On Sculpture

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Is there anything significant in the fact that Aristotle, in explaining his conception of causation, takes the activity a sculptor as one of his key exemplars, his paradigm, if you like?[1] In this paper, I am going to see if, in using Aristotle's account of causation, we can illuminate the nature of sculpture and the approach sculptors take to their art.

Other artists make; poets make poems, painters make paintings, dancers make ballets, architects design buildings but sculptors *make* in an elemental, physical way.

They themselves wrestle with materials (*material* cause) – at least, that is our image of the sculptor, even if in some cases they actually have assistants to do some of the labouring for them. Sculptural materials are traditionally stone, particularly marble, and bronze and wood, hard and impermeable materials, weighty and endowed with presence, not easy to push around, in themselves inert and inanimate. It is this initial presence invested in the unformed material which the sculptor will enhance in the fully formed work, or at least he will if he is successful. In sculpture, the inert becomes animate, or if not actually animate, certainly worked through by mind, infused with life, meaning and finality by mind. Although Aristotle's example is of a sculptor working in bronze, maybe the paradigm sculptural case is the worker in stone. The typical sculptural instruments are chisel, hammer, knife, capable both of strength, necessarily so, but also delicacy.

He (Aristotle) would, of course, have known this well enough. Greek temples were virtual repositories of stone sculpture, not just inside, but outside, with magnificent statues of Athene, Zeus and other gods, and stunning friezes depicting mythological incidents, as part of the architecture. And there were, of course, the *kouroi*, those astonishing marble figures, often life-sized, their faces and figures human in a way Egyptian sculpture is not, but without the illusionistic smoothness and softness of Hellenistic sculpture. If we like to see works of art as material transformed – having a double

[1] cf Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, V.2; *Physics*, II.3; Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics, passim*. The scholastics made a great deal of the sculptor/sculpture example in their explanations of cause.

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aspect in which the material cause is not disguised, factitiously made to look as if it is not what it is – the archaic kouros could be a paradigm case. (I'm going to come back to that, to the distinction between a sculpture and a waxwork, as it were.)

In working with stone there is risk and potential disaster, where one false blow could ruin the marble the sculptor has chosen. You can't stick bits of stone together without destroying their seamless quality. This 'hands-on' element makes working in stone akin to a high-wire act, particularly as when a block of good Carrara marble, say, is rare and expensive. But the worker in bronze and other metals will also get physically involved, forging his work, or, as is often the case, in a slightly less elemental way, moulding a figure in wax in preparation for the casting (the so-called *cire perdu* or lost wax method). In the 20th century, indeed, sculptors have increasingly gone back to working blacksmith-like, with heavy metal, forging and shaping iron, in paradigmatic craft fashion, as with stone sculpture, direct and at times hard physical labour undergirding artistic inspiration.

The physical moulding and shaping by the sculptor is the clearest image we have of *efficient* causation working on a *material* cause. We see before us the whole transformative process. But matter and efficient cause are by no means the whole story, in contrast to, say, an asteroid hitting the moon and causing a crater to appear.

In working with the material cause, the efficient cause (Polyclitus, the sculptor, in Aristotle's example) imposes *form* on the originally formless (*formal* cause). It may be objected here that the marble or molten metal or wood or wax is not completely formless. It is not *materia prima*; it is marble or wax or wood or molten metal; but it is not yet what we are talking about and what it will become, a sculpture. In particular, the unsculpted stone *is* unformed by human mind or hand, even if sometimes a sculptor will chose a piece of stone for the potential he sees in it, its potential to be a sculpture, or even in its veining and or its original conformation its potential to be the sculpture he wants to make (again a point I shall come back to). But even in these cases, it is the work of the mind of the sculptor to see the potential in the first place, to elicit the form that might have been there embryonically, and to work it up.

