New Blackfriars (2026), 1–13
doi:10.1017/nbf.2026.10132

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ARTICLE

Creative Intuition and Being in Art: J. Maritain and É. Gilson on Beauty

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(Received 26 January 2026; revised 26 January 2026; accepted 28 January 2026)

Abstract

This paper explores the enduring tension between rational technique (technē) and creative intuition in art, tracing its origins from Plato's *Ion* through Kant's notion of genius as nature's unteachable rule-giving via the productive imagination. It then examines Jacques Maritain's and Étienne Gilson's complementary Thomistic aesthetics as a unified resolution. Maritain locates creative intuition in the soul's spiritual unconscious, a pre-conceptual grasp of Being (*esse*) uniting intellect, imagination, and senses in a metaphysical act mirroring divine creation, where poetry reveals beauty as transcendent radiance. Gilson, conversely, emphasizes art as *cognitio factiva*: the craftsman's imposition of intelligible form on matter, producing an ontological entity that manifests Being's splendor objectively, independent of subjectivity. Addressing modern unbelief, the analysis affirms that beauty depends on Being, not belief; even non-theistic artists intuitively participate in *esse* through form, yielding works that testify to divine reality despite denial.

Keywords: art ontology; beauty; Being (esse); creative intuition; Thomistic aesthetics

1. Intuition vs. techne

> For not by art do they utter these things, but by divine influence; since, if they had fully learned by art to speak on one kind of theme, they would know how to speak on all. And for this reason, God takes away the mind of these men and uses them as his ministers, just as he does soothsayers and godly seers, in order that we who hear them may know that it is not they who utter these words of great price, when they are out of their wits, but that it is God himself who speaks and addresses us through them.[1]

In the *Ion*, Plato stages a powerful confrontation between two ways of understanding artistic excellence: rational skill and divine intuition. Through the probing questions

[1]Plato, *Ion*, in John M. Cooper, ed., *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997), 534b–d.

of Socrates, the dialogue dismantles the idea that the rhapsode, Ion, possesses a systematic craft (*technē*) in his recitation of Homer. Instead, Socrates insists that Ion's apparent mastery stems not from knowledge or method, but from divine inspiration – he is, in effect, a passive conduit of the Muses. Like a magnetic chain linking the poet, the performer, and the audience, each is seized by a force beyond himself. This striking image elevates intuition, *theia mania* – irrational, ecstatic, uncontrollable – above disciplined expertise, *technē*, and opens a dialectic opposition that remains with us until our very day: the seeming opposition of creativity and skill. Art, a cursory reading of Plato provocatively suggests, is not the domain of skilful technicians but of those touched by something higher and inexplicable.

This ancient tension between reasoned mastery and inspired madness echoes across centuries, reappearing in a strikingly transformed yet resonant form in modern aesthetic reflections. In what follows, we consider two modern philosophers – Jacques Maritain and Étienne Gilson – as offering not opposed poles but complementary elements of a unified philosophy of art.

2. Notes on the aesthetics of Immanuel Kant

Though far removed from Plato's framework of divine possession, Kant, too, locates the source of artistic creativity beyond the realm of conscious technique. What for Plato was the fury of the god speaking through the poet becomes, in Kant, the *spontaneous outpouring* of the *productive imagination* – an equally unteachable and inexplicable force. Both thinkers, though separated by vast philosophical and historical distances, converge in their conviction that the highest art arises not from methodical craft but from an intuitive power that defies rational analysis.

For Kant, the source of creative intuition lies in the mysterious interplay between nature and the imagination. In §46 of the *Critique of Judgment*, he defines genius as 'the innate mental disposition through which nature gives the rule to art',[2] emphasizing that true artistic creation is not governed by learned technique but by an inner receptivity to nature's prompting. Crucially, this means that the artist does not prescribe the rule to art, for, as Kant writes, 'it is not up to the genius to provide scientific rules for the products, but rather nature in him gives the rule to art'.[3] The very essence of geniality is not to operate by precepts but rather as the unwitting organ of nature's formative drive, giving artistic form to what cannot be methodically learned or taught.

