

Dear Father Louis:

Thank you for your letter of October 24. My wife and I are happy to hear that the translation of the sermons is under way and progressing, for a translation will be necessary in order to bring about a decision of the board of the members of the Anvil Press as to whether to print it or not.

You ask me whether I have given further thought to your text. Yes I have. Your text means a great deal to me, but I wouldn't be surprised to learn that to most people it would mean little more than your famous name. As any great thought, your thought is simple and not new, which makes it difficult to understand. Would I not know you and brother Giles personally, I too would not have understood. Since I have seen you in the monastery and exchanged ideas I realize that your text is largely autobiographical and that it reveals more of your inner self than the facts told in the Seven Story Mountain. I am curious to see whether the sermons themselves (in translation) are as intelligible to me as is your exegesis. In the light of your interpretation they probably will.

I may be mistaken but it seems to me that the same thought, that is, silence as a result of understanding is expressed in the last two scenes of Hofmannsthal's play, Der Schwierige, the Difficult One. Here too, humility opens the eyes. So, please let us have the translation and let us hope we will be able to publish the piece.

After a while I shall send you a translation of the three/frag-
ments of Fiedler; a German philosopher of the second half of the nineteenth cen-
tury. I thought of him when reading the*on p. 24 of your Notes on Sacred Art: ^{postumous} *sentence
"What St. Bernard condemns is attachment to aesthetic pleasure,... Fiedler also
emphasizes that aesthetic pleasure is not the key to the understanding of works
of art, and that the essence of art, its secret, has nothing to do with aesthetics
in its modern sense of a philosophy of the perception of the beautiful. Your
notes to the sermons of the Bl. Gueric, and Fiedler's theory have one feature in
common: they are only understandable for those who already know. Those who do not
yet know, but want to know, will be helped when they genuinely and humbly seek
understanding.

It took me almost thirty years of reading Fiedler in order to realize what he was talking about. If now I would try to word Fiedler's theory in my own terms I would, in brief, say: our apparatus of vision, the eyes, can perceive only in the manner of flat or curved planes, that is, in two dimensions. Visual actuality, i.e. three-dimensional seeing can only be realized in and through works of classic art. Primitive art does not go beyond two-dimensional perception; it states its facts on uninterrupted, as it were on unframed, planes. Classic art sees and produces three-dimensionally. In order to achieve this it has turned deliberately away from the uninterrupted planes, from the fields, from the environment of earth

and water, setting up a man-made enclosure, the frame of the agora, the market place, the polis. Art becomes spiritual, intellectual, human; classic art is civilized art. Within a definite framework (of inorganic, crystalline, i.e. spiritual character) it creates a foreground that pushes the onlooker somewhat outside the frame, preparing him to realize depth visually, as a third dimension; then, behind the foreground the main plane rises, acting against a background. These three planes, so interrelated that in the elevation the groundplan can be sensed, permit the onlooker to perceive all three dimensions in a single act of contemplation. This is the visibility of civilized man who turns his eyes toward the dwelling place of the gods. No aesthetic pleasure is involved, he is lifted above animal vision. The secret of art then, to Fiedler, its essence, consists in the creation of three-dimensional space with two-dimensional means.

This applies to sculpture and architecture as well as to painting. The artist who creates classic works of art does not need focussed perspective, to him overlapping forms suffice. However, these individual overlapping forms must be so proportioned that one form cannot be confused with the other within the frame. Spiritually active, the artist conceives his work as pure form which is strong enough to hold any content, such as beauty, emotion, and even aesthetic pleasure. Woe to the artist who ~~by~~ does not conceive in pure form or neglects it altogether. *is

If the elements of classic art (or as to that, those of pure form) consist only of the frame, foreground, middle plane, background and overlapping forms, then it is clear that such works of art can be produced according to recipe, i.e. academically. How then is the genuine distinguished from the academic? ^(to be)

The maker of a thing which, when finished, is named a work of art is from the outset fully aware whether he produces according to a recipe or whether an intensified awareness of existence guides him in his activity and makes him create according to inner necessity. Whatever thing, idea, feeling, story, the artist shapes, remains dead material, substratum, until it has taken on that form of being which for vision is three-dimensional space. Yet, not only in painting but also in sculpture and architecture the artist can only produce what he and any other onlooker is compelled to perceive in two-dimensional terms.

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While the artist actively shapes the substratum of three-dimensional space, thus striving for artistic truth, the onlooker, the critic, the historian, the patron ~~is~~ merely faced with the substratum, that is, with beautiful, exciting, ugly, soothing, enigmatic and so on forms. Are there criteria to enable him to judge the artistic worth of the work of art in question? In other words how fit is the layman to understand artistic truth? who are the teachers to open his eyes? *is

Shall they point to a picture of Chardin where the table on which the boy erects a house of cards, represents the foreground and acts as such; and shall they indicate that the drawer, slightly pulled out of it, pushes the onlooker a little farther ~~back~~ away so that he can see the boy better, or for that matter in three-dimensional space?

Or shall the teacher point to a picture of Bingham, the fur traders on

the spectator

the Missouri and show how the stone which stands out of the water creates the foreground with which the spectator can identify himself in place, and thus actually see the gliding boat with the beast and the traders. Did he see the stone before it was pointed out to him, or does he believe the stone was there when the picture was painted? Does he realize that that branch of a dead tree, sticking out of the water in the background makes the boat float between it and ~~the stone~~ the stone? Does he see now, does he experience the vastness of space?

Is this aesthetic pleasure, or is it visibility created by classic means? Dear Father Louis, it seems that St. Bernard knew what he was talking about. I know, all this could be said with much more grace than I am gifted with but I tried to be as clear as possible.

We finally found the book of Snell: The Discovery of the Mind. It was sitting quietly right in front of our noses while we looked for it everywhere else, my wife will send it tomorrow. You have to wait for the Fiedler, I have to bind your copy.

My friend Grunelius in Kolbsheim writes that Maritain has talked of you several times. He tells me also that three years ago while Maritain was in Kolbsheim you wrote to him about a dream you had, that you would retire to a place near Strasbourg. Both were convinced this place must be Kolbsheim. Alas, says my friend, nothing came of it. I wish you were installed in the little house next to my chapel, a two room place where you really could quietly meditate. If you read in my little book what I said about Kolbsheim and its situation you would get a glimpse of what you dreamt.

Please remember me to brother Giles, and my wife wants to be remembered to both of you. As soon as I have finished my triptych, and it should be finished soon, I shall write and find out what would be best to show it in your monastery, at least for a few hours when we are there.

Yours in Christ

