

SOME SHAPE OF BEAUTY

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. . . Yes, in spite of all,
Some shape of beauty moves away the pall
From our dark spirits
(Keats, *Endymion*)



HE love of beauty is so deeply enrooted in us that the pursuit of beauty is synonymous with the pursuit of happiness. The monk, bent on eternal felicity, who scorns passing things for that

. . . undiscovered country, from whose bourn
No traveller returns . . .

is content to sum up his supreme vocation as that of a "lover of spiritual beauty."¹

But if we are unanimous in prizing beauty, there is no lack of disagreement as to what beauty is. The philosopher, fallen on dull days, can always concoct a definition of beauty and thereby start an argument. Even the uninitiated are not immune. John Jones, in a burst of enthusiasm, buys a beautiful (he thinks so) picture of one sunset, two cows and three chickens. He brings it home in triumph to his better half. This worthy lady, as likely as not, will call said piece atrocious, and consign it to the ash can. This domestic disagreement may have two causes. First, the picture is not beautiful; the wife is right. Second, the picture is beautiful; but the wife and John do not *mean* the same thing by the word beauty.

They have failed to indulge in the scholastic exercise called "defining your terms." Perhaps the whole dispute is thus not provoked by the controverted landscape at all. It is an argument about words. The following is an attempt to arrive at a nominal definition of beauty justified by general usage. If John and his little lady choose to agree on it, they will still be able to disagree on its real fulfillment in the landscape.

There is no nook or cranny of the universe, no degree of being,

¹ Rule of St. Augustine.

in which some philosopher, poet or prosaic mortal has not detected the vestiges of what he called *beauty*. Beauty is said to laugh in a comedy, to weep with the tragic muse. Beauty dances dainty minuets in the best Versailles tradition, it peals and thunders in a Wagnerian "Twilight of the Gods." Palaces share it with hovels, as in the case of the beautiful Cinderella. Thirsty souls travel the world around in the pursuit of what they call *beauty*, from the Alps to the South Sea Isles, from the solitary Buddhist monasteries of Thibet to the pulsating metropolises of the New World. Philosophers seek it locked up in narrow rooms, poring over old tomes. Do not be mistaken, the scholar is pursuing beauty. He judges his pursuit of knowledge as supremely delightful, beautiful and good, since for it he renounces all tangible delights, beauty and goodness.

Pens have written *beauty* wherever there is *being*. Through the sky, the earth, the sea, beauty is unwearingly found. It is seen in the sheer grandeur of the heavens: "When Power becometh gracious and steppeth down into visibleness,—*Beauty* I call such stepping down." (Nietzche) To it is attributed the silent, rhythmic motion of the celestial bodies:

Beauty, with metric discipline,
Hems in
The stanzas written by the stars,
The rings of Saturn and the moons of Mars.²

In the Book of Ecclesiasticus, it is said of the stars: "The glory of the stars is the beauty of heaven."³ St. Thomas assigns as one of the reasons for man's erect stature the beauty of the universe: "The senses are given to man not only for procuring the necessities of life, as to the other animals but also for knowledge. Hence, whereas the other animals delight in the senses only as ordained to food and generation, man alone delights in the very *beauty* itself of sensible things."⁴ The beauty of the heavens by night is a constant matter of praise in itself and is used as a flattering comparison. Thus writes Byron:

She walks in *beauty*, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies.

Succeeding beauty by night, comes twilight and sunrise. The combinations of hues, the grandiose extent of these moments defy description. They are simply called *beautiful*. Sunrises, which take place before the workaday world is astir, are like a magnificent

² Barrett, Alfred, S.J., "Discipline," *Mint by Night*, (New York, 1938). (Italics ours).

³ Eccli. 43: 10.

