, one requires food to live, but one also likes food to have pleasing textures, a nice appearance, and to be cooked just the right amount. Why is it that we are not just animals that eat anything that satisfies our appetite? What do these more pleasing satisfactions of the pallet have to do with the good? If the good is the object of every appetite, as Aristotle, Thomas, and Joyce argue, the intellect is free to choose (since the will is part of the soul)<sup>8</sup> something besides merely animal appetites. It may choose what is more pleasing *because* it is good. Since for Aristotle, “The intellectual soul is the form of forms,” and Joyce quotes this in his notebook, intellectual truth is meant to overcome this pull from the side of the animal appetite. Joyce expresses this simply when he says, “beauty is desired by the aesthetic appetite which is appeased by the most satisfying relations of the sensible.” Any food would be simply good (as for an animal), but well-cooked, nicely textured food is also an intellectual good. This is part of the particularity of the beautiful. However, this does not answer the question of what the “most satisfying relations of the sensible” are, nor how the sensible material relates to form.

Although the early modernist Joyce struggled in some ways with a form of Neoplatonism or Manichaeism, the later “modernist” Joyce emphasised the importance of matter. In relation to their theories of matter, the difference between Aquinas and Joyce is overwhelming and impossible to gauge here. Nevertheless, whereas it would seem that for Thomas, beauty exists without matter, that is, in the idea of God the Father, it also exists (and perhaps in an even more understandable way for humans) in the Son who was flesh at one time. There is a good comparison made in relation to the medical doctor’s need to understand the “humours” of physical matter when A. D. Hope, in his article on Joyce, summarises,

It is interesting to see that Aquinas like Joyce discusses the problem in terms of our ideas of personal beauty. Beauty he says is like health in this respect; the physical balance of humours which would make for health in a boy would not do so in an old man, yet health in all cases consists in a certain kind of *balance or proportion* of humours adapted differently to the needs of each nature [...]. Similarly, examples of bodily beauty can vary tremendously while beauty in all cases consists of the balance or proportion of the limbs and colouring suited to that type. If the Bible says that Christ was beautiful we are not entitled to understand that he had yellow hair.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> See A. D. Hope: ‘The Esthetic Theory of James Joyce,’ in: T. Connolly (ed.): *Joyce’s Portrait: Criticisms and Critiques*, London: Peter Owen, 1962: 190f.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*: 193 (emphasis added).

If the relation of form and matter can be compared to that between health and humours, then there is something visible about health that can be apprehended. The doctor, however, does not always see the same attribute of health in every person. There is also a particular knowledge the doctor has about what to look for in different people. The apprehension of beauty is similar. As Joyce writes in his notebook (with the help of Thomas), “art is the human disposition of sensible or intelligible matter for an esthetic end.”<sup>10</sup> Since humans are disposed differently based on the fact that they see different objects as beautiful, good, or true, the basis of this difference among humans may be argued as a balance or proportion between form and matter, as will be shown in the next two sections of this paper.<sup>11</sup>

## 2. *BEAUTY: A QUESTION OF FORM? THOMAS AQUINAS ON INTEGRITAS, PROPORATIO, AND CLARITAS*

*The central feature in the notion [of beauty] is being, understood as actual existence, which in our experience is always limited and determined by a definite form. Beauty is the actuality of being and form. It is this actuality that accounts for the wholeness, proportion, and radiance that are the objective basis of beauty in things. But by itself the actuality of being does not give us the complete concept of beauty. For this there must be added the relation to a subject who both apprehends the thing and delights in the apprehension of it.*<sup>12</sup>

The relation of beauty and the good, touched upon through the lens of Joyce in the last section, was first placed together by Plato and the Neoplatonists. Thomas, however, responded to the Pseudo-Dionysius in relation to goodness and beauty in the following way:

Beauty and goodness in a thing are identical fundamentally; for they are based upon the same thing, namely, the form; and consequently goodness

<sup>10</sup> *The Critical Writings of James Joyce, op.cit.* : 145.

<sup>11</sup> A. D. Hope continues in his article, “The distinction between sensible and intelligible matter here is that of Aquinas between the objects of sensory and intellectual apprehension. The intellect deals with the formal and universal. One might ask whether Joyce means that a purely intellectual or abstract art is possible as opposed to those which deal with sensibles and particulars. The answer is: no!” (p. 193). No artist should believe it is possible to create an absolutely abstract art without sensible material.

