

May 2013

Sketch of the Artist as a Young God

Robert Brimlow
St. John Fisher College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/verbum>



Part of the Religion Commons

[How has open access to Fisher Digital Publications benefited you?](#)

Recommended Citation

Brimlow, Robert (2013) "Sketch of the Artist as a Young God," *Verbum*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 2 , Article 15.
Available at: <https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/verbum/vol10/iss2/15>

This document is posted at <https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/verbum/vol10/iss2/15> and is brought to you for free and open access by Fisher Digital Publications at St. John Fisher College. For more information, please contact fisherpub@sjfc.edu.

Sketch of the Artist as a Young God

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"This is an old-fashioned passage expressing an old-fashioned view about old-fashioned music in a book that is no longer fashionable to read. These are all characteristics that draw me to it; those and the coincidence that I have been struggling with the notion of *imitatio dei* – the imitation of God – in my work. That also is an old-fashioned notion from a spirituality of another time, but I believe it remains an important one that commends itself to contemporary Christianity. I want to explore how we might gain some insight into this spiritual idea by examining a particular type of aesthetic experience, and there is some irony in this approach. It seems obvious that imitation in art is something that we do not prize or praise. In fact, we consider imitation in art to be, at best, inauthentic and, at worst, cause for claims of forgery. In art we prize originality and fresh perspectives, so much so that the 'classicism' Mann mentions in the first sentence had already been moribund for over a hundred years when he wrote, surpassed by romanticism, which was surpassed by the impressionist, which was surpassed by the modern, which... well, you get the idea. Perhaps the "sophisticated" of his time would be more inclined to appreciate Igor Stravinsky or Alban Berg rather than a music that had once been innovative a long while before. But these issues are too large, even though I touch on them. In fact, almost every paragraph of this essay should be expanded, claims explored and defended more carefully, and other examples examined. Alas, I lack not only the time but also the erudition and the skill. So I must content myself to do only what I am able – hence the "sketch" of the title – and beg indulgence.

No photo
available

Dr. Robert Brimlow

Sketch of the Artist as a Young God

“...That is a perfect piece of music. Classicism – yes, it isn't sophisticated at all, but it is great. I don't say: *For* it is great, because there is such a thing as unsophisticated greatness; but this is at bottom much more intimate. Tell me, what do you think about greatness? I find there is something uncomfortable about facing it eye to eye, it is a test of courage – can one really look it in the eye? You can't stand it, you give way.... [It is] a manifestation of the highest energy – not at all abstract, but without an object, energy in a void, in pure ether – where else in the universe does such a thing appear?... But here you have it, such music is energy itself, yet not an idea, rather in its actuality. I call your attention to the fact that that is almost the definition of God. *Imitatio dei* – I am surprised that it is not forbidden. Perhaps it is.”¹

Thomas Mann

This is an old-fashioned passage expressing an old-fashioned view about old-fashioned music in a book that is no longer fashionable to read. These are all characteristics that draw me to it; those and the coincidence that I have been struggling with the notion of *imitatio dei* – the imitation of God – in my work. That also is an old-fashioned notion from a spirituality of another time, but I believe it remains an important one that commends itself to contemporary

¹ Thomas Mann, *Dr. Faustus*. Tr. H. T. Lowe-Porter, N.Y., Everyman's Library, 1992, p. 77.

Christianity. I want to explore how we might gain some insight into this spiritual idea by examining a particular type of aesthetic experience, and there is some irony in this approach. It seems obvious that imitation in art is something that we do not prize or praise. In fact, we consider imitation in art to be, at best, inauthentic and, at worst, cause for claims of forgery. In art we prize originality and fresh perspectives, so much so that the ‘classicism’ Mann mentions in the first sentence had already been moribund for over a hundred years when he wrote, surpassed by romanticism, which was surpassed by the impressionist, which was surpassed by the modern, which... well, you get the idea. Perhaps the “sophisticated” of his time would be more inclined to appreciate Igor Stravinsky or Alban Berg rather than a music that had once been innovative a long while before. But these issues are too large, even though I touch on them. In fact, almost every paragraph of this essay should be expanded, claims explored and defended more carefully, and other examples examined. Alas, I lack not only the time but also the erudition and the skill. So I must content myself to do only what I am able – hence the “sketch” of the title – and beg indulgence.

The phenomenon Thomas Mann points to in this passage is one that, I believe, occurs fairly often to those of us who seek encounters with great art, though I am not as sure we attend to the experience as much as we should in order to reflect upon it, or even identify it in the way Mann does. He never uses the words ‘beauty’ or ‘perfection,’ but those seem to be the most accurate explanations of what he calls “greatness.” If we are to proceed in this admittedly old-fashioned way, then *greatness* in art needs some sort of explication, even if the defining words themselves are rather vague.

