

## THE AESTHETICS OF ANTONIO CASO

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Few men have influenced the educational and cultural life of Mexico in this century more than Antonio Caso. Born in Mexico City on December 19, 1883, in his twenties he expressed vigorous opposition to the biological-evolutionary ideology that had been presented in support of the Mexican dictator, President Porfirio Díaz (i.e., that life is a battle in which the fittest survive, and since the president had "survived" the challenge of several elections, he must be the person most fit to rule). Then in 1910 Caso joined with other revolutionaries to overthrow Díaz in a civil war. These experiences were to have profound and enduring effects on his developing philosophy.

When the National University of Mexico reopened after the Revolution, Caso was appointed professor of philosophy, which position he held, along with a professorship in the law school, for more than thirty years; he also served periods as an educational administrator, including the top posts at The National University (Rector) and the University's Faculty of Philosophy and Letters (Director). As a devoted teacher he inspired an entire generation of Mexican youth.

Perhaps because of his youthful experiences in the realm of political activity and his continuing concern for the social, political, and, especially, the educational needs of Mexico, Caso (like most other major philosophers's in Latin America during this century) simply could never afford the luxury of speculation from an "ivory tower."

In his *Filósofos y doctrinas morales* Caso proclaims: "Philosophical activity is not something independent of life and action, of art and science," and he insists that the poetic, historical, political, and religious spheres all must be the concern of the philosopher.<sup>1</sup>

Philosophy is not just knowledge, nor even wisdom alone, for Caso; it is a way of living: the heroic. In his *Ensayos críticos y polémicos* he distinguishes between the heroic and the discrete (or circumspect) approaches in philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Among the terms that he uses to describe the heroic are "inventive," "enthusiastic," "intrepid," "striving," and "problematic"; the discreet he terms "objective," "calm," "abstract," "logical," and "impotent."

To a degree Caso's goal is a synthesis of these two approaches. Without the heroic, philosophy will be exact, but will end as a void dialectic of reason. Without the discreet, philosophy will be unable to organize or to justify the heroic goals.

Yet, while he admits the need for both approaches, Caso prefers the

heroic. He remarks that an ingenious and fertile error is worth more than a trivial sterile, truth. Philosophy is a vindication of the human spirit. As a theory of existence it is incomplete without a theory of the *value* of existence. Thus ethical and social and aesthetic concerns have a priority over purely speculative interests.

Now, it is important to note that Caso's key work *La existencia como economía, como desinterés y como caridad* was published in 1919 when his memories of the violence of the Mexican revolution were still strong, and when the first World War (in which such weapons of human destruction as poison gas, the airplane, and the submarine were employed and over eight and one-half million persons died) had just ended.

Further, the definitive edition of this work was published in 1943 during the horrors of World War II, a conflict in which ultimately more than fifteen million persons would perish. In a prologue to this edition he decries the modern world's exaltation of brute force, "power without scruples," over love and even over law which, he complains, makes "our time one of the most bitter in the history of the world."<sup>3</sup>

Caso was also aware of the brutality of the Nazi "solution" to the Jewish problem with the nightmare of mass murder in its concentration camps. Because of all this he felt compelled to oppose an interpretation of life which made of man an animal, irrevocably self-impelled to strife, and to present and defend an alternative view.

In *La existencia como economía, como desinterés y como caridad* while life as economic is life as self-centered and conflict-dominated, life as ethical is loving, self-sacrificing, and peace-filled. Finally, life as art is concerned with the disinterested character of the contemplation of beauty which acts as a break with life as economic and sets the stage for life as ethical.

Here Antonio Caso's treatment of aesthetics will be examined in terms of the role of art in our lives as the source of a distinctively disinterested delight. In both *La existencia como economía, como desinterés y como caridad* and his *Principios de la estética* the existence of art is explained by means of the Bergsonian concept of a surplus of energy in man according to which, after the satisfaction of one's biological requirements for survival, a quantity of unused energy remains for "disinterested" (non-utilitarian) activities.

Apparently among these activities are both art and play for they seem to be similarly purposeless. Yet in the second chapter of *Principios de la estética* Caso carefully dissociates the two. Play or sport has (at times disguised but still very real) functions: as diverting and relaxing recreation that prepares one for work or as a factor in sexual enticement. In this way play is useful and is closely related to economic or animal activities.