<sup>12</sup> A. Maurer: *About Beauty, op.cit.* : 16f. Cf. also J. J. Kockelmans: *The Metaphysics of Aquinas: A Systematic Presentation*, Leuven: Bibliotheek van de Faculteit Godgeleerdheid, 2001 : 128.

is praised as beauty. But they differ logically, for goodness properly relates to the appetite (goodness being what all things desire); and therefore it has the aspect of an end (the appetite being a kind of movement towards a thing). On the other hand, beauty relates to the cognitive faculty; for beautiful things are those which please when seen. Hence beauty consists in due proportion; for the senses delight in things duly proportioned, as in what is after their own kind — because even sense is a sort of reason, just as is every cognitive faculty. Now, since knowledge is by assimilation, and similarity relates to form, beauty properly belongs to the nature of a formal cause.<sup>13</sup>

If “beauty and goodness in a thing are identical fundamentally” — they are “fused intimately in the infinite” in the words of M. De Wulf<sup>14</sup> — according to Thomas, how is it that they are separated by means of a logical difference? This is what is at stake in modernity. Thomas retains something of the Neoplatonist view here regarding the formal nature of beauty and the good. What is then this logical distinction between beauty and goodness that differentiates Thomas from the Neoplatonists? When Thomas writes, “Beauty relates to the cognitive faculty,” he certainly seems to have the Neoplatonists in mind, and since this claim does not explicitly contradict Aristotle, there is no reason for Aquinas to disagree with a rationalist tradition of beauty. However, he says further, “for beautiful things are those which please when seen.” Is this a further instantiation of Neoplatonism as the sight being the closest sense to the intellect, or is it breaking with the Neoplatonists and pointing to later empirical turns in modernity?

This may be an unfair question to pose to Thomas in light of modernity. What is fair is that rationally speaking, there appears to be at least three differences between beauty and the good: (1) they have different intellectual natures; (2) they have different causes; (3) they are perceived

<sup>13</sup> Aquinas: *Summa theol.*, Ia, q. 5, art. 4, ad. 1: “Ad primum ergo dicendum quod pulchrum et bonum in subiecto quidem sunt idem, quia super eandem rem fundantur, scilicet super formam: et propter hoc, bonum laudatur ut pulchrum. Sed ratione differunt. Nam bonum proprie respicit appetitum: est enim bonum quod omnia appetunt. Et ideo habet rationem finis: nam appetitus est quasi quidam motus ad rem. Pulchrum autem respicit vim cognoscitivam: pulchra enim dicuntur quae visa placent. Unde pulchrum in debita proportione consistit: quia sensus delectatur in rebus debite proportionatis, sicut in sibi similibus; nam et sensus ratio quaedam est, et omnis virtus cognoscitiva. Et quia cognitio fit per assimilationem, similitudo autem respicit formam, pulchrum proprie pertinet ad rationem causae formalis.” Cf. also W. T. Noon: *Joyce and Aquinas, op.cit.* : 21, where he claims that, “St. Thomas introduced a really new dimension into “aesthetic” discussion by his insistence that the experience of beauty must be as much considered in its psychological as in its ontological aspects.”

<sup>14</sup> See M. De Wulf: ‘Les théories esthétiques propres à Saint Thomas’, *op.cit.* : 193.

differently.<sup>15</sup> Although these first two differences are of great logical and rational interest, it is the third of these that bridges form and matter and proves itself the most difficult: how does Thomas describe the *perception* of beauty in relation to the good? This question regarding the perception of beauty was one of Joyce's central issues of contention with Thomas. Perception by itself cannot support a separation of the beautiful and the good. However, this contention between Joyce and Aquinas must be put aside in order to first understand Aquinas's form of beauty. This can best be shown by means of a different context of Thomas's *Summa Theologiae*. Whereas the quotation above was situated in the question, "Of Goodness in General," beauty is next discussed within the discussion of the Trinity in a question, "Of the Persons in Relation to the Essence." The importance of the Trinity in relation to the three formal characteristics of beauty are best expressed in the following:

[W]hereby we consider God absolutely in His being [. . .] according to which *eternity* is appropriated to the Father, *species* to the Son, *use* to the Holy Ghost. For *eternity* as meaning *a being* without a principle, has a likeness to the property of the Father, Who is a *principle without a principle*. Species or beauty has a likeness to the property of the Son. For beauty includes three conditions, *integrity* or *perfection*, since those things which are impaired are by the very fact ugly; due *proportion* or *harmony*; and lastly, *brightness*, or *clarity*, whence things are called beautiful which have a bright color [. . .]<sup>16</sup>

The three conditions for beauty are not meant to be separated from the Trinity, nor are they stages of apprehension as Joyce would interpret them to be in his novel *Portrait*.<sup>17</sup> For Thomas, each condition should be known in one single simple act, that is, in any act of the perception

<sup>15</sup> For the first two of these, see A. D. Hope: "The Esthetic Theory of James Joyce", *op.cit.*: 185, where he writes, "The beautiful is distinguishable from other kinds of the good in several ways. The most important of these are: (a) the specifically intellectual nature of the beautiful, whereas St. Thomas uses "the good" to describe the end of *any* activity; (b) the fact that the beautiful has the character rather of a formal than of a final cause. The good is defined simply as that by which an appetite is appeased. And everything that acts does so because it has an appetite. But it pertains to the nature of the beautiful that the appetite in question is appeased by the mere sight or contemplation of its object."