The kind of perfection Mann is focusing on is musical perfection, and that

perfection almost invariably displays itself in the music of Bach², Mozart and Beethoven. I do not mean to imply that we can find perfection only in those composers' works. Even in some “lesser lights” we can experience startling beauty and greatness on occasion in individual works or even in brief passages of longer works; I am thinking here of Bruch, Elgar, Couperin and Chabrier to name a few. Nor do I wish to imply that greatness is restricted to the canon of classical music because perfection certainly appears in contemporary artists of different genres such as Miles Davis and Stevie Ray Vaughan. Indeed, it is possible that Jay Z and Beyonce may have music that is beautiful or perfect in the way Mann describes, but I am not a competent judge (are they really as good as Coleman Hawkins and Billie Holliday?). And of course, what I discuss in this very limited realm is also applicable to other, entirely different art forms as well: from painting to sculpture and dance. The discussion of artistic perfection is truly only limited by my inability to speak coherently about the wide variety of art forms developed over many different eras.

What Bach, Mozart and Beethoven have in common as paradigmatic cases – and also what makes their music the clearest or simplest medium of the experience of perfection – is that we can focus on their purely instrumental works. No doubt operas like *Fidelio* and *Don Giovanni*, or even any particular song with lyrics, such as (to be contemporary again) Leonard Cohen's *Alleluia*, might well be great works of art and exhibit what Mann describes, but it is much more difficult to discern the kind of perfection Mann has identified. Instrumental music, unlike opera or songs with lyrics, is about nothing else but itself. In contrast, a significant part of our experience and appreciation of *Don Giovanni* is about its referent – the Don Juan legend –

² Yes, Bach is a baroque composer, not a classical one. It would be best to get used to giving me some latitude early.

and how well the opera corresponds with, or expands upon, that legend, which exists outside of the work: the insight the opera gives us to the personalities and flaws of the primary characters, how one cooperates with seduction, and so on. Likewise, through its lyrics, *Alleluia* evokes King David's sinful rapture with Bathsheba and it also transports us to the singer's kitchen table where we share his pain and joy. These are wonderful experiences, and often one says that music can transport us in ways like these to other places or within others' souls and heartache, but that is not quite the experience that Mann is trying to isolate.

The instrumental music Mann points to is about nothing else but itself. It is concrete, particular and immediate; and it does not bring us elsewhere but only deeper into itself. At this point one might object and offer something like Schubert's *Trout Quintet* as a counterexample of instrumental music that is about something other than itself. I am not sure. While that piece might well suggest (in a very curious way) an auditory resemblance to the visual aspects of a fish, or make reference to the trout's swimming in a stream through the tonal undulations of the piano, still I think the work commands our presence and attention to it alone: it demands our attention and focus be on it rather than send our attention away to the Colorado River – or wherever trout happen to cavort. Yet, the more I think about it, the more it occurs to me that I can't make that argument, or that if I try I would be sacrificing truth (another old-fashioned value?) in favor of pride and stubbornness. There is definitely something to the objection, especially when I think of other works such as Richard Strauss's tone poems *Don Quixote* and *Der Rosenkavalier*.

So rather than struggle with the point, let me talk about an uncontroversial example of non-referring instrumental music – Bach's *Brandenburg Concertos*. They are *about*

nothing but themselves and refer to nothing else (if they refer at all). They exist only in the playing of them and only while they are played; the score is something else again. While the concertos may exhibit certain theoretical aspects or traits such as counterpoint or polyphony, those aspects are concretized in the sound of the music itself and do not exist as idealized principles in the works. Let's stop here and look at that claim more closely.

It is only by thinking about it – that is, by abstracting theoretical features from the music - that we can apprehend those features and realize their “existence.” It is our thought process, specifically reflection that brings forth the existence of the theoretical “real” but only in a sense. Bach did not bring the theoretical concept of 'polyphony' into concrete existence in a few bars of the first movement of the first concerto; rather, we understand that what Bach did was give a concrete and particular example of polyphony an integral place in the flow of the music, whether he consciously intended to or not; and I think it was not an intentional choice. It just is not plausible to believe that a composer says, “I need to insert this theoretical construct here.” I think it is more likely that a composer or artist allows great music to unfold of itself that she becomes the vehicle through which the greatness of the art develops and grows. Sometimes it seems as if the artist’s intrusion is a primary cause of the ruin of a work.

The way we recognize the theoretical concept in a piece of music is by a process of reflection, thinking about it. In other words, we take a particular and concrete element of the music and abstract from it in order to see if that abstraction corresponds to another abstract concept contained within the corpus of music theory. This process of abstracting from the concretized performance of the music is very similar to what I spoke about above regarding the lyrics of *Don Giovanni* and *Alleluia*, and is also (by the way) what Strauss enables and

encourages us to do in *Don Quixote* and *Der Rosenkavalier*. They all foster us to move away from the immediate experience of the music to another position of a mediated reflection on the experience of the music's referent. I do the same thing functionally whether I say, “Oh, that's Don Quixote fighting the windmills” or “Bach cleverly used that contrapuntal structure here.” Rather than experiencing just the music-phenomenon directly and without filters, our reflection upon the experience while we are having it separates us from the experience.³ It is a form of “giving way” in Mann's terms.

