

AGNES MARTIN The Untroubled Mind (1972)

People think that painting is about color
It's mostly composition
It's composition that's the whole thing
The classic image—
Two late Tang dishes, one with a flower image
one empty. The empty form goes all the way to heaven.
It is the classic form—lighter weight.
My work is anti-nature
The four-story mountain
You will not think form, space, line, contour
Just a suggestion of nature gives weight
light and heavy
light like a feather
you get light enough and you levitate.
When I say it's alive, it's inspired
alive
inspiration and life are equivalents and they come from
outside.

* Agnes Martin and Ann Wilson, "The Untroubled Mind" (sections of which come from notes for a lecture given by Martin at Cornell University in January 1972), *Flash Art* 41 (June 1973): 6–8; reprinted in *Agnes Martin* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1973), 17–24.

Beauty is pervasive
inspiration is pervasive
We say this rose is beautiful
and when this rose is destroyed then we have lost something
so that beauty has been lost
when the rose is destroyed we grieve
but really beauty is unattached
and a clear mind sees it
the rose represents nature
but it isn't the rose
beauty is unattached; it's inspiration—it's inspiration
The development of sensibility, the response to beauty
In early childhood, when the mind is untroubled, is when
inspiration is most possible
The little child just sitting in the snow
The education of children—social development is contradictory
to aesthetic development. Nature is conquest, possession,
eating, sleeping, procreation. It is not aesthetic, not the kind
of inspiration I'm interested in
nature is the wheel.
When you get off the wheel you're looking out
You stand with your back to the turmoil
You never rest with nature, it's a hungry thing
every animal that you meet is hungry
not that I don't believe in eating
But I just want to make the distinction between
Art and eating
This painting I like because you can get in there and rest
The satisfaction of appetite happens to be impossible
The satisfaction of appetite is frustrating.
So it's always better to be a little bit hungry
That way you contradict the necessity.
Not that I'm for asceticism
But the absolute trick in life is to find rest.
If there's life in the composition it stimulates your life moments
your happy moments; your brain is stimulated.
Saint Augustine says that milk doesn't come from the mother
I painted a painting called *Milk River*
Cows don't give milk if they don't have grass and water
Tremendous meaning of that is that painters can't give
Anything to the observer
People get what they need from a painting
The painter need not die because of responsibility

When you have inspiration and represent inspiration
The observer makes the painting.
The painter has no responsibility to stimulate his needs
It's all an enormous process
No suffering is unnecessary
All of it is only enlightening. This is life
Asceticism is a mistake
sought out suffering is a mistake
But what comes to you free is enlightening
I used to paint mountains here in New Mexico and I thought
my mountains looked like ant hills.
I saw the plains driving out of New Mexico and I thought the
plain had it
just the plane
If you draw a diagonal, that's loose at both ends
I don't like circles—too expanding
When I draw horizontals
you see this big plane and you have certain feelings like
you're expanding over the plane
Anything can be painted without representation.
I don't believe in influence
Unless it's you yourself following your own track
Why you'd never get anywhere
I don't believe in the eclectic
I believe in the recurrence
That this is a return to classicism
Classicism is not about people
and this work is not about the world.
We called Greek classicism Idealism
Idealism sounds like something you can strive for
They didn't strive for idealism at all
Just follow what Plato has to say
Classicists are people that look out with their back to the world.
It represents something that isn't possible in the world
More perfection than is possible in the world
it's as unsubjective as possible
The ideal in America is the natural man
The conqueror, the one that can accumulate
The one who overcomes disadvantages, strength, courage
Whereas inspiration, classical art depends on inspiration
The Sylphides. I depend on the muses
Muses come and help me now. It exists in the mind
Before it's represented on paper it exists in the mind