In thinking of formal causes, we are in the area of what John Hyman, in his paper in this volume, calls 'sense': where, in the case of a sculpture, a piece of physical matter becomes significant by virtue of how it looks. In a sculpture the matter (marble, bronze, or whatever) is to be seen as having an intended shape, as having a form if you like, and in some cases that form to be seen as having

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an intended reference to other things, such as the human body or a horse. Form or sense being intended is important here. Unlike Hamlet teasing Polonius about the shapes to be seen in clouds, in the case of sculptural form we are in what Robert Grant, in his paper in this volume, refers to as the tertiary realm, where (primary quality) matter with secondary qualities (shape, colour, etc.) is taken up into the realm of human significance and will, as meaning something to us, and intended to have that meaning by the sculptor.

That for which the sculptor's work is done (*final* cause) can be almost any human intention, from the most mundane to the most elevated, anything from a day's wage to the attempt to embody the serenity and majesty of the divine, and maybe sometimes both, as, for example, in *Le Beau Dieu* in the West Portal of Amiens Cathedral.

Of course, the day's wage is an external final cause, something in order to produce which the sculpture is made, whereas the attempt to embody the divine is internal to the structure and nature of the sculpture, inseparable from the form. Formal and final cause here come together, the final cause being that in the sculpture to which the formal cause is directed, the *outcome* to which the forming *process* is directed. Aristotle thought that they came together in the biological sphere too. The form of an organism was intrinsically related to its functioning, the heart the form it was to serve its function of pumping blood, a function and a form which were collectively the product of the designing intelligence. I am not going to get involved in the philosophy of biology here, save to say that I'm not convinced that Darwin has eliminated final causes from nature. The heart is still, even in the neo-Darwinian model, there because it pumps blood, in a sense then in order to pump blood. But still, in the biological case, we may have eliminated any notion of an intelligence guiding the process leading to the outcome, but clearly in the sculptural case, we know what the guiding intelligence is; it is that which guides the hand and the eye of the sculptor, which expresses itself in this activity (and note that in real life, as opposed to somewhat degenerate philosophy and even degenerate sculpture, the form emerges in the activity of sculpting, rather than being imposed as an external and already existing blueprint – sculpting by numbers, so to speak: it happens, but it is not the best case, where the intelligence and the matter and activity are all intimately conjoined). So in sculpture the efficient cause, in its production of formal and final causality, has to be seen as an intelligent artificer, the paradigm of the intelligent designer.

In considering *Le Beau Dieu* we go back to sculpture which is part of architecture, sculpture which is for the sake of some over-arching project or purpose. Looked at like this, sculpture of this sort is

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particularly apt for expressing the dialectic between the individual craftsman and the communal and in this case transcendent purpose. The individual work is not submerged in the whole, but is actually elevated by its role and position. Ruskin made a great deal of this aspect of Gothic sculpture, also maintaining that in Gothic work the individual craftsman was able to express his own soul: 'the principal admirableness of the Gothic schools of architecture (is) that they thus receive the results of the labour of inferior minds; and out of fragments full of imperfection, and betraying that imperfection in every, indulgently raise up a stately and unaccusable whole'.[2]

Underlying Ruskin's point here are two further considerations. First there is the value of the soul of the individual worker, which, in Ruskin's well-known view, is shredded in the division of labour, but he also thinks it is crushed when the worker has to work according to some pre-determined model of perfection – so, for Ruskin, perfection in a work of art can be a sign of weakness in the conception rather than its strength. Then secondly we should recognise our 'lost power and fallen soul', not as a state intensely and irredeemably painful, but as 'tending, in the end, to God's greater glory'. 'Do what you can', Ruskin says, 'and confess frankly what you are unable to do'. So we have his love of the weird and ill-shapen, even at times crudely and clumsily crafted, figures in the Gothic cathedrals – perhaps tending to God's glory in their contribution to the great churches in which they are placed, and in their manifestation of the individuality of the carver. But I think there may be another aspect to Ruskin's thinking here. Sculptors do not have the powers of Pygmalion, whose statue was made into the flesh and blood Galatea, nor should they pretend to such.