<sup>16</sup> See *Summa theol.*, I, q. 39, art. 8: "Species autem, sive pulchritudo, habet similitudinem cum propriis Filiis. Nam ad pulchritudinem tria requiruntur. Primo quidem, *integritas* sive *perfectio*: quae enim diminuta sunt, hoc ipso turpia sunt. Et debita *proportio* sive *consonantia*. Et iterum *claritas*: unde quae habent colorem nitidum, pulchra esse dicuntur" (emphases added).

<sup>17</sup> This interpretation of Joyce's will be seen in greater detail in section 3 of this paper.

of the beautiful. After defining each of these three central formal aspects or conditions of beauty in light of modernity, the comparison of Thomas and Joyce will be reviewed in section 3.

*a. Integritas sive perfectio (i.e., integrity, completeness, wholeness or perfection)*

There are several interpretations of what Thomas meant by *integritas* in relation to beauty. Armand Maurer lists the first meaning of this term as “existential,” by which he means the following: “[integrity] expresses the primal perfection of a thing, which is found in its existence (*esse*). A thing is integral or whole that lacks nothing, taking into account the sort of thing it is: it exists perfectly or completely.”<sup>18</sup> As the only place where Thomas utilises this term (*integritas*) in relation to beauty, it is meant as a “type of proportion” and is thus a criterion of the beautiful object that it is not impaired; otherwise, if it were impaired, the object would be ugly.<sup>19</sup> In other places, Thomas mentions only two criteria, but for the Son in particular, perfection and integrity are necessary, as when he writes that the “Son has in Himself truly and perfectly the nature of the Father.”<sup>20</sup> This element was not present in the Neoplatonists, possibly due to the fact that they were not discussing the Son in particular in their references to beauty. Whereas the Pseudo-Dionysius in particular mentioned proportion and clarity, the other two elements necessary for beauty, he does not use integrity or perfection. The modern difficulty with applying this integrity to any man-made object or to the human being as such is that someone who is weak or imperfect cannot be beautiful. A child born without a limb is cursed to ugliness because she will never be “complete.”<sup>21</sup> According to one scholar, however, *perfectio* “binds the beautiful to the good as good. The beautiful pleases because it is perfect.”<sup>22</sup> It is interesting nevertheless that Joyce takes *integritas* to something being apprehended as *one* thing.<sup>23</sup> This interpre-

<sup>18</sup> A. Maurer: *About Beauty*, *op.cit.*: 12. In addition, he lists the second sense of integrity as being “perfect in its operation” and summarises, “Wholeness, in short, demands perfection in being and action.”

<sup>19</sup> See U. Eco: *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, *op.cit.*: 99–102.

<sup>20</sup> See *Summa theol.*, I, q. 39, art. 8.

<sup>21</sup> For a critique of perfection as the cause of beauty in early modern philosophy, see for example, E. Burke: *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. A. Phillips, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990: part three, section IX, p. 100.

<sup>22</sup> See J. A. Aertsen: ‘Beauty in the Middle Ages’, *op.cit.*: 91.

<sup>23</sup> See section 3 of this paper where Joyce’s view of *integritas* will be further discussed.

tation, although consistent with Thomas's thinking in general, misses the further ontological integrity that presupposes bodily perfection as good. However, in light of the legless or handicapped child, Aquinas's definition of *integritas sive perfectio* might be expressed in the following way: that (object) which has wholeness or integrity insofar that it is not ugly because of its lack of wholeness. This definition of *integritas* (in light of modernity) does not define perfection in terms of bodily perfection but rather by means of ontological completeness which is, for the most part, an abstract intellectual definition of beauty.