Now surely not all instances of “giving way” or “taking a step back” result from the exquisite discomfort great art can cause us when we are fully receptive to it. Nonetheless, there is a certain separation that takes place whenever we engage in abstraction. While it is true that abstraction may bring us closer to understanding the phenomenon, it can only do that by putting distance between us and that which we wish to consider. After all, the Latin root of 'consider' is *cum sidera* - that is, “with the stars”: to consider something is to regard it from the perspective of the celestial bodies – from a great distance.

In many ways considering the relation of the musical score to the music-performed helps make this notion of separation clearer. The music-performed is something distinct from the notes written on the page. The score is an abstract expression of the (what may well be) similarly abstract music and is written in a specialized kind of notation. On the other hand, the music-performed is itself the particularization of the abstract music that is written: the performance is the actual or actualized music whereas the abstracted score stands at some

3 Analogously, nothing is less humorous than trying to analyze why a joke is funny. There aren't a lot of laughs in Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*.

removed distance. Perhaps the best way to understand this relation between score and music-performed is that the score stands as a written description of performance in general⁴.

In the selection, Mann speaks of a particular, concrete performance, and in his discussion of it he says that it is great, intimate – a “manifestation of the highest energy... energy itself, yet not as idea {i.e., not abstractly}, rather in its actuality” and he goes on to say that this is “almost the definition of God.” But for all of this, I think Mann overstates the case.

I am not quite as willing as Mann to call this kind of artistic phenomenon an “almost definition of God” - which, by the way, I would agree to be the equivalent of an “imitation of God.” I think, rather, that what great art does is offer an imitation of God's art. In the same way, there is a significant difference between imitating Picasso – such as Anthony Hopkins did in *Surviving Picasso* or Antonio Banderas in *33 Dias* – and imitating Picasso's work. There is a similar difference in this case: the music-performed which Mann describes more nearly imitates God's creative act rather than God himself – though perhaps both offer a reflection of God, perhaps in a glass darkly.

So if that revision does not harm Mann's meaning over much, we can rephrase Mann's claim and insight that great art is an imitation of God's art in that it exhibits beauty and perfection such as only God's works exhibit: transcendent, other-worldly, God-touched. I imagine it might be tempting to think of the artist sitting in her garret room waiting for the

4 One way to understand how the score is a written description of performance in general is by attending to the different ways different performers play the “same” piece of music. Prosaically, just compare the time it takes for different violinists to play the Chaconne from Bach's Partita no. 2 on youtube.com. While they are quite different, all of them particularize the same score.

moment to be God-touched herself. That seems to be the root of 'inspiration' – to have the breath of God breathed into one's lungs, as Adam first experienced it. But that picture, bequeathed to us by nineteenth century romanticism, tends to lose sight of the hard, grinding work that must both precede and follow the inspiration: the enormous amount of training an artist must endure to have her talent developed, as well as the weeks or years a performer/artist devotes to creating a single particular instance of a singular perfection or beauty,. It is important to make explicit what the last part of that sentence implies. Perfection and beauty are not concepts that the great work of art refers to, nor are they attributes that a work possesses (though we often seem to speak that way). Rather perfection and beauty are so integral to the work that they are inseparable from it: perfection is what the work is; it is not something in addition or ancillary to it.

I am quite convinced that no successful creator of great art has perfection in mind as a goal to be achieved when she creates. The driven-ness we call “the drive to perfect a work” is probably less a desire to achieve perfection as such and more a desire to fully and completely capture the inspiration, insight or idea in a particularized form. The focus of the artist is to create the concrete particular such that nothing could be added or subtracted to make that particular instance better. The artist's attention is, I would think, centered only on the work itself rather than on anything external to the work, even something such as an external standard of achievement.

One of Mann's most interesting insights is that the great work of art is pure energy and act; it has no object and is not abstract. The reason why I find this such a fascinating claim is that the great work's creation itself can be described in precisely the same terms: the great

artist confronts a void – that which is empty – and fills it with energy, the act with nothing else as its object. The only way the great artwork can come to be what it is depends upon the work flowing from the artist. For the artwork to be perfect and complete and beautiful in itself, with no external object or referent, with nothing external to itself, then there must be no separation between the artwork and the artist's work. There must be some union of the two – art and artist – within the creative process.