This receptivity is exercised – not by ecstatic vision – but through what Kant calls the *productive imagination*, a faculty that does not merely reproduce what is seen but actively generates original forms. In §49, he deepens this idea by introducing *spirit* (*Geist*) as the 'animating principle of the mind' – the power to produce aesthetic ideas, or intuitions, that suggest more than they can articulate, stirring thought beyond the

[2]Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 186: 'Genius is the innate mental predisposition (*ingenium*) through which nature gives the rule to art. Since talent, as the capacity for producing something in a certain way, presupposes a determinate rule, it is not up to the genius to provide scientific rules for the products, but rather nature in him gives the rule to art'.

[3]Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 46, pp. 186–187.

bounds of concept. Crucially, Kant acknowledges that the genius 'does not know himself how the ideas come to him', underlining the intuitive and non-rational character of creative insight.[4] Thus, the creative process is not a matter of conscious formulation but of being the medium through which nature expresses itself – a process as irreducible to method as it is resistant to imitation. Plato's *theia mania* re-emerges, albeit in a godless form.

While Kant departs from Enlightenment rationalism by emphasizing originality and inspiration, his account remains tethered to the structured interplay of cognitive faculties – imagination and understanding – ordered towards a purposive aesthetic experience. Even *Geist*, the animating principle of genius, operates within the bounds of Kant's critical architecture, leaving little space for any sort of divine or supernatural intuition. Kant's elevation of 'genius' introduced a host of theoretical difficulties and provoked significant philosophical reactions.[5]

(a) The most palpable reaction to Kant's aesthetic theory appears in Schopenhauer, who rejects its merely rational architecture only to reaffirm – albeit in a darker key – the trope of divine inspiration. Rather than escaping the dialectic between *technē* and inspiration, Schopenhauer radicalizes it: genius, for him, is not the harmonious interplay of faculties, but their suspension. The true artist does not compose with a view to moral purpose or aesthetic judgment, but abandons will, striving, and selfhood altogether, becoming a pure medium of perception wholly absorbed in the contemplation of timeless, Platonic Ideas.[6]

(b) A further tension in Kant's account of genius, as William Desmond highlights in his article, 'Kant and the Terror of Genius', lies in its inherent equivocation – a symptom, Desmond argues, of Kant's deeper anxiety about the potentially unruly and destabilizing force of creative genius.[7] While the *Critique of Judgment* formally retains the structure and language of Enlightenment rationality, Desmond notes that it nevertheless had a decisive influence on Romanticism, with its 'sanctification of originality' and 'apotheosis of the creative artist'.[8] Kant insists on rational constraints – taste, judgment, education – as necessary correctives to the productive chaos of genius. This double movement reveals what Desmond calls the 'terror of genius': a fear that genius, if not disciplined, could dissolve into the very *Schwärmerei* Kant so strenuously opposed. In the long run, Kant's effort to balance originality with rational form was overtaken by a cultural movement that celebrated spontaneity, emotion,

[4] Ibid., 47.

[5] Ibid., 49, p. 192. Kant defines *Geist* as 'the animating principle of the mind', which produces aesthetic ideas that 'give more to think about than can be comprehended in a concept'.

[6] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation, vol. 1*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, 1969), 34. See especially his description of genius as 'the pure subject of knowing', detached from all willing and individuality.

[7] William Desmond, 'Kant and the Terror of Genius: Between Enlightenment and Romanticism', in Herman Parret, ed., *Kant's Ästhetik/Kant's Aesthetics/L'esthétique de Kant* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1998), pp. 594–614.

[8] Desmond, 'Kant and the Terror of Genius', p. 594.

and expressive individuality – ironically fulfilling the very danger Kant sought to restrain.

(c) Additionally, we may add that Kant's notion of genius, precisely in reducing it to the inexplicable, severs it – perhaps irredeemably – from *technē* altogether, which saw artistic excellence as the fruit of discipline, tradition, and learned craft.[9] In doing so, he inaugurates a long decline: genius becomes unteachable, undefinable, and eventually unaccountable. What was once the well-trained artist of *poiesis* becomes the Romantic 'chosen one' – and today, the media- and critic-curated figure of the avant-garde, whose 'genius' is judged not by beauty or truth, but by novelty, transgression, or critical fashion.[10] With Kant, genius begins to retreat from the realm of shared, embodied excellence and enters the domain of the mythic, until it vanishes entirely into the machinery of modern culture industries.

