

PASSAGE THROUGH BEAUTY

ID QUOD VISUM PLACET: "That which pleases when seen." The simplicity of St. Thomas's definition of beauty is bewildering, embarrassing; and the modern mind which cares so much for aesthetics is likely to be shocked to find that beauty, from which, for some at least, the remnants of all absolute values seem to hang, is dismissed in four ordinary, even commonplace words. The Thomist who seeks to show that this treatment of beauty is neither contemptuous nor insignificant is in danger of appearing to found a complex system of aesthetics on a base incapable of supporting anything of the sort; therefore of failing to convince. And it will probably be admitted that the phrase considered in itself seems almost to give *carte blanche* to the Thomist aesthetician. Its implications are immensely wide, but if a more acute examination of them is likely to reveal unexpected precisions it becomes a duty to make it. The folly is to attempt to prove things by lifting a phrase from St. Thomas. When our minds have grown in St. Thomas as our soil, our air and our sun, we shall be able to lift phrases without the imputation of uprooting them.

Id. The beautiful is a thing. It is neither an abstraction nor a mere feeling, but an objective reality itself capable of causing. It bears within the definition the weight of a relative clause. It is not identified with our seeing, but, sentinelled by the unequivocal relative, stands up blunt as a post. *Id* is the object, that in itself we see; it is not our personal reaction.

Quod visum. It is the thing present to the eye potentially or in fact, not the effect of the thing as the mark in wax is the effect of the seal, but the thing itself, the thing seen. It is the object present in the intimacy of the senses, the seal imbedded in the wax. These are not the senses of the laboratory psychologist, abstracted from everything but their matter, they are the senses of the living person, ministers of the mind, whose vision is a phase of the mind's vision.

That which is seen: the material eye, considered precisely as such,¹ reacts to the surfaces of things, turns a light-image upside down on a screen inside the head. It does not see *the thing*. That which sees the thing is not even the faculty of sight which sees only coloured surfaces, but is the entire human person, the seeing mind which is also, mysteriously, the active principle of the bodily senses. We say "I see a thing," but "My eye sees the colour of a thing."

Placet. The sound of the word is bathetic, almost as if St. Thomas had said "that which makes you feel nice." To be faithful, the whole phrase is present in this word and we must obviously understand from it the pleasure of the seeing mind. But what a poor word is our pleasure. And there is a bathos in the phrase of St. Thomas which we shall not easily escape. What have we come to expect from beauty, that the simplicity of a saint and doctor in its regard should fill us with dismay?

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty"—only God knows how much the poet saw, how much he really knew, when he said that. The affirmation, with a subunderstanding of the reasoning of Maritain in *Art et Scolastique* (c. v, *L'Art et la Beauté*), gives a line of departure with a subsequent new approach to the problem. Beauty is lifted from the atmosphere of what-it-feels-like-to-look-at-nice-things into the very sky of the transcendentals. The beautiful becomes objectively identified in the one, the true and the good, in *being* itself. It is a property of being, transcending categories. It is, as I think Eric Gill would say, the intrinsic holiness of things, itself a certain proportion of truth and goodness.²

There is no fundamental division of things into a black flock and a white flock, the fair and the squat. We can only divide quite frivolously into nice and nasty according

¹ Considered, that is, simply as organized matter.

² That is *integritas, consonantia, claritas*. The connection of wholeness with holiness is etymological, not merely a pun. "Whole" or "*hale*" says the O.E.D. of the root word; and words do not suffer natural change of meaning altogether by accident. Holiness is a kind of wholeness, but so is beauty.

to our likes. Beauty is identified in being, and everything, in the measure that it *is*, is beautiful. In the measure that it *is*—the impulse to deify that which gives joy to the mind is arrested by the nature of being itself. For being is not one stuff like cheese. My being is not the being of God. Infinitely flexible, varied in the particularity of its each recipient, being is continuous by a proportion that escapes mathematics: a fundamentally hierarchic structure of the world. *Tu solus sanctus*: God alone is holy. But, save for the hyperbole of the saints, it is not true to say that the creature only half exists, is only half true, only half good: to the utmost of its created capacity the creature wholly is, is wholly true, is wholly good; but the creature, though its being fulfils all the nature of its creatureliness, cannot fulfil to the utmost the nature of being (*secundum rationem formalem entis*), therefore neither of goodness nor of truth, nor, following Maritain, of beauty.

