

**John G. Trapani, Jr.**

*Poetry, Beauty, and Contemplation: The Complete Aesthetics of Jacques Maritain.*

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Given Jacques Maritain's enormous influence on a host of twentieth-century artists, writers, and musicians, this synthesis of his aesthetics is long overdue. The delay is understandable, however, when one considers the daunting task of sifting through the French neo-Thomist's dispersed writings on art and beauty, anchoring them in his metaphysics and epistemology, and arranging them into some kind of order. Trapani, thankfully, has managed to do just this.

He opens the book with a biographical sketch and introduction to Maritain's metaphysics and epistemology. He explains that although Maritain admired Henri Bergson's intuitionism, Maritain eventually deemed Bergson's notion of 'concept' incompatible with the Catholic faith he embraced in 1906. His reading of Thomas Aquinas reconfirmed his criticism of Bergson. The intellect, according to Aquinas, is an immaterial knowing power operating together with the senses and endowed with the capacity to know being. Only against this background of Aristotelian-Thomistic epistemology, Trapani argues, can we understand Maritain's ingenious reformulation of intuitional, nonconceptual knowledge as the basis for 'Poetry' and 'Poetic Knowledge.' Trapani traces the evolution of these terms throughout Maritain's career, distilling the transcendent, ontological priority of the former over the latter both in artistic production and in the perception of beauty.

'Poetry,' writes Maritain, is the 'intercommunication between the inner being of things and the inner being of the human Self' (72). It 'implies an essential requirement of totality or integrity' (83). Whereas in his earlier writings Poetic Knowledge meant roughly the same thing, it later came to refer to the 'know how' of artistic making. Trapani spends a large portion of the book teasing out the distinction between artistic production and the perception of beauty both from a historical and a theoretical point of view. One of his principal aims is to elaborate how it is possible for one to take pleasure in the beauty of an artifact he or she has not made. Trapani carries out a fine exegesis of all three editions (1920, 1927, and 1935) of *Art and Scholasticism* and ultimately concludes that although Poetic Knowledge is the exclusive possession of the artist, the 'audience,' according to Maritain, may 'participate' in it through contemplation. Like Poetic Knowledge, the 'Poetry' common to artist and audience is an intuitive, nonconceptual, affective, connatural form of knowledge ordered to joy and delight.

The book's opening chapters are crucial to understanding how this is possible. To understand why our delight in the beautiful pertains to the 'heart,' we must first grasp how the intellect and the will cooperate in knowledge and desire. To grasp Maritain's analogies between poetry and grace and natural and supernatural contemplation, we must first appreciate the mutual fecundity of his philosophy and Christian faith. To grasp the beautiful as a special kind of good, we must first study the metaphysics of the transcendentals: being, one, good, truth, etc. With regard to the 'heart,' only a sound epistemology will lend credibility to the idea of 'spiritualized

emotion' as 'form' instead of mere sentimentality. With regard to the analogy between poetry and grace, only a robust notion of connaturality will allow us to see that Poetry disposes the artist to produce a suitable object in the way grace disposes the moral agent to act virtuously.

Things are a bit more complicated when it comes to the transcendentals. Thomists have long debated whether the beautiful should be included among them. Trapani asserts that 'the distinguishing factor that is present in the logical notion of beauty is not the concomitant pleasure given in its apprehension but rather in its relation to the natural desire of the intellect; in this way, the beautiful is a special kind of good' (130). At the same time, Trapani, quoting Maritain, writes that 'just as the beautiful itself is a transcendental and hence of an analogous order, so too is the "property of causing joy, of giving pleasure, implicit in the notion of the beautiful itself"' (131). Trapani walks a fine line between denying that pleasure is the 'distinguishing factor' of beauty and holding with Maritain that pleasure is nonetheless 'implicit' in the very notion of the beautiful. Some interpret Maritain to mean that it is precisely the kind of pleasure that accompanies the perception of beauty that connects it to the intellect and distinguishes it as a special kind of good. Perhaps Trapani also reads Maritain in his way, but it is not clear from the text. This is an important point since the issue of how pleasure relates to the beautiful is at the core of what it means to 'participate' in Poetic Knowledge, insofar as this participation is the audience's participation in the good sought and achieved by the artist.

By raising this and other issues central to Maritain's aesthetics, Trapani has done a tremendous service to Maritain scholarship. He, like Maritain, emphasizes that beauty needs to be experienced before one can have a theory of it. He underscores Maritain's eagerness to remove sentimentality from art and replace it with genuine sentiment. Beauty is a matter of the 'heart,' where heart refers to the seat of desire lying at the intersection of intellect and will. By contributing to aesthetics, Maritain also galvanizes the case against Cartesian dualism by showing that the lower human powers are permeated by the higher intellectual powers, thus allowing for rational emotion and the interplay of the universal and particular that is the hallmark of the beautiful. The 'Self,' Maritain insists, 'becomes' other things through knowledge, just as the artist can 'put himself' into what he makes. The book includes a valuable diagram of Maritain's uses of intuition and connaturality to assist us in understanding how this is possible.

Trapani has set the stage for a more fruitful dialogue between Maritain and other schools of aesthetics. Indeed, the next step is to put Maritain in conversation with thinkers such as Roger Scruton, Jenefer Robison, Jerrold Levinson, Berys Gaut, Nick Zangwill, and others who have reflected deeply on the connection between beauty, goodness, happiness, and value, just as Maritain did.

**Daniel B. Gallagher**  
Pontifical Gregorian University