

Contemplative Realism: A Theological-Aesthetical Manifesto

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Let's get real.

Counting as our companions a number of other approaches to representing reality, and making no claims to create, *ex nihilo*, a new aesthetical species, we the undersigned commit ourselves to a renewed “contemplative realism.” We do not advance this rough school of artistic fish as some preeminent or sole “way forward” for narrative art in our time. We do, however, seek to articulate a literary approach that exists already in diffuse books and in the potencies of living artists, to gather and galvanize those souls who are ready and willing to render this vision for the benefit of all people of good will. We yearn to quicken a contemplative realist disposition among as many as possible.

Contemplative realism addresses the civilizational crisis in which we find ourselves: as Josef Pieper has it, our “ability to see is in decline.” Our very sense of life, of experience, of interior and exterior sensation, our ability to sort between the specious and the precious—all are threatened with obscurity, blinkered by ideologies and technological innovations that promise to provide clear windows but instead function as unreal filters, distorting the mind’s rapprochement with reality. Such influences, all the while claiming to expand our vision, radically hamper the soul’s depth perception.

What Bernanos so ably argued all those years ago has, unfortunately, only gained in truthfulness: “we can witness a lethal slackening of men’s conscience that is attacking not only their moral life, but also their very heart and mind, altering and decomposing even their imagination . . . the menacing crisis is one of infantilism.”

To *see clearly* under such circumstances requires continual attentiveness, continual self-correction, continual communal reference to the visions of others similarly engaged. Ours must be an exacting examen that ever concludes with great gratitude to God. To this end, we wear W.H. Auden’s aphorism like a habit: “Among the many qualities required to create or to appreciate art of any style or age, the most necessary of all is an unlimited capacity for reverence and repentance.” To act well, we must first see well.

What is true for all souls is particularly true for those of us pursuing the writer’s vocation. Being a novelist, Flannery O’Connor contends, is synonymous with being “hotly in pursuit of the real,” although the “realism of each novelist will depend on his view of the ultimate reaches of reality.”

Therefore we should “ask rather more carefully what ‘the real’ actually is,” lest we settle for a limited lens that cannot grasp the vastness of reality. Such a truncation of vision would falsify human and divine being, fail to realize the link between nature and the supernatural, and sacrifice mystery to mere ambiguity. We concur with Pope Benedict XVI when he says that “the man who puts to one side the reality of God is a realist only in appearance.”

Facets of Realism

We must speak of “realisms” in the plural to understand what contemplative realism does and does not aspire to. Realism—from Henry James to Willa Cather (“Realism is a protest against lies,” she wrote) and Jonathan Franzen in our own day—has gifted literature and its readers with great gains. With its insistence upon exacting explorations of the psychological contours of characters, with its willingness to countenance difficulties and tragedies and move beyond the novel’s youthful proclivities towards

sentimentality, realism commits us to increasing what James calls the “felt life” that exists in the story by *telling the truth* instead of handing out rosy romances. For the materialist-realist, only that which can be seen is real—and *the real* is most honestly congealed in life’s undeniable, overwhelming stains, grimes, and uglinesses. The contemplative realist dissents, in life and literature, from such a reductive and despair-tinged view.

The association of realism with the ugly and unpleasant but accurate truth finds a political parallel in the *realpolitik* of Machiavelli, who executes a severely limited depiction of what counts as reality. As Pierre Manent points out, Machiavelli convinces us to “fix our attention exclusively, or almost exclusively, on pathologies.” Fiction founded on a kind of Machiavellian realism unduly asserts the wickedness and duplicity and brutality of humanity at the expense of narrating our virtues.

Psychological realists in fiction leave room for the “supernatural,” but only under the guise of the numinous depths of our own psyches: casting God or the gods, Satan and the demons, and phantoms of all shapes as mere projections of inner turmoil. This is the only mode through which belief is allowed to intrude in most modern fiction.

We are heartened by the fictions of supernatural realists such as J.K. Huysmans and Eugene Vodolazkin, who have attempted to depict the supernatural directly. Laboring alongside them, contemplative realists, show grace through its effects on human actors.

Another close cousin, “magical realism,” combines a fully fleshed-out mundane world with fantastical, magical elements. Instead, contemplative realism registers the supernatural as harmonious with the natural, a poetic extension of the Thomistic understanding that though it may *feel* as if grace grates against nature, in truth God’s movements build upon it.

