

# Art and Forgiveness

*Rodolfo Balzarotti*

At the moment when his work is born,  
the artist is always a forgiven man,  
whether he is aware of it or not.  
—William Congdon

William Congdon was born in 1912 in Providence, Rhode Island and grew up in the cultured, aristocratic society of New England. But Congdon's background was only apparently privileged. A stifling moralism and puritanism presided over the family home, planting in him the seeds of rebellion:

The first thing I was aware of (as a child) was the feeling of profound solitude, even though I was surrounded by numerous family members and servants. Solitude because of my father's rejection. I was afraid. I don't know if you can call this situation an "experience of art," but it was certainly the situation of a frustrated, aborted relationship, and it awakened in me the creative gift.

Congdon's artistic vocation, which matured during his years at Yale University, was a rebellion against a society at once "materialistic" and "moralistic," a society whose relentless *calculation* of everything, whether profit or loss, merit or sin, excluded precisely the dimension of gratuitousness, grace, and love that Congdon would always identify with the dimension of art:

At the moment when his work is born, the artist is always a forgiven man, whether he is aware of it or not. And the forgiveness that has forgiven him by its very nature seeks out through the work of art someone else to forgive.

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In 1934 Congdon began attending painting classes with Henry Henschel in Provincetown. This new study immediately burst upon him as something more than an esthetic exercise. It was an experience of freedom, a plunge into the "abyss" of color:

*Henschel* placed us before a mass of shadow against the light of the sun-sky (for example, a young man seated on a crate, on the beach, against the sun)—and he did this in such a way that we couldn't see the young man's form . . . The glare of the light was supposed to cancel the a priori form of the human figure, to drown the eye in the darkness of the shapeless mass of the shadow . . . in which the movements of the colors were free to lead our eyes to what I call the "new form" . . . This method has the value of total objectivity and obedience to things as they are.

The study of painting, however, wasn't by itself sufficient to reveal to the young artist the full scope of his vocation. After the outbreak of the Second World War, Congdon decided to enlist in the American Field Service (an organization of volunteers dedicated to assisting the wounded), and so came into contact with the horrors of war, with the destruction of cities and the concentration camps. Yet in recalling those years lavished on the victims of the war—the Italian civilians who had been bombarded by two opposing armies or the inmates of Belsen—Congdon would always insist on an apparent paradox: it was precisely the suffering, it was Europe, and above all Italy, that brought home to him for the first time that *he was loved*, that love was freely given. Not surprisingly, Congdon emerged from the experience of war fully confirmed in his painterly vocation. He would always call his artistic talent a "gift," as a way of saying that art is a gratuitous *donum* that springs forth from another, deeper gratuitousness.

After the War, Congdon marked the beginning of his career as a painter by taking leave of his family, of his city, and, little by little, even of his native country. He became an expatriate, a voluntary exile. In 1950 he settled down in Venice, which also became the chief subject of his painting. From the very beginning Congdon was a painter of *places*; he could paint only from a *place*, which he would identify as the source of that love that drew him towards itself:

I went to Venice because its fantastic aspect of a city in the water offered escape from the materialistic world which, after the war, particularly disgusted me. Venice and New York are both dreams of stone on the sea; one is horizontal, the other is vertical . . . They are both romantic cities. Venice resists the present and holds to the past with the same tenacity with which New York resists the past and yearns for the future.

"Redemption" in Art?

For Congdon the 1950s were also a time of success and celebrity on the international art scene. He exhibited at the Betty Parsons Gallery along with the main Action Painters, who for the first time in history had given American art primacy over its European counterpart. He likewise took part in the biggest expositions of contemporary art, while the major museums began acquiring his works. Yet during this very period, Congdon's painting—his experience of "redemption" and the object of his total dedication—failed to heal him and instead revealed the abyss of his own limitation and sin. Rather than reconnecting him with the source of love through rootedness in a concrete place, Congdon's painting increasingly uprooted him from all places, hurling him into a life of ever more deadly wandering and solitude. Congdon's frenetic travels in the late 1950s are a testimony to this new situation:

The wounds of childhood and the burden of guilt were not to be healed by painting alone. As my painting matured, I began to use it as a refuge, an arm against the world. My isolation from society, living alone and traveling, permitted and encouraged an equivocal life which in turn intensified my hostility and guilt . . . I felt liberated and saved by my paintings as the drowning man is saved by the life-preserver. I began to see in each painting a respite, a stay against the eventual death sentence.