Sculptors are mortal men and women, lost and fallen into the material world. It would follow from looking at things in this way that we see the material cause transformed in their work, manual and mental – yes – but not alchemised into something else altogether, such as the flesh and blood of a living, breathing human being. Against the ambition of a Pygmalion, physical integrity of the material cause of the sculpture should be respected, maybe even in the manner of Michelangelo's *Rondanini Pieta*. Here the figures are still clearly part of the marble block from which they are hewn, which in a way emphasises both their vulnerability and the mother's poignant

[2] This quotation and the phrases in the following paragraph are from John Ruskin's 'The Nature of then Gothic', in *The Stones of Venice,* in *The Works of John Ruskin*, edited by E.T. Cook and A.Wedderburn, George Allen, London 1903–12, vol 10, 190.

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protectiveness of her now dead son. Even their faces can be seen as emerging from the marble, which, in contrast to classical and medieval sculpture was not painted – something which led to a concentration on the shape and material elements of the sculpture, elements which post-Michelangelo have taken on increasing importance in sculptural aesthetics. And perhaps in line with this shifting emphasis, Rodin was but one of many later sculptors who exploited the aesthetic possibilities opened up by having figures as it were emerging from the stone from and of which they were formed.

To go back to *Le Beau Dieu*, as the summit of the medieval spirit, so esteemed by Ruskin:

'Of the statue of Christ, itself, I will not speak at any length, as no sculpture would satisfy, or ought to satisfy, the hope of any loving soul that has learned to trust in Him'

so, no idolatry, no Pygmalion magic here, but

'at the time it was beyond what till then had been reached in sculptural tenderness; and was known, far and near as the 'Beau Dieu d'Amiens', yet understood… (as) no idol, only a letter or sign of the Living Spirit, which, however, was conceived by every worshipper as here meeting him at the temple gate (i.e. the Living Spirit, whose sign this stone is) … the best single rendering of the idea (of the Lord of Hosts, the Lord of Virtues) … to a well-taught disciple in the thirteenth century'

And he goes on point out that while, gathered round le Beau Dieu there are prophets who mourn, apostles who are persecuted, and disciples who are martyred, what we read in the stone before us is Christ, not as the crucified or the dead, but as 'the Incarnate Lord, the perfect Friend, the Prince of Peace on Earth, the Everlasting King in Heaven. This, according to Ruskin is the 'pure, joyful, beautiful lesson of Christianity', from which habitual contemplation of Christ's death must be a fall from faith. While 'every stone of the building is cemented with (Christ's) blood, and there was no furrow of its pillars that was not ploughed by His pain', what we have before us is the God of the Last Judgement: 'He holds the Book of the Eternal Law in is left hand; with is right He blesses – but He blesses on condition: "This do, and thou shalt live, this be and thou shalt live… (with) the further word 'This if thou do not, this thou art not, thou shalt die".' And for Ruskin this figure, and its weight of meaning, was seen daily by the people, 'simply, sternly for the great three hundred years of Christianity in her strength.'[3]

[3] All quotations from Chapter Four of Ruskin's *The Bible of Amiens* (1880–5), in Ruskin's *Work*, (*loc cit*), Vol 33, 147–8 and 169–70.

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So, for Ruskin, this statue on a pillar in a gateway was a key sentence in a Bible, whose message could be read, clearer perhaps than writing which, for most of the medieval populace, could not be read… That sculpture *could* have this meaning is all part of its formal and final causation, that this statue is something with a meaning, a sense embodied in its matter, (formal cause) and there to be read in this way (as intended, as endowed with a purpose, a final cause). But note that, as Ruskin says, it is a symbol, a rendering of an idea (even if the 'best possible' rendering of this idea, best possible because the force comes from the aesthetic quality of the statue itself, in which severity and tenderness, divinity and humanity, majesty and vision are inextricably combined and articulated). It is not, though, an idol or a miraculous Galatea; it is still a stone (material cause) that someone has worked on (efficient cause).

I think we can say that the craftsman carver who did this – *soli Deo gloria*, perhaps, or maybe with an eye to his day's wage as well – has not so smoothed out the stone as to obliterate the statue's material provenance under an unnatural sheen (although it would have been painted), nor has he, in the manner of the Spanish baroque, tried to produce an object which, spookily, has the manifest properties of a live human being.

