Chapter 4
Seeing the Invisible, Feeling the Visible
Michel Henry on Aesthetics and Abstraction

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1. Introduction

The Romantic conviction that art can save religious experience from its weakness and dogmatic entanglements represented, despite some ambiguities, a real chance for theological thinking. Yet it is not art itself but its effects, or better, its capacity to strengthen our will to life (art as »the great stimulant to life«, in Friedrich Nietzsche's words[1]) that attracted Romantic minds and persuaded them to focus on the problem of sensibility, or aesthetics. And thus, in Romantic Idealism, aesthetics was identified as a fundamental paradigm of reflection not only with regard to art but also as a valuable model for the interpretation of human experience as a whole, including the religious sphere.

What has remained of this Romantic enterprise? Not very much that might be immediately useful for theological purposes. The aesthetic paradigm maintains its significance for religious analysis, but it has to be restated in more secular terms and in a more nuanced way today. Now, phenomenology, and French phenomenology in particular, has replaced Romantic-idealistic

1 Friedrich Nietzsche, Twilight of the Idols [1888], translated by Richard Polt, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997, § 24, 65.

aesthetics with important reflections on the subject of religious experience, sometimes even going so far as to be accused of a sort of »theological turn«.[2]

One of those phenomenologists, and maybe the one most blamed for his theological leanings, is Michel Henry. In this chapter I will discuss his thoughts about art as a »culture of feeling«[3] and about aesthetics as a philosophical perspective on the transcendental conditions of human experience. In his critical essay on Wassily Kandinsky, published in 1988,[4] Henry outlines an aesthetic theory that emerges from his phenomenology of life. He is persuaded to find, in Kandinsky's writings more than in his art, a confirmation of the validity of his own philosophical thought. Thus in the first section, I will briefly recall some of the characteristic elements of Henry's thinking before discussing in detail his aesthetic reflections inspired by Kandinsky, followed by a critical evaluation. In my conclusion, I suggest a possible theological use of Henry's phenomenological approach as an adequate argument for the importance of the senses and of sensibility for religious experience.

2. A Radical Phenomenology, or: The Quest for Appearance as Such

According to Henry, a foundational discourse in philosophy must put the pathic[5] dimension of human sensibility at the center of its phenomenological investigations. Such an investigation does not study the wide range of empirically observable feelings and emotions but exclusively the conditions that make these human feelings and emotions capable of qualifying every experience of our lives in a specific way. In Henry's view, the essence or truth

2 Dominique Janicaud, Le tournant théologique de la phénoménologie française, Paris: Éditions de l'Éclat, 1992.

3 Michel Henry, Barbarism, translated by Scott Davidson, London: Continuum, 2012, 117.

4 Michel Henry, Seeing the Invisible: On Kandinsky, translated by Scott Davidson, London: Continuum, 2009.

5 According to Martin Heidegger, the ›pathic‹ represents a fundamental dimension of the ›being-in-the-world‹ (*Dasein*), i.e. the fact that human beings feel themselves always in and through a specific emotional tone (*Stimmung*). Henry even radicalizes this view so that the pathic dimension indicates the scope of human emotions not as added to our self and as empirically observable but as a pre-condition of human experience itself.

of every manifestation – in other words, what makes possible the giving of phenomena to us – is exactly that which cannot be given as a phenomenon in the exterior space and in the dynamic of intentionality: instead, it is the immanent feeling of a radical interiority. What does this mean practically for human experience? After all, we have a tendency to imagine the human subject as given in itself, independently from its pathic dimension. In a very general way, we envision all of what a subject ›feels‹ as ›something‹ which can manifest itself in causing the subject to be exalted or depressed, as a sort of addition to the ›center‹ of the individual, at most as an ephemeral coloration of an idea of the subject which itself is thought to be affectively neutral or static.[6] Thus we imagine a representation of the human being that seems altogether consistent with the idea of the autonomy of the subject, of its equidistance from all the affective possibilities inherent in its being sentient.