We find that the beautiful, *id quod*, is, among the objects of our experience, the thing itself complete in the separate autonomy of its being, admirable, delightful, precisely for what it is. It is a thing-in-itself, “sheer off, disseveral, a star”: *Integritas*—the wholeness of the thing! And considered precisely as beautiful it is that complete being, admirable in itself, intrinsically related to our delight. Beauty is not a specious surface of things; it is a profound splendour of being. Neither is beauty a kind of demure devotional garment which things wear to make them acceptable to religious people. The beauty of childbirth as Epstein well knows does not depend on draperies.

In an invaluable passage from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, James Joyce, examining the three requirements of beauty according to St. Thomas, rejects as “literary talk” the suggestion that *claritas* is a sort of otherworldly radiance shining through things in favour of its directer, profounder meaning, the intrinsic intelligibility of things themselves.³ We must face the autonomy of the particular existent as a condition *sine qua non* of its beauty.

³ Page 242 in the Jonathan Cape edition.

The beautiful is not apprehended as such by having its position traced to a branch of the Porphyrian tree. It is apprehended in itself by a leap of the mind which transcends, without cancelling, the order of abstract reasoning.

Visum: this is the key word to which we return. What is this vision in which the thing is delivered whole, ordered and blithely clear into the intimacy of the mind? Our language has few words equal to the rigour of the needed examination. Apprehension—the word has, appropriately, a note of fear. *Intellectus*, lovely word, from scholastic use, is the one word that must have pressed urgently on the mind of Saint Thomas for inclusion, only to be rejected. Why? Must our own “insight” also be rejected? and the tremendously valuable “inscape” coined by Father Hopkins? The most general and commonplace of all, the word “seen,” remains unassailable; for precisely beneath the most general, the most inescapable of our words lie the profoundest depths of our being. The refinement of poets and philosophers are searchlights shining into the abyss of significance which underlies such commonplaces as *to be*, *to do*, *to live*, or such a word as *ever*.

Visio is of the eye also, and of the mind. *Intellectus* which is of the mind only is precisely the word St. Thomas did not use. What then does the eye see? Consider this delicate flesh in which the mathematics of opticians are alive. In this dark hollow sheltered by the flesh of the head, light itself becomes lucid, an unimaginable transmutation. In it the intolerable mathematics of the sky become flesh for our seeing. The lucid bodiliness of things seen begins here as in a source of our tolerable knowing. It is not merely that the eye as the intellectual type of our senses is a convenient arrangement for our mental contact with the world; it is rather that our senses are so necessary, so integral; to the acts of the human person that without them our knowledge is the beating of a stone upon a stone, our mind a spirit empty of intuition, a metaphysical point in the black night of creation.

Apprehension: it is the trembling of the mind in the grasp of the real. The soul, it must be insisted again, is form of