*b. Proportio sive consonantia (i.e., proportion, harmony or consonance)*

Proportion, on the other hand, is a much older concept that may be traced back to the Pre-Socratics (such as Pythagoras but it also appears in the work of Cicero, Augustine, etc.). Although a great deal could be said regarding proportion, this paper must restrict itself to a basic ontological proportion that might be expressed as consistent with *consonantia*.<sup>24</sup> There are at least two ways of looking at proportion: the qualitative and the quantitative (or mathematical). In addition to proportion as a basis of analogy, which is one of the richest interpretations available and an overarching Thomistic theme, the relation of form and matter is of particular interest to Joyce. Joyce speaks very little of mathematics in his discussion of *consonantia*, whereas he is interested in an ontological proportion. Thomas writes, "form and matter must always be mutually proportioned and, as it were, naturally adapted, because the proper act is produced in its proper matter."<sup>25</sup> The importance of the act—in this instant, the moment of apprehension of a beautiful object—lies in its ability to "recognise" a relation of form and matter. This form and matter is consonant with the soul and the body of an intelligent creature. As Aristotle had expressed in his *De anima*, "Thus soul is the first actuality of a physical body potentially having life" (412a28).<sup>26</sup> This is an important distinction between a Neoplaton-

<sup>24</sup> For a discussion of different facets of proportion in Thomas, see U. Eco: *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, *op.cit.* : 82–98.

<sup>25</sup> See Thomas Aquinas: *Summa contra Gentiles*, II, 80–81, 8: "Formam igitur et materiam semper oportet esse ad invicem proportionata et quasi naturaliter coaptata: quia proprius actus in propria materia fit." Cf. also U. Eco: *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, *op.cit.* : 83.

<sup>26</sup> See Thomas Aquinas: *A Commentary on Aristotle's De anima*, trans. R. Pasnau, London: Yale University Press, 1999: 117f, where Aristotle writes further, "So if we must identify something common in every soul, it will be the first actuality of a physical body

ist such as Pseudo-Dionysius and Thomas; namely, Thomas extracts this “equilibrium” of form and matter from Aristotle. Simply speaking, *proportio* refers particularly to the proportion of form and the potentiality of matter. Form and matter work similarly to the soul and the body in that there must be a proportionate ontological relation (*habitudō*) or analogy between the two: it is part of the rational structure of form to relate to matter.<sup>27</sup> Although this relationship can also be quantitative, in terms of harmony or music, it is helpful to see that even in some forms of atonal music, there is still the basic ontological proportion of form (i.e., the musical notes) and matter (i.e., the physical instruments that play/vibrate these notes). In a contemporary application, one might think of Shostakovich’s Fourth Symphony here, as a piece that might be considered dissonant but nevertheless beautiful. The idea of proportion thus overcomes consonance in its traditional sense. In effect, a definition of *proportio* in light of modernity should include an opening for dissonant musical harmonies (different from the Neoplatonic view of music) and enable one to hear the beauty of a dissonant chord. Like *integritas*, which ontologically considers a legless child “whole,” *proportio* refers to an ontological relation that may be applied to contemporary forms of art insofar that form requires some proportionate relationship to matter in the same way that a soul is connected to a body (i.e., not necessarily harmoniously).

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having organs. Thus we need not ask whether soul and body are one—just as we do not [ask about] wax and its shape or in general [about] the matter of any given thing and that of which it is the matter. For although one and existing are spoken of it more than one way, it is actuality that is properly [spoken of in this way]” (412b4–9). Cf. also Thomas Aquinas: *On being and essence*, trans. A. Maurer, Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1968, where he writes in ch. III, “the universality of [...] form is not due to the being it has in the intellect but to its relation to things as their likeness. In the same way, if there were a material statue representing many men, the image or likeness of the statue would have its own individual being as it existed in this determinate matter [...]” (pp. 48f).

<sup>27</sup> See *ibid.*: 120, where Thomas, commentating on Aristotle, writes, “The difference, then, between matter and form is that matter is being in potentiality, whereas form is entelechy—i.e., the actuality through which matter is actualized. Hence the composite is a being in actuality.” Cf. also U. Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, p. 84, who describes the proportion in the following way, “[The *Summa contra Gentiles*] confirms in the most unequivocal way that proportion, in the sense of an aesthetico-ontological regulative principle, refers to a complete substance. It pertains to form understood as an organism and is not a property of *form* as act [...]. It is form which produces order and design in things. But *form* enters into several relationships of such a kind that it is subsumed into a larger whole. One of these is, precisely, the relation of suitability which binds matter to it.”

*c. Claritas (i.e., symmetry, radiance, or splendour)*

Although the term *claritas* appears in the Pseudo-Dionysius, Grosse-teste, and other mediaeval authors, Albertus Magnus certainly had the most direct influence on Thomas's conception of *claritas*, which may be translated as resplendence, clarity, symmetry, or radiance. Eco describes Albertus's ontological and objectivist view in the following way, "Resplendence is not the expressiveness of an object with respect to someone or something else. It is, rather, a clarity which belongs to the order which the object possesses; it can be identified as the property through which being manifests itself."<sup>28</sup> Resplendence was the essence of beauty for Albertus, and the extent to which Thomas agrees with this is at issue in Eco's interpretation. According to Eco, clarity or resplendence cannot merely be a formal ontological relation. Clarity must break with Albertus's Neoplatonic view since the form *must* include the material, or what modern philosophy will later call the "secondary qualities" of an object. This can be seen when Eco writes the following,