Now, in Henry's thought, this is not only a partial representation but an illusory and essentially insincere one. This representation is based upon a confusion between *sensibility* (the power to feel something and being affected by it)[7] and *affectivity* (the ontological ground of every feeling that is expressed, which lies in auto-affection)[8]. The affective tones do not refer at all to the sphere of our sensibility, do not ›occur‹ in a subject like entities coming from elsewhere and passing through the subject modifying it, but they take place as the original manifestation of the subject itself. The subject exists precisely and primarily inasmuch as it is capable of auto-affection. Every feeling is precisely and primarily a feeling-oneself. The reflexive consciousness we have of our feelings and affects does not account for what they are originally in us, and for the fact that they make us what we are. Thus Henry affirms that a feeling »never is and cannot be sensed« and »perceived«,[9] and he explains as follows:

6 See in this sense Martin Heidegger, Grundfragen der Philosophie: Ausgewählte Probleme der Logik, Gesamtausgabe, vol. 45, Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1984, 160–161.

7 Michel Henry, The Essence of Manifestation, translated by Girard Etzkorn, The Hague: Nijhoff, 1973, 463.

8 Henry, The Essence of Manifestation, 461–462.

9 Henry, The Essence of Manifestation, 463.

> This is why a proposition such as »I feel in me a great love« or again »a profound boredom« is equivocation at its highest degree. For there is not, there never is, as far as love or boredom is concerned, something like a power of feeling different from them which would be »commissioned« to receive them, namely, to feel them as an opposed or foreign content. Rather, it is love or boredom, *it is the feeling itself which receives itself and experiences itself in such a way that this capacity for receiving itself, for experiencing itself, of being affected by self, constitutes what is affective in it, this is what makes a feeling.*[10]

Affectivity is not sensible in itself, but it is the ground of sensibility. It is the essence of selfhood,[11] so that the deep structure of the immanent subject can be understood and described as the passivity of the human being toward itself, as the *se sentir soi-même*, the original ontological passivity.

The object of phenomenological analysis is, for Henry, this immanent, invisible, and unreflected ground which makes possible every feeling and every experience. I am walking, looking, laughing, or crying, but all these acts are projections of myself into the exteriority of the world. Consciousness itself performs these acts as part of mundane exteriority. Before knowing myself as walking, looking, laughing, or crying, before each modality of intentional consciousness, *I am* this walking, looking, laughing, or crying itself. In other words, there is a feeling which is immanent to my walking, looking, etc. Henry defines this affective and non-intentional content, this original auto-manifestation, as the matter of consciousness (»matière de la conscience«[12]) or the impressionality of the impression.[13] In this absence of mediation, and only here, life shows itself, and every subjectivity finds a permanent ground. In following this intuition, Henry propounds a reversal of the phenomenological project, whose object is no longer intentional acts and contents but the original pathos, the immanence of what is not projected outside the self in the form of impressions, perceptions, knowing. The space of manifestation to which attention should be paid is not that of

10 Henry, The Essence of Manifestation, 464 (original emphasis).

11 Henry, The Essence of Manifestation, 465.

12 Michel Henry, Incarnation: Une philosophie de la chair, Paris: Seuil, 2000, 71.

13 Michel Henry, Phénoménologie matérielle, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1990, 21.

the relation between subject and object, between the self and the world, but a purely interior and invisible space. In this perspective, which Henry considers an overcoming of Husserl and a return to Decartes' true but misunderstood intuition,[14] it is not thought that gives access to life, as the philosophical tradition has thought, but life that allows thought to access itself, to show itself as a modality of life.

This can of course also be applied to the religious act of believing. Such an act supposes, as said earlier, that *I am* this believing; it assumes an intimate ›feeling to believe‹ that allows the believing self to experience itself. Following Henry, one could say that even faith, understood as a disposition and a decision to believe, is a modality of life, and thus there is no other faith than the one given to the subject in the auto-donation of Life. This means that I can deceive myself about the contents of my faith, I can give credit to something that is not worthy of it, but, on the other hand, nothing can damage the truth, that is, the immanence and pathos of my ›feeling to believe‹, of this unmediated upsurge that makes me adhere to what I feel is more intimate to me than myself. Of course, such a statement does not offer arguments for an apologetic of a historical faith and its claim to truth. And yet it represents an interesting point for the study of religion and theology: these disciplines could gain maximum benefit from an analysis of what precedes the specific acts of believing consciousness and their rootedness in our originary affectivity.

