ON SEEING THE BIRTH OF THE HEART

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This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt.
I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
—T. S. Eliot, “Journey of the Magi”

Le monde est grand, mais en nous
il est profond comme la mer.
—Rainer Maria Rilke

This is an essay in seeing and articulating meaning in two works of art from Christian and Buddhist traditions: the fifteenth-century Christian icon of the Kardiotissa known as “The Virgin of the Passion” (color plate 21, and fig. 1), and the Vishvakarma cave, a Buddhist chaitya-griha located in Ellora, India (figs. 2–5). In seeking to experience these works of art and bring their respective religious traditions into dialogue with each other, primary emphasis will be given to the representation of interiority and seeing within it the revelatory dialectic intrinsic to both aesthetic representation and human religiosity. To speak of interiority and its aesthetic representation will be to engage this revelatory dialectic both in the works of art and in human being, to see the confluence of subjective and objective, interior and exterior domains rendered in visible form. By inquiring into the nature of art and human perception, this essay endeavors to see these works as incorporating, and thus bearing witness to, the interior valences of human subjectivity, faith, and their epic presence within material form.

It is this material form—pictorial, sculptural, architectural—and its inherent silence that will guide our seeing these works of art, allowing them to disclose their meaning both within and without established epistemic and historical contexts. This paradoxical situation that all works of art testify to—that of being deeply situated within material
and temporal bonds, and yet, at the same time, extending beyond or without them—highlights the double nature of representation, its dialectical movement between visible and invisible, external and internal, grounds. “The exterior spectacle helps the intimate grandeur unfold,” writes Gaston Bachelard, distilling Baudelaire’s thought on the relationship between interior and exterior domains (192). Within each of these images—the Kardiotissa and the Vishvakarma—this coincidence of exterior spectacle and internal grandeur is present; in each there is ample realization of the invisible within the visible, of the interpenetration of these two apparently opposite realms. In light of this coincidence of apparent opposites, these works of art will teach both the poverty of language and its plenitude, for words attempting to describe the experience of seeing will inevitably belie the experience itself, and yet it is in language—its poverty and its plenty—that an articulate witness to the humanity borne within such silent form may be found.

I The Advent of Sight

The Kardiotissa icon and the Vishvakarma cave are religious representations, religious in the normative sense that both the images and their meaning can be situated within a particular religious tradition—Christian and Buddhist, respectively. Moving within and beyond these individual frames, this essay approaches each work from an aesthetic perspective, one that cultivates meaning within form, its phenomenal and symbolic aspects. With the aid of a compassionate eye, if not an innocent one, this aesthetic lens hopes to open a view into the perichoresis of material and spiritual form, without dismissing or replacing normative religious or historical content. To see these works will be to acknowledge a religiosity that lies beyond and within the already interpreted religious paradigm—a religiosity that may be called the heart of humanity, a heart and a humanity that, while expressed and cultivated through religion, is prior to and unbounded by its institutional frames. It is not, however, to religious experience that this essay appeals, for as

1 “In certain almost supernatural inner states, the depth of life is entirely revealed in the spectacle, however ordinary, that we have before our eyes, and which becomes a symbol of it” (Baudelaire Journaux intimes, qtd. in Bachelard 192).

2 An allusion to John Ruskin’s concept of “the innocent eye,” later refuted by Gombrich.