3. Jacques Maritain

> The reason for this is the fact that the reality with which the poet is confronted is the very object of intelligence, that is, the ocean of Being, in its absolute universality; whereas the reality with which the painter is confronted is the universe of visible matter, of Corporeal Being, through which alone the ocean of Being in its infinity comes to show through for him.[11]

In Jacques Maritain's theory of art, creative intuition is neither a sentiment nor a vague inspiration, but a precise act of non-conceptual knowledge rooted in the very metaphysical structure of the soul. It originates not at the surface of the intellect, but in what he calls the 'single root of the soul's powers', a centre buried within the *spiritual unconscious* – distinct from the Freudian unconscious – where intellect, imagination, sensation, desire, and love converge in a pre-reflective unity. The spiritual unconscious designates the deepest, pre-rational interiority of the soul – a preconceptual ground where the human subject does not think its existence but experiences it in a dark, ineffable act. This level of self-awareness, inaccessible to discursive reasoning, is where the soul apprehends itself not through essence but through a bare, silent grasp of its own act of existing, revealing a dimension of subjectivity that is at once intimate and impersonal. It is in this zone – where the soul, emptied of notions and memories, enters into a night of metaphysical silence – that natural mysticism becomes possible: a negative contact with the Absolute, not by conceptualizing God as object but by touching the radiance of divine being reflected in the mirror of one's own existence. This spiritual unconscious is thus not a void of ignorance but a luminous depth, where human

[9] On *technē* and the ancient understanding of artistic excellence, see Plato, *Ion* and *Republic*, Book X; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI, chs. 4–5.

[10] Tom Wolfe, *The Painted Word* (New York: Picador, 1975); *From Bauhaus to Our House* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981). Wolfe satirically identifies the modern trend of 'genius' as a media-manufactured avant-garde, defined by theory, novelty, and critical gatekeeping rather than traditional standards of beauty or craftsmanship.

[11] Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), p. 129.

existence, in its pure actuality, becomes the site of an indirect, improperly immediate communion with the Source of all being.[12]

Hence, the intuition that gives rise to poetry – and art more generally – does not proceed from rational deduction or empirical concept-formation. Rather, it is a *knowledge in act*, a determined but non-conceptual grasp of reality, and in this sense, a direct contact with *Being* itself before its abstraction into form.

To understand the status of this intuition, we must reference the first striking source of Maritain's aesthetic theory in Thomas Aquinas, more precisely his elaboration of the emanation of the soul's powers. As the soul comes into existence, its various faculties – intellect, imagination, and sense – flow from its essence in a fixed order of natural priority.[13] The more perfect powers, such as intellect, emanate first and mediate the existence and operation of the less perfect ones. 'In this ontological procession', Maritain writes, 'one power or faculty proceeds from the essence of the soul through the medium or instrumentality of another – which emanates beforehand'.[14] Thus, imagination flows from the soul through the intellect, and the senses through imagination. This metaphysical layering ensures that even the lower faculties are ontologically subordinated to the intellect, which is itself ordered to *Being* and *Truth*.

Creative intuition emerges in the soul, where it is 'free from the workings of rational knowledge and the disciplines of logical thought'. In the free life of the intellect, operating within the spiritual unconscious, the soul can attain an act of knowledge that is not mediated by concept, definition, or logic. It is a direct, though often ineffable, intellectual grasp of the real in its existential and affective concreteness. This grasp is not preparatory to conceptualization or abstraction, like the *intelligible species* of Scholastic epistemology; rather, it is already a fully formed act, veiled only by the obscurity of its preconscious origin.[15]

Yet this act is not ontologically inert; it draws the soul into a silent yet affective participation in the radiance of *being*. *Beauty*, like *truth* and *goodness*, must be understood as a dynamic transcendental – not a static attribute but an expressive mode of being's

[12]Maritain's theory of the spiritual unconscious and natural mysticism is significantly shaped by his sustained engagement with Eastern mysticism, particularly the metaphysical and ascetical traditions of Vedanta and Yoga. This influence is mediated in part through his student Olivier Lacombe and explicitly developed in Maritain's 1938 essay 'L'expérience mystique naturelle et le vide', published in 1956. Jacques Maritain, 'L'expérience mystique naturelle et le vide', in *Quatre essais sur l'esprit dans sa condition charnelle* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1956). See also Olivier Lacombe and Louis Gardet, *L'expérience du Soi* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1981), esp. pp. 161–170, for a comparative exposition of Indian mystical experience and Maritain's doctrine of natural mysticism. James Arraj, *Mysticism, Metaphysics and Maritain: On the Road to the Spiritual Unconscious* (Inner Growth Books and Videos, 2011), ch. 3, 'Mysticism of the Self', pp. 89–116.