Moreover, Henry's theoretical framework, with its constant reference to the original passivity/affectivity in which every human experience is rooted, allows us to apprehend the proximity of religion and aesthetics, impeding at the same time any attempt to colonize the former or the latter. Both of them, in fact, belong to the original affectivity more than they belong to themselves. Religious and aesthetic experiences function as catalysts of the Life that lies in ourselves and in which we are given to ourselves. There is a certain something in these experiences that resists the centrifugal polarity typical of what is humanly experienced, and by reason of which whatever we feel or make, is always felt or made in mundane exteriority, is always projected outside of ourselves. Where does this unique ability for resistance come

14 The object of such an intuition, according to Henry, is not the *cogito*, but the *videor*; see on this Jean-Luc Marion, Générosité et phénoménologie: Remarques sur l'interprétation du cogito cartésien par Michel Henry, Les Études philosophiques 58.1 (1988), 51–72.

from that characterizes religious and aesthetic experience? For an answer to this question, I turn to Kandinsky's theory of abstract painting, which Henry recovers, charging it with an ontological meaning.

3. The Colors of the Invisible

In his theoretical writings, Kandinsky analyzes the geometrical elements which make up every painting from the point of view of their inner effect on the observer and theorizes a relation between sensation and abstraction.[15] He claims that every phenomenon can be experienced in two ways: internally and externally. Henry attributes great importance to this insight, as it points out two possible phenomenological trajectories, an intentional and a non-intentional (or material, as Henry says) one. These divergent trajectories can be well observed in the attitudes of Henry and Maurice Merleau-Ponty towards painting. According to Merleau-Ponty, an artist intent on painting is not allowed to give voice to Cartesian doubts: they »cannot grant that our openness to the world is illusory or indirect, that what we see is not the world itself«;[16] they know in fact that »[t]he eye accomplishes the prodigious work of opening the soul to what is not soul – the joyous realm of things«.[17]

Henry understands painting in exactly the opposite way. In his view, painting – art – has nothing to do with the visible world, rather it gives visibility to the interior and invisible Life. The wonder itself of vision is not so much the power to see the beauty of various objects but the revelation of subjectivity as a phenomenological ability to see. Otherwise access to the »joyous realm of things« would not be different for us than for a camera, and our emotion in front of a celebrated painting would be comparable to that of a museum's surveillance camera. To be fair, Merleau-Ponty's proposition goes beyond such a rigid either/or. He agrees with Henry that our very first access

15 Wassily Kandinsky, Point and Line to Plane: Contribution to the Analysis of the Pictorial Elements [1926], translated by Howard Dearstyne and Hilla Rebay, New York: Dover, 1979.

16 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Eye and Mind, translated by Carleton Dallery, in: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, The Primacy of Perception, and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History, and Politics, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964, 159–190, here 186–187.

17 Merleau-Ponty, Eye and Mind, 186.

to exterior reality is not an act of representation and does not imply the displacement that is involved in processes of consciousness. In Merleau-Ponty's view, the world unfolds to us in an immediate manner, regardless of the Cartesian distinction between the internal and the external, and thanks to a pre-reflexive power inscribed within our bodies and sensibilities.

For Henry, however, Merleau-Ponty's attempt limits itself to the level of our encounter with the external world while denouncing the aporetic results of any phenomenolgical project that do not push the analysis beyond intentional experiences. According to Henry, this is not enough, because the very phenomenological question does not concern »what appears […] but the act of appearing«, or the ›how‹ of the appearance of the phenomenon.[18] From the perspective of a classical phenomenologist, such a question cannot find an answer because the appearance of phenomena itself is the source of wonder and of philosophy. But not so for Henry, who cultivates the ambition to push his initial query in the direction of pure impressionality.

But what could ›explain‹ the sense of wonder? Nothing in the external world, because what is exterior cannot explain what is interior. That is, nothing in our world, except perhaps art. And how could that be if painting is nothing but rendering something visible? Does not a painting belong to the realm of the visible and therefore to the exteriority of the world? In fact it belongs to exteriority because of the material from which it is made, but only because of that. All the rest, that is, the form and the expression of the painting, ought to be recognized as interior and invisible. Thus, even in painting, the phenomenologist has to give account of the twofold mode of appearance. The finality of painting, and of artworks in general, is not representational, and thus Merleau-Ponty's account should be reversed: this »prodigious work«, when it happens, is precisely that of opening to the soul the soul itself, that of seeing something which is not the world itself.

