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Thomas MacGreevy's "Gloria de Carlos V." In-between Poetry and Art

Abstract. The article "Thomas MacGreevy's 'Gloria de Carlos V.' In-between Poetry and Art" presents an interpenetration of a poem by an Irish modernist poet, Thomas MacGreevy, entitled "Gloria de Carlos V" written around 1924 after the poet's visit to the Prado gallery in Madrid. My interpenetration focuses on the intersection of the poet's fascination with visual arts, religion and poetry itself. The main thesis of my article is that this intersection offers a unique insight into the poetic knowing of being.

Key words. Poetry, art, Christology, contemplation, being

1. Introduction

To the readers of Irish and English literary periodicals (in the 1930's and 1940's) Thomas MacGreevy, a Kerryman and an Irish follower of T. S. Eliot's poetics, was known mainly as a critic of art and literature. His poetic debut, *Poems* (1934), remained almost unnoticed by the second generation of Irish revivalists still dominant in the country's literary stage. As a result MacGreevy chose emigration to London. There he found employment at the National Gallery where he lectured on art. When German air raids on London started and the National Gallery was evacuated, he was forced to return to Dublin. In 1945 he published *Jack B. Yeats: An Appreciation and an Interpretation*, a famous essay on the art of W. B. Yeats's younger brother. In 1953 he was appointed to the post of the director of National Gallery in Dublin and continued writing essays on art. Curiously enough his new demanding occupation resulted in

publication of such essays as “Leonardo da Vinci: 1452-1950” (1953), “Art and Science” (1954), *Nicolas Poussin* (1960), and *Some Italian Pictures in the National Gallery of Ireland* (1963). However, poetry kept on haunting him. It returned in 1950 as intricate and beautiful “Homage to Vercingetorix” (or even in 1941 when its first drafts appeared in MacGreevy's personal notes) (Susan Schreibman's endnote in: MacGreevy 1991, 160). And in the 1960's, a few years before his death, he published three fascinating texts: “Moment Musicaux,” “Breton Oracles,” and “On the Death of Joseph Djugashvili alias Stalin.”

2. Poetry and art

What meets an eye (in an even superficial view) in MacGreevy's biography is continuous rivalry between two passions, one of poetry, and the other of visual art. There is, obviously, in his poems and essays, a place for music, even for quotations of scores of notes from Wagner. However, mounting over these three passions one finds religious contemplation. Not that majority of his texts is religious. Art, poetry and Christology, meditation and contemplation of the person of God incarnate, directly inter-penetrate each other in few of his texts. However, Christocentric spirituality is always in the background of all his poetic utterances, both of aesthetic, personal, and historical significance.

3. Thesis

My brief text will focus on a chosen poem entitled “Gloria de Carlos V,” which belongs to the most painterly poems of MacGreevy, inspired mainly by art, mainly by Titian's painting *La Gloria* dedicated to Carlos V. In fact, all the basic themes of his output find their proportional manifestation in it. It directly refers to the poet's war trauma, which links autobiographical meanings with historical ones. It features art as the main theme of the poem. The value of art, exposed by MacGreevy, is not, however, only aesthetic but also theological. If meanings are

the basic element of poetry, if religious meanings properly belong to poetic use of language, then “Gloria de Carlos V” offers an occasion of particularly interesting interpenetration of poetry, linked with spirituality, and visual art. If poetry is the artful, meditative use of meanings of our language, my analysis should choose it as the basic reality to be studied.

However, the thesis of my text reaches beyond language, into the dimension of being, which is reflected in language, including the language of poetry. Thus the target of my study is to show that in-between poetic meditation, reception of art and the meditation of the core of faith, in the dimension indicated by these there is being. Even if hidden behind memories, history and aesthetic impressions, it informs the knowing of the poet as the “real thing,” not merely desired to be actual but recognized and felt as the hard bottom of reality.

The being that appears in the centre of MacGreevy's attention is not an inanimate thing, not a tangible object, but the being that is the most general truth, i.e. the first thing that gives actuality to other things as the Immovable Mover. The phrase Immovable Mover does not mean that God, whose presence MacGreevy finds through Titian painting, to whom the final phrase of the poem alludes, is an indifferent intelligence, Aristotelian *Nous* disconnected from His creation. In MacGreevy's poem, He is the Person, more precisely the community of three Persons united by one essence which is identical with the infinite Being of their divinity. Therefore, the final perspective of the poem, mediated by the play of colours achieved by Titian, is the perspective of the encounter with the other who is the Person, the God, the very model of human personhood and the basis of communication between human persons. The being found in-between the poetic composition of meanings, the message of faith, and art, is the light of the being that is the Person, possessing the supernatural fortitude of the giving of oneself to the other and of compassion.