The point. It doesn't exist in the world.
The classic is cool
a classical period
it is cool because it is impersonal
the detached and impersonal.
If a person goes walking in the mountains that is not detached
and impersonal, he's just looking back.
Being detached and impersonal is related to freedom
That's the answer for inspiration
The untroubled mind.
Plato says that all that exists are shadows.
To a detached person the complication of the involved life
is like chaos
If you don't like the chaos you're a classicist
If you like it you're a romanticist
Someone said all human emotion is an idea
Painting is not about ideas or personal emotion
When I was painting in New York I was not so clear about that
Now I'm very clear that the object is freedom
not political freedom, which is the echo
Not freedom from social mores
freedom from mastery and slavery
freedom from what's dragging you down
Freedom from right and wrong
In Genesis Eve ate the apple of knowledge
of good and evil
When you give up the idea of right and wrong
you don't get anything
What you do is get rid of everything
freedom from ideas and responsibility.
If you live by inspiration then you do what comes to you
you can't live the moral life, you have to obey destiny
You can't live the inspired life and live the conventions
You can't make promises
The future's a blank page
I pretended I was looking at the blank page
I used to look in my mind for the unwritten page
If my mind was empty enough I could see it
I didn't paint the plane
I just drew this horizontal line
Then I found out about all the other lines
But I realized what I liked was the horizontal line.
Then I painted the two rectangles

correct composition
If they're just right
You can't get away from what you have to do
They arrive at an interior balance
like there shouldn't need to be anything added
People see a color that's not there
our responses are stimulated
I'm painting them for direct light
With these rectangles I didn't know at the time exactly why
I painted those rectangles
From Isaiah, about inspiration
"surely the people is grass"
You go down to the river
you're just like me
an orange leaf is floating
you're just like me
Then I drew all those rectangles. All the people were like
those rectangles
they are just like grass
That's the way to freedom
If you can imagine you're a grain of sand
you know the rock ages.
If you imagine that your rock
rock of ages cleft from me
let me hide myself in thee
you don't have to worry
If you can imagine that you're a rock
all your troubles fall away
It's consolation
Sand is better
you're so much smaller as a grain of sand
We are so much less
These paintings are about freedom from the cares of this world
from worldliness
not religion. You don't have to be religious to have inspirations
Senility is looking back with nostalgia
senility is lack of inspiration in life
Art restimulates inspirations and awakens sensibilities
that's the function of art.
A boy whenever he had a problem
he called this rock up out of the mud
he turned into a rock
he summoned a vision of quiet

The idea is independence and solitude
nothing religious in my retirement
religion from my point of view
it's about this grass
The grass enjoyed it when the wind blew
It really enjoyed the wind leaning this way and that
So the grass thought the wind is a great comfort
Besides that it blows the clouds here which makes rain
In fact we owe all our self being to the wind
We should tell the wind our gratitude
perhaps if we fall down and abase ourselves
We can get more—we can avoid suffering
that's religion
solitude and independence for a free mind.
Nothing that happens in your life makes inspiration
When your eyes are open
You see beauty in anything
Blake's right about there's no difference
between the whole thing
and one thing
freedom from suffering
suffering is necessary for freedom from suffering
first you have to find out about what you're suffering from.
My painting is about impotence
We are ineffectual
In a big picture a blade of grass amounts to not very much
worries fall off you when you can believe that
pride is in abeyance when you think that.
One thing I've got a good grip on is remorse
The whole wave
It applies to life the wave
As it was in the beginning, there was no division
and no separation
don't look at the stars. Then your mind goes freely—way, way
beyond
look between the rain
the drops are insular
try to remember before you were born
the conqueror will fight with you
If there's no one else around.
I am constantly tempted to think that I can help save myself
by looking into my mind I can see what's there
by bringing thoughts to the surface of my mind I can watch

them dissolve
I can see my ego and see its intentions
I can see that it is the same as all nature
I can see that it is myself and impotent
like all nature; impotent in the process of dissolution
of ego, of itself. I can see that its main intention is the
conquest and destruction of ego, of self; and can only go back
and forth in constant battle with itself; repeating itself.
It would be an endless battle if it were all up to ego
because it does not destroy and is not destroyed by itself
It is like a wave
it makes itself up; it rushes forward getting nowhere really
It crashes, withdraws and makes itself up again
pulls itself together with pride
towers with pride
rushes forward into imaginary conquest
crashes in frustration
withdraws with remorse and repentance
pulls itself together with new resolution
individually and collectively the same
children trained in pride and patriotism
towering in national spirit
charging in conquest
Victory and defeat and frustration
withdrawing and repentance
then once more pride
the wheel of life
pride
conquest
Victory defeat frustration
remorse repentance
resolution
pride
More people at an earlier age see the conqueror in themselves
then see the way out in another process, the real defeat of
ego in which we have no part
The dissolution of ego in reality as it was in the beginning
as it was before we were separate and insular
the process we call destiny
in which we are the material to be dissolved
We eat
We procreate
We die

