

2002

Beauty (Essay 8 of Seeing: When Art and Faith Intersect)

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Recommended Citation

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Essay 8

Beauty

As with the experience of beauty in nature, unless the Christian faith has an understanding and place for the arts it will inevitably fail to win the allegiance of those for whom they are the most important aspect of life. For they will see in the Christian faith only what strikes them as flat, moralistic and platitudinous compared to the troubling, haunting depths of Mahler or *King Lear*. Unless the experience of beauty in nature and the arts is encompassed and affirmed the Christian faith will seem to have nothing of interest or importance to say. This is not however, just a tactic to win the allegiance of the lost. The fact is that God is beautiful and the Church is hiding this.¹

Richard Harries

Beauty as a concept has given twentieth century writers, especially art critics and art historians, a great deal of difficulty. Why is this so? Answering would take several volumes--I will settle for less.

The traditional idea of beauty has all the trappings of a universal concept. For Plato, one of the earliest and most prominent supporters of such universals, beauty, along with other concepts, had the mind of the creator as its source. For much of Christianity's existence Plato's idea of beauty was accepted--with some alterations. For one, the creator became Yahweh, creator of the universe. Secondly, though spiritual beauty might inhabit physical beauty, the reverse was not necessarily the case.

The link between physical and spiritual beauty did however become central for many artists and writers of the Renaissance. The connection was weakened in the Baroque period, when beauty was made to compete with emotional intensity and physical veracity. The Enlightenment, which overlaps the art historical period of the Baroque, brought beauty down to earth.

Some Enlightenment philosophers questioned the intellectual acceptability of belief in God. And without God, where could beauty exist? Certainly it must be in the eye of the beholder. Well, as long as each beholder has a different set of eyes, a different response to what is perceived, then beauty can no longer be adjudged universal. So as empiricist thought dominated the philosophical environment, the concept of beauty became less interesting and beauty in the arts became less crucial.

The Romantics, who were not impressed with empiricism, loved beauty, but it had to share their affections with the sublime (which was more thrilling) and the exotic (which was more seductive). The Materialists, including the Marxists, had no use for beauty. For it was a harlot who had sold out to the powerful and elitist forces that kept the rest of humankind in thrall.

Beauty as a concept has been so crippled by negative associations that it is now seen as synonymous with pretty or handsome. Such a weak term was of little use to those who vied for intellectual ascendancy in the twentieth century. Writing about the arts of the twentieth century focused on integrity, or conceptual innovation, uniqueness of vision or personal expression, social awareness, aesthetic diversity or psychological honesty--but not beauty. This does not mean that some of what beauty encompassed is not included. Rather it means that the term *beauty* is seen as anachronistic and no longer viable or meaningful within the current language of discussion.

But is this the case? The broadened scope allowed in a Postmodernist culture does not mandate abandoning beauty. If artists may make reference to art from the past, including that of ancient Greece and the Renaissance, then beauty may again be discussed. It will not likely be made the central focus, but it may play a supporting role.

One positive outcome is that beauty will again need to be redefined as it re-enters the intellectual marketplace. And as beauty is redefined, there is the chance that the concept of universals, and beauty as one of them, may become intellectually acceptable again. As a concept it may again be seen as viable.

Richard Harries, in *Art and the Beauty of God*, has made valuable connections between beauty, God and the arts for Christians. He re-universalizes the term *beauty* by identifying God as the ultimate beauty:

All that is, is fundamentally good; so all that is, radiates with the divine splendour. This means that truly to discern the existence of anything,

whether a flower or a grain of sand, is to see its finite existence rooted in the ground of being, God himself; it is to discern glimmerings of eternal light, flames or flashes of divine beauty.²

Many of Harries' terms are absent from contemporary art history and criticism. *Good, splendor, eternal* and *divine* are not frequent visitors to most contemporary discussions of art because they indicate a divergent intellectual perspective. They are absent because their use assumes a God. And with a God, *beauty, good, eternal* and *divine* communicate ideas that transcend the individual personality.

Many if not most art historians and art critics adhere to alternative perspectives. So writers who use these terms to refer to universal concepts will have to use them with intelligence and precision. For any imprecision or lack of clarity will certainly and legitimately be exposed.

But if dealt with clearly, beauty may again be viewed as a legitimate concept in relation to contemporary art with Christian imagery, subjects or content. That would create new concerns to deal with. The first of these is that seekers after beauty will not go the distance, as Jenson suggests, and they will end up adoring beauty for its own sake. Then beauty will be disconnected from God its source:

But Western history has gone on to teach another lesson as well: the experience of beauty does not survive the cessation of worship. Precisely those who thematically dedicate themselves to beauty, and who within the modern Western tradition regularly just so abandon worship, are in wave after wave driven at last to deny beauty as well.³

Beauty is anchored in God. Without belief in him, beauty is merely an empty shell filled with the hollow echoes of unrequited spiritual desires.

While seeking beauty for its own sake can lead us into a spiritual cul-de-sac, that is not the only danger. Another is that those seeking God will be seduced by beauty before they are sufficiently grounded in faith. This difficulty may arise if Christian believers are not made aware of the theological relationship between beauty and God. If they are not aware of God as the source of beauty, then Saliers believes that they may become confused: "we are on the brink of substituting the 'holiness of beauty' for religious concern with the beauty of holiness. Admiration for the artistic may prevent real prayer and worship."⁴ Thus the worship of beauty diverts the believer from worshipping God, the source of both holiness and beauty.

So the worship of beauty can become the non-believer's substitute for the worship of God. Or beauty can misdirect the worship of a believer. Being made aware of beauty is somewhat akin to becoming familiar with fire. Like fire, beauty is powerful, it can create inner warmth, it can surround us with brightness and light, it can allow us to see and follow a path through the dreary darkness that surrounds us. Or it can consume us if we abandon ourselves to it.

On the other hand, the absence of beauty, like the absence of fire, can leave us cold and hungry and unsatisfied.

Admiration for the beauty without grasping the intrinsic and intimate connection with faith may lead to idolatry. Such an attitude often correlates with the sentimental, the cheap and ersatz or with the pompous; hence we often have both aesthetic and religious faithlessness,⁵

warns Saliers. On the other hand, recognizing that beauty exists only in God can lead to an eye-opening, soul-reviving revelation that brings joy to the heart and mind of the believer.

Notes

1. Richard Harries, *Art and the Beauty of God: A Christian Understanding* (London: Mowbray, 1993), 5-6.

2. Harries, 36.

3. Robert W. Jenson, "Beauty," *Dialog* (Fall 1986): 251.

4. Don E. Saliers, "Beauty and Holiness Revisited: Some Relations Between Aesthetics and Theology," *Worship* (May 1974): 288.

5. Saliers, 288.