This is the paradox of abstract painting in Kandinsky's conception, which, however, in Henry's view, gives evidence to the quality of every painting and of pictorial art as such. No real artist presents a mere representation but intends to use their art to evoke in us a vibration which is not the result of our conscious understanding of what is possibly represented in the work. The painter does not represent but compose, and their activity must be under-

18 Henry, Incarnation, 35; in the original: »ce qui apparaît […] mais l'acte d'apparaître«.

stood, according to both Kandinsky and Henry, in close analogy with the art of musical composition. To compose music, one needs to know musical forms and be able to combine them observing the rules of melody and harmony. In a similar way, Kandinsky seeks to identify and analyze the basic elements of pictorial composition (lines, graphic forms, colors): »A *composition* is nothing other than an *exact law-abiding organization* of the vital forces which, in the form of tensions, are shut up within the elements.«[19] Kandinsky is convinced that it is possible to determine precisely these laws in examining compositional elements not from an external perspective but in the attempt to capture their intimate pulse, their musical quality: »Color is the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the soul is the piano with many strings.«[20] Hence, musical composition is only apparently distinguished from the pictorial because it is invisible. They are both art insofar as they speak to feeling, which, in a Kantian way, allows us to grasp the shape of things. And finally, they are both invisible with regard to that which really characterizes them.

For Henry, Kandinsky's analysis of the twofold way in which things can be experienced and the consequent duplicity of pictorial elements is coherent with his own distinction between the affective and the sensible. The red color I see on the surface of the canvas is one thing, and the impression that this red color creates in myself is another. But the perspective has to be reversed: what founds my sensibility, what allows me to admire a particular shade of color in a painting in a way which is not merely reflexive, is not the color itself as it is applied to the canvas but the matter of consciousness, that is, a pure force, an impression that Life, and Life only, is able to catch in its auto-affecting. The primacy of interiority is absolute. The terms employed by Henry to express such a reversal are arresting but they do not lack precision: »There is no red in the world. Red is a sensation, and this sensation is absolutely subjective, originally invisible. Originary colors are invisible, but they are spread on things through a process of projection.«[21]

19 Kandinsky, Point and Line to Plane, 92 (original emphasis).

20 Wassily Kandinsky, Concerning the Spiritual in Art [1911], translated by Michael Sadler, New York: Dover, 1977, 25.

21 Michel Henry, Phénoménologie de la vie, vol 3: De L'Art et du politique, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2004, 290; in the original: »Il n'y a pas de rouge dans le monde. Le rouge est une sensation, et cette sensation est absolument subjective, originairement

In other words, color is not originally where it is sought but rather where it is felt, thus in interiority.[22] Henry is not afraid to follow Kandinsky even when his theory about color becomes essentialist and thus problematic. The Russian painter proposes a series of enthusiastic assessments of the essence of red, yellow, blue, that is, of the affective tonalities intrinsically related to each color. But how can one not see how much the cultural is implicated in such evaluations? How is it possible to claim their absolute and unconditional validity? According to Henry, a distinction must be made: what lacks validity and appears vague or naive, »is the figurative language with which one seeks to express the affectivity of colour«[23] but not the relation between colors and affect, which is not even a relation but rather their full coincidence in the auto-affection of Life. Despite the theoretical embarrassments that can be attributed to him, Kandinsky was aware of the necessity to distinguish between the attempt to put into words the relation between colors and affects by means of »very provisional and general«[24] remarks and the indefinable subtlety of both the chromatic tonalities and the profound emotions of interior life. Such subtlety is quickly lost as soon as it becomes exteriorized, as soon as it is translated into thought and word, and abstract art can rediscover it only thanks to its rejection of codified language. Free from any discursive or representative constraint, colors and other pictorial ele-

invisible. Les couleurs originaires sont invisibles, mais elles sont étendues sur des choses par un processus de projection.«

22 A classical empiricist would interpret this statement differently and consider the fact that through our senses, we experience the ›impression‹ of colors. They would thus conclude that not the objects we look at but our experiences are colored. Henry, on the contrary, cannot be considered to be a supporter of chromatic subjectivism. In his view the sensible experience in which (colored) objects are given to us does not represent a primary given because it presupposes the auto-affection of Life where sensations are rooted. Color is a sensation, subjective and invisible.

