

BEAUTY GRANTS AN INTERVIEW

HYACINTH CONWAY, O.P.



BEAUTY is a word with a certain nobility. We call *beautiful*, objects which we are inclined to admire unselfishly for themselves, rather than selfishly use for ourselves. But just as golden sunlight plays upon muddy rivers and pig-stys as well as upon serene, immaculate mountain peaks, so the word *beauty*, despite sublime prerogatives, graciously submits to ennoble whatever fancy chooses, be it only yellow shoes, a juicy steak, or a pugilistic "sock" upon the jaw. "What a beauty!" can mean anything from praise of some fair creature to a home-run. Truly a democratic word, a lovely lady of high estate who generously smiles on every walk of life. *Beauty*, the word, rubs elbows with checkered suits and polka-dot neckties, with ostrich feathers and gold teeth. Yet, in reward, this word so hackneyed has at times the privilege of being uniquely and exclusively conferred upon the most sublime things in life.

Associated to a heroic life, a magnificent expanse of sea and sky, or a passage of lucid, crystal thought that draws the veil from divine horizons, *beautiful* becomes a synonym for *perfect*. Within it are wrapped at times the most exalted aspirations and ideals of mankind. From the universal use of the word *beauty*, and from its high worth in men's eyes, we may assume that it expresses a concept of fundamental importance to human nature. The difficulty we experience in defining *beauty* is sometimes due precisely to the fact that by it we express dear, exalted thoughts and knowledge that far surpass our ordinary vocabulary.

Let us not arbitrarily say: "*Beauty* means this," or "*Beauty* means that." Rather let us try to determine the thought, the idea, which the generality of our fellow-dwellers on this planet choose to express by the word. Do we here usurp the task of dictionaries? Surely they have by now defined the word *beauty* to satiety. But dictionaries are wary of philosophy. They content themselves with definitions which describe the pleasing effects of beauty, they enumerate examples of beauty, but they do not tell us *why* an object is beautiful, what makes it so. They leave that for you and me to decide. Shall we sit at the feet of some sage and hear his own peculiar, if breath-taking definition? Rather let us learn the common definition of our brothers the clerk, the cab-driver, and the ditch-digger.

To do so, let us take a cross-section of objects conceded by all, high and low, wise and dull, to be beautiful. Do not most agree in calling sunsets, Niagara Falls, the reigning movie-queen, a coursing race-horse, and Nathan Hale's last words beautiful? They disagree on minor things such as the night-mare hues of some sartorial creation or the stucco of some rococo movie-palace; but regarding classic, time-tried beauty, the pipe-fitter and the coal-heaver align themselves with Michael Angelo and Ruskin to form one solid front. All alike they doff their hats to the *Venus de Milo*, pay due homage to the velvet petals of the rose, thrill to the colored woods at autumn and pause to watch the graceful soaring of the gull. From such unanimity two conclusions emerge: all objects called *beautiful* must have some quality in common which ensures the common epithet, and that same quality must be intended by the majority of men speaking of beauty, as indicated by their tacit agreement on the objects to be included in this category.

It remains to discover the common quality of the beauty brought together in our esthetic Hall of Fame, and which gives it its stamp. We do agree to call certain objects *beautiful*. By it we express that quality which transformed a shapeless pile of stones into Notre Dame Cathedral, that quality which, added to a block of marble, produced the *Venus de Milo*. What is this quality which distinguishes the majestic and inspiring grandeur of a sun-set from an equally colorful splash of oils thrown at random upon a canvas, which makes symphonies out of sounds? A kitten tumbling along a piano key-board may strike all the notes of Chopin's *Butterfly Etude*, perhaps more. Chopin brought beauty from out of chaos. How? Although the much-interviewed "man-in-the-street" does not go about with ready-made definitions of the good, the true and the beautiful which he freely quotes between the baseball scores and the weather forecast, nevertheless it may be permitted to deduce his definition from the one common characteristic peculiar to all the things which he seriously calls *beautiful*. This characteristic is, in a word, *order*. Order is neither marble, color, nor sound. It is the *arrangement* of these.

Order is all that stands between a carved saint and firewood. Order brought the *Venus de Milo* out of a block of marble. A rash stroke of the chisel destroying order, a false note, and beauty has flown. As Pascal put it: "If Cleopatra's nose had been longer, the face of the earth would have been otherwise." The flower's delicately-chiselled petals, their lustre of powdered gold, their exquisite nuances of color, entrance us. As we limn their fragile beauty, what

do we absorb? The order. When the flower has withered and died, how does the artist re-create it? All the colors of the rainbow are spread before him on the palette. His deft fingers can trace lines and arcs similar to the contours of the flower. It is not colors and lines he lacks. The magic of the artist comes in *ordering* those shapeless lines and those patches of color. If he succeeds, beauty is with us again.

The enchanting universe about us is ordered already. The heavens swing mightily on in their tremendous course; the earth yields up its trees and flowers, each a masterpiece of craftsmanship; the animals stalk gracefully through the woods. Man is the exception. He is free. The universe moves as a dutiful slave, but man must tame himself. His life's work consists in fitting himself into the order of the universe. He must find himself, orientate himself. When he has set order in a sum of numbers, in his garden, or in his passions, he experiences a pleasure distinctly human, the perception of order. When this order is particularly luminous and exhilarating, weary man calls it beauty. When he has set order in his whole life, that is, when he has discovered the principle around which to group the various facts of existence, and has done so, behold beauty to the *n*th degree.

Beauty, that which pleases when seen, must be seen by the intellect. Therefore man alone of earthly creatures perceives beauty. For a daffodil to unfold its petals before a St. Bernard dog is for it equivalent to being "born to blush unseen." One sniff, and the ponderous beast pads away unmoved, perhaps crushing the luckless posy en route. Should a man of poetry chance along, he may write a charming poem on daffodils. One did, once. Sensibly he drinks in nothing more rapturous than does the massive canine. But there is in the flower exquisite order, and order delights the intellect. And it is this delightful order which we call beauty.

One does not grow fat on beauty. Artists grow thin on it. Beauty does not keep one warm. A Rembrandt canvas burns no brighter than a few good sticks of firewood. But beauty fattens and warms the soul. It causes a rational pleasure, a pleasure that comes from order, a pleasure that satisfies our noblest appetite, the intellectual one. The pursuit of beauty betrays the deep fundamental pursuit of order, which is the grouping of all things about one principle. Thus the quest of beauty leads us on, on to the quest of perfect order, and to supreme and infinite beauties, undreamt of when first we looked upon a daffodil.