For me, precisely because of the stylisation, even simplification involved in the Amiens statue, its meaning is purer, more dignified and more forceful than a realistic work would be (which couldn't in any case, properly show forth the majesty of the Divine Judge – we would be distracted by the physical details so illusionistically crafted by the sculptors of the Spanish baroque, by Jesus's loin cloth or his hair style, or whatever).

Does it matter that we do not know the name of the Amiens sculptor? Are we (and Ruskin) fantasising about his spirit of service to a greater glory? I think not, or not entirely, which I think may come out by contrasting it with another work of genius, but this time one done by someone whose name we do know. What I have in mind here is Michelangelo's *David*. Even though this sculpture was, I believe, produced in order to play its part in an architectural complex (the Palazzo della Signoria, in Florence, the block of marble chosen some decades earlier for a statue of David having originally been destined for the façade of the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore); even though all this, there is, I think, a sense here of self-assertion, or if not of assertion of the self of the artist, a sense that the statue itself is proud and assertive – of humanity? – in a way *Le Beau Dieu* is not, in a way a traditionally sculpted Buddha would not be. It would be very hard to see *David* as drawing our

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compulsions within, to a haven of inner peace, as opposed to asserting the physicality and humanity of this man.

So partly because of its very physicality, sculpture can subserve quite contrasting effects. But also because of its context – something we may overlook in seeing sculpture in a gallery, all jumbled up and taken out of context. Think of the Apollo in the Olympia pediment, to which Michelangelo might have been indirectly referring (not that he knew of this actual piece, but he certainly knew of the aesthetic underlying it). The Olympian Apollo is beautiful, the sort of beauty known (for obvious reasons) as Apollonine; out of context it is a human beauty, but here it is divine, definitely the divinity taming the human and the sub-human. But this itself shows us that focusing on Nietzsche's distinction between the Dionysian (music) and the Apollonine (plastic arts) might mislead; for, as we see in the *Laocoön*, we can also have the Dionysian in stone.

I've already mentioned that some people don't like this sort of Hellenistic sculpture, precisely because of its apparent aesthetic, of repudiating its material. Form here submerges matter, if you like. But maybe one can be too precious about the alleged purity of archaic Greek sculpture, if one thinks of the way the silken diaphanous fabric of the chiton is rendered in the 6th century Kore statues, the sisters of the Kouroi.

In practice in most sculpture there will be several final causes, several purposes for which the work is done; but as human work, it will have always have some final causality, and in having it, a sculptural object will be distinguished from a purely natural stone, however similar the two might be in appearance. We can appreciate this when we consider the prehistoric menhirs, standing stones, to be found all over Europe, put there by our pre-literate ancestors. A whole host of other questions, about form and meaning, will then come into play in determining our response to the sculptural object. In the case of the (thousands of) menhirs there are in Europe, we simply do not know their purpose; but we know that they are the products of intelligent design, with the full panoply of causation.

Even without understanding their final or even formal causes, menhirs and similar prehistoric stones do exemplify a fundamental aspect of sculpture, the way sculpture is spatial, and marks out space. Precisely because we do not know anything about their meanings or purposes, they allow us to focus on the nature of their spatiality, and, by extension, to delve into the nature of space itself. I think that the conclusions we might draw from these reflections could be drawn from considering natural objects in space; but this

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would be more difficult because natural objects are usually part of a continuous tract of space, and aren't so clearly self-standing, standing out against the rest of their environment. Objects we make, like tables or chairs, are not parts of a continuous nature, but we rarely look at them as they are in themselves, as opposed to as they are for our purposes, so like a feature of a natural landscape, they too are normally seen in their relation to other objects – all of which tends to make us look at space simply as a container, in which things are put, and in which they are related to us and to our purposes, or to other things in a wider environment; but there is another and more profound way of conceptualising space and our experience of space. In this more fundamental conception, space does not pre-exist objects. Indeed if there were not objects, there would be no space. Space and objects come into existence simultaneously, and we only forget this because in our experience there are always objects (and hence space) there already, and we tend to think of space as a kind of permanent, neutral background to the objects which we conceive as filling it.