We can see the process and recognize suffering as the defeat of
ego by the process of destiny
We can relinquish pride, conquest, remorse and resolution
inevitably as destiny unfolds
cradled on the mountain I can rest
Solitude and freedom are the same
under every fallen leaf.
Others do not really exist in solitude. I do not exist
no thinking of others even when they are there; no interruption
a mystic and a solitary person are the same
night, shelterless, wandering
I, like the deer, looked
finding less and less
living is grazing
memory is chewing cud
wandering away from everything
giving up everything
not me anymore, any of it
retired ego, wandering
on the mountain; no more
conquests; no longer an enemy to anyone
ego retired, wandering
no longer a friend, master, slave; all the opposites dead to
the world and himself irresponsible
perhaps I can now really enjoy sailing
adventure in the dark
very exciting
beast seems to be stretched out dead.
He is very mild.
I will not be seeking adventure but it might happen I suppose
Inspired action is destiny
our feet are in the paths of righteousness
the paths that our feet take are marked
As the river runs to the sea
and the plant grows to the sun
So do we flow and grow and exist
ecstasy playing with Sylphides angels
As long as I look in my mind and see nothing at all
The Sylphides have the beast captured and are grooming him
very pleasant sun, that is what destiny is like
It is like grooming
The idea—the sudden realization of the destruction of
innocence by ego.

In solitude there is consolation
thinking of others and myself, even plants,
I am immediately apprehensive
because my solitude has been interrupted
solitude, inspiration
Westward down the mountain
I am nothing absolutely
There is this other thing going on
the purification of reality
that is all that is happening
all that happens is that process;
not nature; the dissolution of nature
the error is in thinking we have
a part to play in the process
As long as we think that, we are in resistance
I can see that I have nothing to do with the process
It is very pleasant
The all of all, reality, mind
the process of destiny
like the ocean full to the brim
like a dignified journey with no trouble and no goal on and on
Solitude
other than nature
smiling
Everyone is chosen and everyone knows it
including animals and plants
There is only the all of the all
everything is that
every infinitesimal thought and action is part and parcel of
a wonderful victory
“freedom on the mountain a glimpse of victory”
We seem to be winning and losing,
but in reality there is no losing
the wiggle of a worm as important as the assassination of a
president
I want to talk to you about “the work,” art work
I will speak of inspiration, the studio, viewing art work, friends
of art, and artists’ temperaments.
But your interest and mine is really “the work”—works of art
Art work is very important in the way that I will try to
show when I speak about inspiration.
I have sometimes put myself ahead of my work in my mind and
have suffered in consequence.

I thought me, me; and I suffered
I thought I was important. I was taught to think that. I was
taught “You are important; people are important beyond
anything else.”
But thinking that I suffered very much
I thought that I was big and “the work” was small. It is not
possible to go on that way. To think I am big is the work is big
the position of pride is not possible either
and to think I am small and the work is small, the position of
modesty, is not possible.
I will go on to inspiration and perhaps you will see what is
possible.
As I describe inspiration I do not want you to think I am
speaking of religion.
That which takes us by surprise—moments of happiness—
that is inspiration. Inspiration which is different from daily care.
Many people as adults are so startled by inspiration which is
different from daily care that they think they are unique
in having had it. Nothing could be further from the truth
Inspiration is there all the time
for everyone whose mind is not clouded over with thoughts
whether they realize it or not
Most people have no realization whatever of the moments in
Which they are inspired.
Inspiration is pervasive but not a power
It’s a peaceful thing
It is a consolation even to plants and animals
Do you think that it is unique
If it were unique no one would be able to respond to your work
Do not think it is reserved for a few or anything like that
It is an untroubled mind.
Of course we know that an untroubled state of mind
cannot last so we say that inspiration comes and goes
but really it is there all the time waiting for us to be
untroubled again. We can therefore say that it is pervasive.
Young children are more untroubled than adults and have
many more inspirations. All the moments of inspiration
added together make what we call sensibility. The development
of sensibility is the most important thing for children
and adults but is much more possible in children. In
adults it would be more accurate to say that the awakening
to their sensibility is the most important thing. Some
parents put the development of social mores ahead of

aesthetic development. Small children are taken to the park for social play; sent to nursery school and headstart. But the little child sitting alone, perhaps even neglected and forgotten, is the one open to inspiration and the development of sensibility.