And if this is so, then Mann is not entirely wrong in his identification that an *imitatio dei* is taking place. If it is possible to imitate God's creative act, then it would also seem to follow that one is simultaneously imitating God himself while performing that act. These two instances of imitation can be contained within and implied by the phenomenon of artistic creation. I think we need to explore this connection a little bit more.

From Psalm 19: 1 through Roman 1: 20, scripture frequently proclaims that the glory of God is made manifest through his creation, and there is good reason for this. In Exodus 33: 19 – 23, God says to Moses, “I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you the name “the Lord”.... But you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.... [Y]ou shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen.” No one may see God directly, and Paul points out that such a direct, face-to-face encounter with God is not necessary to know him, for “Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made.” (Rom 1: 20)

It all seems to follow rather straightforwardly from here. If the divine nature of God is revealed through what he has created, then the nature of the artist is similarly revealed through the creation of the artwork. Insofar as the artwork is perfect and beautiful, we, the

audience, come to “see” what is invisible: through our experience of great art, we come to apprehend the perfect and the beautiful, which is the nature of God. Clearly, the artist is God's creation too, so what the artist reveals of herself in the work is yet another way to approach and understand God's union of himself in creation and the revelation of who God is in a particularized and concrete form. When Mann says that we cannot look at great art in the eye – that we must turn away – he is echoing God's warning that no one may see him face-to-face and live.

But herein lies the problem. The artist is no mere conduit for the revelation of divine perfection. The fullest expression of God's glory would seem to require the artist's cooperation such that the artist should acknowledge in one way or another the source of the inspiration with which she cooperated. You see, the work, if it truly is perfect, would still exhibit the glory of God even if there were no acknowledgement of the source, but the artist herself might not otherwise recognize that and attribute the glory to herself alone. We must not forget that the cooperation of the artist is so essential that the artist might intrude herself as the primary or sole affect in such a way that we can be misled. Indeed, if we the audience do not ourselves acknowledge the source of beauty and perfection, we also might attribute that perfection and beauty to either the artist or to some other source, such as culturally relative conventions of beauty, or psychosocial patterns of stimulus/response, all of which are very plausible contemporary secular accounts that, perhaps, hold greater appeal than my old-fashioned take.

Friedrich Schiller in the late 18th century expressed the basis of the contemporary secular viewpoint in a letter to Christian Koerner: “...regarding mortal man, surely no greater

word has been spoken than the Kantian, which is also the content of his whole philosophy: Determine yourself from yourself.” As Peter Gordon points out, “‘Freedom,’ according to Schiller, was the ‘pure form of spirituality as such,’ and it reached its highest realization in the experience of beauty. The beautiful in nature and in works of art reflected the idea of self-determination, such that every beautiful object seemed to call out, ‘be free, as I am.’”⁵ These notions of freedom and self-determination as expressed by Schiller in the late Enlightenment declare the independence of creation – humanity included, if not foremost – from God.

Over a century after Schiller, in 1927 – roughly the same time that Mann was at the height of his literary power and also about the time when art ceased to be concerned with beauty – the great German art historian Erwin Panofsky argued that the beginning of the Modern Era occurred when artists reduced the divine “to a mere subject matter for human consciousness” - when politically we destroyed theocracy and culturally abandoned theocentricity and replaced them each with anthropocracy and anthropocentricity.⁶ This fundamental shift from a focus on the divine to a focus on the human, especially in the person of the artist, misplaces the glory and transcendence displayed from God to the artist. It is a plagiarism in which many of us are complicit. And once again, Mann gets it partially wrong and partially right: the *imitatio dei* is not forbidden, but the misattribution certainly is.

This essay may have some passing interest for those who have a concern to explore a religious interpretation of the nature of art (if there are any who have such an interest),

5 Peter E. Gordon, *Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2012, p. 18.

6 Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, tr. Christopher S. Wood. New York, Zone Books, 1991, pp. 258 - 330.

and I doubt that it would have much appeal to those whose standpoint is more contemporary and secular. I said above that, even though this essay focuses on a certain kind of instrumental music, it could well be applied to other art forms as well. I wish to expand that claim to something a bit more important: the issues of the imitation of God and the misattributions of glory, and the subversion of the divine are all things that deserve attention from believers.

We Christians are called to imitation – to the imitation of God and the imitation of Christ. We are called to fashion our lives in a particular way: to turn ourselves, if you will, into works of art that express God's perfection in a concrete way. I think that is the meaning of Jesus' command at Matt 5: 48, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." If that command makes sense, it must be do-able; but we run the risk of subverting God by making ourselves the center. We run the risk of affecting the outcome perversely if we do not cooperate but rather struggle for control of the meaning of the process or credit ourselves with the outcome. Paradoxically, Adam's desire to imitate God became sinful because he wished to be like God, but free, self-determining and independent from God. That is a temptation for us as well because the imitation we are called to can be so easily misunderstood.