[13]Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 77, a. 6: 'Whence it is clear that all the powers of the soul, whether their subject be the soul alone, or the composite, flow from the essence of the soul, as from their principle; because it has already been said that the accident is caused by the subject according as it is actual, and is received into it according as it is in potentiality'.

[14]Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), p. 107.

[15]Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 85, a. 2.

self-communication.[16] The creative intuition, then, is not just an inner resonance; it is the soul's *connatural* response to the call of being in its fullness – a moment where *truth* is glimpsed not as abstraction, but as radiance, and *goodness* not as duty, but as delight. It is this affective-ontological unity that undergirds Maritain's metaphysical aesthetics and roots poetic experience within the very dynamism of *esse* itself.[17]

Crucially, Maritain insists that such intuition arises from the totality of the human person – 'sense, imagination, intellect, love, desire, instinct, blood, and spirit together'.[18] This entails not a poetic exaggeration but a metaphysical claim. Because all the faculties of the soul flow from a single essence, they are not simply juxtaposed, but interiorly united, where they 'are all, within the intellect, stirred and activated by the light of the Illuminating Intellect'. This unity at the level of *Being* explains how the poetic act can integrate rational, affective, and sensory elements without reduction to any one of them.

The heart of Maritain's reflections mirrors at least two crucial features of Thomistic metaphysics: first, that the *essence* of humanity underlies and unites all its faculties; and second, that the *act of being* (*actus essendi*) is the innermost dynamism of all reality – including *essence* – as the *actualitas omnium actuum*, the actuality of all actualities and the perfection of all perfections.[19] This Thomistic insight allows us to understand *being* not as a static property but a *pure act* (*actus purus*), as self-diffusive, irreducible, and foundational. Maritain's existential meditation echoes this Thomistic metaphysical structure by situating mystical self-awareness not in an intuition of *essence* (*quidditas*), but in a non-conceptual contact with the *esse* – the sheer act that makes the soul real.[20] This aligns with Aquinas's doctrine that all created beings receive their being as an act that perfects their essence, which is in potency to it; the essence limits and receives the act, but the *being* itself flows from God – the *ipsum esse subsistens*, the one pure subsisting act.[21] For Maritain, when the soul touches its own existence in metaphysical silence, it is not grasping itself as an object of knowledge but participating reflectively in the very gift of being.

[16] Alice Ramos, *Dynamic Transcendentals: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty from a Thomistic Perspective* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2012), esp. pp. 4–9, where she develops the idea of the transcendentals as inherently dynamic, expressive of the self-diffusive nature of being.

[17] See also the enlightening study: Michael Waddell, 'Integrating Beauty: Reflections on the Psychology, Ontology, and Etiology of Aquinas ST 1.5.4', *Nova et Vetera* 15, no. 4 (2017): 1019–1045.

[18] Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), p. 111.

[19] Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de potentia*, ed. Mandonnet, vol. 2 (Paris, 1925), q. 7, a. 2, ad 9.

[20] The legitimacy of Intensive Thomism rests on its rigorous fidelity to Thomas Aquinas's original metaphysical insight that *esse* – the act of being – is not merely one among many aspects of being, but its deepest ontological core and the *actus omnium actuum*. Cornelio Fabro reclaims this foundational intuition by distinguishing it sharply from later 'essentialist' readings, arguing that Aquinas's metaphysics is animated by the inner dynamism of esse as pure act. Ferraro affirms this interpretive line as both textually faithful and philosophically potent, describing Fabro's approach as a profound rereading of Aquinas in light of his doctrine of *actus essendi*, which reinstates the centrality of existence as the metaphysical principle of all actuality and perfection. See: Christian Ferraro, 'L'atto d'essere nel "tomismo intensivo" di Cornelio Fabro', *Philosophica* 1 (Rome, 2017): 6–174. Ferraro affirms Fabro's interpretation of Aquinas as recovering the centrality of *esse* – the act of being – as *actus omnium actuum*, distinguishing this from essentialist readings.

[21] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 3, a. 4; I, q. 4, a. 1; and *De Ente et Essentia*, chs. 4–5.