the body, its active principle, *actus corporis*⁴ says St. Thomas, that by which the body has its being. The senses are not something quite physically separate and tacked on to our minds.⁵ It is true that we are to be separated from our bodies by death, but death is a privation and the result of sin. The blessed dead await with what impatience we cannot guess the Resurrection of the last day. And the soul's existence is not discontinuous in time, confined to the high lights only in the chiaroscuro of consciousness. It continues in twilight and the dark and is intimate beyond our belief in the physical processes of living.⁶ We apprehend. That which is beautiful, the thing we now grasp, has already invaded us beyond our knowledge: our soul has already lived beneath consciousness the phrase of being which now knocks for recognition at the door of our mind. It is an assignation, a tryst, a meeting with a note of terror. Had our mind, which is virtually all things according to the philosopher, thought to possess for its own the being it now beholds (apprehension—a fearful seeing), now is the moment of renunciation. Had our senses thought to live this phrase of being as a mode of their sleepy activity, now is the moment of separation: a first childbirth, the thing which is the object of our vision delivered into the respect of the mind. The mind too awakes into the thing seen as into an air of freedom and of challenge; for beauty, itself a kind of freedom—*integritas*, is seen freely, not in a manner of enslavement.

Intellectus: the seeing of the awakened mind succeeds the mysterious apprehension of the mind sleeping in the senses. There is no cancellation; the awakening is into a recognition, not a contradiction. There has been renunciation certainly, renouncement of the sleepiness of sense rather than of its activity, of the smothering selfishness of feeling

⁴ Literally "the act of the body," but act here is not the same as action; it is rather the "principle of actuality."

⁵ There are two facile errors to be avoided, (a) that that which is metaphysically distinct is therefore physically separate, (b) that that which is physically united is metaphysically indistinguishable.

⁶ The *anima vegetativa*, *sensitiva* and *intellectiva*; these are not three souls but one.

rather than of feeling itself. Now we have the naked vitality of sensation informed by the lucid act of the mind. No longer is sense-knowledge the principle of act, but the mind's own act, infinitely simpler and more intimate, contains it and fulfils it, for the mind in its act of knowing is, more perfectly, all that the senses imply. The mind sees. As the intimacy of the act is greater out of all measure than the intimacy of sense-life, so is the mind's recognition of the wholeness and the separateness of its object immeasurably more complete. For the recognition of the otherness of things is so necessary to the mind's act that without it there can be no knowledge, only growth.

If the senses must renounce the static self-satisfaction of their own mode of living for the sake of apprehending the beautiful, the mind too must stand forth from itself, renouncing the pleasure of its own self-regulated activity for that delight which is identified in the profoundest being of the object to be seen. *And God saw all the things that He had made, and they were very good.* It is that being itself is delightful, and each created thing is a separate delight.

That the apprehension of beauty involves necessarily mortification, a pruning of the senses, has been observed. We shall go no further without a certain mortification of the mind. Beauty is not a sensuous glamour, neither is it a logical descant upon things. It is not a link in the chain of discursion and rumination of which our mental life is largely composed, but has the character of originality, of freshness. It is not one of a train of concepts but a reality at which we halt. It is the thing itself intrinsically proportioned to our seeing, but this is a kind of seeing whose term is delight, not explanation; not even comprehension either, for the greater the mystery the greater very often is the mind's delight.

It is as if the mind, to make immediate and delightful contact with being, were under the compulsion of a complete if momentary defencelessness in an abandonment to being, without reserve or presupposition. It must make a leap out of the derivative courses of the reason, and is aware of peril. It must make an act of faith in being, unprescribed by

propositions, lay momentarily aside all its verbal certainties for the sake of a certainty deeper than concepts. Such an act is incomprehensible in the ordinary circuit of the reason. It is an act of love. Without this element of love the problem of beauty, its impulse and its delight, remain fundamentally inexplicable.

We have seen that the apprehension of beauty, beginning in the senses, themselves informed by the soul, their active principle, awakes the deeper, more searching activity of the mind; that a point of crisis is reached in the mind's acute appreciation of the wholeness and the otherness of the object of its vision. The mind awakes into respect of the thing as a separate existent wholly worthy of its admiration; by its free act of love it leaps the chasm which separates being from being; it awakes into the being of the thing. This is more than a sensitive awareness probed by metaphysics; it is a happening in the real order, in the world which metaphysics probes.