⁴ *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q. 91, a. 3 ad 3.

pageant reserved for the few. On this magic spectacle, the nocturnal tramp, and those for whom the sunrise is the sunset, occasionally blunder. A spectator on the road to Avignon, leaning over the parapet of a little bridge and munching a matutinal crust of bread, may suddenly enjoy the rapturous sight of the molten red sun swinging up from behind the vast white peaks of the Alps of Provence, transforming the icy, shimmering blue of the night into the pale, warm azure of day, and make his morning prayer in the words of Scripture: "The firmament on high is His *beauty*, the beauty of heaven with its glorious show."⁵ As for the end of day and sunsets, the word *beautiful* is so constantly used in association with them that it becomes positively banal.

This beauty of heaven pleases not the eye alone. The intervals between the celestial bodies produced for Pythagoras the sublime "harmony of the spheres." The less gifted among us find this music on a smaller scale:

Where rivulets dance their wayward round,
Amid the . . . *beauty* born of murmuring sound . . .⁶

To the crystal music of brooks succeeds the crashing symphony of the sea. Turbulent, frothing waves come swirling over the boulders to break with a resounding crash against the solid rock and recoil in an explosion of spray. Does not one call these tremendous sounds *beautiful*? And what of the music of the wind? Whose ear has not been lulled by the silver tinkling of many leaves, dancing to and fro as the breeze filters through their green clusters, or by the low gentle murmur of tall trees inclining before the wind?

Yet more than in the inanimate universe, beauty is proclaimed in pulsating, breathing life. The coveted title of *beautiful* is bestowed upon all the degrees of life, upon plants, animals and men. "Fair as the rose" implies not only a compliment, but fundamentally the beauty of the flower. Animals are called beautiful,—the lithesome panther, the graceful antelope, the splendid peacock, the melodious nightingale. But of all terrestrial beauty praised in song and story, man's beauty undoubtedly holds first rank. St. Thomas alludes to man's physical beauty in speaking of habits: "The disposition of the limbs and hands and feet in a manner convenient to nature is *beauty*."⁷

The coercive power of physical beauty is well known. Pope writes in *The Rape of the Lock*:

⁵ Eccli., 43: 12.

⁶ Wordsworth, *Three Years She Grew In Sun And Shower*.

⁷ *Summa Theologica*, Ia-IIae, q. 54, a. I, c.

Fair tresses man's imperial race ensnare,
And *beauty* draws us with a single hair.

Diogenes Laertius quotes Aristotle as saying: "Personal beauty is a better introduction than any letter." Aristotle himself says in the *Ethics*: "Some things there are again, a deficiency in which, mars blessedness: good birth, for instance, or fine offspring, or even personal *beauty*."⁸

The spiritual beauty underlying physical beauty is yet more cherished, though perhaps fewer pursue it. It is already impressed upon children in *Beauty and the Beast* where the charming princess is rewarded for her preferment of spiritual over physical beauty by the complete satisfaction of her love when her donkey-headed lover becomes again a handsome prince. In spiritual beauty, two sorts of beauty are distinguished, intellectual and moral, beauty of the mind and beauty of the heart. Of the first, Keats, following Plato, says tersely:

Beauty is truth, truth *beauty*,—that is all
Ye know on earth and all ye need to know.⁹

Aristotle assigns spiritual beauty as the cause of spiritual love: "Corporeal vision is the principle of sensible love, and likewise the contemplation of spiritual *beauty* is the principle of spiritual love."¹⁰ St. Thomas states: "In the contemplative life, which consists in the act of reason, is found *beauty* properly and essentially,"¹¹ and again says: "The light of reason is the cause of all the clarity and *beauty* of virtue." More poetically, Richard Henry Stoddard says:

Without, the somber Real;
Within, our heart of heart, the *beautiful* Ideal.

This spiritual beauty, when it pervades all a man's acts, is seen as moral beauty. It is manifested in great deeds, great sacrifices. "Conceive on the human face the expression of courage joined to that of intelligence and goodness, is not the union of these three rays *beauty*?" (Père Gratry). Hence St. Thomas terms propriety "a certain spiritual *beauty*."

In gleaning a nominal definition of the word, beauty, from these general usages, the first striking fact is that beauty is predicated of *all* the different degrees of being. Its application is not limited to any one kind of thing. The heavens are beautiful, flowers and animals are beautiful. Finally, God is beautiful, as may be noted in the words

⁸ *Eth.*, Lib. I, cap. VIII.