23 Henry, Seeing the Invisible, 72.

24 Kandinsky, Concerning the Spiritual in Art, 42. Henry remarks: »The difficulty that the theory of colours runs into as long as it speaks from the perspective of ›physics‹ – a difficulty that *On the Spiritual in Art* does not altogether avoid – disappears once its approach, either consciously or unconsciously, becomes phenomenological.« Thus, in Henry's material phenomenology, Kandinsky's theory finds »its radical foundation, the same one that Descartes gave to philosophy and that protects it from the reproach of being a mere interpretation« (Seeing the Invisible, 75).

ments regain their primordial force, on account of the affective resonance they are able to produce.

I mentioned above that in Henry's view a painting belongs to the mundane visibility exclusively because of its material, not because of its form and expression. However, the results of this disjunction are inadequate in regard to the extent of the revolution caused by abstract art, and thus Henry goes even further, saying that, according to Kandinsky, even matter is an element of composition and that, at the same time, the sole principle governing the composition is a principle of interior necessity. Any support material is subjected to it. As an element of composition, material is twofold: it has an exterior appearance – for example paper, canvas, wood, or glass – and an interior aspect because it modifies the forms drawn on it and the color with which it is covered. Hence their effect on us: »From the latter point of view, it should be said that *matter is invisible*. It is a pathos. This is truly how it enters into the composition.«[25] Support material is withdrawn from visibility as far as it interacts with other pictorial elements in order to compose a product offered not to sensory perception but, through perception, to the power to feel which is one with our pathic subjectivity, with the being we are, with Life in us.

How do painters succeed in making visible the invisible? They have to use pictorial means to ›abstract‹ from any reference to the exterior world. To abstract means in this context not just to put into question the visible surface of things (as in Impressionism, then Cubism, and up to Kazimir Malevich and Piet Mondrian) but to definitively turn one's back to the mundane and the forms of its representation, merging into the secret of radical subjectivity. This means not so much to change the object of art but rather to lose it: painting becomes »a knowledge without object«.[26] Henry understands Kandinsky's conception of abstract painting as an ontological move. If, according to Kandinsky, the proper dimension of art is the spiritual one, the French philosopher identifies this spiritual dimension with Life's immanent self-revelation. In abstract art, life is never objectified nor represented. Instead, one could say that abstract art is an expression of life, provided one understands exactly that the artwork offers an opportunity to show

25 Henry, Seeing the Invisible, 92 (original emphasis).

26 Henry, Seeing the Invisible, 18.

life in ourselves, to feel its auto-affection anew. Only in this sense is it correct to say that painting is the exteriorization or the materialization of an invisible content.

4. The Duplicity of Appearance and the Space of Its Recomposition

Michel Henry's contribution to philosophy contrasts with the contemporary tendency to abandon great systems and the general distrust in the capacities of reason to enrich the sense of being and the capability of language to designate such a sense. Even philosophers who continue to identify the object of their quest as ›truth‹ do not seem to be able to express this truth except by subtraction or deconstruction. Henry's thought, on the other hand, differentiates itself from this broad tendency and from a modality of expression generally inspired by circumspection and fragmentation. In his view, human beings hold within themselves, in the pathic dimension of their life, a meaning beyond all doubt upon which it is possible and necessary to build an ontology. And this is what he proposes to do in his writings.

Not surprisingly, this earned him the sympathy of several theologians, *a fortiori* after the publication of his late works which are a dialogue with the Christian tradition and in which he identifies the emblematic figure of Christ as the original Son in whom the originary coming-to-us of Life takes place.[27] This wave of theological interest seems to be motivated, at least in part, by his relief to finally find a party which, so to say, does not economize the metaphysical aspirations of reason and seems to be immune to the ›virus‹ of relativism (whatever that might be). Yet there is no doubt that Henry's thought resists any offhand use of it, requiring first of all a careful understanding of the terms of his phenomenology. I think that Henry's fundamental intuition represents an original and effective criticism of every form of objectivist thought, which directly or indirectly denies the pathic subjectivity involved in all acts of human perception and minimizes its place in the contemporary ontological debate. Even phenomenology, for Henry, is part of this objectiv-