In contrast, with art surplus energy is employed with no practical purpose at all intended. Thus when Caso says that our response to art is disinterested, he uses this term in a utilitarian-economic sense. He, of course, does not mean by it an "uninterested" denial of desire or pleasure. It is simply that the enjoyment of a work of art is for its own sake, with no additional benefit sought.

Clearly the world of art is opposed to the biological law of self-interest. Beyond the biological order exists another in which the activities of the person are not motivated by his greatest economic interest.<sup>4</sup> As Caso puts it: "Such is the victory of the soul over [biological] life, the aesthetic victory, a superior human life—existence as disinterested."<sup>5</sup> With art truly human life appears.

In this way the stage is set for the possibility of life as ethical: a life of unselfish, and self-sacrificing, love; and it appears that here for Caso the term "disinterested" has something of a meaning given it by Arthur Schopenhauer who valued aesthetic contemplation as a temporary escape or at least as a respite from the dominance of the biological will to power. Yet for Caso art has intrinsic values far surpassing those admitted by the German pessimist.

In *La existencia como economía, como desinterés y como caridad* he affirms that art reveals the essentially spiritual and creative dimensions of the human person, while in *Principios de la estética* he concentrates on the unique value of the aesthetic intuition (which is consistent with, and, in fact, an extension of, the emphasis on intuition in his general theory of knowledge).

Briefly concerning this latter point, in one of his earliest books, *Problemas filosóficos*, Caso insists that the ways of knowing cannot be reduced to the rational, that in order to approach the truth about reality we must find our rational knowledge on intuition.<sup>6</sup>

It is clear that he is not critical of reason as such. Rather it is a dogmatic faith in isolated reason as a source of knowledge that he rejects. Since, he insists, all things that exist are individual, since there are no "general things," universal ideas are merely means of thinking about individual objects that must themselves be grasped by means of intuition.<sup>7</sup>

In *La existencia como economía, como desinterés y como caridad* Caso explains that without concrete intuitions of individual objects or ideatic intuitions of essential characteristics of these objects reason is blind. In order to know something rationally one must first grasp it, apprehend it, in short, intuit it. "Reason and intuition," he notes, "are complementary. They are the two wings of the spirit which bear it aloft in its quest for truth."<sup>8</sup>

Further, he insisted that purely theoretical knowledge can never satisfy

human aspirations. Knowledge must be for the purpose of teaching one how to live. The formula of Zen Buddhist, Daisetz Suzuki, "Intuition linked to a concept leading to action" could very well be taken as Antonio Caso's.

Now, returning to the aesthetic intuition, the Mexican philosopher explains that for practical purposes the scientist, the theoretician, and the mathematician abstract from the individual certain general concepts that they can schematize and organize and put to use, while, in contrast, the artist, the poet, and the musician present a distinctive, intrinsically valuable and delightful picture of the concrete individual itself. In *La existencia como economía, como desinterés y como caridad* he puts it this way: "The world of art is inconceivable for pure reason, for to think is to relate, to utilize, but art is only known as individuality, as intuition. In this intuition the subject is the object."<sup>9</sup>

This identity of subject and object in an aesthetic intuition is explained in *Principios de la estética* by the concept of an emotional empathy according to which the role of the percipient of beauty is so direct and immediate and vivid that the distinction between subject experiencing and object experienced is not made.<sup>10</sup>

Further, for Caso, the aesthetic intuition helps to explain not only our response to or experience of a work of art but also its creation. This spiritual, selfless intuition, when it encounters the self-centered, materialistic, economic aspects of life, becomes creative, expressing itself in works of art. The work of art, as a "vehicle of the spirit," is a spiritual intuition "materialized, externalized, embodies in symbols."<sup>11</sup> Like Croce, Caso insists that intuition cannot be separated from expression.