*Claritas* is explained to be physical color only whenever the term is being used in this precise sense [. . .]. Isidore of Seville [for example] stated that the soul presided over the mixing of humours and the composition of blood. It thus was the cause of skin color, which became in turn an external manifestation of an internal physiological balance. Consequently, external beauty or *suavitas coloris* derived from the soul, which is the substantial form of the body. The surface *claritas* of color became a sign and expression of a principle of organization, and so "resplendence of form" referred to something physical.<sup>29</sup>

In this way, the mixing of humours relates to health in an analogous way to the material external surface of an object relating to the rational interior substance of the object. Contemporary abstract expressionist Barnett Newman might be an apt example of someone who embodied abstract ideas through colour. His paintings, *Adam*, *Joshua*, *Anna's Light*, or *Cathedral* exemplify the clarity of matter in contemporary art, namely, the spiritual coextensive with the physical.<sup>30</sup> This last component of beauty for Thomas, *claritas*, is defined in the passage of the

<sup>28</sup> *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas, op.cit.* : 114.

<sup>29</sup> *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas, op.cit.* : 117. See also his footnote on pp. 252f, where he relates and critiques the views of M. de Wulf, J. Maritain, E. de Bruyne, and James Joyce on the issue of *claritas*.

<sup>30</sup> See D. Anfam, *Abstract Expressionism*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1990, esp. ch. 6, for a discussion of Newman and other abstract expressionists. Cf. also P. de Bolla, *Art Matters*, London: Harvard University Press, 2001 : ch. 2.

*Summa* quoted earlier as that which “things are called beautiful which have a bright colour.” Some of the magnificent paintings of Newman are “bright colours” personified. This may be the simplest and most clear way of perceiving beauty—i.e., by means of a visual painting—or what Joyce writes in *Stephen Hero*, “*claritas is quidditas*.”

### 3. BEAUTY: A QUESTION OF MATTER? JUDGING JOYCE'S THOMISM

After introducing the relation of Joyce on Thomas in the first section of this paper, followed by a formal ontological interpretation of Thomas's three prerequisites of beauty in the second section, this third section will now step back and attempt to critique Joyce's so-called Thomism. In other words, if Thomas were alive today to judge Joyce's art and modern art in general, what would he say? This is not to say that he would not read Joyce, or that today we should not look at contemporary art because of its lacks; rather, it is to say that we should not do so uncritically. Joyce certainly was a master of form and most believe of matter as well. Each of his novels embodies a different goal and purpose, if not completely different styles. The fifth chapter of *Portrait*, published in 1916, which includes Joyce's most extensive discussion of Thomism and aesthetics, will expand upon the discussion that has already been raised in the first two sections of this paper.

“His mind, when wearied of its search for the essence of beauty amid the spectral words of Aristotle and Aquinas”<sup>31</sup>—thus begins the anonymous narrator of *Portrait* who questions, somehow benignly yet stoically, Stephen's intellectual pursuits. Stephen no longer wishes for beauty to overwhelm him like some immediate sound, sight, taste, or epiphany;<sup>32</sup> rather, he wants to be able to stand back and intellectually ponder it from a distance. This is precisely the problem of beauty for Stephen in the *Portrait*. If the object overwhelms one in its sense-like immediacy, then one is left vulnerable to passions. But if one is indifferent, then one never notices the beauty of anything, like the old

<sup>31</sup> J. Joyce: *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, London: Penguin, 1992: 190.

<sup>32</sup> See H. Cixous, *The Exile of James Joyce*, trans. S. A. J. Purcell, London: John Calder, 1976: 599, where she writes, “The primary work of the young Joyce was to meditate upon and to evolve the principles of an aesthetic based on Aristotle and Saint Thomas, and to note down in exercise-books or on scraps of paper instants of reality as they were seized by hearing, sight, or taste, or caught in a word, a phrase, or several phrases. These momentary snapshots [...] he called ‘epiphanies.’”

priest in the following quotation: “Nay, his very soul had waxed old in that service without growing towards light and beauty or spreading abroad a sweet odour of her sanctity.”<sup>33</sup> The priest, who “waxes” old in “lowly service of the Lord,” does not have command of himself. No, he must serve another, “a mortified will no more responsive to the thrill of its obedience than was to the thrill of love [..].” This is the setting in which Stephen’s conversation about beauty is raised. Again, sense perception is not separate from the will or intellect. The beautiful object meets the subject by means of the will. As a response to the old priest who becomes indifferent to beauty, Stephen and the dean have the following conversation:

“You are an artist, are you not, Mr Dedalus?” said the dean, glancing up and blinking his pale eyes. “The object of the artist is the creation of the beautiful. What the beautiful is is another question [..]. Can you solve that question now?” he asked.