27 For example in Michel Henry, C'est moi la vérité: Pour une philosophie du christianisme, Paris: Seuil, 1996; Michel Henry, Paroles du Christ, Paris: Seuil, 2002; Henry, Incarnation.

ism when it equates phenomenality with visibility and consequently imagines that the only mode of appearance is that of exteriority, transcendent to consciousness. In this way one risks obscuring the most important form of appearance, namely that of the self to the self, or self-affection, in Henry's terms. Self-affection means not knowledge of oneself, which is already transcendent, but the feeling of oneself, which is immanent. The appearance of self-affection, which is not detectable in a transcendent horizon, has to be identified before its self-alienation in the representative space of the world. This is precisely the purpose of material phenomenology.

But Henry's criticism of the ontological monism of Western philosophy does not mean that every form of objectivation is insignificant. When Henry states that the phenomenal appearance of things does not explain, found, nor reveal anything, his position becomes difficult to justify theoretically and rather seems dictated by polemics. The idea of radical affectivity as an absolute power of Life in my flesh, regardless of history, thought, and body, and assumed as self-evident, seems to be, in turn, the result of representation.[28]

I would argue that this is also true for the aesthetic sphere. Henry points out the limits of the conception of art as *mimesis*, albeit understood as imitation of moods and emotions, or as a symbol for interiority. His intuition, borrowed from Kandinsky, to consider abstract art not as an artistic current but rather as a key to the understanding of all figurative art, leads Henry to theorize that the pictorial elements receive their expressiveness from the fact that they are related to the originary phenomenological matter, or better, identify themselves with this matter, in the depth of invisible Life. The advantage of such a theoretical move is the retrieval of aesthetic emotion, which thus acquires an absolute dignity. But there is a price to pay if we want to follow Henry's hypothesis to the end, and this price is that such an emotion is so pure and originary to exclude in principle any connection with the cultural, historical, and symbolic context. Once again, the duplicity of appearance gives rise to a radical dichotomy.

28 After having established a dualism between immanence and transcendence, such a representation proclaims salvific the former and meaningless the latter. But proceeding strictly in this way, we have no other solution than to embrace a monistic conception of the subject and its immanent truth, in opposition to the monism or objectivism of Western philosophy that Henry criticizes.

I would therefore argue that it is possible to assume Henry's aesthetic view without sharing the peremptory dualism of its outcomes. The operation is delicate due to the very systematic character of Henry's thought but one can glimpse a possible legitimation for this move in a passage towards the end of *Seeing the Invisible*, where the author alludes to the quality of the emotion felt in front of works of Christian art. What determines, for example, the emotion felt when looking at Mathias Grünewald's *Resurrection*, one of the panels of the Issenheim Altarpiece (1512–1516)? Henry's answer is not surprising: such an emotion derives uniquely from the affective tonalities of the elements of the pictorial composition. Far from being a simple repetition of *topoi* and themes of Christian iconography, this masterpiece reworks these motifs in such a way that they become incommensurate with the representation of any exterior reality. »Objects in the real world are defined on the level of sensibility by their colours and their sensible forms«, he writes, up to the point that they do not express anything but the »auto-affirmation of life in its exaltation and in the certainty of its force.«[29] It seems clear, however, that independently of the author's will, there emerges a collaboration between the pathic-affective dimension and the representative one and that such a collaboration helps to better understand the artistic phenomenon without any need to distinguish between abstraction and figuration. Henry is forced to admit the role of imagination in the reworking of traditional iconography, and he affirms that the function of the imagination is to transfer »this so-called figurative painting [Grünewald's *Resurrection*] into the domain of the purest abstraction.«[30] But if the artist's imagination is capable to do this, I see no reason why one should not acknowledge the recipients' ability to create a synthesis within themselves between the immanent and the transcendent, between Life and world. In spite of Grünewald's innovative re-elaboration of the iconographic tradition, recipients reasonably continue to consider the result a representation of the resurrected Christ. This identification of what they see cannot be considered insignificant with regard to the pure emotions that the painting provokes in us through its unique composition of forms and colors. On the contrary, it offers the opportunity

29 Henry, Seeing the Invisible, 131.

30 Henry, Seeing the Invisible, 129.

to create a symbolic space in which to name these emotions, in themselves impenetrable.