During these years an ever deeper gulf yawned between the man and the artist. The artist, who was supposed to redeem the man from his failures and miseries, had in reality become so autonomous and disincarnate that he left the man out of the picture, plunging him into degradation and despair. Congdon realized that this condition was shared by the whole of contemporary art and, with uncommon clarity, revealed its true nature in this striking phrase: "We create in the grief of our non-saintliness."

Yet Congdon would find a penetrating exposure of art's illusory redemption in the pages of Miguel de Unamuno, which he read and re-read towards the end of the 1950s—on the very eve of his conversion:

What man seeks in religion, in religious faith, is to save his own individuality, to make it eternal. This, however, he cannot achieve either with science or art or morality. Neither science nor art nor morality requires a god: religion alone requires him (*On the Tragic Feeling of Life*).

Completing Unamuno's profoundly "catholic" affirmation, we might add that only the religious sense requires a personal, incarnate God. It is this God whom Congdon discovered, at the end of his wanderings, in Assisi, the city of St. Francis:

Yes, God became flesh . . . this is the literalness of St. Francis. The Gospel *sine glossa*. Francis had realized that Christ became a letter among letters. After all, man needs banality, the letter. He, Christ, the Truth, in order to redeem, to lead the world beyond appearance, became literalness . . . In the world like the world but something else. This is the peace of St. Francis. A child-like joy.

Assisi was also the opposite of Venice:

Because Venice was mine, whereas Assisi never belonged to anyone because it was St. Francis's . . . Assisi converted me. Venice made me paint . . . Oh, Venice! It's all tinsel. You have to be a real artist to find the bone in Venice . . . Assisi is as spare as a bone . . . That's the bone, the basis, the skull, it's Christ himself. Christ is that in which and for which every man has been created . . .

*Between Suicide . . .*

At first, Congdon's entrance into the Church was an intoxicating discovery of the miracle of forgiveness and mercy, which he had always sensed were the source of his life:

I had in childhood been made to feel guilty when I was without sin. There had been no absolution even for imaginary sins. And yet now that I had really sinned, I was suddenly in the forgiveness of Christ, without guilt.

Yet Congdon would always speak of this step as a "suicide": his act of crossing the threshold of the "Church of Peter" [*Pietro*]<sup>1</sup>—after having celebrated so many "churches of stone" [*pietra*]<sup>2</sup>—threatened to leave the artist outside. Whereas the previous ten years had seen the agony of the man, who was subjugated to the claims of the artist, the nearly twenty years that followed Congdon's conversion in 1959 would witness the "agony" of the artist, who was now submitted to the claim of a redemption in which, lying beyond art, might seem to overwhelm it altogether. In reality, Congdon's agony was not an annihilation, but a "struggle." It was no accident that during this period Congdon suffered even more frequent creative blocks than he had before his conversion. Gradually distancing himself from the public and the galleries, he was soon forgotten by the very artistic world that for the past decade had sung his praises as one of the

most promising talents in American art. But there was a place, indeed, an *arena*, where this "struggle" between the man and convert and the artist could also find expression in the language of painting: *the image of the crucified Christ*. Between 1960 and 1979—the years during which Congdon lived and worked in Assisi and Subiaco—he painted, almost frenziedly, no less than 180 versions of the Crucifixion! It seems that for Congdon this image was a sign of the painful division separating the man from the artist and, at the same time, a possible bridge between the two. Still, it is curious that the human figure, which Congdon had strictly banished from his painting, should now return in just this form. Yet the human form—though it had been denied, repressed, almost exorcized—had in reality always been present as the other side, the dark, disquieting side, of Congdon's painting—the shadow cast by his painting on that suffering, sinful humanity from which the artist yearned to be set free. Intense meditation on the crucified Christ would finally lead the artist to confess that:

The body I met is my own body hurting from sin, a body soaked with pain to the point of being unable to distinguish the body from the pain, as if the pain had become a body and not the body pain . . . in short, I recognize that the Christ on the Cross is myself; that it is my sin that is nailed to the Cross! It is my own flesh that I paint with the certainty of the Resurrection within me.

Though Congdon's membership in the Church and participation in the sacraments did not eliminate this division (hence the necessary struggle and agony), it did take away its deadly effect:

[B]y the fact that Christ came to fill everything with Himself in everything's way of being, even if this division between the disunity of my person and the unity of my work were not taken away, Christ, reconciling everything in himself, takes away its condemnation.

*. . . And Survival*

As a matter of fact, the end of this long period of transition is marked by an unexpected turnaround, especially after Congdon's crucial journeys to India in 1973 and 1975 and the major works that they inspired. Thanks to this change, Congdon began to feel that he had been freed from the task of "converting" his own art. He had discovered that

it seems at times that the artist seizes everything for himself—his unbearable egoism—but this isn't the case, at least not insofar as the artist is an

authentic one . . . God has put in the artist the dynamism of His own forgiveness, it's the arm of His redemption, it is a weapon, but it makes of the artist the biggest sign among men of Christ's victory over the world!

Following his move in the Fall of 1979 to Gudo Gambaredo in the heart of the Milanese lowland, Congdon entered upon a new season: the season of *stability* ("I have begun my last trip by *stopping*"); the season of the *earth*, the humble earth made fertile by the patient labor of man and the cycle of the sun; the season, finally, of *painting*, pure painting without qualifiers, without pretense, without esthetic or exotic stimulants. For, before anything else, Congdon had entered the season of *color*, of color almost bereft of signs, of any subjective and artificial overlay on the part of the painter himself. Taking the earth as his subject for the first time, Congdon—hitherto the painter of cities, of monuments, of the proud tokens of human civilization!—now discovered that "heaven [*cielo*] is earth." The "heaven/sky" of Congdon's painting was, at bottom, the earth that had received his person, to the point of becoming identical with his own body. This last phase of Congdon's life and work was the subject of a recent exhibition in Rimini (Italy) entitled *Cielo è terra* [Heaven is Earth].

A concluding remark: Congdon's journey is also an illustration of the dynamic of Christian faith. That "suicide" whereby Congdon had surrendered his creative "gift" to Christ at the time of his conversion to the Church has proven, at a distance of thirty years, to have been the only way to "save" this gift, to remain faithful to it to the very end. Striking, in this regard, is the recent testimony of a historian of American art, who is also a great Congdon scholar:

Seeing Congdon's work after thirty years caused a kind of supernatural stir in me . . . Having spent his life far from the critics, from the market, from the galleries, from the collectors, Congdon continued to work in the same spiritual conditions that had marked the birth of Action painting . . . Congdon represents an unusual phenomenon of *sur-vival*, which is the opposite of *re-vival* . . . A *survival*, when it happens . . . sets up a direct encounter with the past, without filters, sentimentalism, or nostalgia . . . It confronts us *in toto* and without compromises. It is easier to wrestle with a phantom than with a Lazarus. This does not mean that he has spent the last thirty years without notable developments in his painterly vocabulary. But as an artist he has remained totally loyal to the faith and to the principles that motivated the best American talents of his epoch. His work places us before the vexing question of how and why the moral patrimony, the vital texture that was at the origin of our epoch, was destroyed (Fred Licht, 1992).

—Translated by Adrian Walker

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