However clearly this is not a simple one-to-one relation with each individual intuition requiring a specific expression. Personal genius plays an essential creative role between intuition and expression. Intuition merely suggests forms of expression. The artist with his own skills and feelings creates the expression, the work of art. For Caso the human personality is the most unique reality in existence and it reaches its greatest fulfillment in artistic creation and in heroic acts of love. As W. Rex Crawford, commenting on Caso's aesthetics, puts it: "In the last analysis both art and heroism are supreme expressions of a kind of 'super-abundance' which amazes and confounds the observer."<sup>12</sup>

Finally, Caso insists that the artist must employ symbols to express the immaterial and spiritual in a material and corporeal medium. In all the arts—music, painting, sculpture, architecture, poetry—there is this synthesis of the spiritual and the material, the ideal and the real.

Now, it is on these assumptions that our philosopher bases his concept of the supreme aesthetic value, beauty, as a "rich concentration of ideas"

symbolized, and this value does not derive simply from the role that art as disinterested plays in opposition to life as economic and in setting the stage for life as ethical.

In contrast with these two, the first consisting of a relentless struggle for conquest and the second of loving, sacrificing activity for others, the aesthetic realm is one of peace and calm and joy "where good and evil gaze upon each other."<sup>13</sup> With beauty nothing is sought besides what is being contemplated. "In pure beauty one looks at the world only to see, to admire, to enjoy . . ."<sup>14</sup>

Thus beauty is outside the realm of good and evil. A truly beautiful work of art can represent evil without inspiring or arousing the percipient to perform evil acts. No beautiful work is moral or immoral. If, for example, a person feels sexual desires in the presence of a statue or painting of a nude, it is he who is immoral not the artifact. The artist is not concerned about our desires; his goal is to create the work of beauty which will arouse an unselfish response of aesthetic delight.

In *Ensayos críticos y polémicos* Caso succinctly presents a similar argument. First he points to the law of contradiction: a thing cannot both be and not be at the same time. Then he notes that if a work of art is a disinterested intuition and expression of an individual object for its own sake and if an immoral thought or act is one based essentially upon self-interest, then no work of art can be immoral. That is, no work of art can be both disinterested and interested.<sup>15</sup>

Thus art in Antonio Caso: the language of the human spirit, the realm of pure delight, of selfless joy, and the passage-way to the ultimate goal: life as love.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Caso, *Filósofos y doctrinas morales*. (México: Librería Porrúa, 1915), pp. 11-13.

<sup>2</sup> Caso, *Ensayos críticos y polémicos*. (México Moderno, 1922), pp. 64-72.

<sup>3</sup> Caso, *La existencia como economía, como desinterés y como caridad*, 3a ed. (México: Sec. de Educación, Pública, 1943), p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> See *La existencia como economía, como desinterés y como caridad*, ed. cit., pp. 99-105.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>6</sup> Caso, *Problemas filosóficos*. (México: Editorial Porrúa), pp. 205, 206.

<sup>7</sup> The term "intuition" is first used in a bergsonian sense by Caso as an immediate grasp of the singular object as a whole, but later a reading of the phenomenologist, Edmund Husserl, led him to the acceptance of a rational type of intuition leading to a direct knowledge of essences. In fact it seems that Caso did not distinguish clearly between the two types of intuition, and, indeed, it appears that he used them as two versions of the same idea.

<sup>8</sup> Caso, *La existencia como economía, como desinterés y como caridad*, ed. cit., p. 77.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 104-105. [In an article, "The Nature of Art", from his *Doctrinas e ideas* Caso quotes Novalis: "The more poetic a thing is, the more real it is."]

<sup>10</sup> Caso, *Principios de la estética*. Ed. cit., pp. 90-95. For an excellent treatment of the aesthetic intuition in Caso see A. Berndston, "Mexican Philosophy: The Aesthetics of Antonio Caso", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, IX, 4 (June, 1951), pp. 325-327.

<sup>11</sup> Caso, *La existencia como economía, como desinterés y como caridad*. Ed. cit., pp. 112-114.

<sup>12</sup> Crawford, *A Century of Latin American Thought*. New York; Federick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1966, p. 281.

<sup>13</sup> Caso, *La existencia como economía, como desinterés y como caridad*, ed. cit., p. 127.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125. In *Ensayos críticos y polémicos*, Caso writes of the myopia of critics: "Since they cannot see, they think. To think is only tolerable when one cannot see." (p. 82).

<sup>15</sup> Caso, *Ensayos críticos y polémicos*, ed. cit., p. 85.