Furthermore, Maritain draws a theological analogy to clarify this further: God's creative Idea is not reactive to external things – it is formative and forming, determined solely by God's own essence. In poetic intuition, by analogy, the artist does not imitate external forms in a passive or derivative way. Rather, the poet expresses something interior and original: a movement of *Being* becoming manifest through the soul's creative act. What is expressed in the work is a created and creative participation in the poet's own being, and ultimately, a fragmentary and enigmatic participation in the transcendent *Essence* of the Creator. 'Poetry proceeds from the totality of man', Maritain writes, 'and the first obligation imposed on the poet is to consent to be brought back to the hidden place ... where this totality exists in the state of a creative source'.[22]

Art, in its highest vocation, then, mirrors the mystery of creation itself. Just as the Creator calls the cosmos into being through a pure act of will – breathing unity, order, beauty, and intelligibility into what was once nothing – the artist, too, draws forth from the depths of interior silence something never before seen. The work of art is a created and creative participation in the being of the poet or painter; it bears the imprint of the artist's soul, transfigured through imagination into tangible form. Yet this form is not a mere copy of the artist's self – it is a fragment, a glimmer, charged with suggestion, echoing not only the personal but the eternal. For in expressing the inner world, the artist also touches upon the source of all being, participating – however darkly and enigmatically – in the transcendent *Essence* of the Creator. Art thus becomes not only a human utterance but a metaphysical sign: a symbol that points beyond itself, whispering of divine realities.

In this way, art assumes a sacramental character – not in conferring *grace* in beauty *ex opere operato* but in revealing the sacred through the sensible, allowing beauty to be not just seen, but contemplated as a threshold into the divine.

True, meaningful art, thus, originates in the hidden ontological centre of man, where the soul contacts its own being. Creative intuition is, therefore, not merely a poetic phenomenon of avant-garde boundary-breaking, but a metaphysical endeavour, mirroring the ground of existence itself. What emerges through the artist is not only a form but a silent testimony to the act by which *Being* gives itself. This gives the most robust foundation of creative intuition in general and reminds us how aesthetic beauty – beauty itself – is always linked to a metaphysical understanding of the person.

4. Etienne Gilson

4.1 Art as cognition of being

Standing as a harmonious counterpoint to Maritain's focus on the artist's individual meditative intuition, Étienne Gilson emphasizes the ontological significance of the work of art itself and the skilful mastery of the craft necessary to realize it. Where Maritain excavates the interior dynamism of the artist's soul and the operation of creative intuition, Gilson turns us outward towards the reality of the work and working itself, insisting with philosophical rigor that the artwork is not merely expressive but ontologically grounded.

[22] Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, p. 111.

For Gilson, art is a metaphysical act – a true action, not conceptual but real, through which *Being* manifests itself. The key to understanding Gilson's philosophy of art lies equally in his fidelity to Aquinas's doctrine of *esse* as the *actus omnium actuum*, and in his extension of this doctrine to the order of making (*ars*). The artist is not primarily a subject expressing himself but a craftsman whose form bestows *Being* as form upon matter. He departs from modern aesthetics in a radical yet precise way: art is not the expression of thought; it is the production of a thing – a being in the full metaphysical sense: 'a painting is not a thought, it is a thing made visible'.[23] He rejects the Kantian bifurcation between knowing and making, reviving instead the classical *cognitio factiva* – the knowledge expressed in and through making. Artistic knowledge is not speculative but productive: it culminates not in a concept but in a form instantiated in matter.

Gilson reminds us that the 'objective' ground of beauty lies in 'the splendor of Being as known',[24] echoing the Thomistic axiom *pulchrum est splendor veritatis*.[25] 'Artistic creation' is not imitation of nature, nor expression of feeling, but the production of a form that enables *Being* to 'shine forth in matter'.[26] Thus, the artist is a metaphysical agent – not a dreamer, not an analyst, but one who causes *Being* to appear under the mode of the beautiful. Beauty, he insists, is 'an ontological reality, not a psychological state'.[27] It is tied to *Being* not by analogy but by participation.

This warrants a crucial metaphysical clarification: the form with which the artist works is not a 'concept' in the modern, abstract sense, but rather the original and intelligible structure that the human intellect discovers in reality itself – a form understood in the Aristotelian and Thomistic tradition as the intrinsic principle of order and actuality within things. Thus, art is the production of a form in matter, a 'transference' of *Being* through form.[28] The realist basis of the form as relating to *Being* is significant: it actualizes the potency of matter and renders it a substance – a unified whole. It is in the unified, integral, radiant whole that the artwork shines forth as beautiful. The Thomistic ontology of form and matter, applied here, secures the objectivity of the artwork's existence and its integrity as a thing. It is not reducible to psychological intention, nor to cultural function: it is a being – *ens artisticum* – with its own mode of subsistence.