This interpretation seems to be confirmed by Henry's concluding statement: »The Issenheim Altarpiece does not represent life; instead, it allows life to be felt within ourselves.«[31] If representation is not all the altarpiece is about, it does also represent: the duplicity of appearance, for once, does not create a strong opposition between pathos and representation but rather a space for possible exchanges. Thus, the aesthetic experience, in manifesting the primacy of the pathic element, also shows a capacity for the communication, in a non-illusory way, of the content of the emotions, using the resources of culture and history, language and symbols.

The particular value of Henry's rereading of Kandinsky lies exactly in its implicit acknowledgment of this possible exchange which goes beyond the suspicion towards the phenomenological qualities of that which is intentionally perceived. Led by Kandinsky's intuitions about the fundamentals of aesthetic theory, Henry is obliged to reconstitute its dignity to the transcendent appearance of phenomena. Affirming the move towards abstraction in every artistic representation is not enough to annul its representational content, which is always primarily a content imagined by the artist and then entrusted to the forms and harmony of the composition. Henry writes: »The imagination is the proper history of subjectivity. The imagination is the expansion of its pathos.«[32] The imagination allows the appearance in the external world of that of which the world knows nothing, or better, should say nothing, because of the strong dualism between Life and world postulated by Henry. Thanks to the imagination, thus, and to an artist's talent, the barrier of incommunicability between the interior and the exterior can be disrupted. Thanks to the imagination, again, we are not condemned to exile from ourselves in a world in which everything comes into sight except the only things that really count: Life and its pathos.

31 Henry, Seeing the Invisible, 132. But a year before, in *Barbarism*, Henry said: »*Art is the representation of life*« (36, original emphasis). This apparent shift in Henry's thinking, in considering the possibility of something as an artistic »representation«, is significant for Henry's awareness of the philosophical complexity of the question, notwithstanding its customary consequences.

32 Henry, Seeing the Invisible, 125.

5. Conclusion: An Appeal to Theology

Thus the sphere of art and aesthetics represents a place of resistance to the pure objectivation of phenomena. Art reveals that in what appears in the world, there is more than what appears, and, in so doing, art expresses something that is also part of our ordinary experience of the world. Art is, in Henry's concluding words in his essay on Kandinsky, »the resurrection of the eternal life«,[33] that is, the overflowing into the world of that which does not belong to the world. The religious tenor of this statement, confirmed by many others in *Seeing the Invisible*, requires us to come back to the parallel between aesthetic and religious experience evoked at the beginning.

In *Barbarism*, Henry develops the idea that as cultural forms, art and religion take part in the process through which life realizes its continuous coming-to-itself, increasing its potentialities.[34] As the last bastions of culture in a world dominated by science, art and religion open us up to a »knowledge of life as a knowing where life constitutes at the same time the power that knows and what is known by it«.[35] They represent a point of contact with the inner and invisible truth. It is interesting to note how the author rescues aesthetic and religious experiences, on the basis of their capability to intercept the originary passivity and affectivity of human beings and to recognize this originarity as 'sacred', that is, withdrawn from any kind of manipulation. Art is the implementation of the powers of sensibility,[36] those powers that human beings cannot explain or measure but just feel as the feeling itself in which the self is given.

Could theology not find in these reflections an opportunity to renew its own language which is so sorely lacking of terms and concepts that are able to escape the binary of interior and exterior? In its long history, the motif of the spiritual senses was one (not entirely successful)[37] attempt to correct the ›lack of sensibility‹ in theological reasoning. But in the light of Henry's phenomenological model, the expression ›spiritual senses‹ should not be read as an oxymoron but rather as the precise description of the relationship

33 Henry, Seeing the Invisible, 142.
34 Henry, Barbarism, 5; ch. 2 in the same volume focuses especially on art.
35 Henry, Seeing the Invisible, 37.
36 Henry, Seeing the Invisible, 48.
37 See also Chapter 5 in this volume.

between sensibility and that which grounds it, namely originary affectivity. Then this theological expression loses its exhortative connotation, which remains inserted into a binary scheme (the incitement to go beyond the physical senses and to develop the spiritual and most valuable ones), and acquires an ontological meaning. Every feeling is spiritual, not because I must make an effort to add ›something‹ to what I physically feel but because whatever I feel ›talks‹ about Life which is in myself and in which I am given to myself as more than myself.

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