4. Titian's painting

In her annotations to MacGreevy's poems, Susan Schreibman writes that "Gloria de Carlos V" is one of the series of texts brought from his journey in 1924 to Spain, where he visited the Prado art gallery in Madrid (Susan Schreibman's endnote in: MacGreevy 1991, 136). At the Prado he could see Picasso's paintings, Matthias Grünewald's fascinating *Crucifixion* (known as altar from Isenheim painting), and Titian's *La Gloria*, dedicated to Charles V, the Spanish King and Roman Emperor. However, the opening words of the poem, link the love of art, especially of religious art, with the dramatic context of World War I:

When we come back from first death
To our second life here
It is no longer the same Christianity.
It is orient air express,
Golden horns
And silver gilded horns -
Con-
stantinople. (MacGreevy 1991, 36)

The enigmatic "golden horns" may allude to a famous Golden Horn bay, where the main harbour of Istanbul is located. The "silver gilded horns" seem to stand for the Turkish crescent moon. Images of both might have been found by MacGreevy on unidentified paintings at the Prado gallery. The "orient air express" signifies the essence of Christian art and spirituality, which means that the new "second life" is found in art, especially in religious art of Titian and Grünewald. Nevertheless, for all its novelty and regenerative power, art is not free from associations with the war trauma named by the poet "first death." In fact, it should not be and cannot be, for religious art cannot shun the drama of undeserved suffering:

Here 'twas scarlet and black
Green and black.
Starch white streaked with cadaver black.

O Grünewald!

O Picasso!

Those without gas masks were lost. (MacGreevy 1991, 36)

Grünewald's altar painting from Isenheim, the famous image of Christ on the Cross, through the images of "scarlet and black," "green," "starch white and cadaver black" brings inevitable associations with the hues of war: of blood, of the green of military uniforms, of craters in the earth made by explosions, of the starch white of bandages, of the cadaver black of botches on bodies of dead soldiers killed by new weapon of massive impact, by gas. The terrifying range of these sufferings is anticipated only by the horror of the deicide. A secret link is established between the massive casualties of war and the death of Christ, as if His suffering and agony was to gather in itself the pain of all the victims of violence.

The themes of the crucifixion and the horrible death on the battlefields of World War I are linked, in a collage-like manner, with a characteristically Irish motif, namely with the image of "the rose of Tralee":

My rose of Tralee turned grey in its life,
A tombstone grey,
Unimpearled. (MacGreevy 1991, 36)

The deadly destructiveness of gas attack, the symbol of modernity, is associated with modernization of Irish culture causing the symbolic fading of the "rose of Tralee." The image of "the rose of Tralee," alludes to a popular romantic love song by William Pembroke Mulchinock from MacGreevy's native County Kerry, famous also for its beautiful roses. The song speaks of a tragic love for a girl named "Mary the rose of Tralee," whom the author of the song was "prevented from marrying by the class and religious divisions of the time" (Susan Schreibman's endnote in: MacGreevy 1991, 138). "My Rose of Trallee" became an

unofficial anthem of Kerry and an emblem of the popular, nineteenth century, gentile culture of Ireland. Thus the image of “the rose of Tralee” alludes to what the poet perceives as a painful process of the Ireland's rebirth in the shadow of toxic influence of modern ideologies.

However, the religious art at the Prado inspires for contemplation of “the light of the world,” which through Catholic liturgy, theology, and art communicates unchanging novelty, the spiritual light that remains *semper major*, ever exceeding natural expectations. In this way it brings the hope for fullness of existence, the sense of spiritual revival, and the intuition of transcendent perfection that contains within itself aesthetic beauty. The closing stanza of “Gloria de Carlos V” speaks of the poet's initiation into the contemplative knowing of the object of faith:

But a moment now, I suppose,
For a moment I may suppose,
Gleaming blue
Silver,
Gold,
Rose,
And the light of the world. (MacGreevy 1991, 36)

La Gloria is another imaginative, artistic interpretation of the theological truth of *visio beatifico*, the ultimate, eschatological vision of God. Offering a distant background for the heavenly community of the saints and Triune God, the bottom of the painting presents a gloomy landscape of St. Peter's martyrdom (Susan Schreibman's endnote in: MacGreevy 1991, 136). God the Father is presented as a figure of an elderly sage. He and Christ the Son, on the left side of the painting, hold symbols of the royal power, seated on the clouds, and dressed in blue gowns, with the Holy Spirit as a silhouette of a white dove eclipsing a triangular background of light illuminating the community of saints. The Holy Virgin, in a

blue mantle, on the right hand of Her Son, is closest to the Divine Trinity. Behind her there is St. John the Baptist looking straight-forward in the direction of Christ, while the Holy Mother turns her hooded head in the direction of other figures below, martyrs, Apostles, and the prophets of the Old Testament, like Ezekiel, on an eagle, Noah, King David, and, most recognizable, Moses, in the lowest foreground, with the tablets of law, an almost naked, muscular old warrior, as if rising from a horizontal position, in an effort to lift his body in the direction of the light proceeding from the Holy Spirit. On the left hand of God the Father, there are Charles V, the Empress Isabella and Philip II of Spain, together with Maria of Hungary, the Infanta Doña Juana and Titian himself.