The metaphysical independence of the artwork sets Gilson decisively apart from both Romantic subjectivism and postmodern constructivism. Against the Romantic impulse to reduce art to a projection of interior emotion, and against the postmodern tendency to dissolve it into cultural semiotics or linguistic play, Gilson insists that art is a metaphysical act – a real engagement with *Being*. Neither an expression of the self nor the fruit of a social construction, the work of art is a forged presence. In the act of creating, the artist participates – analogously – in the fecundity of *esse*, that

[23] Étienne Gilson, *Painting and Reality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), p. 169.

[24] Étienne Gilson, *The Arts of the Beautiful* (Dalkey Archive Press, 2000), p. 32.

[25] Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 39, a. 8; and *In Divinis Nominibus*, c. 4, lect. 5.

[26] Étienne Gilson, *The Arts of the Beautiful* (Dalkey Archive Press, 2000), p. 49: 'A work of art is beautiful when it possesses that unity, proportion, and clarity by which the form of a thing shines through its matter and renders it intelligible to sense and intellect'.

[27] Étienne Gilson, *The Arts of the Beautiful* (Dalkey Archive Press, 2000), p. 35.

[28] Étienne Gilson, *Forms and Substances in the Arts* (Dalkey Archive Press, 2001), p. 22.

fundamental act of existence which is the very core of reality. While the artist does not create *Being ex nihilo* (as only God does), he nonetheless imposes intelligible form upon matter, drawing out from potentiality a new actuality, and in doing so, allows *Being* to be seen anew, under a fresh aspect. The artwork is conceived as a metaphysical synthesis, wherein matter and form (*idea*) are unified in a singular instance of beauty, disclosing the splendor of *Being* itself. In this light, art assumes a quasi-sacramental dimension – an incarnate sign that reveals the radiance of truth through form.

4.2 The ontology of art

Throughout his writings, Gilson targets the modern reduction of art to pure subjectivity – whether under the banner of Romantic genius, Hegelian dialectics, or formalist self-referentiality. These approaches do not deepen our understanding of art but sever it from the very *Being* that grants it intelligibility. When art is treated as mere psychological expression, dialectical moment, or autonomous form, it loses its ontological weight and becomes conceptually orphaned – a flicker of consciousness rather than a new presence in the world. Gilson accuses such tendencies of evacuating art of its metaphysical dignity, denying the artist's true vocation: the bringing forth of a new being – a reality that is both perceptible and metaphysically grounded. The artist does not create *truth* but reveals it – through form, through matter, through making.

The stakes could not be higher. For Gilson, *beauty* cannot be severed from *being* without forfeiting its very intelligibility. It is not a free-floating aesthetic 'value', but a transcendental property of being itself – *splendor formae* – radiating *truth* and *goodness* in sensible form. To divorce *beauty* from *being* is not merely to shift philosophical perspective, but to undermine art's ontological foundation and render *beauty* arbitrary, subjective, and ultimately hollow. Once *beauty* is no longer recognized as a mode of *being* known by the intellect and desired by the will, it becomes an aesthetic simulacrum – detached from *truth*, immune to *goodness*, and thus incapable of signifying anything beyond itself. *Realism* alone, as Gilson insists, secures the proper metaphysical ground in which *beauty* can be both perceived and created.[29]

In natural beings, form is intrinsic and ontologically grounded in substantial being. It arises per se through a metaphysical principle of generation or actualization internal to nature itself. The form of a tree, for instance, is the principle that organizes its matter into a living substance; it exists as a substantial form – independent of any external intellect or intention. Nature possesses its own causal intelligibility and generates forms immanently, through natural causes.

In contrast, the form of an artistic being does not arise from nature but from the operation of an intellect exterior to the artefact: the artist. It is imposed upon matter extrinsically – not violently, but creatively – so as to give it an accidental unity that does not amount to a new substance, but a composite entity whose being is ontologically derived from the human agent. The artefact has no substantial form of its own in the same sense as a natural being; rather, its form is intentional, instrumental, and aesthetically oriented.

