

The Centrality of the Crucified Christ in the Work of William Congdon: An Interview with Massimo Cacciari

Instead of accepting the challenge of secularization, a lot of Catholic culture preferred to retreat behind defensive lines. Theology should have entered into serious discussion with art, even in its nihilistic aspects.

"I was first introduced to Congdon's work by the late art critic Giuseppe Mazzariol," he begins, "who took me to the exhibition at the Palazzo dei Diamanti in Ferrara [1981]. My initial approach was exclusively 'critical,' in the sense that I mainly wanted to enter into the horizon of early post-War American painting, which I wasn't very familiar with at the time.

Then I got to know Congdon personally and realized, to my surprise, that he was a great master of twentieth century art."

A master who is practically unknown to contemporary critics...

That's true; yet I'm convinced that Congdon represents an extremely interesting current in contemporary art. For that matter, contemporary art itself is largely unknown, hard to approach, and only superficially understood.

Massimo Cacciari, a professor of aesthetics at the University of Venice, Italy, has become the mayor of Venice.

In fact, if you don't try to see Congdon's work within the travail of twentieth-century art and thought as a whole, you ultimately can't understand it properly. You would turn Congdon into a romantic voyager on a continual quest for personal identity who then—among other things—ends up a Christian. Instead—and this is what makes his work so extraordinary—he embodies a unique possibility, both existentially and artistically, which is nonetheless fully a part of contemporary art and thought.

Could you explain a bit more, Professor Cacciari, the nature of this travail?

In the first place I want to state unequivocally that twentieth century art represents an absolute highpoint in artistic history: in our century, all the questions and difficulties pertaining to art, and thus to thought in general, have risen dramatically to the surface. This is why I disagree whenever people reminisce nostalgically about "the good old days" of art. That's simply false: it's in this very century that we've reached the highest point.

Can you sum up the characteristics of twentieth-century art?

In the essay on Congdon which I wrote for the catalogue accompanying the Milan exhibition,¹ I spoke of the "massive onslaught on idolatry in contemporary art." In other words, the great contemporary artists realized that the days of art as representation, whether of objects or of the artist's self, were over. Significantly, the great sculptor Giacometti used to say: "I create by canceling." Art is no longer a portrayal of something (objects, or the feelings or ideas of the subject), but a radical calling into question of the very possibility of representation.

We're accustomed to speak in this regard of "abstract art," but the truth is that we are looking at the highest realism: the search for "something" beyond the pure objectivity of the object or the pure subjectivity of the subject. This is why I speak of the spiritual openness of contemporary art. In fact, without this interpretive key, the mere analysis of forms and signs doesn't explain anything.

¹[This interview was conducted on the occasion of an exhibition of Congdon's work in Milan in 1993.—Trans.]

Maybe some examples would make this easier to grasp.

Of course. Actually, this common tendency against "idolatry" takes extremely different, even opposite, paths. We can sum up four of them.

The nihilist solution. The Russian Malevich goes the farthest on this path when he paints a white square on a white background: there's nothing left, there's a complete and dramatic destruction of the object and of the subject.

Mondrian's "theosophical" solution. Mondrian divides the canvas with perfectly horizontal or vertical lines and fills in a few rectangles with pure colors. What's going on here is the search for a rhythm, an equilibrium rigorously defined in mathematical terms. It's as if Mondrian were attempting to discover a mysterious universal law underlying reality.

Klee's solution, which I call "physical." It's the same quest as Mondrian at the level of elementary, primordial physical forms.

The solution of Duchamp, which consists in the "presentation"—mind you: not "representation"—of an object (the famous urinal, for example). Representation is completely eliminated: there's nothing but the—scandalous—presentation of the object.

Can we make a connection between the work of artists like these and the crisis of the Renaissance concept of reason?

As a matter of fact, the greatest experiments of contemporary art occur in the context of the general crisis of the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*—I think, therefore I am—understood as the "foundation." They're actually a radical critique of the *cogito*, the end of the dogma of subjectivism.

Let's go back to Congdon.

He represents—within the context which I've just sketched—a new and extraordinary possibility: the Christian solution. Congdon lives the whole drama of contemporary art with passionate intensity and points toward—I think he's a unique case—a Christian "solution." He also gives up normal "representation," and he does so by a continual "exodus" from himself. It's in this sense only—and certainly not in terms of the Late Romantic cliché of the bohemian—that we have to interpret his many travels. At a certain point in his exodus, Congdon runs

into, encounters a particular form of "reality," and it's neither Malevich's nothing, nor the numerological rhythm of Mondrian, nor the primal form of Klee nor Duchamp's pure object. Congdon meets the crucified Christ.

There's a great deal which could be said here; I'll limit myself to pointing out that Congdon's crucified Christ is a real flesh, a concrete suffering body. Mondrian also arrived at the form of the Cross, but there's no one on it. In his case you could speak of gnosis; in fact, the quintessence of gnosis is precisely the assertion that God cannot suffer or have a body which dies on a cross. Not so for Congdon: there's a real event, a dying flesh which is also the flesh of God; God is offering himself for love.

However, I would like to underscore that this "way" of Congdon's is a possibility accessible to the whole of contemporary art, a possibility which recommends itself to everyone. If it weren't, his work would be no more than petty apologetics, which, sad to say, is the fate of a great deal of our century's Catholic culture.

In what sense?

In the sense that, instead of accepting the challenge of secularization, of the "heresies" of our century, a lot of Catholic culture preferred to withdraw, to retreat behind defensive lines. Theology should have entered into serious discussion with art—even in its nihilistic aspects—, with music—think of Schönberg—, with the literary work of Rilke or Kafka. It should have been on the "inside." Instead, it often refused to take up this challenge. As a result, theological reflection often limited itself to academic discourse or else to apologetics or to pure exegesis in the positivist mold. It thus became a dead language, a "Latin" which most people couldn't understand.

But Christian truth can't be reduced to a "foundation" which is acquired once and for all and then has to be defended. Saint Augustine speaks of *veritas indaganda*, of truth which calls for inquiry. This seems to be a contradiction, because we are talking about truth—and thus about something definitive—which nevertheless always has to be regained and investigated further.

It isn't a contradiction when you consider that Christianity is not a doctrine but an event, a relationship, which thus sets in motion an inexhaustible dynamism...

To be sure, the category of event is appropriate for describing what I have in mind. There's an extremely fine line

separating the Christian *veritas indaganda* from the position which claims that there is no truth; this brings to mind the saying from the Gospel: "he who loses himself finds himself."

Existentially, our relationship with the truth takes the form of a question. And, as a matter of fact,—to return to our subject—Congdon's entire art is a question. And it obliges the viewer to question, to relate. It takes its place on this level, too, as one of the significant poles of contemporary art, which as a whole no longer allows a calmly detached contemplation of the picture, but questions and implicates the viewer and addresses him with the word "you." —*Translated by Adrian Walker* □

*This interview originally appeared in *Litterae communionis* (now *Tracce*), a monthly journal published in Italy by the movement Communion and Liberation. The interviewer is Pigi Colognesi. Printed with the permission of the Foundation for Improving Understanding of the Arts.