“Aquinas,” answered Stephen, “says *Pulcra sunt quae visa placent.*”

“This fire before us,” said the dean, “will be pleasing to the eye. Will it therefore be beautiful?”

“In so far as it is apprehended by the sight, which I suppose means here esthetic intellection, it will be beautiful. But Aquinas also says *Bonum est in quod tendit appetitus.* In so far as it satisfies the animal craving for warmth fire is a good. In hell however it is an evil.”<sup>34</sup>

Whereas in Joyce’s notebook of 1904, the problems of Thomist aesthetics were merely noted, Stephen’s view (and possibly Joyce’s) has evolved into an almost full-blown aesthetics. However, there are now many narrative difficulties to this passage. First of all, the dean assumes that the artist has an object, and that object is “the creation of the beautiful.” This fact is no longer self-evident and may have been considered “old-fashioned” even in Joyce’s time. The artist need not intend to create something beautiful. Second, the relation between sight, “esthetic intellection,” and “animal craving” is equally not self-evident. We are missing Thomas’s greater whole: God, happiness, the beatific vision, etc. These elements of Thomist “aesthetics,” according to Stephen, are divorced from the theology that Thomas would have emphasised. Thirdly, the evolution from Joyce’s Notebook of 1904 that was then “revised and placed in Stephen Dedalus” mouth [..] during the spring of 1905 “consolidates” and “amplifies” a materialisation from spiritual

<sup>33</sup> *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, op.cit.* : 200.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* : 200f.

to physical “seeing”.<sup>35</sup> When Stephen says to the dean, “which I suppose means here esthetic intellection,” he is meaning that this is what Thomas means but not what he (Stephen) means when he speaks of Thomas. Thus, the “spiritual eye” that is mentioned in 1905 becomes a physical eye in the publication of *Portrait* in 1916.<sup>36</sup>

What would Thomas say to this? If he were able to speak of the matter of reflecting on aesthetics, or on creating itself, it seems that he would certainly have recognised a darker side of human acts. That is, humans cannot become gods and create *ex nihilo*. Humans are only capable of representing beauty that is already there in the created world. This is true for the Neoplatonic tradition as well as for Thomas. Joyce believed himself, in some ways, to perform a god-like work of creating. This is certainly a darker Nietzschean view of looking at contemporary forms of art, perhaps even most of the art since the Renaissance; that is, man has attempted to replace God by means of creating out of oneself.<sup>37</sup> Thomas would have clearly been able to recognise the power behind an artwork that many art lovers now cannot, and what Joyce has done through his character of Dedalus is to make the artist an “impersonal or invisible artist-God.”

The tension between Stephen’s artist as impersonal creator and the Thomist artist as recognising the theological and metaphysical relations between beautiful matter and (the form of) beauty is crucial for attempting to uncover any kind of Thomist aesthetics. This can be seen further in Joyce’s text where the dean says to Stephen, “These questions are very profound, Mr Dedalus [. . .]. It is like looking down from the cliffs of Moher into the depths. Many go down into the depths and never come up.” Stephen’s response to such “speculation” is the following: “For my purpose I can work at present by the light of one or two ideas of Aristotle and Aquinas [. . .]. I need them only for my own use and guidance until I have done something for myself by their

<sup>35</sup> See I. Crump: ‘Refining himself out of existence: the evolution of Joyce’s aesthetic theory and the drafts of *A Portrait*’, in: V. J. Cheng and T. Martin (eds.): *Joyce in context*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992: 223. Cf. also *Joyce and Aquinas, op.cit.*: ch. 2.

<sup>36</sup> For the movement from spirit (or soul) to matter in the whole of Joyce’s *oeuvre*, see the dissertation of the Hungarian Joyce scholar T. Mecsnóber: *The “Happy Fault” of Signs: Linguistic Self-Reflection in Gerard Manley Hopkins and James Joyce*, Budapest: Eötvös Loránd University, 2000: esp. chs. 3–4.