I submit that when we see a menhir, because we know that it is not a natural part of a landscape, but something made or placed there, and because we do not see it in terms of our purposes, we see it as itself constituting a place, and not merely belonging to a place. Space here – its space or place – is not that in which the menhir is placed, but is brought into being by its presence. When we look at it, we see it as the centre of its world, both attracting us and our vision to it, and also articulating and constructing its own space around it, by which it comes into relation with other things and their places. If we question the container view of space, as I think we should on general philosophical grounds, then space arises only through the presence of the objects which come into existence, and which, by coming into existence and motion, define space and its hypothetical dimensions and limits. If there were no objects, and space were a container, how big would the container be? What would be (say) a mile or a metre within it? What would have to happen for the size of the container to be doubled or halved? I think that because these questions would have no meaning or answer, we should conclude that it is wrong to conceive of space as a container which is ontologically prior to the objects which we conceive as being 'in' space.

What I am suggesting is that certain types of sculptural object, because we see them as existing in and for themselves, and without any discernible purpose, can help us to experience the elementary nature of space. We sometimes experience sculpture as the centre of its own space, constructing its own space, gathering space around

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it, thickening it, so to speak, both tying things into its orbit and sending its own vibrations out beyond itself, to other things it connects with. (And maybe if we think of gravity as the curvature of space, brought about by the presence of physical objects, this experience or thought is not completely metaphorical or abstractly metaphysical.)

Something of what I am getting at is brought out by the following statement by Eduardo Chillida: 'Sculpture and music exist in the same harmonious and ever-developing space. The volume of musical sound fills the silence with tension; similarly there could be no volume in sculpture without the emptiness of space. In the void the form can continue to vibrate beyond its own limits; the space and the volume together, selecting from all the potential structures inherent in the form, build up its final shape. The rhythm is determined by the form and is renewed with it.'[4] The idea is of space or of a space being moulded, shaped, even brought into existence by the ebb and flow of the objects in it and their mutual relationships; as if objects bring their own space with them.

Chillida's own sculptures seem to me to be the best illustration of what I think he is getting at here. In his *Wind Combs* series (*Peine de Viento*), he produces work which encompasses, articulates and constructs its own space. These works, large and curved abstract iron forms, locked as they are into the rocky Atlantic headland of San Sebastian (Donostia), have the effect of focusing our attention not just on themselves, with their empty metallic curves drawing the lines of their own space, but they also humanise the wild environment of which they have become a part: humanise, but not domesticate. In fact, the opposite of domestication – they present us and our work and perception as being bound up in the wild, and in a way cast on its turbulence and in its eye, so to speak, a modern expression of the sublime.

> There is some notion,
> here, of the sea guffawing off reefs,
> to which we compose our daft music
> of comprehension. Rain front on rain front,
> then a sun-gash, clouds moody, the sea's mood
>
> turns from slate-black, to yellow ochre, to green.[5]

[4] Eduardo Chillida, quoted in Pierre Volboudt, *Chillida*, (trans. V. Menkes), Harry N. Abrams, New York, 1967, vii–ix.

[5] Geoffrey Hill, *Scenes From Comus* 1.4, Penguin, London, 2005, 4.

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Traditionally Western sculpture has been raised up on an altar or a building or placed on a pedestal, and so not free standing in its own space, and this has in a way deprived it of its full expressive potentiality. In *The Burghers of Calais* it was Rodin's genius to take sculpture off its marble plinth, on to rough ground, so to speak, letting the burghers be on the same level as the public, and letting their own weightiness dominate their own space with an extraordinary psychological power. (In 1347, the burghers of Calais gave themselves and, as they believed, their lives up to Edward III of England, as the price of raising the siege of Calais. In Calais now the ensemble is ridiculously and against Rodin's intention placed on a stone pedestal.)