However, the poet leaves aside the community of saints and focuses on the central composition of colours: “blue, silver, gold, rose,” which expose the white of the radiating illumination proceeding from the centre of the Trinity and depict, in more immediate sense, light in its aesthetic aspect, as something that strikes in a particular way sensory perception. In fact, the concise description brings out, in a realistic manner, an effect of dispersion of light by clouds and the silhouette of the Holy Spirit's dove. The culminating theophany in the closing phrase is introduced by an impression created by the subtle play of colours on Titian's painting.

But why should one speak at all about theophany? Does not “Gloria de Carlos V” refer only to aesthetic beauty, to the harmonious composition of shapes and colours that create an effect of brightness? Why should not we claim that “the light of the world,” in the concluding line of the poem, is simply aesthetic perfection of art? Such propositions are questioned by the metaphors in the first and second stanzas. The overall metaphoric meaning of any poem is a synthesis of the meanings delineated throughout an entire text. The meaning of its conclusion builds on the earlier metaphoric meanings. That is why in “Gloria de Carlos V” the metaphor of “the light of the world” has to be interpreted in the context of the metaphor of Christianity

as “orient air express” and the meaningful juxtaposition of the image of dead Christ with the horrors of modern war. Both of them spiritualize the conclusion of the poem. They shift the chain of meanings to immaterial, ontic dimension of reality, suggesting that existence, as a constitutive ingredient of a being, is of immaterial character. It is so, because “second life” after “first death,” i.e. after moral death in the *inferno* of war, is the essence of Christianity discovered anew as a spiritual regeneration of human existence, as the metaphoric “orient air express.” The speaker's life acquires new fascinating dynamism through faith and religious art. His intellect and will are close to the spiritual core of existence. Strangely enough, despite the memory of suffering, ugliness and sin, the presence of the analogy, in the meditation of Grünewald's *Crucifixion*, between the ugliness of Christ's dead body and the horror of modern genocide is intruded by a suggested closeness of the one who hides in this body, the one who is “light of the world.” All of a sudden when it is seen in retrospective, from the point of the poem's conclusion, His presence is implied even in the humiliation of agony brought by modern weapons of mass destruction. The analogy to His invisible transcendental beauty intrudes the depressing pain of unjustified dying. If the concluding stanza suggests Christ's identification with the victims of war, His death on the cross is an act of taking on himself the sin of murder and the horror of sudden death in order to regenerate human life by the power of the fullness of His existence, revealed in forgiveness, in soothing peace of His resurrection, and finally in His supernatural love always present in the unimaginable unity of the three divine Persons whose symbolic image is rendered by Titian with such magnificent scope of vision. In this way the meanings pointing to the spiritual current of existence are being separated, subtly and continually, from the description of art in MacGreevy's poem.

5. Being

Another obstacle in the interpretation of “Gloria de Carlos V” is that at first sight analogy between the natural being and the supernatural one seems to be absent in this poem. Its meanings focus mainly on analogy between art, life, and theological ideas. Are there any grounds to accept being, “the real thing,” as the aim of MacGreevy's poem? The opening of such perspective can be found, in fact, in the metaphoric meaning of the phrase “a moment (...) gleaming (...),” with its possible fuller structure as “a moment is gleaming.” If the concluding image of “the light of the world,” as the content of the poem's theophany, is only partly an object of sensory knowing, what does “gleaming” stand for in the final meaning of MacGreevy's metaphor? In the aesthetic sense, as radiation of colours, it seems to mean *claritas*, radiance or brightness of beauty, which in Aquinas's concept is the third, most enigmatic feature of beauty perceived in a sensory way (apart from *integritas*, integrity, wholeness, and *consonantia*, proportion, harmony).

With Aquinas's concept of aesthetic beauty MacGreevy gets acquainted through Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1992, 206-207), and Maritain's *Art and Scholasticism*, where the French neo-Thomist explains the connection between knowing and three aspect of aesthetic beauty: “integrity, because the intellect is pleased in fullness of Being; proportion, because the intellect is pleased in order and unity; finally, and above all, radiance or clarity, because the intellect is pleased in light and intelligibility” (Maritain 2001, par 3).

However, the notion of beauty employed by Aquinas and Maritain, both of whom the Irish poet accepts as major points of reference, is analogical. It concerns both aesthetic, visual aspect of being as well as its transcendental, ontic perfection, accessible to intellectual knowing after further analysis which recognizes a particular perfection of existence and form of a given being.