[29] Étienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1952), p. 68.

While the artwork lacks the substantial independence of a natural being, it gains instead an ontological density of a different kind – through the *form's* visibility and expressivity. The artistic *form* is not an abstract design nor a Platonic *idea*, but a real, sensible structure that instantiates order and makes *beauty* present. Its finality is not natural subsistence, but manifestation – manifestation of *being* through the medium of *form*. Thus, the artwork participates in *being* not as a naturally subsisting entity but as a mediated presence, a *being-made-to-be-seen*.

The artist, then, does not impose an *idea* onto inert matter; he brings into actuality a singular *form* that did not previously exist. This *form* is a concrete and individualized act – a singular expression of order, proportion, and unity – embodied in the sensible. Thus, the *form* is both ontological and perceptible; it makes the work to be, and it allows the work to be known. Without it, the artwork could not exist as a coherent object, nor could it be apprehended as *beautiful*.

Gilson reaffirms the classical insight that *form* is the first principle of *beauty: beauty* arises when *being* is present in a *form* that allows it to shine forth with clarity, harmony, and radiance. Therefore, the ontology of art is inseparable from its *form* – not as a shell that conceals but as the very transparency through which *being* is revealed in the sensible world. In scholastic tradition – especially in Aquinas, whom Gilson follows closely – *beauty* is defined as *id quod visum placet* ('that which, when seen, pleases'), but more precisely as the *splendor formae super partes materiae* – 'the splendor of form shining over the parts of matter'.[30]

In forging artistic *form*, the artist exercises what Aquinas calls the *liberating power of the intellect* – a power not bound to speculative abstraction but free to integrate sensory, affective, and rational faculties into a unified act of expression. Gilson's *cognitio factiva* thus mirrors Aquinas's insight that the intellect is not confined to conceptual knowledge but may produce signs that mediate *being* through *delight*. The resulting *form* is not simply intelligible – it is delightfully intelligible, evoking not only recognition but contemplation. In this sense, the work of art becomes a site where cognition and *delight* converge, and where the *form* becomes the very possibility of perceiving the *splendor of being*.

This formula reveals the essential link: *beauty* is not simply the presence of *form* but its radiance – its capacity to shine forth, to reveal itself as harmonious and complete. Without *form*, there is no *splendor*; and without *splendor, beauty* cannot be apprehended. *Form* is to *beauty* what actuality is to intelligibility – the enabling ground that makes *beauty* not only possible but perceivable.

At the heart of Étienne Gilson's aesthetics lies a resounding fidelity to the Thomistic doctrine of *esse* – *being* as *act* – and to the metaphysical realism it entails. Gilson's originality does not lie in novelty, but in precision: he does not invent a new aesthetic metaphysics, but retrieves, with philosophical exactitude, Aquinas's ontological vision. To speak of *form* is to invoke the very principle by which *being* becomes knowable – and thus, lovable. Art, for Gilson, becomes intelligible only when situated within this realist metaphysics of participation, where *beauty* is not a mere psychological experience or cultural construct, but a transcendental property of *being*, perceived

[30]Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 5, a. 4; Étienne Gilson, *Forms and Substances in the Arts* (Dalkey Archive Press, 2001), p. 97-98.

through the *splendor of form*. The artwork, though it does not exist *per se* as a natural substance, participates analogically in *esse* through the order imposed by the artist's intellect. In this act, the artist does not express himself but becomes an instrument through which *being* achieves a new visibility.

5. Art without belief

Having established the foundational contributions of Jacques Maritain and Étienne Gilson, it becomes necessary to confront a pressing and contemporary question: what of the artist who does not share this metaphysical conviction? In fact, we are encountering a profound metaphysical dilemma: can art retain its ontological dignity when belief in Being is lost? Can beauty be borne from hands that deny the source from which beauty ultimately flows? In short: can an artist who denies God, or even denies that God is Being, create something truly beautiful?

We must answer: yes – but not in the way the question presumes.

(a) Beauty Depends on Being, Not Belief

The artist's belief – or unbelief – does not change the metaphysical structure of beauty. Beauty is not a subjective projection, nor the result of ideology. It is an objective reality grounded in form and in being. Thus, a work may radiate beauty by virtue of its formal integrity, unity, and radiance, even if its maker consciously rejects the source of these qualities. In essence, beauty is ontologically anterior to belief. The painting, sculpture, poem, or musical composition does not require the artist's assent to metaphysical truth in order to participate in that truth. Like a scientist who discovers gravitational laws without confessing the divine order of the cosmos (which would ultimately present the ground even of gravity), the artist can manifest beauty without naming its cause.