It is worth suggesting that the act of love, a fling of the heart opening the gates of the real, may be a prerequisite not only to the experience of the beautiful as such but to any knowledge of the real that is not merely information. That the true may be vitally apprehended as a thing in itself, not merely deduced as the quality of a proposition, requires in the mind a spontaneous impulse, an act of freedom. If the will cannot love without a knowledge of its object, however mysterious, neither can the mind reach the real without a movement of love however indeliberate; for mind and will imply each other, and the most spontaneous act of the mind implies the most profound *habitus* of our being—the love of being for its own sake. It is only the derivatives of the reason that seem to work automatically.

This is not to say that the derivatives of the reason are not implicitly present in the act by which beauty is enjoyed. *Consonantia*, the second requisite, demands that the constituents of being should be seen as harmoniously bound together in the thing. But this seeing is synoptic, not discursive; not a matter of exhaustive enquiry but an immediate recognition of order and rightness, the ring of a good

half-crown. For beauty cannot be separated from rightness, that is truth, and from goodness. *Ad rationem pulchri pertinet quod in eius aspectu seu cognitione quietetur appetitus.*⁷ Beauty is a fruition, a fulfilment proportioned to our being, identified in something other than ourselves.

The beautiful is the thing, not our act of apprehending it. Is this to say that every thing that may be an object of aesthetic experience is completely proportioned to our being? As far as itself is concerned, yes. The poet's skylark is wholly delightful. The poet too is wholly delighted in it, in the sense that he is not partly delighted and partly not. The delight is complete and integral. Total from the part of the thing, it cannot, for the same reason, exceed the creaturely limitations of the thing. This is not delight to the fullest measure that delight can be in itself; it is a quite complete joy in the being of a skylark. It is arguable that we should not expect from beauty any less limited joys. The beautiful "has the nature of an end in itself," says Thomas Gilby, and James Joyce has uttered a warning which we shall ignore only to our confusion. But if beauty "does not point beyond itself in the same way as an instructive notion does"⁸ may we not be thankful for that and then enquire in what way the beautiful does throw the mind upon absolute things? When Keats said, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" he was not saying so much that the being of a Grecian urn is of such a kind as to give to the mind at once intelligibility and delight. He was saying: "The beautiful as such is absolutely identified in the true." Otherwise he would have had no business to add, "that is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

Only one thing is absolutely an end in itself. That one thing is God. It is not so much that the creature is relative, that is the concern of metaphysics; it is rather that the creature, for all the wholeness, the delightful integrity of its

⁷ It belongs to the very meaning of beauty that in the sight or knowledge of it desire should be set at rest. *Sum. Theol.*, I-II, q. 27, a. 1 ad 3.

⁸ Thomas Gilby, O.P., *Poetic Experience*. The debt of the present writer to this important essay will be obvious.

being, is in itself a variant of a theme of lack. Only its creatureliness is really complete; being, truth, beauty, are proportioned to that. But this is a completeness resting on infinite supports against a background of the derisive infinities of mathematics. There are so many skylarks. We had demanded that our one bird should fill the sky. A contradiction of fact and the mind's demand. The poet evades it by pretending the lark is not a bird at all but a spirit, and his evasion ruins him, skylark and all, in the horrible line, "Bird thou never wert."

We know by abstracting from the conditions of the real that all things have a first cause and that cause is God. This proposition is verified not in a metaphysical system, not in the authority of St. Thomas, but in things as they really exist. If this were not so our abstraction would be so much fatuity. And the end of things is God. The verification is equally realistic. It is necessary to note that the relations of things in an orderly cosmography are no immediate help. God is not identified in a map of the universe. What we seek is the name by which things name God, the immediate relation of each finite particular to the Creator; and that relation, though distinguished formally from the thing, is identified with the essence of the finite as such.

The world is God's external utterance—news of God. The words from Gerard Hopkins are not a pious metaphor. They are the strictest possible truth. But the world is concrete; it is not an instructive notion. In apprehending the physical concrete, therefore, we apprehend God's external utterance. We are not led from one to the other. The world is God's external utterance, not merely connected with it.