<sup>37</sup> For the relation of Nietzsche to Joyce and Aquinas, see T. S. Hibbs: “Portraits of the Artist: Joyce, Nietzsche, and Aquinas”, in: A. Ramos (ed.): *Beauty, Art, and the Polis*, Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2000: 117–137.

light.”<sup>38</sup> Stephen’s use and abuse of Aristotle and Thomas here, that is, his using them only insofar as they are of interest to him, is one of the determining elements of modernity. This light of which Stephen speaks is recognised by Stephen as a kind of truth. Joyce, immersing himself in Aristotle and Aquinas, recognised the canonical status of the latter philosopher/theologian. When Joyce places these words into the mouth of Stephen, he is giving a nod to the Catholic Church while using their canon and wisdom for his own purposes. The difference is one of “formal objects” as William T. Noon pointed out.<sup>39</sup> Whereas Thomas recognised God to be the formal object of all truth, oneness, and the good, Stephen collapses the formal and material object into one and the same matter. Instead of beauty being seen as an incarnation of the Son, expressed in the setting of Thomas’s explication on beauty (i.e., regarding the Trinity), beauty is now an incarnation into matter by a material artist. As Noon writes, “To the traditional (ancient and medieval) treatment, which located beauty almost exclusively *in things* or in transcendental ideas underlying *things* (or beauty in its ontological, objective aspect), St. Thomas [...] by the time he wrote his great *Summa Theologiae*, added a decisively new coordinate of his own, beauty as it exists in the human mind (beauty in its psychological, subjective role).”<sup>40</sup> Joyce, as we have seen, absolutised this subjectivity through his character Stephen who appropriates both the ontological and psychological categories of the aesthetic “for [his] own use.”<sup>41</sup>

Furthermore, how does Joyce use the ontological formal categories mentioned above (*integritas*, *proportio*, and *claritas*)? After discussing and rejecting religion and nationality in chapter five of *Portrait*, Stephen returns to his aesthetic thoughts. This time, instead of having a conversation with the dean, he is speaking with a more humorous friend, Lynch:

“Art,” said Stephen, “is the human disposition of sensible or intelligible matter for an esthetic end” [...]

Lynch made a grimace at the raw grey sky and said:

“If I am to listen to your esthetic philosophy give me at least another cigarette. I don’t care about it” [...]

<sup>38</sup> *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *op.cit.*: 202.

<sup>39</sup> See *Joyce and Aquinas*, *op.cit.*: 20.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*: 21.

<sup>41</sup> One way to put it might be that in modernity it is difficult to understand truth (or beauty) as conformity of the mind (or the senses) to the thing known (or perceived). Thanks to F. C. Bauerschmidt for pointing this out.

“These relations of the sensible, visible to you through one form and to me through another, must be therefore the necessary qualities of beauty. Now, we must return to our old friend saint Thomas for another penny-worth of wisdom.”

Lynch laughed.

“It amuses me vastly,” he said, “to hear you quoting him time after time like a jolly round friar. Are you laughing in your sleeve?” [..]

“To finish what I was saying about beauty,” said Stephen, “the most satisfying relations of the sensible must therefore correspond to the necessary phases of artistic apprehension. Find these and you find the qualities of universal beauty. Aquinas says [..] I translate it: *Three things are needed for beauty, wholeness, harmony and radiance*. Do these correspond to the phases of apprehension? Are you following?”<sup>42</sup>

Although this is an abridgement of the entire lengthy conversation, Stephen nevertheless uses Thomas (as he admits himself) in order to develop his own aesthetic theory. This passage articulates Stephen’s collapse of the ontological categories of “wholeness, harmony, and radiance” into necessary “phases of artistic apprehension.” In other words, the ontological becomes psychological. Since Stephen places each category into different times of the subject’s apprehension of an object, they are no longer categories *of the object*. This is clearly a break with the mediaeval tradition as a whole, both Neoplatonic and Thomist.

In what Stephen calls the “first phase of apprehension” (i.e., wholeness or *integritas*), “[w]hat is audible is presented in time, what is visible is presented in space. But, temporal or spatial, the esthetic image is first luminously apprehended as selfbounded and selfcontained upon the immeasurable background of space or time which is not it. You apprehend it as *one* thing. You see it as one whole. You apprehend its wholeness. That is *integritas*.”<sup>43</sup> This is precisely the “magic” of Stephen Dedalus’s aesthetic theory: take the formerly ontological relation of *integritas* and give a modernist spin on it (à la Nietzsche) and out comes the sensible integral object (i.e., a basket). Thomas did not intend the wholeness to be one of *absolute recognition* on the part of the subject. He meant for the object to be integral or whole in itself. But how would the subject *know* that the object is whole? This is, of course, *the question of modernity*, and the question that Stephen poses to Lynch. But Lynch just laughs, wishing he could smoke another cigarette. Lynch is bored with such theorising, since he is not the serious dean mentioned

<sup>42</sup> *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *op.cit.* : 224–229.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* : 230.

earlier in the *Portrait* who has lost “command of himself.” No, Lynch is the common man on the street that seems to care nothing for the “transcendental” character of beauty. Thus, Stephen loses on two accounts: first, by means of the priest who says that Stephen is digging a hole from which he cannot escape; second, by means of Lynch, who couldn’t give a damn about the abstract nature of Stephen’s aesthetics. The material subjectivisation of Thomist aesthetics through the mind and eyes of Stephen burns out like a falling star, waiting to be appropriated by yet another writer who might “need [him] for his own use and guidance until [they] have done something for [themselves] by their [own] light.”