Many, if not most, of these “realisms” end by either ignoring supernatural realists, disproportionately representing mundanity, or peering into an abyss of despair. Jonathan Franzen, with acuity of insight, calls out this artistic malaise as “depressive realism”—that supposedly sobering reminder that “You are, after all, just protoplasm, and some day you’ll be dead.”

The contemplative realist concedes Franzen’s claim that “improvement always comes at a cost” (though we call this the fear-and-trembling counterpoint of “cheap grace”), and that unalloyed goodness is rarer than badness and evil in the heart of man. Still, balanced against this, we hold Dietrich von Hildebrand’s resistance to formal and spiritual poverty of art that “breathes out upon us all the depressing triviality of this milieu.” “The real” includes both the supernatural shattering instantiated through “slum naturalism” beside those “dark holes of the poor” where St. Teresa of Calcutta prayed her Hail Marys beside the deathbed gutters—and the glories and joys of the selfsame soul that first suffered this shattering. Beside undeniable darkneses of flesh and spirit the summons to beauty becomes more, not less, urgent.

The contemplative realist integrates Nietzsche’s central insight that narratives bless us by granting Apollonian beauty, clarity, and form to human hardships that are anarchic, dark, Dionysian. We embrace Franzen’s assurance that “the formal aesthetic rendering of the human plight can be (though I’m afraid we novelists are rightly mocked for overusing the word) redemptive.”

We know humankind has a *telos* toward the Good and a concupiscent talent for mucking up that trajectory; we know there is nothing we can do, existentially speaking, about either. We know that if nature croons with beauty it also groans for redemption. As the exiled poet Czeslaw Milosz wrote to the troubled monk Thomas Merton:

Every time you speak of Nature, it appears to you as soothing, rich in symbols, as a veil or curtain. You do not pay much attention to torture or suffering in Nature . . .

Along with Oklahoma poet laureate Benjamin Myers, “seeing Christ in nature,” we “see Him crucified.” Yet on the other side of the crucifixion, we hold a firm faith in the literal Resurrection and in all its manifold implications.

The Loving Gaze on All That Is

Amidst mundanity and muck, only the loving gaze (*ubi amor, ibi oculus*) can see reality. “A new dimension of ‘seeing’ is opened up by love alone.” The contemplative realist is keenly aware of the difference between the necessarily clinical gaze of the scientist and the mesmerized smitteness of the contemplative.

Contortions and conversions of bodies and souls appear to us not as they might to an objective scientific observer, but as they do to a friend, as to one who loves both readers and characters and who loves God still more, one who loves readers and characters all the more for seeing all in light of their connection to Dante’s “Love that moves the sun and other stars.”

Our patron saint is St. Teresa of Avila, renowned for her assurance that “God moves amidst the pots and pans.” Nothing was too miniscule for St. Teresa’s soul. Her lived example reassures us of O’Connor’s firm belief that “the artist need never be ashamed of staring; there is nothing that does not require his attention.” Parallel to this, the mystic of Avila writes, “I believe that in every little thing created by God there is more than we realize, even in so small a thing as a tiny ant.” This “more than we realize” in turn underwrites O’Connor’s further insistence that “life from the standpoint of the central Christian mystery” has “for all its horror, been found by God to be worth dying for.”

No one, says St. Bonaventure, “arrives at contemplation except through penetrating meditation, holy living, and devout prayer.” The contemplative realist surely needs these things and more.

To escape the grim vise of our time’s refusal of reality, we must seek our own way forward. A conscious contemplative realist *movement* has only just begun.

We commit to the daily hard work required to train our souls to ascertain the action of Grace in and around the contests of the human spirit.

This side of the beatific vision, the contemplative realist is content to do lowly tasks, sweeping the floor of a decrepit cave to make room for some roofless travelers afoot. Fed by the majestic poverty of the Word he will write another novel of the nameless nobody who happens to be made in the *imago Dei*, numbering the hairs of her head very carefully, surprised to find in her insignificance some of the deepest drama in the cosmos.

Daily we must ascend the mountain to be alone and to pray in great silence, moved by St. Bonaventure’s promise that when the soul “embraces with love the Incarnate Word, inasmuch as she receives delight from Him and passes over to Him in ecstatic love, she recovers her sense of taste and touch. Having recovered the spiritual senses, the soul now sees, hears, smells, tastes, and embraces her beloved,” capable at last of singing as the bride from the *Canticle of Canticles*, “which was composed for the exercise of contemplation.”

As artists and lovers of the arts, as souls committed to the contemplation of God and of His creation, we affirm our devotion to an ethic and aesthetic that strips off the blinders of falsehood to pursue the demanding, daily, ascetic love of seeing ever anew.

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