What is more, a moment in time does not possess the physical energy that could manifest itself in a form of light. Therefore the quality of “gleaming” is predicated in relation to a

moment in time analogously and metaphorically. It conveys both a sense of similarity to the radiation of hues and a difference. In itself time belongs rather to what can be defined as the order of physical reality. Consisting of sequences of relations, duration or changes, its nature requires greater effort of perception than perception of light. It is less obvious to sensory cognition. It has to be recognized by intellectual analysis. For this reason, time is closer to the immaterial nature of knowing than to the order of sensory perception which is, after all, interpreted and ordered by our understanding. Therefore, the phrase “a moment is gleaming” conveys much more than the perception of aesthetic beauty. It alludes to the contemplating mind. This is the allusion that points to being, for the intellect-will-consciousness is the proper form of human being.

The painting itself is also a being, but an artificial one, intentional. Its form is the aesthetic and symbolic idea created by Titian. MacGreevy's poem is not only a description of *La Gloria*. It is also a meditation on the meanings evoked in the poet's mind by the famous visualization of *visio beatifico* and other paintings from the Prado gallery. The fact that particular images are linked in the poet's consciousness with his experiences, suggests that MacGreevy goes beyond the visible, and ventures into the realm of what exists and what is intelligible either with mediation of the visible or without it. It is a particular privilege of poetry to change the aesthetic into the ontic, i.e. to discover the depth of being in what seems to address, at first sight, only senses. The power of imagination consists, among others, in the ability to extract meanings out of images. Maritain speaks of spiritualization of sensory data by virtue of the “small light” of the so-called illuminating intellect, *parvum lumen*, which is the preliminary step of extraction of abstract concept on the basis of what is perceived by senses (Maritain 1955, 71). Poetry turns images into words, in fact, into something more than words, into meanings. It offers not only artistic use of words, but most of all creative composition of meanings. The foremost compositional function is performed in poetry by

metaphor, i.e. a particular way of predication which puts together distant or contradictory meanings. In “Gloria de Carlos V” the most striking case of metaphor is the phrase indicated above, “a moment ... gleaming,” which links divergent dimensions of reality into one predication, pointing to the existence and activity of a man as a being endowed with cognition and the ability of contemplation.

However, if the crucial metaphor in “Gloria de Carlos V” offers also theophany the contemplating mind of the poet carries in itself the reflection of the being known through faith, i.e. of God. Contemplation becomes an encounter not with an idea, not even with a religious idea, but with the presence of being, approximated by symbolic function of the painting and by particular perfection of art visualizing the essence of divinity in the aesthetic form of the image of light dispersed. Another aspect of MacGreevy's poem is that it suggests a link between art as the virtue of practical intellect, i.e. of the creative mind and will of the Spanish painter, and the contemplating mind of the poet, and the creative wisdom and love of the Divine Being.

4. Conclusions

It is an analogous concept of beauty embracing both the aesthetic and the transcendental that opens the ground for such theophanic interpretation of MacGreevy's poem. A Polish Neo-Thomist, Prof. Piotr Jaroszyński writes of beauty as of relational *transcendentale*, i.e. as a property of being which exists in-between a being perceived and a mind perceiving it (Jaroszyński 2011, 171). It is not any kind of perception that brings out beauty. It is only the one that is characterised by contemplation, i.e. by an approach of love. He argues that it is beauty of being, whether visible, striking consciousness immediately, or invisible, appearing in consciousness with gradual meditation, that comes to human mind as the first impulse

together with the so-called existential judgement, i.e. with the assertion about the actuality of the thing perceived. Jaroszyński continues:

The object of man's love is the same being that is the object of cognition. It is really existing being. Being shakes up the corresponding faculties of love and attracts them to itself. Since the will is open to everything, anything and everything can be an object of the will's love. ... Man knows and loves at the same time. The being that 'strikes' us runs like a current through all man's faculties and reaches what we call 'I' – the subject. (Jaroszyński 2011, 178-179)

For that reason poetic image, symbol or metaphor is also an incentive for a particular spiritual activity. In MacGreevy's poem it invites into the contemplation of art and of Biblical theology. Its main, though hidden, persuasion strikes, in fact, the very core of the "I." Beauty is what human subject participates in by the virtue of the essence of his/her being. If the human person carries in himself/herself the image and likeness of God, beauty, which comes as the first impact of being, here of the painting, and, by symbolic implication, of the divine being, offers a perspective of encounter, the living "I-Thou" relation. The richness of meanings conveyed in MacGreevy's "Gloria de Carlos V" emphasize this tremendous ethical, and, by implication, practical, significance of art and aesthetic beauty.

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