From the point of view of our fourfold causal analysis, Rodin is making full use of the material cause of his work to bring out the reluctance, the foreboding, the heaviness of the situation and of the weight of fate on the shoulders of the walking men – something which is made fully manifest only when we walk round the group, and see the figures as fully three dimensional. I think that this coiled up power, impression yielding expression, is very characteristic of sculpture from the first half of the twentieth century, which is often semi-abstract, so as to emphasise both the materiality of the material (material cause) and the way in which space is here made dense, dense with tension, releasing considerable psychological force. But, I would argue that in a way sculptors like Epstein and Gaudier-Brzeska, and later Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth were following the path opened up by Rodin in works like *The Burghers of Calais* and *Balzac*.

Summing up a number of themes so far, Epstein wrote this:

> The unworked alabaster block lies in my studio for a year. I can conceive any number of works in it… I always try to get the whole feeling and expression of the work with regard to the material I am working in… with an isolated piece of stone they should regard the sculpture as primarily a block, and do no violence to it as a stone (MATERIAL CAUSE). There must be no exact imitation of nature to make one believe that one is seeing a translation of nature into another material. Imitation is no aim of sculpture proper, and a true piece of sculpture will always be the material worked into a shape. This shape is the important thing, not whether the eye is fooled by the representation, as at Madame Tussaud's waxworks… The work a sculptor is engaged in is continually in his mind (FORMAL CAUSE)… He sees it with his mind's eye, at any moment of the day or night… The vision of the work is there for analysis, as an

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> inescapable presence. The sculptor with his vision, planning, working, bringing his hands upon the willing and love-returning stone (EFFICIENT CAUSE), the creation of a work, the form embodying the idea, strange copulation of spirit and matter, the intellect dominating hammer and chisel – the conception that at last becomes a piece of sculpture.' (FINAL CAUSE).[6]

(In my discussion I have tended to think of final cause as internal to the sculptor, that effect to which the sculpture is directed, its achieved impression so to speak, that to which the form or sense is moving us, rather than more external aims, such as fame for the carver or his day's wage.)

Because we are so used to seeing sculpture either in two dimensional reproductions or as attached to a building, we tend to overlook its three-dimensionality (and conversely tend to underestimate the poverty of photographic reproductions).

Even in bas-relief, as with the horses in the Parthenon Frieze, there is the effect of the constantly changing light on the stone, and also of the viewer seeing it from different angles which again alters the way the light falls on the stone (to say nothing of the way this – then painted – marble would have looked so sharp in the Athenian light of its day). And one can also think of the extraordinarily delicate shadows cast by the wire and string pieces by sculptors such as Naum Gabo and, in certain phases, Barbara Hepworth, all part of the vibrant effects made possible by the sculptural three dimensionality of their constructions.

But I want to end by referring a work which may seem to go against the spirit of quite a lot of what I have said – but which, actually, in its own way seems to me to articulate its own space, in a way which is never still, which is never capturable in a two dimensional image, which has all the geometric potential of Chillida, but which at the same is intensely human, but elevating and dancerly, still, but never still. The point is that, like all sculpture, one has to see Canova's *The Three Graces* in three dimensions to appreciate it properly. (The Three Graces or Charities classically are akin to the Muses, daughters of Zeus, or perhaps of Dionysus and Aphrodite, Aglea goddess of splendour, Euphrosyne that of mirth and Thalia of good cheer: somewhat vague in origin and protean in significance, though clearly always invoking feminine grace, generosity and beauty) Here Canova has (in my view) exploited the three

[6] Jacob Epstein, *Let There Be Sculpture*, (Michael Joseph, London, 1942), 154–5.

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dimensionality of the medium to the full, with ever changing complexity, perspective and emotional charge as one looks from different angles, a perfect expression of what Seneca spoke of as the 'giving, receiving, returning' motif of the Graces, by turns sensuous and humane and even, in a neo-Platonic sense, spiritual, akin to Botticelli's evocation of the Three Graces in his *Primavera* – a deeply affecting example of the power of sculpture, exploiting to the full its three dimensionality and its formal-expressive opportunity, even its spiritual potentiality, but not negating its materiality.

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