(b) Intuition of Form Is Already Intuition of Being

When an artist shapes matter into a *form* that moves the soul, he does more than arrange elements – he responds to the ontological structure of reality. In Thomistic terms, *form* is the principle of *being's* intelligibility. To apprehend *form*, even tacitly, is already to touch *esse*. This intuition is not discursive; it is a *connatural* grasp of order, unity, and radiance – what Aquinas identifies as the marks of *beauty*. Even if the artist calls it inspiration or chance, he participates in *cognitio factiva* – a making that is also a knowing. He does not create *being* but brings potential into act, echoing the metaphysical structure of creation. Thus, even unbelieving artists, by rightly intuiting and embodying *form*, unknowingly commune with *being. Art*, in this sense, is always metaphysical before it is ideological.

(c) Beauty Can Exist Without Its Confession

The third response is perhaps the most humbling. It is not the artist who gives *beauty* its power, but *beauty* that testifies despite the artist. Many of the greatest works of modernity – marked by existential doubt, silence, even despair – nonetheless radiate order, mystery, and *form*. They stir the soul because they carry within

them the mark of *being*. In Thomistic terms, *pulchrum* is not reducible to subjective confession but is the *splendor formae super partes materiae* – 'the splendor of form shining over the parts of matter'.[31] The artist may intend irony, but the work may manifest proportion. He may invoke chaos, but the *form* may still disclose order.

Therefore, while the artist may not believe in God, and may even reject the notion of *Being* as transcendent, the very act of creating *beauty* places him – knowingly or not – within the stream of metaphysical reality. He cannot create *beauty* without *Being*, for *beauty* is the splendor of *Being*. He may not believe in God, but when he shapes a work that truly is – one that holds, that speaks – he becomes an unwitting participant in the *logos*. God's presence, in such cases, is not proclaimed but silent – a hidden radiance within the *form* itself.

So, to the question: if God is *Being*, and *Being* is *beautiful*, how can the artist create *beauty* without God?

> We answer: the artist cannot create *beauty* without *Being* – but he may do so without knowing he is touching *Being*. He may not believe in God, but the *beauty* he brings forth still testifies to God, even if he denies the voice that speaks through him.

In this way, every *beautiful* work becomes a fragmentary epiphany – a splinter of transcendent light refracted through the prism of human hands.

6. Conclusion

In the final analysis, the aesthetic philosophies of Maritain and Gilson converge upon a single metaphysical affirmation: that *art is a privileged site of Being's self-disclosure*. It is not the product of fantasy nor a plaything of culture, but a serious act – rooted in ontology, radiant with truth, and charged with the mystery of form.

When the philosophy of art is unmoored from metaphysical foundations – when beauty is relativized and art instrumentalized – their Thomistic vision stands as a quiet defiance. It reminds us that every act of true artistic creation is an analogue of the actus essendi – that primal act by which all things are and shine. Art, properly understood, becomes a metaphysical threshold, a luminous passage through which the real breaks into appearance. And the artist, far from being a romantic solitary or a cultural technician, is revealed as a contemplative maker – a steward of form, a mediator of being. In fidelity to esse, he bears witness to what is – by shaping what appears. And in doing so, he restores to beauty its dignity: not as a pleasure, but as a splendor; not as sentiment, but as truth made visible.

From this metaphysical depth arises a serious demand: the responsibility of the artist. This responsibility is not political, propagandistic, or moralistic in the usual sense. Maritain is clear: 'The artist has no duty to the State or to public opinion; his

[31] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 5, a. 4.

sole responsibility is to the work, and to truth.'[32] But this truth is metaphysical, not factual. The artist must 'consent to descend into himself, to suffer the travail of form, to allow Being to take shape in his medium'.[33] He must be faithful to what he receives, not to what he controls.

[32] Jacques Maritain, *The Responsibility of the Artist* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960), p. 26.
[33] Ibid., p. 28.

Cite this article: Jan Christoph Bentz, 'Creative Intuition and Being in Art: J. Maritain and É. Gilson on Beauty', *New Blackfriars* (2026), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2026.10132