#### 4. *BEAUTY: A RENEWAL?*

As we have seen, a good starting point for the possibility of a renewal of the question of beauty is found in the works of the young Joyce. Joyce, a modern novelist *extraordinaire*, raised the question of the meaning of beauty in light of modernity. Unable to return to the Middle Ages, the contemporary art lover who is interested in the metaphysical possibilities of abstract art need not give up in despair over the lack of quality in abstract or non-representational art forms. Joyce saw the richness of Thomas’s writings on beauty that may then be applied to contemporary reflections on art, whether that art be literature, painting, film, music, architecture, sculpture, or another medium. The separation of beauty and the good is an enterprise which moderns have already long accomplished. But Joyce’s question for modernity, summarised as follows, is nevertheless relevant: *are aesthetics and ethics entirely autonomous of each other since they are perceived differently?* What continues to be unique to aesthetics is that most questions revolve around both the *form and matter* of perception. This is not as true for ethics although even the manner—the manner in which humans learn, desire, and choose what is, in fact, beautiful or good—of perception in aesthetics must still relate to ethical dimensions. The beautiful and the good cannot be entirely divorced in modernity as much as modernity believes they always already are. Nevertheless, there are ways of seeing a beautiful object as logically distinguished from the good that further deepens the beauty of that object.

The treatise mentioned in the quote at the beginning of this paper, regarding the three formal requirements of beauty, is still yet to be written. Each of the three requisites of beauty, conjecturally speaking,

allows for its own schools and interpretations of beauty. The first requisite, integrity, expresses the most transcendental (i.e., Neoplatonic) abstract perfection of beauty, that which Joyce calls *oneness*. The second requisite of beauty, proportion, is best understood in regards to the relation of form and matter or soul and body in Aristotle and Aquinas. However, in order to tap into the deeper meaning of proportion, one must also look at the notion of analogy. The third requisite of beauty, clarity, should be expressed by means of Joyce's and Eco's interpretations of the modern problem of psychological perception. Clarity is best exemplified through a "secondary quality" such as colour. Material colours and lines symbolise something universal in the modern movement of abstract expressionism. The painting itself is apprehended and becomes *clear* by means of the resplendence and radiance of the physical colour. The physicality of the object thus becomes stressed. Whereas the mediaevals tended to over-emphasise the importance of form as integrity or perfection, the moderns tend to over-emphasise the materiality of colour or clarity (i.e., in a canvas). Is it then possible for all three requisites to be understood and seen in contemporary art?

Finally, this paper tried to show that Stephen's misunderstanding (or psychologistic reading) of Thomas demonstrates an overtly subjectivist turn in contemporary thinking. This subjectivist turn is reacted against both by Phenomenology's "to the things themselves" and the mediaevalist's historical revival. Central to both phenomenology and the mediaeval renewal is an ontological level of beauty that may be re-appropriated in contemporary art forms. One reason Lynch laughs at Stephen may be that for Lynch, the subject does not define the object's beauty. The beautiful object may be beautiful without a subject. What then is fundamentally refreshing about Thomist aesthetics in light of contemporary art is that all three formal aspects of beauty can be re-evaluated in their metaphysical, historical, and psychological setting. That is, a "newer" understanding of the Neoplatonists, of the "in between" understanding and sense of Thomas and Aristotle, and of the immediate sense-based apprehension of the beautiful object (*à la* Joyce and Eco) all provide clear categories of meaning for a renewal of beauty. These three historical *topoi* are related to Stephen's "modern" discussion with Lynch regarding the three phases of artistic apprehension. This discussion in chapter five of *Portrait* may be listened to by us, if we are interested in such "modern" questions, without our being thrown into the depths of despair (like the Priest who waxes old) or bored to tears (like Lynch). By means of these categories, integrity, proportion,

and clarity, it is evident that throughout history there has been a qualitative desire on the part of the human towards that which is beautiful. If this desire is in fact good and true in itself, then humans recognise the good in all recognitive apprehensive acts of the beautiful, even if the object is a legless human child, a dissonant musical composition, or an abstract expressionist painting.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Many thanks to the following scholars for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper and providing it with any strengths that it contains: Frederick Bauerschmidt, Constance Blackwell, and Tristan Dagrón. I also wish to thank Gergely Bakos for his friendship and encouragement, as well as P. R. Blum for his organising an excellent conference in such an architecturally modern “Thomist” location as Piliscsaba.