Beauty in its intrinsic nature, by its three marks, *integritas, consonantia, claritas* (wholeness, harmony, radiance), is identified absolutely in the Holy Trinity, *quae per omnia opera sua significationis suae sparsit indicia*.⁹ That by which beauty comes into our minds, *claritas*, is more proper to the Son, the Eternal Word, *Lumen de Lumine*. Thinking of beauty, therefore, we think of Jesus Christ. Properly

⁹ De Civitate Dei, Lib. XI, c. xxiv.

too, for He intended it, becoming Himself beautiful with the beauty that we see through the eyes.

God the Utterance of God, the Son of the Father, consubstantial in the mystery of Three Persons Who are yet more One than the indivisible angels are, has an external utterance, this world, which bears more deeply than its own identity-with-itself the character of the uttered-of-God. The uttered-of-God which is not God rests upon the Uttered-of-God Who is God. The relation of the creature to God is therefore in the heart of the creature an infinite lack conditioned by an infinite intimacy.

Beauty according to our mode of knowing it is beauty *in patria* or beauty *in via*, beauty of the Beatific Vision or beauty met by us on our way to eternity. Both concern us. The identification of beauty *in patria* with beauty which is God, and of beauty *in via* with beauty which is not God, is too facile to be accepted. *Ego sum via*: I am the Way, said the Incarnate Word. Beauty both by its subjective and its objective nature leads the mind to Christ in a way that eludes the final explanation of the reason. That the theologian should be suspicious of this manner of approach is natural and to some large extent salutary. But the theologian would be of the first to grant that the reason must sometimes stand aside to enable the whole man moved by a spontaneous inclination of the will to make the passage through thought to reality. The act of faith includes such an inclination. And it is not unreasonable to suppose that the real approach to beauty may need something at least akin to the act of faith.

Beauty is a splendour of being, not merely of those relations of being that the reason can with most assurance abstract from the real world: and the being of the creature in the utmost concretion of its reality is ineffably identified with its relation to the Creator, the name by which it names God. This relation is not only a relation of lack, the hunger of the finite for the infinite; it has also a positive element. We know the ontological chasm which separates the creature from God, but we know also that God by virtue of His immensity is more intimate to each particular creature than

the creature is to itself. We have seen that the gap between the world and the human mind is bridged by an act of love (a spontaneous act arising from the deepest *habitus* of our being). The abyss of the infinite that swings on the further side of each created thing is also bridged by love, but this is Divine love, love which proceeds from God and is His act, not ours. But ours also by participation, and that through Christ.

Into this mystery as into a vortex of incredible power and beauty the mind is drawn by beauty, the beauty of the creature. The mind staggers, hardly daring to know that in the toils of such mystery a guess is more fecund than a reason; that in the austerity of the abyss the only criterion, the only medium left to us is nothing of our own but is that love in which the Father is beloved of the Son, the Son of the Father from the beginning: that love in which the flesh of our humanity was made Flesh of the Incarnate Word. For with that vision by which our humanity is made adequate to beauty we see nothing save in the person of Christ, we see nothing save the beauty of Christ to which the splendour of each created thing is a swift approach.

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NOTE.—It was not in the possible scope of this essay to do what would take many years and many volumes to do, that is, examine in all its implications the problem of beauty and of its ultimate identification in the second Person of the Holy Trinity. Perhaps this will be done one day by someone who loves God well enough and has the necessary intellectual qualifications. But it was possible to make hints and suggestions, and most of the arguments here are obviously not much more than that. The most important arguments have been dropped at that point where to continue them would have exceeded the scope of a hint. This point at which they are dropped is for some a point of warning also. The theologian should not find it difficult to recognize which of the more categorical statements are made in the sense of *dico sine assertione*.—B. K.