⁹ *Ode on a Grecian Urn*.

¹⁰ *Eth.*, lib. IX, cap. V.

¹¹ *Summa Theologica*, IIa-IIae, q. 180, a. 2 ad 3.

of St. Augustine: "Too late have I loved Thee, O ancient Beauty." Beauty appears as a quality of being in general. But what particular property of being answers to the term, beautiful? Being and beauty are not used synonymously. Tenements, grey skies, dirty streets, though beings, are usually, to our mind, woefully lacking in beauty. Beauty implies more than nude being, it adds the note of pleasure to the beholder, that is, the character of goodness. Where there is an added radiance, a more evident perfection, there is the term beautiful employed. A fine blending of colors in a winter sunset, a graceful harmony of sounds in a Mozart sonata, the proportionate contour of the features of a Raphael Madonna, these are called *beautiful*. In several places St. Thomas stresses the identity of the good and the beautiful within the object.¹² But he goes on to say: "They differ according to reason." In fact, we do not take beauty as broadly as goodness; it signifies a certain aspect of goodness. A landscape covered with apple-orchards, wheatfields and business-like barns is certainly very good. Yet it is rather to an awe-inspiring landscape such as a cold, frozen glacier, wedged between monstrous masses of forbidding black rock, that the term *beautiful* is reserved. The epithet is determined not by purely sensible pleasure, but by intellectual pleasure. Both landscapes have the same goodness of being. St. Thomas explains it by saying: "Since the good is 'that which all desire,' it is of the essence of good that it fulfil the appetite. But it is of the essence of beauty that in its *beholding* or *knowledge* the appetite be fulfilled."¹³ Thus beauty appears to be, in common usage, what it is in scholastic usage: the goodness whose knowledge pleases, *id quod visum placet*; briefly, the goodness of the mind. Thus we praise as beautiful the rainbow whose colors flash across the sky, to the senses so intangible and airy, yet so pleasing to the mind in the vast magnitude of its harmonious proportions and combinations of color. Thus the wise man finds beauty in wisdom, far removed from sensible things, yet which perfectly fits the mind: "I have desired to take her for my spouse and I became a lover of her beauty."¹⁴

After pursuing beauty through the universe, it seems disappointing to return with a definition no more rich in content than: *id quod visum placet*—that which pleases when seen—which definition has the added disadvantage of being the old-fashioned scholastic edition. Yet such simplicity of content appears perfectly adapted to the common usage of the word. When a person suddenly exclaims "Beautiful!" at

¹² *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q. 5, a. 4 ad 1; and Ia-IIae, q. 27, a. 1 ad 3.

¹³ *Summa Theologica*, Ia-IIae, q. 27, a. 1 ad 3.

¹⁴ *Wisd.*, 8: 2.

the sight of a face or a landscape or on the hearing of a melody, does not his rapid and delightful concept resume itself very well in the words: that which pleases when seen? Therein are many perfections vaguely perceived, not yet describable, of which the sum total, the "I know not what," of delight is expressed in the word *beautiful*. This simplicity of content is in itself an enchantment and ennobling of the word *beauty* inasmuch as it brings it closer to the absolutely simple concept of the word *being*. Like *beauty*, the word *being* expresses little actually, yet it implies in its concept an open avenue to limitless perfection. Man's constant pursuit of what, under one form or another, he calls *beauty*, which is so closely allied to his pursuit of the fullness of being or happiness, indirectly shows how united these two ideas are in his mind.

Is it too much, then, to say that by beauty we mean *being*, being which appears to our intellectual natures as all it ought to be? It seems that in its nudity and simplicity the ordinary use of the word *beauty* means no more than this: *perfect being*, which man perceives not solely as animal, but properly as intellectual. In *beauty*, we have a word, a word by its alliance to *being* open to infinity. Have we something in reality corresponding to that word, something as equally pleasant and gratifying as its boundless concept? That is the real problem.